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Jennifer L. Armentrout



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OBLIVION

CHAPTER 1

Faster than any human eye could track, I moved soundlessly among the trees in my true form, racing over the thick grass and the dewy, moss-covered rocks. I was nothing more than a blur of light, speeding along the tree line. Being an alien from a planet thirteen billion light years away was pretty much made of awesome.

I easily passed one of those damn energy efficient cars that was coasting up the main road past my house.

How in the hell was that thing pulling a U-Haul trailer?

Not like that was important.

I slowed down and slipped into my human form, keeping to the thick shadows cast by the oak trees as the car went by the empty house at the start of the access road, and then grinded to a halt in front of the house next to mine.

"Shit. Neighbors," I muttered as the driver's car door opened and a middle-age woman stepped out. I watched as she bent down and spoke to someone else in the car.

She laughed and then ordered, "Get out of the car."

Whoever was with her didn't listen, and the woman eventually closed the car door. She all but bounced up the porch steps and unlocked the front door.

How could this be happening? The house was meant to stay vacant—any house around here was supposed to remain empty of *humans*. This road was the freaking gate to the Luxen colony at the base of Seneca Rocks, and it wasn't like this house went up for sale and those suited assholes didn't realize it.

This could not be happening.

Energy crackled over my skin, humming, and the urge to slip back into my true form was hard to ignore. And that pissed me off. Home was the only place that I—that *we* could be ourselves without fear of discovery, and those assholes—the Department of Defense, the D-O-fucking-D—knew it.

My fingers curled into my palms.

Vaughn and Lane, my own personal government-issued babysitters, had to have been aware of this. It must've slipped their damn minds when they checked in on us last week.

The passenger door of the Prius creaked open, drawing my attention. At first, I couldn't see who got out, but then she walked around the front of the car, coming completely into view.

"Oh shit," I muttered again.

It was a girl.

From what I could see, she was close to my age, maybe a year younger, and as she turned in a slow circle, staring at the forest that crept onto the lawn around the two houses, she looked like she expected a rabid mountain lion to pounce on her.

Her steps were tentative as she neared the porch, as if she was still debating if she really wanted to walk into the house. The woman, who I was guessing was her mom based on the similar dark hair, had left the front door open. The girl stopped at the bottom of the steps.

I sized her up as I drifted silently through the trees. She appeared of average height. Actually, everything about her seemed average—her dark brown hair, pulled back from her face in a messy knot; her pale, roundish face; her average weight—definitely not one of those skinny girls I hated—and her... Okay. Not all of her appeared average. My gaze was hung up on her legs and other areas.

Damn, they were nice legs.

The girl turned around, facing the forest as her arms folded along her waist, just below her chest.

Okay. Two areas in particular were not average.

She scanned the line of trees and her gaze stopped—stopped right where I was standing. My hands opened at my sides, but I didn't move, didn't dare force my lungs to take a breath. She stared *right* at me.

But there was no way she could see me. I was too hidden among the shadows.

A handful of seconds passed before she unfolded her arms and turned, slowly heading into the house, leaving the door wide open behind her.

"Mom?"

My head cocked to the side at the sound of her voice, which was also...average. No real discernible accent or indication of where they came from.

Wherever it was, they must have no sense of personal safety, since neither of them thought to close the door behind them. Then again, around these parts, most humans believed they were completely safe. After all, the town of Ketterman, located just outside of Petersburg, West Virginia, wasn't even incorporated. Deputies spent more time chasing after roaming cattle and breaking up field parties than handling any real crime.

Even though humans did have a nasty habit of going missing around here.

The smirk twisting my lips faded as an image of Dawson formed in my thoughts. Not just humans...

When I thought of my brother, anger bubbled inside me, rushing to the surface like a volcano about to erupt. He was gone—dead because of a human girl. And now there was another damn one moving in *next* door.

We had to...simulate humans, blend among them, and even act like them, but being close to them always ended in disaster.

Always ended in someone missing or dead.

I had no idea how long I stood there, staring at the house, but the girl eventually appeared again. Pulled out of my thoughts, I straightened as she walked to the back of the U-Haul. She dug a key out of her pocket and then opened the metal door.

Or tried.

And tried some more.

She struggled with the lock and then with the lever for what had to be the longest amount of time in history. Her cheeks were flushed, lips pursed. She looked like she was seconds from kicking the back of the U-Haul. Good God, how long did it take one person to open a trailer door? She made it a marathon event. I was half tempted to make myself known and walk my ass over there and open the damn door for her.

Finally, after an eternity, she opened the trailer and pulled down the ramp. She disappeared in and reappeared moments later with a box. I watched her carry it in and then return again. Back up the

ramp, she stumbled down it this time, carrying a box that had to weigh more than her by the strained look on her face.

She shuffled around the trailer, and even from where I stood, I could see her arms trembling. I closed my eyes, irritated over...everything. She'd made it to the steps, and I knew there was no way she was going to get the box up that porch without falling and possibly breaking her neck.

I raised my brows.

If she broke her neck, then I guessed that solved the whole "moving in next door" problem.

One foot made it onto the bottom step and she teetered to one side. If she fell then, she would be okay. She made it up another step, and my stomach growled. Damn, I was hungry even though I'd eaten about ten pancakes an hour ago.

She was almost to the top of the steps, and granted, if she fell, she wasn't going to break her neck. Maybe an arm? A leg would be pushing it. As she planted a foot on the next step and then slowly lifted the other foot beside it, I was reluctantly impressed by her sheer determination to muscle that box into the house. When she wobbled dangerously at the top, I muttered a rather obscene list of curse words and raised my hand.

Zeroing in on the box in her hands, I tapped into the Source. In my mind, I focused on raising the box just the slightest, taking the brunt of the weight off her arms. She stopped on the porch just for the tiniest of seconds, as if she recognized the change, and then with a shake of her head, she walked into the house.

Slowly, I lowered my hand, somewhat shocked by what I had done. There was no way she could ever guess that some random dude standing in the woods was responsible for that, but man, that was still a dumbass move on my part.

There was always the risk of exposure whenever we used the Source, no matter how insignificant it was.

The girl reappeared again on the porch, her cheeks bright pink from the work so far, and headed back to the cargo container as she wiped her hands along her denim shorts. Once again, she stumbled out of the trailer with a box of death in her arms, and I had to wonder: where in the hell was her mother?

The girl's step faltered and the obviously heavy box rattled. Glass was inside.

And because I was competing for world's biggest dumbass, I stayed out there, in the trees, stomach grumbling like a damn engine, and helped her carry in box after box without her even knowing.

By the time she/we finished hauling every last item into her house, I was wiped, starving, and certain I'd risked tapping into the Source enough to get my damn head examined. I hauled my tired ass up the steps to my house and slipped inside quietly. No one else was around tonight, and I was too exhausted to cook, so I gulped down half a gallon of milk and then passed out on the couch.

My last thought was of my annoying new neighbor and my too-awesome-to-fail plan to never see her again.

Night had fallen, and thick clouds, dark and impenetrable, blocked out the stars and covered the moon, squelching even the tiniest amount of light. No one could see me. Which was probably a good thing.

Especially considering I was standing outside the once-empty house like a total creeper in one of

those true-crime shows—yet again. So much for my never-see-the-chick-again plan.

This was quickly becoming a disturbing habit. I tried to argue with myself that it was necessary. I needed to know more about our new neighbor before my twin sister, Dee, spotted her and decided they were gonna be besties. Dee was all I had left in this world, and I'd do anything to protect her.

Glancing over at my house, I blew out an aggravated breath through my nose. Would it be such a terrible thing if I just, I don't know, just burned the damn house down? I mean, I wouldn't let those... those humans inside burn or anything. I wasn't *that* terrible. But no house, no problem.

Seemed simple to me.

The last thing I needed was another problem—the last thing any of us needed.

A light was on in one of the bedrooms upstairs despite the fact that it was late. It was *her* bedroom. Only a handful of minutes ago, I'd seen the outline of her pass in front of the windows. Sadly, she was completely clothed.

That disappointment took creeper status to a whole new level.

The girl was a problem, a big one, but I had all the working guy parts, which sometimes zeroed out the whole problem thing.

Having someone move next door, someone who was our age, was just too risky. This girl had only been here two days, but it was just a matter of time before Dee saw her. She'd already asked me a couple of times if I'd seen the new neighbors, if I knew who they were. I'd shrugged and said probably just an old couple retiring to the country to ward off her initial enthusiasm, but I knew Dee's excitable personality would be impossible to contain for long.

Speaking of the hyper devil...

"Daemon," a voice whispered from the shadows of my front porch. "What in the world are you doing out here?"

Debating on whether or not burning down a house next time they head to the store is a reasonable response to getting new neighbors?

Yeah, I was gonna keep that one to myself.

Sighing, I pivoted around and headed toward the porch. Gravel crunched under my boots. My sister was leaning against the railing, staring at the house next door, a curious expression pinching her face as a soft breeze tossed her long, dark hair around her.

It took unbelievable effort to walk at a normal speed as I joined Dee. Normally, it wasn't something I even attempted when I was home since I could move fast as light, but with the new neighbors, I needed to get back in the habit of appearing...well, human.

"I was out patrolling." I cocked a hip against the railing, my back to the house as if it didn't exist.

Dee raised a brow as she glanced up at me. Bright emerald eyes, the same color as mine, were filled with skepticism. "It didn't look like that."

"Really?" I crossed my arms.

"Yeah." Her gaze flicked over my shoulder. "It looked like you were standing outside that house, watching it."

"Uh-huh."

Her brows knitted. "So, someone has moved in there?"

Dee had been over at the Thompsons' house the last couple of days, which was a freaking blessing even though the idea of her being there with another alien our age, Adam, overnight did not make me a happy camper. But it worked out. She had no idea who had moved in next door, and knowing her, a human girl of her age would be like discovering an abandoned puppy.

When I didn't answer, she sighed heavily. "Okay. Am I supposed to guess?"

"Yeah, some people moved in next door."

Her eyes widened as she whipped back around and leaned out over the railing, eyeing the house as if she could see through it. While our abilities were pretty awesome, we didn't have X-ray vision. "Oh my, they're not Luxen. They're *humans*."

Obviously she would've sensed if they were of our kind. "Yep. They're human."

She shook her head slightly. "But why? Do they know about us?"

I thought of the girl struggling to carry the boxes inside the other day. "I'm gonna go with a no."

"That's so weird. Why would the DOD let them move in there?" she asked, and then immediately added, "Who cares? I hope they're nice."

My eyes drifted shut. Of course Dee wouldn't be worried about it, not even after what happened to Dawson. All she cared about was if they were *nice*. It didn't even occur to her, not for one second, the kind of danger the close proximity of a human posed to us. Not my sister. She was all unicorns puking rainbows.

"Did you see who they were?" she asked, excitement crowding her voice.

"No," I lied, opening my eyes.

Her lips pursed as she drew back from the railing, clapping her hands, and turned to me. We were almost the same height, and I could see delight sparkling in her eyes. "I hope it's a hot guy."

I clenched my jaw.

She giggled. "Oh! Maybe it's a girl, like, my age. That would be awesome."

Oh God.

"It would make this summer so much better, especially since Ash is being a you-know-what," she went on.

"No. I don't know what."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't play innocent, you jerk. You know exactly why she's as cuddly as a honey badger right now. She thought you two would be spending all summer together doing—"

"Each other?" I suggested slyly.

"Oh, gross! Seriously. I wasn't going there." She shuddered, and I barely hid my grin as I wondered if Ash had admitted that the doing-each-other part still happened although not in a while. Not often, but it did. "She was complaining about not going wherever you promised to take her this summer."

I had no idea what Dee was talking about.

"Anyway, I really hope whoever is next door is cool." Like a hamster on a wheel, Dee's mind kept on cycling. "Maybe I'll stop over—"

"Don't even finish that sentence, Dee. You don't know who they are or what they're like. Stay away from them."

She placed her hands on her hips as her eyes narrowed. "How will we know what kind of people they are by staying away from them?"

"I'll check them out."

"I don't particularly trust your judgment of humans, Daemon." Her stare turned into a glare.

"And I don't trust yours. Just like I never trusted Dawson's."

Dee took a step back as she drew in a deep, slow breath. The anger faded out of her expression. "Okay, I understand. I get why—"

"Let's not go there. Not tonight," I said, sighing as I lifted my hand and scrunched my fingers through my hair, making the ends stick up. I needed a haircut. "It's late and I need to make another round before I call it a night."

"Another round?" Her voice had dropped to a whisper. "Do you think...any of the Arum are nearby?"

I shook my head, not wanting her to worry, but the truth was *they* were always nearby and they were our only natural predator—our enemies from the time when our true planet existed. Like us, they weren't from this Earth. They were, in many ways, the exact opposite of us in appearance and abilities. But we didn't kill like they did. Oh no. They derived their use of the Source from feeding off the Luxen they killed. They were like parasites on steroids.

The Elders used to tell us that when the universe was formed, it was filled with the purest light, making those who lived in the shadows—the Arum—envious. They'd become jealous and determined to suffocate all the light. That was how the war started between our two planets.

And our parents died in that war, when our home was destroyed.

The Arum had followed us here, using atmospheric displays to travel to Earth without detection. Whenever there was a meteorite shower or a rash of falling stars, I was on edge. The Arum usually followed such occurrences.

Fighting them wasn't easy. We could either take them out with the Source directly or with obsidian—sharpened into a blade, it was deadly to the Arum, especially after they'd fed. It fractured light. Getting ahold of it wasn't easy, either, but I tried to always keep one on me, usually attached to my ankle. So did Dee.

Never knew when you'd need it.

"I just want to be careful," I said finally.

"You're always careful."

I smiled tightly.

She hesitated and then sprang forward. Stretching up on the tips of her toes, she kissed my cheek. "You can be a demanding jerkface, but I love you. Just wanted you to know."

Chuckling, I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and briefly pulled her in for a hug. "You can be an annoying chatterbox, but I love you, too."

Dee slapped my arm as she stepped back, once again smiling. "Don't be too late."

I nodded and then watched her dart into the house. Dee rarely did anything slowly. She'd always been the one with the endless energy. Dawson had been the laidback one. And I was—I laughed under my breath—the *jerkface* one.

We'd been triplets.

Now we were just twins.

Several moments passed as I stared at the spot my sister had stood in. She was one of the only things left on this planet that I genuinely cared about. I turned my attention back to the house. I wasn't even going to lie to myself about this. The moment Dee realized it was a girl next door, she was going to be all over her like barnacles on a hull—a crusty, seen-better-days hull. And no one could resist my sister. She was a damn fluffy ball of hyped-up sunshine.

We lived among humans, but we didn't get close to them for a metric ton of reasons. And I wasn't going to let Dee make the same mistake that Dawson had. I'd failed Dawson, but that wasn't going to happen to Dee. I would do anything to keep her alive and safe. *Anything*.

CHAPTER 2

Pressing my forehead against the glass, I cursed under my breath, mainly because I was staring out the window—at that house. Waiting. I was waiting. There were better things to do than this. Like beating my head against cement. Or listening to Dee describe in painful detail every intricate and disturbingly personal attribute of each of those guys in that band she loved.

I forced myself away from the window, yawning as I rubbed my palm along my jaw. Damn near three days later and a part of me still couldn't believe people had moved into the house next door. *Could be worse*, I decided in that moment. Our new neighbor could be a dude. Then I'd have to lock Dee in her bedroom.

Or at least it could have been a girl who looked like a dude. That would've been helpful, but oh no, she didn't look like a guy at all. She was average, I reminded myself, but definitely not a dude.

With a wave of my hand, I turned on the TV and flipped through the channels until I found a repeat of *Ghost Investigators*. I'd seen this episode before, but it was always fun watching the humans run out of the house because they thought they saw something glowing. I lounged on the couch with my legs on the coffee table and tried to forget about the girl with not-so-average tan legs and a killer ass.

I'd seen her a total of two times before today.

Obviously the day she moved in, when I'd been a dumbass and helped her from afar. I wanted to punch myself in the gonads for that. Sure, she didn't know that I'd lessened the weight of the boxes so she didn't fall right over, but I shouldn't have done it. I knew better.

I'd seen her yesterday. She'd dashed out toward a sedan and grabbed a stack of books out of the car. Her face had lit up with the biggest smile, as if the leaning tower of books were really a million bucks.

It was all very—not cute. What the hell was I thinking? Not cute at all.

Man, it was hot in here. Leaning forward, I grabbed the back of my shirt and pulled it over my head. I tossed it to the side and idly rubbed my chest. I'd been walking around shirtless more than ever since *she'd* moved in.

Wait. I'd seen her three times if I counted seeing her through the window last night.

Dammit, I needed to get out and do something. Preferably something that required working up one hell of a sweat.

Before I knew it, I'd stalked across the room and ended up right in front of the window. Again. I didn't want to examine why too closely.

I brushed the curtain aside, scowling. Hadn't even spoken to the girl and I felt like a stalker staring out the window, waiting once more...waiting for what? To catch a glimpse of her? Or to better prepare myself for the inevitable meeting?

If Dee saw me now, she'd be on the floor laughing.

And if Ash saw me right now, she'd scratch out my eyes and blast my new neighbor into outer space. Ash and her brothers had arrived from Lux about the same time as we did, and a relationship just sort of...happened...more from proximity than I could honestly say real emotion. We hadn't dated for months, but I knew she still expected that we'd end up together eventually. Not because she really wanted me, but it was expected of us...so of course she probably didn't want me with anyone else. I still cared for her, though, and I couldn't remember a time without her and her brothers around.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Turning slightly, I saw the screen door on the wide porch next door swing shut. Shit.

I shifted my gaze and caught her hurrying off the porch.

I wondered where she was going. Not much to do around here, and it wasn't like she knew anyone. There hadn't been any traffic next door, with the exception of her mom coming and going at odd hours.

The girl stopped in front of her car, smoothing her hands down her shorts. My lips curved up at the corners.

All of a sudden, she veered toward the left, and I straightened. I fisted my hand around the curtain, and my breath got stuck somewhere in my chest. No, she was not coming over here. She had no reason. Dee didn't even realize there was a girl here yet. No reason...

Oh hell, she was coming here.

Letting go of the curtain, I backed away from the window and turned toward the front door. I closed my eyes, counting the seconds and reminding myself of the valuable lesson learned at Dawson's expense. Humans were dangerous to us. Just being around them was a risk—getting too close to a human inevitably ended with one of us leaving a trace of the Source on them. And since Dee was obsessed with befriending anything that breathed, it would be especially dangerous for this girl. She lived right next door, and there'd be no way I could control how much time Dee spent with her.

And then there was the fact that I'd been, you know, watching her. *That* could possibly be a problem. I clenched my fists at my sides.

My sister wouldn't have the same fate as Dawson. There was no way I could bear the loss of her, and it had been a *human girl* who had brought him down, led an Arum right to him. Time and time again it had happened with our kind. It wasn't necessarily the human's fault, but the end result was always the same. I refused to let anyone put Dee in danger, unknowingly or not. It didn't matter. Throwing out my hand, I flung the coffee table across the room but caught myself and pulled back just before it crashed into the wall. Taking a deep breath, I settled it back down on four legs.

A soft, almost tentative knock rapped against our front door. Shit.

I exhaled roughly. *Ignore it*. That was what I needed to do, but I was moving toward the door, opening it before I even knew it. A rush of warm air washed over my skin, carrying the faint scent of peach and vanilla.

Man, did I love peaches, all sweet and sticky.

My gaze dropped. She was short—shorter than I'd realized. The top of her head only came up to my chest. Maybe that was why she was staring at it. Or maybe it was the fact I hadn't had the inkling to put on my shirt.

I knew she liked what she saw. Everyone did. Ash had once said it was the combination of dark, wavy hair and green eyes, the hard jaw and full lips. Sexy, she'd said. I was hot. Might sound arrogant, but it was the truth.

Since she was blatantly checking me out, I figured I could do the same. Why not? She came knocking on *my* door.

The girl... She wasn't cute. Her hair, not really blond or brown, was out of the messy bun, and it was long, hanging over her shoulders. She was short as hell, barely five and a half feet. Still, her legs seemed to stretch forever. Dragging my eyes away from her legs took effort.

Eventually, my gaze landed on the front of her shirt. my blog is better than your vlog. What in the world did that mean? And why would she have that on her shirt... And the words blog and better were stretched taut. I swallowed. Not a good sign.

I lifted my gaze with even more effort.

Her face was round, nose pert, and skin smooth. I bet a million dollars her eyes were brown—big, old doe eyes.

Crazy as hell, but I could feel her eyes as her gaze made the slow perusal from where my jeans hung from my hips, back up to my face. She sucked in a sharp breath, which overshadowed my own inhale.

Her eyes *weren't* brown, but they were large and round, a pale shade of heather gray—intelligent and clear eyes. They were beautiful. Even I could admit that.

And it pissed me off. All of this pissed me off. Why was I checking her out? Why was she even here? I frowned. "Can I help you?"

No answer. She stared at me with this look on her face, like she wanted me to kiss those full, pouty lips of hers. Heat stirred in the pit of my stomach.

"Hello?" I caught the edge in my voice—anger, lust, annoyance, more lust. *Humans are weak, a risk...Dawson is dead because of a human—a human just like this one.* I kept repeating that over and over again. I placed my hand on the doorframe, fingers digging into the wood as I leaned forward. "Are you capable of speaking?"

That got her attention, snapping her right out of the ogling. Her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink as she stepped back. Good. She was leaving. That's what I wanted—for her to turn and rush away. Running a hand through my hair, I glanced over her shoulder and then back. Still there.

She really needed to get her cute ass off my porch before I did something stupid. Like smile at the way she was blushing. Sexy, even. And definitely not average. "Going once..."

The flush deepened. Hell. "I...I was wondering if you knew where the closest grocery store is. My name is Katy."

Katy. Her name was *Katy*. Reminded me of Kitty. Kitty cat. Kitten. Look at me, putting all these words together.

"I moved next door." She gestured at her house. "Like, almost three days ago..."

"I know." I've been watching you for almost three days, like a stalker.

"Well, I was hoping someone would know the quickest way to the grocery store and maybe a place that sold plants."

"Plants?"

Her eyes narrowed just the slightest, and I forced my face to remain expressionless. She fidgeted some more with the hem of her shorts. "Yeah, see, there's this flower bed in front—"

I arched a brow. "Okay."

Now her eyes were thin slits, and irritation heightened the blush and rolled off her. Amusement stirred deep inside me. I knew I was being an ass at this point, but I was perversely enjoying the spunk slowly igniting behind her eyes, baiting me. And...the flush of anger was sort of hot in a weird, there's-really-something-wrong-with-me kind of way. She reminded me of something...

She tried again. "Well, see, I need to go buy plants—"

"For the flower bed. I got that." I leaned my hip against the doorframe, crossing my arms. This was

actually almost fun.

She took a deep breath. "I'd like to find a store where I can buy groceries and plants." Her tone was one that I used with Dee about a thousand times a day. Adorable.

"You *are* aware this town has only one stoplight, right?" And there it was. The spark in her eyes was a blazing fire now, and I was fighting a full-on grin. Damn, she wasn't just cute anymore. She was much, much more, and my stomach sank.

The girl stared at me, incredulous. "You know, all I wanted were directions. This is obviously a bad time."

Thinking of Dawson, my lip curled into a sneer. Playtime was over. I had to nip this in the bud. For Dee's sake. "Anytime is a bad time for you to come knocking on my door, kid."

"Kid?" she repeated, eyes widening. "I'm not a kid. I'm seventeen."

"Is that so?" Hell, as if I didn't already notice she was all grown up. Nothing about her reminded me of a kid, but dammit, as Dee would say, I had piss-poor social skills. "You look like you're twelve. No. Maybe thirteen, but my sister has this doll that kinda reminds me of you. All big-eyed and vacant."

Her mouth dropped open, and I realized that I may have gone a little too far with that last statement. Well, it was for the better. If she hated me, she'd stay away from Dee. It worked with most of the girls. Ah, most of them.

Okay. That didn't work with a lot of girls, but they didn't live next door, so what the hell ever.

"Yeah, wow. Sorry to bother you. I won't be knocking on your door again. Trust me." She started to turn, but not quickly enough that I didn't see the sudden glisten in those gray eyes.

Dammit. Now I felt like the biggest dick ever. And Dee would flip if she saw me acting like this. Stringing together a dozen or so curses in my mind, I called out to her. "Hey."

She stopped on the bottom step, keeping her back to me. "What?"

"You get on Route 2 and turn onto U.S. 220 North, not South. Takes you into Petersburg." I sighed, wishing I'd never answered the door. "The Foodland is right in town. You can't miss it. Well, maybe you could. There's a hardware store next door, I think. They should have things that go in the ground."

"Thanks," she muttered and added under her breath, "douchebag."

Did she just call me a douchebag? What decade were we in? I laughed, genuinely amused by that. "Now that's not very ladylike, Kittycat."

She whipped around. "Don't ever call me that."

Oh, I must've hit a sore spot there. I pushed out the door. "It's better than calling someone a douchebag, isn't it? This has been a stimulating visit. I'll cherish it for a long time to come."

Her little hands balled into fists. I think she wanted to hit me. I think I might've liked it. And I think I seriously needed help.

"You know, you're right. How wrong of me to call you a douchebag. Because a douchebag is too nice of a word for you." She smiled sweetly. "You're a dickhead."

"A dickhead?" It would be too easy to like this girl. "How charming."

She flipped me off.

I laughed again, lowering my head. "Very civilized, Kitten. I'm sure you have a wide array of interesting names and gestures for me, but not interested."

And she looked like she did. Part of me was a bit disappointed when she spun around and stomped off. I waited until she yanked open her car door and because I really was an ass...

"See you later, Kitten!" I called out, chuckling when she looked like she was about to race back to the door and kangaroo kick me.

Slamming the door shut behind me, I leaned against it and laughed again, but the laugh ended in a groan. There'd been a moment where I'd seen what flickered behind the disbelief and anger in those soulful gray eyes. Hurt. Knowing that I'd hurt her feelings made the acid in my stomach churn.

Which was stupid, because last night, I'd considered an arson-assisted relocation plan and hadn't felt guilty then. But that was before I saw her up close and all kinds of personal. Before I actually spoke to her. Before I realized her eyes were intelligent and beautiful.

Returning to the living room, I wasn't at all surprised to find my sister standing in front of the TV, her slender arms crossed and green eyes burning. She looked just like that girl's expression—like she wanted to kick me in the nuts.

I gave her a wide berth as I headed to the couch and dropped down on it, feeling a dozen years older than the eighteen I was. "You're blocking the screen."

"Why?" she demanded.

"It's a damn good episode." I knew that wasn't what she was talking about. "The one guy thinks he's possessed by a shadow person or some—"

"I don't give a crap about a shadow person, Daemon!" She lifted her small foot and slammed it down with enough force to rattle the coffee table. Dee took stomping her feet to a whole new level. "Why did you act like that?"

Leaning back, I decided to play dumb. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Her eyes narrowed but not quickly enough that I missed how her pupils gleamed diamond white. "There was no reason for you to talk to her like that. None whatsoever. She came over here to ask for directions and you were a jerk."

Katy's too-bright gray eyes flashed in my mind. I shoved that image away. "I'm always a jerk."

"Okay. That part is sort of true." Her brow wrinkled. "But you're not usually *that* bad."

My stomach churned again. "How much of it did you hear?"

"Everything," she said, stomping her foot again. The TV trembled. "I don't have a doll that is vacant-eyed. I don't have any dolls, you ass."

My lips twitched despite everything, but the humor quickly faded because the memory of those damn gray eyes surfaced again. "It's the way it has to be, Dee. You know that."

"No, I don't. I don't know that and neither do you."

"Dee—"

"But you know what I *do* know?" she interrupted. "She seemed like a normal girl who came over here to just ask a question. She seemed *normal*, Daemon, and you were horrible to her."

I could really do without all the reminders of how shitty I'd been.

"There is no reason for you to act like that."

No reason? Was she insane? Moving as fast as lightning, I came off the couch and was right in front of Dee, bypassing the coffee table in less than a second. "Do I need to remind you what happened to Dawson?"

My sister did not back down. Her chin tipped up stubbornly, and her eyes flashed white. "No. I remember everything about that quite clearly, thank you."

"Then if that's the case, we wouldn't be having this stupid conversation. You'd understand why that *human* needs to stay away from us."

"She's just a girl," Dee seethed, throwing up her arms. "That's all, Daemon. She's just—"

"A girl who lives next door. She's not some chick from school. She lives right there." I pointed out the window for extra effort. "And that is too damn close to us and too damn close to the colony. You know what will happen if you try to become friends with her."

She took a step back, shaking her head. "You don't even know her, and you can't tell the future. And why do you even think we'd become friends?"

Both my brows flew up. "Really? You're not going to try to be her best friend *foreva* the moment you walk out of this house?"

Her lips pressed together.

"You haven't even talked to her yet, but I know you're probably already wondering if Amazon sells friendship bracelets."

"Amazon sells everything," she muttered. "So I'm sure they sell that."

I rolled my eyes, done with this conversation—already done with the most annoying new neighbor, too. "You need to stay away from her," I said, turning and walking back to the couch.

My sister was still standing when I sat down. "I'm not Dawson. When will you realize that?"

"I already know that." And because I really was an ass, I drove the point home. "You're more of a risk than he was."

Sucking in a shallow breath, she stiffened as she lowered her arms. "That...that was a low blow."

It was. I ran my hand down my face as I lowered my chin. It really was.

Dee sighed as she shook her head. "You're such a dick sometimes."

I didn't lift my head. "Don't really think that's breaking news."

Turning away, she stalked into the kitchen and returned a few seconds later with her purse and car keys. She didn't speak as she walked past me.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Grocery shopping."

"Oh Jesus," I muttered, wondering how many human laws I'd break if I locked my sister in a closet.

"We need food. You ate it all." Then she was out the door.

Tipping my head back against the couch, I groaned. Good to know everything I'd said had gone in one ear and danced right out the other. I didn't even know why I bothered. There would be no stopping Dee. I closed my eyes.

Immediately, I relived the conversation with my new neighbor, and yeah, I really had been an ass to her.

But it was for the best. It was. She could hate me—she *should* hate me. Then hopefully she'd stay away from us. And that was that. It couldn't be any other way, because that girl was trouble. Trouble wrapped up in a tiny package, complete with a freaking bow.

And worse yet, she was just the kind of trouble I liked.

CHAPTER 3

It literally took Dee only a handful of hours to take everything I'd said to her, throw it out the window, and run over it with her Volkswagen. She'd come back from the grocery store with bags of crap and a big smile on her face, and I'd known she'd found our neighbor.

When I'd asked her about it, she buzzed past me like a damn hummingbird, refusing to answer any questions about what the hell she was doing, but a little after one, she disappeared out the front door. Being the good older brother—older by a handful of minutes—I'd gone over to the window to make sure everything was okay. But Dee hadn't headed toward her car. Oh no, she had gone straight for the house next door. Not like I was entirely surprised. She had either been on the girl's porch or already in her damn house. It was hard enough keeping an eye on her during the school year, but now this?

Dee avoided me when she finally made her way back over to the house, which was fine by me. I didn't trust myself not to start yelling at her, and even though I was admittedly a grade-A certified asshole, I didn't like losing my cool on my sister.

I'd left home in my SUV that evening, managing to not look at that damn house for one second. Halfway into town, I called up Andrew, Adam's twin and the Thompson brother who matched me in temperament and personality. In other words, we were fucking balls of sunshine.

He was going to meet me at Smoke Hole Diner, a restaurant not too far from Seneca Rocks—the nearby range of mountains that contained beta quartz, a crystal that had this amazing ability to block our presence to what most Luxen considered our only true enemy, the Arum. But even if the beta quartz blocked Luxen, once an Arum saw a human with a trace, they knew Luxen were nearby.

I took my seat in the back, near the massive fireplace that was always cranking during the winter. The diner was pretty cool, with rock formations jutting up among the tables. I kind of dug the whole earthy vibe it gave off.

Andrew was tall and blond and turned heads as he strolled in, walking down the middle of the booths.

I'd had the same effect on the patrons earlier.

Might've come across like I was rocking a healthy dose of arrogance—well, I was—but it was simply the truth. Blending of human and Luxen DNA and the choice we had in the matter typically meant we were *very* blessed in the appearance department. I mean, if you could choose to look like anyone, wouldn't you choose the hottest looks you could? My green eyes were a family trait and my hair tended to curl a bit on the ends whether I wanted it to or not, but my six-foot-something awesome frame and movie-star good looks—well those just fit my stellar personality.

Andrew slid into the seat across from me, his eyes a vibrant blue, just like Adam's and Ash's. He lifted his chin at me in greeting. "Fair warning. Ash knows I was leaving to meet you. Don't be surprised if she shows."

Lovely.

I kept my expression bland out of respect for her and her brother sitting across from me, but a meet-up with Ash was not something I needed right now. "Last I heard, she wasn't very happy with me, so I'd be kind of surprised if she showed up."

He snickered. "You'd be surprised? Really? You've known Ash your entire life. The girl thrives on confrontation."

That much was true.

"So do you," Andrew added, smiling slightly when I lifted a brow. "I don't know what's going on between you two."

"And that's not something I'm really going to talk about with you, Oprah." Besides the fact that they were siblings, so come the hell on, it was also hard to put into words. I liked Ash. Hell, I genuinely cared about her, but I was bored with that whole thing, the expectation of our people that we'd of course end up together. I didn't do predictable.

Andrew ignored that. "But you know what's expected of us." His voice lowered as his gaze met mine. One of the waitresses here was a Luxen, but 99 percent of those around us were human. "There aren't many of our kind around our age, and you know what Ethan wants—"

"The last damn thing I care about is what Ethan wants." My voice was deadly calm, but Andrew stiffened across from me. Nothing pissed me off faster than dealing with the Elder known as Ethan. "Or what any of them expect from me."

His lips curled up on one side. "Something's done crawled up your ass today."

Yeah, and that something had a name that reminded me of a little furry, helpless animal.

"So what's your deal?" he persisted. "Right now you just got this look on your face that said you're either really hungry or you want to kill something."

Shaking my head, I draped my arm along the back of the booth. The Thompsons obviously didn't know about that girl moving in next door, and for some reason I figured it was better if it stayed that way for as long as possible. Not because I cared or anything, but because once they did realize there was a human living next door, I was going to have to deal with them bitching about it.

And I was pissed off enough for all of us already.

We ate and then I headed back home. Andrew's sarcasm had a way of lightening my mood, but I was back to doom and gloom as I pulled up in my driveway again.

It was the Thompsons' night to take patrols, but I was too restless to just sit inside. Our families were the strongest of all the Luxen, hence why the colony was already planning Ash and my nuptials, so it was upon us to run most of the patrols and train the new recruits.

I spent half the night out there, finding nothing to work off the building frustration. Building? Hell. That was laughable. More like constant state of anger that had been present ever since Dawson... Since he'd died. Very few things eased it. Certain things with Ash had, but the peace was always fleeting and it was never worth all the strings attached to it.

I crashed somewhere around three in the morning and woke up way too damn late, near eleven, the pent-up energy still humming in my veins. Dragging myself out of bed, I brushed my teeth, then pulled on a pair of sweats and sneakers.

Dee was already gone when I left the house and stepped out into the muggy summer weather. Her car was in the driveway, but that girl's was gone. Hell. They were together. Of course. My anger hit near stroke levels.

If I could actually have a stroke.

I kicked off the porch steps and started jogging down the driveway. Once I reached the end, I

crossed the street and then made my way around the trees. I kept myself running at a human pace so I could burn off as much energy as possible and forced my mind to empty. When I ran, I tried not to think about anything. No Arum. No DOD. No expectations. No Dee. No Dawson.

No girl next door.

Sweat ran down my bare chest and dampened my hair. I had no idea how much time had passed when I finally started to feel a burn in my muscles and I headed back home. By the time I came up the driveway, I could probably eat an entire cow.

And the driveway wasn't empty. Her car was back.

I slowed down to a walk as I spied a pile of bags sitting behind the trunk of the car. Frowning, I reached up and shoved my hair off my forehead. "What in the hell?"

They were bags of mulch and soil—heavy-ass bags of mulch and soil.

Stopping, I glanced up at the house with a narrowed gaze. Ah, yes, plants for the flower bed that sort of looked like something straight out of a horror movie. Was Dee seriously with her? A chuckle rumbled out. Dee was going to help with the flower bed? Now that was freaking hilarious. She couldn't tell the difference between crab grass and the real deal, nor was she a fan of dirt under her nails.

I rounded the back of the sedan and then stopped. Lifting my gaze to the skies, I shook my head and laughed out loud at myself in genuine humor. God, I was pathetic. Thought myself all badass but couldn't seem to walk past a heavy box or bag and not help a girl out. I wheeled back around and gathered up the bags, grunting at their weight. Moving incredibly fast, I deposited them in a neat stack by the pathetically overgrown flower bed and then headed inside to shower.

It was then, as I stood under the steady spray of water, I realized I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed in real amusement.

Just as I walked out of the shower, my cell went off, ringing from where it sat on the nightstand. I walked over to it, brows rising when I saw it was Matthew.

Matthew wasn't very much older than all of us, but he'd become sort of a surrogate father, since our parents hadn't made the trip here. Like us, he lived outside the colony, and he taught at PHS. I knew without a doubt he would do anything for the Thompsons and us. He wasn't a phone guy, though.

"What up?" I answered, snagging a pair of jeans that I thought might be clean from a pile on the floor.

There was a pause. "Vaughn was just here. Without Lane."

"Okay." I whipped off the towel and tossed it into the bathroom. "You want to add more to that?"

"I was getting ready to," Matthew said as I dragged on the jeans. "Vaughn said they were tracking unauthorized Luxen movement near here. You know what that means."

"Shit," I muttered, snapping the button closed on the jeans. "We have incoming Arum."

After all this time, the DOD couldn't tell the Luxen and Arum apart, and our two kinds really looked nothing alike. Dumbasses. It was probably because they've never actually captured one of the bastards, since we always managed to take care of them before the DOD had a chance to start rounding them up, like they did with us. It was imperative that the government didn't realize there was a difference, because even though the DOD had crawled up our asses, they didn't know what we were

fully capable of. It needed to stay that way, but it wouldn't if they realized Arum were an altogether different species.

"Do they know how many?" I asked.

"Sounds like a whole set, but when there is one group of them, you know there's always more."

Well wasn't that wonderful fucking news. My stomach rumbled, reminding me how absolutely starving I was. Outside my bedroom, I took the stairs two at a time and started for the kitchen. Changing my mind at the last minute, I walked outside onto the porch.

And I saw them.

Both girls were hard at work in front of the flower bed, and I had to admit, from where I stood, the thing already looked better. A lot of the weeds and dead plants had been removed, filling the black trash bag by the steps.

Dee looked absolutely ridiculous, delicately tugging the leaves on a new planting as if to turn the plant already stuck in the dirt, and I had no idea what she was attempting to do. Probably trying not to get dirt under her nails. My gaze drifted toward the other girl. She was on her knees, one hand planted in the fresh soil, her back slightly arched with her ass right up in the air. My lips parted, and yeah, my mind immediately went *there*, picturing her roughly in the same position with less clothing.

Which pissed me off, because that was the last place it needed to go. I didn't even find her that attractive for shit's sake. No way. Not at all.

She settled back on her haunches as Dee said something to her, and then she slowly turned her head in my direction.

"Hey," Matthew's voice snapped in my ear.

I dragged away my gaze, frowning as I rubbed my hand over my chest. Shit. No shirt. "What?"

"Are you even paying attention to what I'm saying?" Matthew demanded.

"Yeah." I paused, distracted. I watched the girl turn back to the flower bed, where she started digging furiously with a shovel. "Dee has a new friend. She's human."

There was a sigh on the other end of the phone. "We're kind of surrounded by humans, Daemon."

No shit. "Yeah, but this one moved in next door."

"What?"

"I have no idea why they allowed it." I paused as I glanced over at them. My sister handed her some kind of plant that actually looked like a healthy weed. "But Dee's crawled right up her ass and you know how Dee is. Ever since...Dawson and Bethany, she's been desperate for..." Desperate for everything Dawson had been and I wasn't.

That's the damn truth right there.

"School is one thing," Matthew said, glossing over what I hadn't said but definitely hung between us. "But that close—your home and the colony? What in the world was the DOD thinking?"

"I don't think they were thinking." But that didn't seem right. They never did anything without having a reason.

"You need to be careful."

"I'm always careful."

"I'm being serious." Exasperation filled his voice.

"I'll take care of it," I promised. "Don't say anything to the Thompsons yet about her, okay? I don't need to deal with however they're going to react on top of all of this."

Matthew agreed and then ranted on for about thirty minutes, alternating between my new neighbor and the Arum. I was catching bits and pieces of his conversation as I watched the girls from where I stood on the porch. I didn't need Matthew telling me how serious nearby Arum were and the

precautions we needed to take, and I think he knew that, too. But that was Matthew, the prophet of doom.

But with confirmation of the Arum moving in, this crap between Dee and that girl needed to end before something happened and drew one of those bastards right to us, like it had with Dawson.

When I got off the phone, I went inside and grabbed a shirt, and then went back outside despite my empty, grumbling stomach. I was hungry and annoyed. Never a good combination.

Dee rose as I crossed the driveway, brushing the grass off her hands, but the girl stayed on the ground, smacking the soil. I dropped my arm over Dee's shoulders, holding her still when she tried to squirm free. "Hey, sis."

She grinned up at me with hope in her gaze. God only knew what she thought about me making an appearance, but I was really going to let her down. "Thanks for moving the bags for us," she said.

"Wasn't me."

Dee rolled her eyes. "Whatever, butthead."

"That's not nice." I tugged her close, smiling down at her when she wrinkled her nose. I felt eyes on us and when I glanced up, I saw that the girl was watching us. The sun had pinked the heights of her cheeks—or something else had. Her hair was pulled up but sweat had dampened the loose tendrils around the nape of her neck. The smile slipped from my face. She was going to be such a problem. "What are you doing?"

"I'm fixing—"

"I wasn't asking you," I said, interrupting her as I directed my attention to Dee. "What are *you* doing?"

The girl shrugged and picked up a potted plant, totally unfazed by me, and my eyes narrowed on her. She acted as if I wasn't even standing there. Unacceptable.

Dee punched me in the stomach. Knowing she could hit a hell of a lot harder than that, I let her go. "Look at what we've done," she said. "I think I have a hidden talent."

I looked over at the flower bed. Yeah, they had done some major work on it. Then again, how hard could it really be, pulling up weeds and planting new shit? I arched a brow when the girl looked at me. "What?" she demanded.

I shrugged and honestly, I couldn't care less about it. "It's nice. I guess."

"Nice?" Dee all but shrieked. "It's better than nice. We rocked this project. Well, Katy rocked it. I kind of just handed her stuff."

Ignoring my sister, I turned my full attention on the girl. "Is this what you do with your spare time?"

"What—are you deciding to talk to *me* now?" She smiled, and my jaw tightened as she grabbed a handful of mulch. "Yeah, it's kind of a hobby. What's yours? Kicking puppies?"

At first, I wasn't sure why she had said that to me, because *no one* talked back to me. No one was that insane. I tilted my head to the side. "I'm not sure I should say in front of my sister."

"Ew," muttered Dee.

The girl's face flushed even more, and I felt my lips kick up at the corner. What was she thinking? "It's not nearly as lame as this," I added, gesturing at the flower bed.

She stilled. Pieces of red cedar drifted to the ground. "Why is this lame?"

I raised both brows.

The girl wisely retreated, but her jaw jutted out as she returned to spreading the mulch, and my eyes narrowed even farther. I could tell she was forcing herself to keep quiet, and that made me feel like a shark that scented blood in the water.

Dee sensed it, because she pushed me. "Don't be a jerk. Please?"

"I'm not being a jerk." I stared at the girl.

Her brows flew up, and there it was. The attitude. I didn't like it...but I did, and realizing that amped me up. "What's that? You have something to say, *Kitten*?"

"Other than I'd like for you to never call me *Kitten*? No." Running her hands over the mulch calmly, she then stood and grinned at Dee. "I think we did good."

This girl was legit ignoring me.

"Yes." Dee pushed me again, but this time in the direction of our house. "We did good, lameness and all. And you know what? I kind of like being lame."

As I stared at the fresh plants, I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that she was standing there, pretending like I wasn't even here. This chick was not even one bit intimidated by me. That floored me. I couldn't be reading her right. Yeah, most human girls didn't run from me. They wanted to run to me, but one look would send them scurrying away. This girl was basically like, whatever.

"And I think we need to spread our lameness to the flower bed in front of our house," Dee continued, practically humming with excitement. "We can go to the store, get stuff, and you can—"

"She's not welcome in our house." Annoyed, I knew where this was heading. "Seriously."

Dee's hands balled into fists. "I was thinking we could work on the flower bed, which is *outside*—not inside—the last time I checked."

"I don't care," I snapped. "I don't want her over there."

"Daemon, don't do this." Her voice dropped, and then I saw her eyes turn too bright. "Please. I like her."

Hating the look in her eyes, I exhaled softly. "Dee..."

"Please?" she asked again.

I cursed under my breath as I folded my arms. I couldn't give in to this. There was too much at stake, like her *life*. "Dee, you have friends."

"It's not the same, and you know it." She folded her arms. "It's different."

Glancing over at Katy, I smirked. She looked like she wanted to throw something at me. "They're your friends, Dee. They're like you. You don't need to be friends with someone...someone like *her*."

"What do you mean, someone like me?" Katy demanded.

"He didn't mean anything by it," Dee rushed to add.

"Bullshit," I said. I'd totally meant it. The girl just didn't get what it *really* meant.

Katy looked like she was about to throw down, and if I hadn't been so damn annoyed, it might've been cute. "What the *hell* is your problem?"

Shock flickered through me as I fully faced her. This girl... Wow. She was kind of prettier than average when her eyes lit with sparks of anger, but I was determined not to care. "You."

"I'm your problem?" She took a step forward, and oh yeah, she wanted to throw down like a mofo. "I don't even know you. And you don't know me."

"You are all the same." And damn, that was the truth. "I don't need to get to know you. Or want to."

Confusion flickered across her face as she threw up her hands. "That works perfectly for me, buddy, because I don't want to get to know you, either."

"Daemon." Dee grabbed my arm. "Knock it off."

I didn't take my eyes off Katy. "I don't like that you're friends with my sister."

"And I don't give two shits what you like," she spat back.

Holy shit. I was not one bit mistaken when I realized she wasn't at all intimidated, and my first, the very immediate response, was that I *liked* that.

And I could not have that.

I moved, faster than I probably should've, but I was there, right in front of her, my gaze locked in on hers.

"How...how did you move...?" She took a step back, her eyes widening as she shuddered.

There it was. Fear. And maybe it made me a complete jackass, but I wanted her afraid, because in my world, fear equaled common sense. "Listen closely," I said, backing her up until she was against a tree, caging her in. She didn't look away from me. "I'm only going to tell you this once. If anything happens to my sister, so help me—" My gaze dropped, and I saw her lips part. Damn, I hadn't noticed how full her lips were until this moment. When I raised my eyes, she had that look again, one that said her mind recognized the danger she was in, but her body was totally not on the same page.

She was attracted to me, even right now, when I'd backed her clear across the yard, and yet she was still attracted to me. And that kicked off something in me that I didn't want to look too closely at.

My lips curled up and I lowered my voice. "You're kind of dirty, Kitten."

She blinked slowly, as if in a daze. "What did you say?"

"Dirty." I let that word hang between us and then added, "You're covered in dirt. What did you think I meant?"

"Nothing." The flush in her cheeks said otherwise. "I'm gardening. You get dirty when you do that."

I resisted a laugh at her poor attempt to explain herself, but she still wasn't cowering in fear, and that was really kind of hot. "There are a lot more fun ways to get...dirty." I caught myself. Where in the hell did that come from? Yeah, I needed to correct that. "Not that I'd ever show *you*."

That...interesting flush spread down her throat. "I'd rather roll around in manure than anything *you* might sleep in."

So fucking doubtful.

Part of me wanted to call her on that right here. Lower my head to hers and taste that smart little mouth. I was willing to bet an arm she wouldn't push me away, but the momentary satisfaction wasn't worth it. With one last look, I pivoted around, and as I passed Dee, I yelled out, "You need to call Matthew. Like, now, and not five minutes from now."

That was a lie, but like most lies, it would get the job done.

CHAPTER 4

My house became a war zone over the next couple of days.

Dee and I argued nonstop about the girl next door, and the words were just wasted time on my end, because she ultimately did what she wanted, no matter how brutally honest I got about the kind of risks befriending her posed.

The only reason I didn't lose my last nerve was the fact that Dee would be leaving Monday, spending a week with the colony, something the damn Elders required at least once a year so that we did not forget what we were or where we came from or some kind of bullshit like that. Maybe the week away would wake her up.

Doubtful.

Then on Friday, some of my favorite damn shirts—one of them a *Ghost Investigators*—had turned up missing. I had a strong suspicion the pile of ashes in the kitchen sink I'd discovered later that day had been what was left of my shirts.

Damn Dee.

Fed up with the situation, I'd gone over to the Thompsons', and Ash had been more than willing to help work off some of the frustration. But it hadn't worked, and when I'd come home in the early hours of Saturday morning, I found myself sitting out on the hood of my SUV, staring at nothing really, with only the stars and the rustling of nearby critters for company.

The idea of even hooking up with Ash had been empty and boring, and nothing happened. Not even a touch. Things like that with Ash had been a take-it-or-leave-it kind of deal for a while, but empty?

Dropping my head, I rubbed at the back of my neck. I could do another patrol, but Matthew was out there and so was Adam. No Arum had been sighted. Yet.

At least my head was quiet at the moment. Except when my head was quiet, I started thinking about what the hell all of us were going to do. When summer ended, we were entering our senior year and all of us—Dee, the Thompsons—would be graduating next spring. What in the hell were we going to do then?

Dee didn't talk about it a lot, not to me at least, but I had a feeling she wanted to leave. Go to college far away from here, and I could sympathize with that. I wanted to get the hell out of here myself, but unlike the teenagers who shared classes with us, it wasn't an easy decision. We'd have to get permission from the DOD. They'd have to approve the relocation, and even if they did, we'd need to find someplace safe, near beta quartz, and it wasn't like there was a wide selection of that available.

And the colony—Ethan—didn't want us to leave at all. He wasn't even happy with us living outside the damn place. He'd be a problem. All the Elders were focused on was the younger generation hooking up and producing more Luxen babies, born and raised on Earth, and yeah, that wasn't in my game plan.

"Hell," I muttered, dropping my hand and lifting my head.

In the quiet moments, I also thought about Dawson, and those thoughts always cycled back to how he could have felt so strongly for a human, had fallen in *love* with one, knowing what it risked. I couldn't wrap my head around it. So many countless, sleepless nights I'd tried to figure it out. In the end, Dawson had given two shits about the danger he posed to his family, but if he truly loved the girl —Bethany—wouldn't he have stayed away from her? The Luxen Elders or the government did not tolerate mixing of our two kinds, and then there was the Arum aspect.

Had love made him that damn selfish? Didn't he realize I'd be lost if anything happened to him?

The stars I stared at held no answers, and as I slowly lowered my gaze, I found myself staring at the bedroom window of the house next door, my new problem. There was a part of me that had accepted there was nothing I was going to be able to do to stop Dee and her from getting closer, but I couldn't just let it go.

I had done exactly that when Dawson had asked me to.

Yeah, these were two different scenarios, but the likelihood of ending the same was high, so I couldn't just walk away from this. I would be keeping an eye on that girl, a very close one.

Monday morning, I woke up before Dee and made her breakfast of W.E.B.—waffles, eggs, and bacon. Even though she was pissed at me, I didn't like the idea of her leaving for a week on those kinds of terms.

And no one, not even my sister, could resist my breakfast skills.

It worked.

At first, I think she was suspicious of my intent, eyeing me warily, but when I didn't mention the girl next door, she was all smiles and hugs from that point on. I followed her outside, carrying her luggage even though she could carry the thing with a pinkie. I popped it in the back of her Volkswagen. The colony could be accessed from the woods, but she would drive the handful of miles and enter through one of the nearly invisible roads leading in. The local humans thought the little village was just full of nature nuts who preferred to live off the grid.

Humans saw what they wanted to see, never what was really right in front of them.

"You sure you don't want me to come with you?" I asked.

Smiling, she shook her head as she walked around the car. "That's the fifth time you've asked." "The third."

"Whatever." She laughed. "You know if one of the Elders or Ethan saw you, you won't be getting out of there in the foreseeable future. I'll be okay."

I didn't like the idea of it, but I nodded. "Text me when you get there."

"They'd better not try to take my cell phone like they did last time. I'll cut them." Dee turned to me and smiled before climbing in behind the wheel. "Can you do me a favor while I'm gone?"

"Hmm?"

Her expression turned serious. "Try to talk to Katy if you see her."

I arched a brow.

"Actually, how about you make a point to see her, without being a jerk to her so you don't ruin my chances of having one normal friend who is not obligated to like me because we're both freaking aliens. I really like her and it would be great if my *friend* didn't hate my brother," she continued, and I

wasn't sure how to feel over the fact that the girl hated me.

Granted, that was the whole point of my being such a dick to her.

"Can you do that for me?" She opened the driver's door. "Make nice with her. Please?"

Her gaze was so earnest that I found myself nodding.

"Really?" she persisted.

I sighed and looked away as I agreed. "Yeah. Sure."

A smile broke out across her face, the kind of smile that had every guy at school tripping all over themselves, and here I was, her brother, most likely lying to her.

But lies...they worked.

I watched her leave and then headed in, going upstairs to take a shower. Afterward, I changed into a pair of jeans and a shirt that hadn't been burned and then puttered around the house, actually picking up after myself. That was a miracle right there.

Make nice with her.

I shook my head as I walked over to my trusty stalker window and pulled back the curtain, wondering if— "What in the hell?"

Squinting, I watched the girl next door jump up and down, trying to reach the roof of her car with a sponge with absolutely no success. A slow smile pulled at my lips.

She looked absolutely ridiculous as the minutes ticked by.

Before I even knew what I was doing, I pivoted around and went out the back door, slipping quietly between the houses. I reached the front of the house just in time to see her bend over to pick up the sponge she'd dropped.

I stopped mid-walk, totally admiring the view offered to me. Alien...human... We're all universally predictable it seems.

She straightened as I wandered closer. I thought I heard her curse as she plucked at the sponge before tossing it in the bucket.

"You look as if you could use some help," I said, shoving my hands into the pockets of my jeans.

Jumping, she whipped around with wide, startled gray eyes. There was no mistaking the look of surprise as she eyed me, and it was clear as we stood there staring at each other, she had no idea why I was out there.

Neither did I.

Make nice with her.

I swallowed a sigh as I gestured at the bucket with a lift of my elbow. "You looked as though you wanted to throw that again. I figured I'd do my good deed for the day and intervene before any innocent sponges lose their lives."

Lifting her arm, she used it to wipe strands of damp hair out of her face as she watched me. Tension radiated from her. Since she didn't say anything, I walked over to the bucket and snatched the sponge, squeezing out the water. "You look like you got more of a bath than the car. I never thought washing a car would be so hard, but after watching you for the last fifteen minutes, I'm convinced it should be an Olympic sport."

"You were watching me?"

Probably shouldn't have admitted that. Oh well. I shrugged. "You could always take the car to the car wash. It would be a lot easier."

"Car washes are a waste of money."

"True." I walked around the front of her car and knelt, hitting a spot she'd missed. While I was there, I checked out her tires. Jesus. They were in terrible condition. "You need new tires. These are

about bald, and winter's crazy around here."

Silence greeted me.

I peered up through my lashes as I rose. She was watching me like I was some kind of hallucination, arms loose at her sides, and damn, the entire front of her shirt was soaked, showing off a very interesting outline I shouldn't even be paying attention to. Turning away, I took care of the roof. When I was done, she was still standing there, absolutely immobile, and that made me grin. "Anyway, I'm glad you were out here." I grabbed the hose and sprayed down the car. "I think I'm supposed to apologize."

"You think you're supposed to?" Ahh, she speaks.

I slowly turned around, almost hitting her with the spray of water as I attacked the other side of the car. The slight narrowing of her eyes brought forth a great wealth of satisfaction. "Yeah, according to Dee, I needed to get my ass over here and make nice. Something about me killing her chances of having a 'normal' friend."

"A normal friend? What kind of friends does she have?"

"Not normal."

"Well, apologizing and not meaning it kind of defeats the purpose of apologizing."

I chuckled. "True."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her shift her weight from one foot to the other. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah." I worked my way around the car, chasing off the suds as a genius idea struck me. There was no getting rid of this girl, and the likelihood of Dee growing bored with her wasn't going to help. I'd decided Saturday morning I needed to keep a close eye on her and I needed an excuse. There was no way this girl was going to believe I wanted to be around her when I really didn't want to be, but if Dee was going to be her new BFF, I needed to know everything about her, and not just if she could be trusted if something weird went down. "Actually, I don't have a choice. I have to make nice."

She gave a little shake of her head. "You don't seem like a person who does anything he doesn't want to do."

"Normally I'm not." I hit the back of the car with the water as I picked out the first thing I could come up with. "But my sister took my car keys and until I play nice, I don't get them back. It's too damn annoying to get replacements."

I started to grin, because the whole thing was ridiculous. It wasn't like I needed keys to get anywhere. Not like this girl knew that. I made a mental note to text Dee as soon as possible.

She laughed. "She took your keys?"

The small grin slipped off my face as I returned to the side she was standing on. "It's not funny."

"You're right." She laughed again, and it was a nice laugh—throaty. Kind of sexy. "It's freaking hilarious."

I scowled at her. Of course, my keys were on the kitchen counter, but still, she could be more sympathetic to my plight.

Her arms folded across her chest. "I'm sorry, though. I'm not accepting your not-so-sincere apology."

My brows rose. "Not even when I'm cleaning your car?"

"Nope." Her smile grew, and that plain face suddenly wasn't really plain. "You may never see those keys again."

"Well, damn, there went my plan." A reluctant smile broke free. Her attitude was...interesting. Entertaining. "I figured that if I really don't feel bad, then at least I could make up for it."

She tilted her head to the side. "Are you normally this warm and sparkly?"

I walked past her to where the outdoor spigot was. I turned off the water. "Always. Do you usually stare at guys when you stop over, asking for directions?"

"Do you always answer the door half naked?"

"Always. And you didn't answer my question. Do you always stare?"

She blushed a deep pink. "I was *not* staring."

"Really?" I grinned as I turned around. "Anyway, you woke me up. I'm not a morning person."

"It wasn't that early."

"I sleep in. It is summer, you know. Don't you sleep in?"

A piece of hair had snuck free of her bun again and she pushed it out of her face. "No. I always get up early."

Go figure. "You sound just like my sister. No wonder she loves you so much already."

"Dee has taste...unlike some," she said, and there it was again, the attitude. "And she's great. I really like her, so if you're over here to play big, bad brother, just forget it."

God, she was a little firecracker.

"That's not why I'm here." I gathered up the bucket and various sprays and cleaners, and when I glanced over at her, I thought she might be staring at my mouth. Interesting.

"Then why are you here, other than delivering a crappy apology?" she asked.

Placing the supplies on the porch steps, I lifted my arms and stretched as my gaze flickered over to her and stayed. "Maybe I'm just curious why she is so enamored. Dee doesn't take well to strangers. None of us do."

"I had a dog once that didn't take well to strangers," Katy quipped.

For a moment, I didn't move, and then I laughed—a real laugh—and it sounded strange to my own ears. Shit. She was quick.

Her gaze dipped, and then she cleared her throat. "Well, thanks for the car thing."

And she was clearly dismissing me.

I crossed the distance between us—and I hadn't even moved that fast—but based on her soft inhale, I'd caught her off guard. I was right in front of her, and she smelled like peaches again.

"How do you move so fast?" she asked.

Ignoring that loaded question, I let my gaze roam over her face. What was it about her that had my sister bouncing all over the place? Her tongue was sharp as a knife and she came across as intelligent, but there were literally billions of humans like her. I didn't get it. "My little sis does seem to like you."

She opened her mouth and then snapped it shut. A moment passed. "Little? You're twins."

"I was born a whole four minutes and thirty seconds before she was." I lifted my gaze to hers. "Technically she is my little sister."

"She's the baby in the family?" Her voice sounded different as she lowered her gaze.

"Yep, therefore I'm the one starved for attention."

"I guess that explains your poor attitude, then," she shot back.

"Maybe, but most people find me charming." Sometimes.

Her gaze flicked to mine and then stayed. Something shifted in those gray depths. "I have...a hard time believing that."

"You shouldn't, Katy." Her name sounded strange on my tongue and in my thoughts. That damn little piece of hair had fallen free again, brushing her cheek. I caught it between my fingers. "What kind of color is this? It's not brown or blond."

She tugged her hair free of my grasp. "It's called light brown."

"Hmm," I murmured, lowering my gaze. "You and I have plans to make."

"What?" She stepped around me, putting some space between us. "We don't have any plans to make."

I sat down on the steps, stretched out my legs, and leaned back on my elbows. Plans. I needed plans. My mouth was moving faster than my brain.

"Comfortable?" she snapped.

"Very." I squinted up at her. The front of her T-shirt had dried—the greatest idea known to man and Luxen formed in my thoughts. "About these plans..."

She remained standing. "What are you talking about?"

"You remember the whole 'getting my ass over here and playing nice' thing, right? That also involves my car keys?" I crossed my ankles as I glanced at the tree line. Man, I was such a liar. "Those plans involve me getting my car keys back."

"You need to give me a little more of an explanation than that."

"Of course." I sighed. "Dee hid my keys. She's good at hiding stuff, too. I've already torn the house apart, and I can't find them."

"So, make her tell you where they are."

"Oh, I would, if she was here. But she's left town and won't be back until Sunday."

"What?" She paused. "I didn't know that."

"It was a last-minute thing." Uncrossing my ankles, I started tapping my foot. "And the only way she'll tell me where the keys are hidden is by me earning bonus points. See, my sister has this thing about bonus points, ever since elementary school."

The bonus points thing was true.

"Okay...?"

"I have to earn bonus points to get my keys back. The only way I can earn those points is by doing something nice for you."

She let out a loud laugh, and I looked at her, my eyes narrowing. "I'm sorry, but this is kind of funny."

Her lack of sympathy for my nonexistent problem was amusing. "Yeah, it's real funny."

Her laughter was slow to fade. "What do you have to do?"

"I'm supposed to take you swimming tomorrow. If I do that, then she'll tell me where my keys are hidden—and I *have* to be nice." Totally sounded like something Dee would say. I was rather proud of myself.

Katy stared at me for a moment, and then her mouth dropped open. "So the only way you get your keys back is by taking me swimming and by being nice to me?"

"Wow. You're a quick one."

Her laugh this time was actually quite evil sounding. "Yeah, well, you can kiss your keys goodbye."

I cranked my head back and waited for her to say she was just kidding. "Why?"

"Because I'm not going anywhere with you." Smugness rang in her voice.

"We don't have a choice."

"No. *You* don't have a choice, but I do." She looked over her shoulder at the front door. "I'm not the one with missing keys."

Huh. Perhaps I was a bit too much of a dick the first two times I talked to her. Good thing she didn't know I briefly considered burning her house down. "You don't want to hang out with me?"

"Uh, no."

"Why not?"

She rolled her eyes. "For starters, you're a jerk."

I nodded. "I can be." Not going to disagree with that.

"And I'm not spending time with a guy who's being forced to do it by his sister. I'm not desperate." "You're not?"

Anger flashed across her face, and again, it transformed her features. "Get off my porch."

Completely committed to my plan, I pretended to consider it. "No."

"What? What do you mean, no?"

"I'm not leaving until you agree to go swimming with me."

She was so going to blow a fuse. "Fine. You can sit there, because I'd rather eat glass than spend time with you."

I was genuinely amused by that statement. "That sounds drastic."

"Not nearly." She started up the steps.

I twisted at the waist and caught her ankle. Damn, her skin was incredibly soft. Fragile. I kept my grip loose. Her gaze lowered to mine, and I forced a smile that had gotten me excused from many school assignments. "I'll sit here all day and night. I'll camp out on your porch. And I won't leave. We have all week, Kitten. Either get it over with tomorrow and be done with me, or I'll be right here until you do agree. You won't be able to leave the house."

She gaped. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, I am."

"Just tell her we went and that I had a great time. Lie."

When she tried to pull her leg free, I held on. "She'll know if I'm lying. We're twins. We know these things." I paused, thoroughly enjoying myself. "Or are you too shy to go swimming with me? Does the idea of getting almost naked around me make you uncomfortable?"

"I'm from Florida, idiot." Grabbing ahold of the railing, she pulled her leg and got nowhere. "I've spent half my life in a bathing suit."

"What's the big deal?" Warmth built under my hand, surrounding her ankle.

"I don't like you." She drew in a deep breath, causing her chest to rise. "Let go of my ankle."

"I'm not leaving, Kitten." Holding her glare, I lifted my fingers, one by one. Screw the whole keeping an eye on her thing. Now this was pure principal. A challenge. "You're going to do this."

Her lips curled back, and I waited, barely able to contain a grin, because I knew she was seconds from laying into me. Maybe even kicking me. But the door opened, stopping her.

I glanced up and saw her mom. There were...bunnies on her pajamas.

"You live next door?" her mom asked.

Seeing my end, I twisted around and smiled broadly. "My name is Daemon Black."

"Kellie Swartz. Nice to meet you." She glanced at her daughter. "You two can come inside if you want. You don't have to sit outside in the heat."

"That's really nice of you." I stood, knocking my elbow into her. "Maybe we should go inside and finish talking about our plans."

"No," she replied immediately. "That won't be necessary."

"What plans?" her mom asked. "I support plans."

I liked her mom.

"I'm trying to get your lovely daughter to go swimming with me tomorrow, but I think she's worried you wouldn't like the idea." I gave her a little love tap on the arm, biting down on my lip when she moved half a foot. "And I think she's shy."

"What? I have no problem with her going swimming with you. I think it's a great idea. I've been telling her she needs to get out. Hanging out with your sister is great, but—"

"Mom," Katy gasped. "That's not really—"

"I was just telling Katy here the same thing." Unable to stop myself, I draped my arm over her shoulders. She stiffened. "My sister is out of town for the next week, so I thought I'd hang with Katy."

Ms. Swartz smiled and her eyes got all big. "That is so sweet of you."

Katy wrapped her arm around my waist and surprise flicked through me. Then I felt it. Her tiny fingers digging into my side. "Yeah, that's sweet of you, Daemon."

Her little nails were freaking sharp. "You know what they say about boys next door..."

"Well, I know Katy doesn't have plans tomorrow," her mom said. "She's free to go swimming."

She dropped her hand and squirmed her way out from under my arm. "Mom..."

"It's okay, honey." Her mom turned, winking at me. "It was nice to finally meet you."

"You, too." I braced myself.

Her mom closed the door, and in a nanosecond, she whirled around and shoved her hands into my chest. I didn't budge. "You jerk."

Knowing when to retreat helped win the war. I backed down the steps. "I'll see you at noon, Kitten." "I hate you," she spat.

"The feeling's mutual." Pausing, I looked over my shoulder. "Twenty bucks says you wear a one-piece swimsuit."

Katy let out an outraged shriek.

I sort of hoped I would be out twenty bucks tomorrow.

CHAPTER 5

U want company today?

Glancing down at my cell as I tugged a pair of jeans on over the swim trunks, I was at once grateful that Ash knew better than to just show up at our house announced. If she found me heading off to the lake with Katy, she'd go off like a nuclear rocket.

And it wouldn't be because Katy was human, but because I'd never taken Ash to the lake when we'd dated. The lake had been a sanctuary for just Dee, Dawson, and me since we moved here. Part of me couldn't even believe that was the plan I'd come up with to spend the day with Katy. Thinking with the wrong head, most likely.

I reached down, sending a quick text back. Can't.

Ash's response was immediate. What are u doing?

Got stuff to do.

Walking over to my closet to grab a shirt, I smiled slightly when I saw her response. *So? I'm bored. Entertain me.*

Can't.

I'd made it downstairs before she replied. *You suck*.

We have that in common then, I replied back.

UR an ass. Whatever. Go do ur STUFF.

Planned on it. Leaving my phone on the counter, I didn't worry about locking up after I grabbed a towel and then left the house, heading toward...Kat's.

Huh.

I guess she was no longer "that girl" every time I thought of her. For some reason, I didn't like the name Katy. It didn't suit her. Kat did, I decided. So did Kitten. I smirked, recalling how much she hated that nickname.

Last night, I'd texted Dee and let her know what I was doing. Her series of exclamation points and shocked emoticons was a little on the excessive side. She would play along with the whole keys thing, but I wasn't looking forward to the million questions she was going to have when she got home.

I wasn't sure how today was going to end, either. The potential outcomes varied. Maybe I would get lucky and discover something about her that would steer Dee away. What, I had no idea, but damn I was hopeful.

Climbing the porch steps, I knew I was early when I banged on the door with a closed fist, but it amused me to keep her on her toes. A handful of moments passed and the door opened.

Kat appeared, her gray eyes wide as they met mine for a fleeting second.

"I'm a little early," I told her.

"I can see." She sounded like she was about to leave for a dental appointment. "Change your mind?

You could always try lying."

"I'm not a liar." I was totally a liar right now.

"Just give me a second to grab my stuff." Then she slammed the door in my face.

I coughed out a laugh. She really was like a prickly, pissed-off little kitten. A part of me actually wanted to show her I could be a nice guy. I hadn't been an ass to her because of who she was—well, other than her being human. While she'd given as good as she'd gotten, though, I'd noticed the flickers of hurt in her eyes at being attacked for no reason. The whole situation was messed up. If I wasn't mean to her, I could be putting us in danger, but being mean to her was upsetting as well. There was no win here for anyone.

She finally reappeared, careful to not brush against me as she stepped outside, closing the door behind her. I wondered what she had on under the shirt and shorts.

"Okay, so where are you taking me?" she asked, not looking at me.

"What fun would it be if you knew? You won't be surprised then."

We stepped off the porch and started down the driveway. "I'm new to town, remember? Everywhere is going to be a surprise for me."

"Then why ask?" I raised a brow.

She bristled as I led her past the cars. "We aren't driving?"

Picturing us trying to drive around the trees, I laughed. "No. Where we're going, you can't drive. It's not a well-known spot. Most locals don't even know about it."

"Oh, I'm special, then."

I looked over at her, studying her profile as we walked down the driveway, and I found that I had a hard time looking away. She was something all right. "You know what I think, Kat?"

She glanced over, catching me staring at her. The tips of her cheeks flushed. We passed the empty house at the end of the road. "I'm pretty sure I don't want to know."

"I think my sister finds you very special." The next words came out without my really even thinking about it, but once I said them, I figured they were true. "I'm starting to wonder if she's onto something."

A humorless smile appeared on her lips. "But then there's all kinds of *special* now, isn't there, Daemon?"

I jolted at the sound of my name. Was this the first time she had said it? I liked the sound of my name on her tongue. Looking away, I exhaled slowly as I led her across the main highway and into the dense tree line on the other side of the road.

"Are you taking me out to the woods as a trick?" she asked.

I glanced over my shoulder at her, lowering my lashes. "And what would I do out here to you, Kitten?"

She didn't reply immediately. "The possibilities are endless."

I winked. "Aren't they?"

She didn't answer as she tripped through the thick brush, avoiding the mass of vines tangled along the floor of the woods. "Can we pretend we did this?"

Pretend to go on a walk with me? I blinked, speechless for probably the first time in like...ever. I was actually being nice right now. She didn't like Dickhead Daemon and she didn't like Nice Daemon? What the hell ever. My God, this girl had me coming and going so much, I didn't know what I was thinking. Did I *want* to be nice to her now? Or was I just being nice to get closer to her and drive Dee away? Jesus, all this thinking about my feelings and hers was probably going to give me a period. "Trust me, I don't want to be doing this, either." I jumped over a fallen tree. Spinning around,

I offered her my hand. "But bitching about it isn't going to make it any easier."

"You're such a joy to talk to." Her gaze dropped to my hand and she sucked in her lower lip between her teeth, drawing my attention. The burst of heat low in my gut had nothing to do with aggravation.

She wasn't going to take my hand. She shouldn't.

But she did.

Kat placed her hand in mine, offering a tiny bit of trust, and there was a shock of static from the contact. It happened sometimes, when humans touched us, as if they had dragged their feet along carpet. I ignored it and how incredibly small that hand was in mine. I helped her over the log.

"Thank you," she murmured when I let go.

I ignored how my chest tightened at being her hero, no matter how small. "Are you excited about school?"

"It's not exciting being the newbie. You know, the whole sticking out like a sore thumb. Not fun."

"I can see that."

"You can?" Surprise colored her tone.

She had no idea. "Yeah, I can. We only have a little bit more to go."

"A little bit? How long have we been walking?"

"About twenty minutes, maybe a little longer. I told you it was fairly hidden." A wry grin twisted my lips as she followed me around an uprooted tree. I stepped aside, revealing the clearing we were entering, still a little shocked that I'd actually brought her here. "Welcome to our little piece of paradise."

Kat was silent as she walked past me, her gaze darting all over the place, taking everything in as I felt tension creep into my muscles.

A thin creek cut across the clearing, expanding into a small, natural lake. The water rippled in the soft breeze. Flat, large rocks erupted from the middle. Wildflowers, purple and blue ones, surrounded the lake.

Did she see what I saw? I knew Dee did. Ash, if I'd ever brought her here, would've just been bored. Dawson got it. Matthew might've.

"Wow," she whispered. "This place is beautiful."

"It is." Standing next to her, I raised my hand, blocking the glare of the sun bouncing off the surface of the lake. Peaceful. This place had always been a source of peace. I could come here and escape everything, even if it was just for a few hours. I lowered my hand.

Her soft touch on my arm drew my attention. I looked down to where her hand rested, and then my gaze flicked to hers.

"Thank you for bringing me," she said, and then quickly removed her hand as she looked away.

I didn't know what to say. And that damn tight feeling expanded in my chest a little more.

Kat wandered to the water's edge. "How deep is it?"

"About ten feet in most parts, twenty feet on the other side of the rocks." I ghosted up behind her. "Dee loves it here. Before you came, she spent most of her days here."

Her brows pinched together as she stared at the lake, and then she took a deep breath. "You know, I'm not going to get your sister in trouble."

"We'll see."

"I'm not a bad influence," she stated. "I haven't ever gotten into trouble before."

I walked around her. I could tell she was trying to, well, get past our initial run-ins with each other, but I doubted Bethany ever thought she'd be Dawson's downfall. You could be a weapon without ever

realizing you were one. "She doesn't need a friend like you."

"There isn't anything wrong with me," she snapped. "You know what? Forget this."

When she started to turn, I stopped her the best way I could. "Why do you garden?"

Her hands clenched as she faced me. "What?"

"Why do you garden?" I stared at the lake, wondering what in the hell I was really accomplishing by getting to know her, but that question didn't stop me. "Dee said you do it so you don't think. What do you want to avoid thinking about?"

She exhaled roughly. "It's none of your business."

Well then. "Then let's go swimming."

When I glanced at her, she looked like she wanted to strangle me a little. I dipped my chin before she saw the grin, because I doubted that would help. Stepping to the side, I kicked off my sneakers and then reached down, unbuttoning my jeans. I didn't need to look at her to know she was watching. I could feel her gaze on me as I shed my jeans and then my shirt.

And I knew she was really staring when the only article of clothing that remained were the swim trunks.

I didn't look back at her as I stepped to the very edge and then dived in. The rush of cool water immediately scattered all my thoughts, washing them away as I swam underwater. I loved the water. Swimming was a lot like flying, and I could move fast enough that it was damn near close to flying.

When I broke the surface, Kat was still standing there, her face the color of a tomato. I started to tease her, but then decided I really didn't want to have to chase her ass down when she left. "Are you coming in?"

She dragged the toe of her sneaker in the loose soil at the lake's edge as she nibbled on her lower lip. Uncertainty bled out from her as her gaze met mine and then fleeted away. Cute. That was kind of cute.

"You sure are shy, aren't you, Kitten?"

Her foot stilled. "Why do you call me that?"

"Because it makes your hair stand up, like a kitten." Pushing onto my back, I swam a few feet away. "So? Are you coming in?" When she didn't move, I figured I was going to have to motivate her. "I'm giving you one minute to get in here."

Kat squinted. "Or what?"

Twisting around, I moved closer to the bank of the lake, no longer on my back. "Or I come and get you."

Her mouth pinched. "I'd like to see you try that."

"Forty seconds."

Did she really think I wouldn't do it?

"Thirty seconds." I smiled, hoping she didn't do it.

Because I totally would toss her ass into the lake and I would thoroughly enjoy myself.

She snapped into action, muttering under her breath as she reached down with a quick, jerky motion and grabbed the hem of her shirt. She yanked it off and then quickly pulled off her shorts. Then she straightened, her hands on her hips. "Happy?"

Holy shit.

She was not wearing a one-piece, and I got my wish. It was a two-piece red bikini, and yeah, holy shit. All I could do was stare. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this.

Under the plain shorts and shapeless shirts I'd seen her in, Kat was hiding a...a magnificent body full of the kind of curves that made me want to do stupid things. Fun things, but damn, things that

would be really stupid considering everything.

I wasn't staring. I didn't notice how the blood-red bathing suit stretched across her chest, reminding me of the top part of a heart. I didn't notice how her body was reacting to the way I was staring at her, because neither of us was moving, and there was something tangible in that moment, like a physical caress. And I sure as hell didn't count the inch and a half, maybe two inches of skin between her navel and the top of her bottoms.

Aw hell.

Now was a good time to drown myself.

Who was I kidding? I was totally checking her out.

For someone who was so short, her legs appeared incredibly long, but that might've had something to do with the skimpy cut of her bottoms—a cut that displayed the fullness of her hips and the surprising tininess of her waist. Muscles low in my stomach tightened as I dragged my gaze over her soft-looking stomach and then farther north. How that red top was staying on was beyond me, and I didn't know if I should be grateful or disappointed by that.

Average? Had I seriously used the words average or plain to describe her? Hell, this girl...

The old saying surfaced in my heated thoughts. *Be careful what you wish for.* So true. I wouldn't have wished for this if I had known how intensely my body would've reacted to it, and oh, it was reacting all right.

This plan I'd come up with had to be an all-time dumbass one.

My smile slipped from my face. "I'm never happy around you."

"What did you say?" she demanded, eyes narrowing.

"Nothing. You better get in before that blush reaches your toes." And before I really started considering all the stupid shit I could do right now.

And that blush deepened. She walked stiffly over to the edge of the lake where the water was shallow, giving me a view of her backside, and that really did nothing to help dampen the purely physical response.

Folding her arms along her waist, she dipped her toes into the water. "It's beautiful out here."

Yeah, it was beautiful out here. And it was hot. My gaze dipped to her bent knee and then slid back up, getting hung up on certain areas. My throat tightened. Other parts of me tightened.

Shit.

I dunked myself and when I came back up, it hadn't helped, because now she was wet. She must've gone under while I had. We were only a few feet away, and I was in deeper water, hunched down to where the water lapped at my mouth.

"What?" she asked.

"Why don't you come here?" My heart was pounding in my chest. If she were smart, she wouldn't get anywhere close to me at this moment. Actually, if I were smart, I wouldn't have called her over.

Kat was smarter than me.

She twisted around and dipped under the water, swimming toward the rocks. When she pulled herself out of the water, climbing onto the rock, I swallowed a groan. I wanted to—

"You look disappointed," she said.

God, I was disappointed, and I really didn't know what to make out of that. I pushed it aside.

"Well...what do we have here?"

Her legs dangled off the rock, her feet slipping into the water. "What are you talking about now?"

"Nothing." I waded closer to the rock.

"You said something."

"I did, didn't I?"

"You're strange."

"You're not what I expected," I admitted, voice low.

She gave a little shake of her head. "What does that mean?"

I grabbed for her foot, but she moved her leg out of reach. No fun.

"I'm not good enough to be your sister's friend?" she asked.

"You don't have anything in common with her."

"How would you know?" She shifted back as I reached for her other foot.

"I know."

"We have a lot in common. And I like her. She's nice and she's fun." She scooted back this time, completely out of arm's reach. "And you should stop being such a dick and chasing off her friends."

Her words slipped over me, and I laughed outright. "You're not really like them."

"Like who?"

Like any person I'd ever met. Truth was, human and Luxen females treated me the same. Only Ash and Dee mouthed off at me, but we'd grown up together. It was different for them, but others? They pretty much wanted one thing from me. Most of the time I was okay with that, but if I so much as glared in their direction, they scattered like bugs. Not really attractive when you thought about it. But not Kat. She may not have a clue what I was, but she was not scared of me, she wasn't wowed, and as twisted as it was, that turned me on.

That did make her dangerous.

I pushed away from the rock, making ripples in the water, and then I slipped under. I swam to the other side of the rock and I stayed under, hoping the icy water would cool down the very inappropriate arousal thing I had going on.

Dammit, I didn't even like the chick, I thought, trying to convince myself.

Yeah, she was amusing. Yeah, even entertaining. And yeah, I wanted to trace her curves with my hands and my mouth. Possibly even my tongue—okay, definitely with my tongue—but she irritated the hell out of me.

And she didn't even like me. She liked *looking* at me, because who didn't, but the distaste went both ways.

I had no idea how much time passed underwater until I was about 92 percent confident I wouldn't do something, and I broke the surface.

"Daemon!"

The sheer panic blanketing the sound of my name caught me off guard. I burst onto the rock, crouching as I scanned the lake, expecting an Arum to be nearby. Those assholes wouldn't blink an eye when it came down to taking out an innocent human.

All I saw was Kat, on her knees, in her damn bikini.

Whelp, there went all the work that cold water had done for me.

She was frozen for a second and then scrambled over the rock, clutching my shoulders. Blood had drained from her face and she was exceptionally pale. "Are you okay? What happened?" Then she let go of my shoulders, hauled back, and smacked my arm. *Hard*. "Don't you ever do that again!"

"Whoa there." I threw my hands up. "What is your problem?"

"You were under the water for so long. I thought you drowned! Why would you do that? Why would you scare me like that?" She jumped to her feet, chest heaving. "You were under the water *forever*."

Oh shit. I'd been under there longer than I'd thought. My body didn't function like hers, and I'd

forgotten that. Luxen didn't need to breathe air, but humans weren't supposed to figure that out, dumbass. "I wasn't down there that long. I was swimming."

Her hands were shaking. "No, Daemon, you were down there a long time. It was at least ten minutes! I looked for you, called for you. I...I thought you were dead."

I climbed to my feet slowly, cursing myself every which way from Sunday. "It couldn't have been ten minutes. That's not possible. No one can hold their breath that long."

Her throat worked. "You apparently can."

Damn. I stepped closer to her, my eyes searching hers. "You were really worried, weren't you?"

"No shit! What part of 'I thought you drowned' don't you understand?" A tremble rocked her.

Hell, she was really upset. Honestly, if I'd drowned, I figured she'd do a little dance on my grave. In her bikini. Shit. Screw the bikini. "Kat, I came up. You must not have seen me. I went right back down."

Taking a step back, she shook her head, and I could see in her steely eyes she didn't believe me. Holy hell, here I was worrying about Dee doing something to expose us, and it was me who did the bonehead thing. *Let it go, Kat. Let it go.* I took a deep breath, thinking maybe if I pissed her off, she would forget what happened in her anger. Better than the other option. "Does this happen often?" I asked.

Her gaze snapped back to mine. "Does what?"

"Imagining things." I gestured at the lake. "Or do you have a horrible issue with telling time?"

"I wasn't imagining anything! And I know how to tell time, you jerk."

"Then I don't know what to tell you." I stepped forward, crowding her. "I'm not the one imagining that I was underwater for ten minutes when it was like two minutes tops. You know, maybe I'll buy you a watch the next time I'm in town, when I have *my* keys back."

She stiffened as she stared up at me and anger clouded over the suspicion in her eyes. "Well, make sure you tell Dee we had a *wonderful* time so that you can get your stupid keys back. Then we won't need a replay of today."

I smiled at her. "That's on you, Kitten. I'm sure she'll call you later and ask."

"You'll have your keys. I'm ready—" She turned, and it happened so fast. Her foot slipped over the wet rock. Thrown off balance, her arms flailed.

I didn't stop to think.

Snapping forward, I reached out and caught her hand just as her feet left the rock. I pulled her forward, and then we were chest to chest. Her skin was warm and dry, mine wet. I clenched down on my jaw as sensation powered through every one of my cells. There was no denying the bolt of lust that shot through me.

Hell, she was so soft in all the right places.

"Careful there, Kitten," I murmured. "Dee would be pissed at me if you end up cracking your head open and drowning."

Kat slowly lifted her head, and her gray eyes met mine. Her lips parted, but she didn't speak, and I was A-OK with that. Words were freaking pointless at this moment, because our bodies were pressed together.

Electricity coursed through my skin, and I had no idea if she felt it, and if she did, if she thought it was just her imagination, but I swallowed a low groan as a light breeze washed over our skin. Her chest rose against mine, and I needed to either let her go or...or what?

There was no other option.

I dropped my arm from her waist, letting my hand slip off her lower back just to freaking torture

myself. The skin was soft and smooth, and the near-painful pressure building in me was worth it. "I think it's time we head back."

Officially the smartest decision I had made since first seeing her.

Pathetic.

Kat nodded, and we didn't speak as we made our way back to land, dried off, and dressed, and that was probably a damn good thing, because I was in one hell of a mood for a multitude of reasons.

The walk back was silent and stiff, and when we crested the driveway, my mood went from shit to punch someone when I saw the car in the driveway. Dammit all to hell in a hand basket. Kat glanced up at me, her expression curious.

"Kat, I—"

My front door swung open, banging off the side of my house, and Matthew strolled out like he had every right. He came down the porch steps, not even looking in Kat's direction. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

Man, I cared for Matthew like a brother, but he had no business being in my house like that. I folded my arms. "Absolutely nothing. Since my sister is not home, I'm curious as to why you're in my house?"

"I let myself in," he replied. "I didn't realize that would be a problem."

"It is now, Matthew."

Kat shifted uncomfortably beside me, drawing Matthew's attention. His lip curled up as he shook his head. "Of all people, I'd think you'd know better, Daemon."

Tension poured into the air around us. "Matthew, if you value the ability to walk, I wouldn't go there."

"I think I should go." Kat moved to the side.

For some reason I'll never understand, I stepped in front of Kat, blocking her from Matthew's glare. "I'm thinking Matthew should go unless he has another purpose other than sticking his nose where it doesn't belong."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, voice wavering, and that did a funny thing to my consciousness, made it take notice. "But I don't know what's going on here. We were just swimming."

I squared my shoulders. "It's not what you're thinking. Give me some credit. Dee hid my keys, forced me to take her out to get them back."

Kat sucked in a breath.

Recognition flickered across Matthew's face. "So this is Dee's little friend?"

"That would be me," she said from behind me.

"I thought you had this under control." Matthew gestured at her. "That you'd make your sister understand."

"Yeah, well, why don't you try to make her understand," I retorted, my patience wearing thin. "So far, I'm not having much luck."

Matthew's lips hardened. "Both of you should know better."

And my patience snapped. I was tired. A certain area of my body was aching, and being scolded wasn't going to work for me. Energy crackled over my skin, invisible to the human eye, but it leaked out, charging the air. Thunder cracked. Lightning streaked overhead, bright and near blinding. When the light receded, Matthew's eyes widened for a second and then he spun around, walking back into my house.

Warning received.

I started to turn to Kat, but there was really nothing to say, and so I said nothing as I stalked toward

my house. I thought I heard her speak, but it didn't matter. Nothing that had happened with her mattered.

CHAPTER 6

Matthew started the moment I walked into the kitchen. "What is going on with that girl, Daemon? You have never acted that way."

I passed him on the way to the fridge, beyond irritated and hungry. "Acted like what?"

He turned to me. "You know what I mean."

Opening the fridge, I eyed everything needed to make a kickass sandwich. Waving my hand, I got all *Beauty and the Beast* up in here and danced the items over to the counter. "Want a sandwich?"

Matthew sighed. "Already ate."

"More for me." I grabbed a plate and moved to the counter.

"Daemon, we need to talk about this."

I snatched up a knife and the jar of mayo. "We don't need to talk about shit, Matthew. I already told you what was going on when we were outside. The story isn't going to get any more interesting."

"You're making sure Dee doesn't get too close to her by hanging out with her?" he asked, disbelief coloring his words. "Swimming together? Is this a new tactic?"

Slapping the slice of bread on the plate, I glanced over to where he stood near the table. My voice was deadly calm. "Let it go, Matthew."

"I can't let it go."

My eyes met his. "You might want to try."

He ran a hand over his short brown hair. "I don't want to argue with you, Daemon."

I almost laughed as I slapped deli meat onto the bread. He was doing a shitty job at not arguing. Tension had stiffened the muscles of my neck and back. Matthew was right about one thing. I'd never acted like I had outside a few minutes ago, not over a human and not against one of my own kind. I don't even know why his presence or his words had grated on me so badly.

Maybe because deep down I knew I passed up the chance to either find out something about Kat I could use against her or scare her off enough that she'd stay away from Dee. I really hadn't done either of those things.

Instead, we'd talked about school and gardening and stupid shit like we...like we were normal.

"This is different," Matthew continued quietly. "We live among the humans, but we don't get close to them, not for any extended period of time. If we do, something always happens. They either find out about us, because we let our guard down, or we trace them and the Arum hunt *us* down. It never ends well. Never."

I faced him, my hands at my sides. "You think I don't know that? What do you expect me to do about her? There's only so much I can do unless you expect me to take her ass out."

Matthew's blue eyes deepened, going from ocean blue to dark skies at dusk. "I don't want to see a young woman harmed, and I don't expect you to be the one who would take care of that if it came to

that point. If that girl proves a risk, I will handle it. It won't be like with Bethany, where all of us let it slide until it was too late. I won't let that happen this time."

Energy charged my skin as I stared at him. Realization slipped in and it left me cold. "Her name is Kat," I heard myself say as I stepped toward him, my chin dipping down. "And I will handle her."

"You know I would do anything to protect you all." Matthew planted his hands on the table and took a deep breath. "All of you—you're my family."

Thrusting my hand through my hair, I struggled with my patience. "I know that. We feel the same way, but you do not need to step in here. I will make sure she isn't a risk to us."

His eyes met mine and a moment passed. "You're one of the strongest, if not the strongest, Luxen right now. The Elders know that and so does the DOD, and that means someone is always watching you. You have to be more careful than any of us."

I lowered my hand as the weight of my race settled on my shoulders. There was nothing I could say to that. I was faster and stronger than most Luxen and I could wield more of the Source than any of my kind we knew about. But I didn't take these gifts for granted. I trained harder than anyone. Patrolled more often. And I was determined to stay focused on my duty. Not get lost and vulnerable like my brother had...

Matthew watched me and must have seen something in my eyes. "Your brother wasn't weak."

My head cocked to the side. "He—"

"He wasn't," he interrupted. "He was kinder and he was more laid back, but he was just as strong as you and you need to remember that. Dawson wasn't weak. He wasn't foolish, and yet, because of a girl, he's gone. Don't follow in your brother's footsteps."

Message received, loud and clear.

Don't follow in your brother's footsteps.

That statement was actually laughable.

Just because I wasn't actively trying to run her out of town didn't mean I was going to end up like Dawson. For one thing, Kat and I didn't even like each other. Yeah, there was something physical brewing, but it didn't run deeper than that. Dawson had fallen in love with Bethany. Big difference there.

And my brother—he had been weaker.

Maybe not physically, but when it came to everything else, he was.

It was early evening on Saturday when I saw Kat's mom drive off. Knowing Kat was alone and that Dee would be coming home tomorrow, I knew the last thing I should be doing was what I was doing.

Which was walking my ass over to her house.

After knocking on her door, I ambled to the porch railing and looked up. The sun had a couple of more hours before setting, but a few stars were starting to appear. Shoving my hands in the pockets of my jeans, I waited to see if she'd even answer the door. If I were her, I'd probably never want to see my face again. I couldn't explain my hot-and-cold behavior either. I knew she was bad for Dee, bad for the colony, and especially bad for me. But there was something about her spunk I couldn't shake.

I was a little surprised when the door opened and Kat stepped out onto the porch. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Having no idea how to answer that, I was quiet for a moment and then cleared my throat. "I like

staring at the sky. There's something about it. It's endless, you know." Lame.

She stepped closer to me, her movements almost tentative. "Is some crazy dude going to run out of your house and yell at you for talking to me?"

I grinned at that. "Not right now, but there is always later."

Her nose wrinkled. "I'm okay missing 'later."

"Yeah." I twisted at the waist, facing her. "Busy?"

"Other than messing with my blog, no."

"You have a blog?" I had to force myself not to laugh. Blogging always seemed like something middle-age moms did, not above-average high school girls.

She folded her arms across her chest, her stance widening as if she were preparing for a battle. "Yeah, I have a blog."

"What's your blog's name?"

"None of your business." Her smile was too sweet.

"Interesting name." One corner of my lips rose when annoyance flashed across her face. Getting her angry was too easy. "So what do you blog about? Knitting? Puzzles? Being lonely?"

"Ha ha, smartass." She sighed. "I review books."

Huh. Books. Should've guessed that. "Do you get paid for them?"

She laughed out loud at that. "No. Not at all."

I frowned. "So you review books and you don't get paid if someone buys a book based on your review?"

"I don't review books to get paid or anything." Her arms unfolded as she seemed to grow more comfortable talking about her blog. "I do it because I like it. I love reading, and I enjoy talking about books."

"What kind of books do you read?"

"All different kinds." She leaned against the railing and looked up, meeting my gaze. "Mainly I prefer the paranormal stuff."

"Vampires and werewolves?" I guessed.

"Yeah."

"Ghosts and aliens?"

"Ghost stories are cool, but I don't know about aliens. ET really doesn't do it for me and a lot of readers."

I raised an eyebrow at that. "What does it for you?"

"Not slimy green space creatures," she replied, and I swallowed a laugh. "Anyway, I also appreciate graphic novels, history stuff—"

"You read graphic novels?" Disbelief flooded me. "Seriously?"

She nodded. "Yeah, so what? Are girls not supposed to like graphic novels and comics?"

I didn't think she wanted me to answer that. Damn, she was always a surprise. "Want to go on a hike?"

"Uh, you know I'm not good with the whole hiking thing." She reached up, tucking a loose strand of hair from her ponytail behind her ear. Did she ever wear her hair down?

Why in the hell was I thinking about her hair?

My gaze followed the movement. "I'm not taking you up on the Rocks. Just a harmless little trail. I'm sure you can handle it."

She pushed off the railing but hesitated. "Did Dee not tell you where your keys were?"

Hell, I'd forgotten all about that. "Yeah, she did."

"Then why are you here?"

How could I possibly explain it to her when I couldn't to myself? I fumbled in my head for an excuse she'd buy and realized I really wasn't that creative. This was probably a sign I should get my ass home and forget all about whatever *this* was. "I don't have a reason. I thought I would just stop over, but if you're going to question everything, then you can forget it." Pivoting around, I headed down the porch steps, totally realizing I was yet again acting like an ass. What could I say? I was good at it.

A moment passed and then, "All right, let's do this."

Surprised, I stopped. "Are you sure?"

She didn't look 100 percent certain when I glanced over my shoulder at her, but she hurried down the steps and followed me. "Why are we going behind my house?" She paused, pointing to the west, at the sandstone mountain still glittering in the fading sunlight. "The Seneca Rocks are that way. I thought most trails started over there."

"Yeah, but there are trails back here that will take you around, and it's quicker," I explained. "Most people here know all the main trails that are crowded. There used to be a lot of boring days out here, and I found a couple of them off the beaten trail."

Her eyes widened. "How far off the beaten track are we talking?"

Cute. I chuckled. "Not that far."

"So it's a baby trail? I bet this is going to be boring for you."

"Any time I get to go out and walk around is good." That was true. Luxen naturally had more energy in them, and any physical activity helped. "Besides, it's not as if we'll hike all the way to Smoke Hole Canyon. That's a pretty big hike from here, so no worries, okay?"

She relaxed. "All right, lead the way."

Kat waited outside as I stepped into my house, grabbing two water bottles, and then she followed me across the backyard and into the heavily shaded forest. Something about the fact that she was actually willing to do this struck me wrong. I hadn't been nice to her. That was a big *no shit* there. I wondered if she would do this if Andrew befriended her, just roam right the hell off.

If so, that wouldn't be good.

Andrew would totally be in the Matthew camp, as in he'd have no problem with the idea of preemptively "taking care of her."

"You're very trusting, Kitten," I said quietly.

"Stop calling me that."

I glanced over my shoulder. She was trailing a few steps behind me. "No one has ever called you that before?"

Stepping around a thorny bush, she shot me a bland look. "Yeah, people call me Kitten all the time. But you make it sound so..."

I waited. "Sound so what?"

"I don't know, like it's an insult," she said, and I slowed my longer-legged pace so she was walking beside me now. "Or something sexually deviant."

That knocked a laugh out of me, right along with some of the tension that had carved its way into my neck and shoulders.

"Why are you always laughing at me?"

I shook my head as I grinned. "I don't know, you just kind of make me laugh."

"Whatever." She kicked a rock, apparently deciding that wasn't a good thing. "So what was up with that Matthew dude? He acted as if he hated me or something."

"He doesn't hate you. He doesn't trust you," I muttered.

Her ponytail bounced as she shook her head. "Trust me with what? Your virtue?"

Another laugh burst out of me. "Yeah. He's not a fan of beautiful girls who have the hots for me."

"What?" she blurted out, and then, within a second, she tripped.

I caught her easily, with my arm around her waist, and quickly let go, but I felt the jolt of the brief contact, and my skin hummed.

"You're joking, right?" she asked.

Amused by her inability to watch out for whatever was on the ground, I felt my grin grow even bigger. "Which part?"

"Any of that!"

"Come on. Please don't tell me you don't think you're pretty." When she didn't answer, I sighed. "No guy has ever said you're pretty?"

Her gaze met mine and then skittered away. She shrugged. "Of course."

Huh. "Or...maybe you're not aware of it?"

She shrugged again, and I couldn't believe she didn't see what I... Wait a second. She didn't see what I saw? When had what I saw changed? Because I'd been thinking she was plain as hell. Sometimes above average when she was mad. Or smiling. Or blushing. But, well, mainly she was just average.

As I watched her cheeks pink up even more, I knew I'd been wrong.

Kat wasn't plain. Maybe at first glance, but once you got up close to her, once you spent any amount of time around her, those heather gray eyes, the full lips, and the shape of her face were anything but plain. It ran deeper than the skin, though.

"You know what I've always believed?" I asked, stopping in the middle of the path.

She looked up at me, her eyes wide but not wary. "No."

For a moment, I didn't speak, and the only sound between us was the chirping of nearby birds as my gaze searched hers. "I've always found that the most beautiful people, truly beautiful inside and out, are the ones who are quietly unaware of their effect. The ones who throw their beauty around, waste what they have? Their beauty is only passing. It's just a shell hiding nothing but shadows and emptiness."

Her lips parted, and then she laughed.

Kat laughed.

What in the hell?

"I'm sorry," she said, blinking back tears as a giggle snuck free. "But that was the most thoughtful thing I've ever heard you say. What alien ship took the Daemon I know away, and can I ask them to keep him?"

I scowled. "I was being honest."

"I know, but it's just that was really...wow."

Eyeing her, I shrugged and then started down the trail again. Whatever. "We won't go too far." I paused. "So you're interested in history?"

"Yeah, I know that makes me a nerd." She caught up to me, an extra bounce in her steps.

"Did you know this land was once traveled by the Seneca Indians?"

"Please tell me we aren't walking on any burial grounds?"

"Well...I'm sure there *are* burial grounds around here somewhere. Even though they just traveled through this area, it's not a stretch that some died on this very spot and—"

"Daemon, I don't need to know that part." She lightly pushed my arm.

The ease with which she touched me was unnerving. It took me a moment to get past that.

"Okay, I'll tell you the story and I'll leave some of the more creepy but natural facts out." I grabbed a long branch, holding it back for Kat to duck under. Her shoulder brushed my chest, kicking around my sense of awareness.

"What story?" she asked, thick lashes lowered, shielding her eyes.

"You'll see. Now pay attention... A long time ago, this land was forest and hills, which isn't too different than today with the exception of a few small towns." I pushed the lower branches out of the way for her. At this point, she might impale herself; she was so obscenely unaware of how to walk in the woods. "But imagine this place so sparsely populated that it could take days, even weeks, before you reached your nearest neighbor."

She shivered. "That seems so lonely."

"But you have to understand that was the way of life hundreds of years ago. Farmers and mountain men lived a few miles away from one another, but the distance was all traveled by foot or horse. It wasn't usually the safest way to travel."

"I can imagine." Her response was faint.

"The Seneca Indian tribe traveled through the eastern part of the United States, and at some point, they walked this very path toward the Seneca Rocks." Our gazes glanced off each other. "Did you know that this very small path behind your house leads right to the base of them?"

"No. They always seem so far off in the distance, I never thought of them as being that close."

"If you stayed on this path for a couple of miles, you'd find yourself at the base of them. It's a pretty rocky patch even the most experienced rock climbers stay away from. See, the Seneca Rocks spread from Grant to Pendleton County, with the highest point being Spruce Knob and an outcropping near Seneca called Champe Rocks. Now they are kind of hard to get to, since it usually involves invading someone's property, but it can be worth it if you can scale way beyond nine hundred feet in the sky."

Man, I loved getting up there. Hadn't done it in a while.

"That sounds like fun." Her smile was pained.

I laughed. "It is if you're not afraid of slipping. Anyway, the Seneca Rocks are made out of quartzite, which is part sandstone. That's why it sometimes has a pinkish tint to it. Quartzite is considered a beta quartz. People who believe in..." Hmm, had to proceed carefully. "Abnormal powers or powers in...nature, as a lot of Indian tribes did at one time, believe that any form of beta quartz allows energy to be stored and transformed, even manipulated by it. It can throw off electronics and other stuff, too—hide things."

"Ooo-kay."

I shot her a look and she quieted. "Possibly the beta quartz drew the Seneca Tribe to this area. No one knows, since they weren't native to West Virginia. No one knows how long any of them camped here, traded, or made war." I slowed my steps, nearing the small stream. "But they do have a very romantic legend."

"Romantic?" She followed me around the stream, her ponytail bouncing with each step. It was sort of distracting.

"See, there was this beautiful Indian princess called Snowbird, who had asked seven of the tribe's strongest warriors to prove their love by doing something only she had been able to do. Many men wanted to be with her for her beauty and her rank. But she wanted an equal."

I wasn't normally a chatty Cathy. Most people who knew me would probably be checking my temp by now, I'd strung so many sentences together in a row. But Kat was riveted. I liked that.

"When the day arrived for her to choose her husband, she set forth a challenge so only the bravest and most dedicated warrior would win her hand. She asked her suitors to climb the highest rock with her." The path narrowed and I slowed down. "They all started, but as it became more difficult, three turned back. A fourth became weary and a fifth crumpled in exhaustion. Only two remained, and the beautiful Snowbird stayed in the lead. Finally, she reached the highest point and turned to see who was the bravest and strongest of all warriors. Only one remained a few feet behind her and as she watched, he began to slip."

Stepping around an outcropping of rocks, I waited until Kat had passed them. "Snowbird paused only for a second, thinking that this brave warrior obviously was the strongest, but he was not her equal. She could save him or she could let him slip. He was brave, but he had yet to reach the highest point like she had."

"But he was right behind her? How could she just let him fall?" She sounded almost panicked and, yeah, cute again.

"What would you do?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Not that I would ever ask a group of men to prove their love by doing something incredibly dangerous and stupid like that, but if I ever found myself in that situation, as unlikely—"

"Kat?"

She squared her shoulders. "I would reach out and save him, of course. I couldn't let him fall to his death."

"But he didn't prove himself," I reasoned.

"That doesn't matter." Her gray eyes flashed like storm clouds. "He was right behind her and how beautiful could you truly be if you let a man fall to his death just because he slipped? How could you even be capable of love or worthy of it, for that matter, if you let that happen?"

I nodded slowly. "Well, Snowbird thought like you."

A wide smile broke out across her face. "Good."

"Snowbird decided that the warrior was her equal and with that, her decision had been made. She grabbed the man before he could fall. The chief met them and was very pleased with his daughter's choice in mate. He granted their marriage and made the warrior his successor."

"So is that why the rocks are called Seneca Rocks? After the Indians and Snowbird?"

"That's what the legend says."

"It's a beautiful story, but I think the whole climbing several hundred feet in the air to prove your love is a little excessive."

I chuckled. "I'd have to agree with you on that."

"I'd hope so or you'd find yourself playing with cars on an interstate to prove your love nowadays." Her features tensed, and then a flush raced across her cheeks.

"I don't foresee that happening," I said quietly.

"Can you get to where the Indians climbed from here?" she asked.

"You could get to the canyon, but that's serious hiking. Not something I would suggest you doing by yourself."

Kat laughed, and the sound was light and almost free. "Yeah, I don't think you have to worry about that. I wonder why the Indians came here. Were they looking for something? It's hard to believe that a bunch of rocks brought them here."

"You never know." Who knew why they came, but there had to be a reason. "People tend to look on the beliefs of the past as being primitive and unintelligent, yet we are seeing more truth in the past every day." She looked at me in a long, assessing way. "What was it that made the rocks important again?"

"It's the type of rock..." I turned to her, my gaze sliding across her face and then over her shoulder. Oh shit. My eyes widened. "Kitten?"

"Would you stop calling me—?"

"Be quiet," I whispered, gaze fixed over her shoulder as I placed my hand on her bare arm. "Promise me you won't freak out."

"Why would I freak out?" she whispered back.

Well, most people would freak out over a three-hundred-pound bear only several feet away, and it was a big one. Energy began building in me. I tugged Kat closer to me and her hands flew to my chest, above my heart. "Have you ever seen a bear?" I asked.

"What? There's a bear—?" She pulled out of my grasp and spun around.

Kat stiffened against me.

The bear's ears twitched, picking up on our breathing. I willed Kat to remain still. There was a good chance the bear would just mosey on past us. Or at least I hoped it would, because if that sucker rushed us, I was going to have to do something to scare it off.

Something that would not be easy to explain.

"Don't run," I told her.

She gave a jerky nod.

My hands settled on her arms again, and I don't even think she felt it. Then, without any provocation, the bear huffed out a low growl as it rose onto its hind legs. Massive jaws opened and it roared, pawing at the air.

Oh shit.

Letting go of Kat, I stepped away from her and started waving my arms, shouting at it, but the bear dropped onto its paws, shoulders shaking and fur coat twitching. It charged right at Kat.

Cursing, I shot back toward her. She was frozen, eyes squeezed shut and face drawn and pale. I didn't stop to think. I lifted my hand and blinding white light, tinged in red, swirled down my arm, snapping into the air. A bolt of light, very much like lightning, slammed into the ground, no more than a foot in front of Kat, startling the bear.

All of it happened so fast.

Scared, the bear reared back and shifted its heavy body, running off in the opposite direction just as the light receded. The burst of energy bounced, and I saw Kat's legs fold and her head tip to the side. And she went down.

I snapped forward, catching her before she hit the ground and lifting her up in my arms, cradling her close to my chest as I kept my eyes on the area the bear had disappeared to. I doubted she'd passed out due to fright. She'd been too close to the Source. God only knew what the charge had done to her heart or nervous system.

"Shit shit," I muttered, calming only slightly when I heard her heartbeat still pounding in her chest.

When I was sure the bear wasn't coming back, I looked down at her. Pressure clamped down on my chest. Oh no. Dammit. No...

A faint white glow surrounded Kat, almost like an aura or like the space around her was glowing with a supernatural light humans couldn't see. But it would be visible to any Luxen...and to any Arum.

I'd traced her.

CHAPTER 7

Kat seemed incredibly small and delicate in my arms, her weight so slight I pressed her closer. Oddly, her head fit perfectly against my shoulder, as if she'd placed it there and fallen asleep instead of passing out.

I couldn't believe I'd inadvertently knocked her out.

In a twisted way, it was a blessing in disguise. Most likely I wouldn't have to come up with some whacked-out excuse for why it seemed like lightning had shot from my fingertips and scared a bear off.

Above, dark clouds rolled in. A storm was brewing—a common consequence of too much charged power. Something to do with the electrical fields affecting the weather and blah blah blah.

But even if Kat woke up and believed the incoming storm had something to do with scaring the bear off, I'd traced her. Which was equivalent to putting a bull's-eye on her back, especially when there might be Arum around.

Shit.

Here I was, ranting at Dee over how dangerous it was getting close to Kat, and I'm the one who was bored and coaxed her into a walk, who had endangered them all.

The trace should fade in a couple of days. As long as she stayed home and no one other than Dee saw her, then it shouldn't be a problem.

I laughed drily, almost bitterly. Not going to be a problem? Dee was never going to let me hear the end of it.

Heading back down the trail, I forced my gaze to stay forward instead of on what I carried, focused on the scenery. Trees—lots of trees and maple-shaped leaves, pine needles, a few shrubs...birds hopping from limb to limb, shaking out their feathers. A squirrel shimmied up the trunk of a tree.

I glanced down.

Thick lashes fanned paler-than-normal cheeks. I kind of thought she looked like Snow White. Good God, that sounded lame. Snow White? But her lips were parted perfectly, and they were rosy even without makeup.

Thunder cracked and the scent of rain rolled in. Checking to make sure she was still out like a little kitten, I picked up the pace and flew down the trail. Even as fast as I moved, the storm was unpredictable, and the skies opened up, drenching us. And still, she slept.

She reminded me of Dawson. An atomic bomb wouldn't have woken my brother.

After reaching the porch steps, I slowed down and shook my head, sending droplets of rain flying in every direction. I stopped at the door and frowned. Had she locked it before she left? Dammit, I couldn't remember. If so, she probably had a key in her pocket, but that would mean going into her pocket and getting it. How else would I explain how I unlocked her door?

My gaze dipped and ran over her legs. Legs unbelievably long for someone so short...and those shorts were short. Tiny pockets, too.

Yeah, I was not going after that key.

Well past time to deposit her little butt on the swing and get the hell out of here.

Sighing, I went over to the swing and started to put her down, but she snuggled closer. I froze, wondering if she was awake. A quick check told me she wasn't. Again, I went to lay her down, but I stopped this time. What would she think if she woke up here alone?

Why did I care?

"Dammit," I muttered.

Searching the porch frantically as if it held the answers, I finally rolled my eyes and sat, placing her beside me. It made sense that I would stay. I had to know if she had seen me shoot a lightning bolt out of my hand, I reasoned. I kept my arm around her, because knowing my luck, she'd slip out of the swing and crack her head open. Then Dee *would* kill me.

I tipped my head back and closed my eyes. Why had I come over here today? Was it really just boredom? If that was the case, I could've watched the episodes of *Ghost Investigators* I had DVRed. I hadn't really considered what I was doing until I was knocking on her door and it was too late to think about it.

I was an idiot.

Kat murmured something and wiggled closer, pressing her cheek against my chest. She was molded to the entire right side of my body: thigh to thigh. Her hand curled below my hip and I started counting backward from a hundred. When I got to seventy, I found myself staring at her lips.

I really needed to stop staring at her lips.

Her brow wrinkled, lids flickering as if she was having a bad dream. Some ridiculous part of me responded to that—to the minute distress pinching her features, tensing her body. My thumb started to move along her lower back, tracing idle circles. Seconds passed, and she settled right down, her breathing deep and steady.

How long would she sleep? Part of me wasn't bothered by the prospect of sitting here for hours. There was something calming about holding her, but it was also the exact opposite, because every inch of my body was aware of how she fit to my side, of where her hand was, the rise and fall of her chest.

This was peaceful *and* torturous.

Some time later, after what felt like forever and yet not enough time at all, Kat stirred awake. It was a slow process that began with her muscles tensing, relaxing, and then tensing again when she realized what...who she was lying on.

My hand stilled, but I didn't move it away. Wasn't like she was going to fall on her face now, but I... I just didn't, and I wasn't at all okay with that. I clenched my jaw.

Kat lifted her head. "What...what happened?"

Oh, you know, shot a pure bolt of energy at a bear and you wilted like a delicate flower at my feet. Then I carried you back like a true gentleman and sat here for God knows how long and just stared at you.

Yep, so not going there.

I pulled my arm free. "You passed out."

"I did?" She scooted back, brushing a mass of hair out of her face. It was then that I realized her hair had come undone at some point. My gaze dropped briefly. As expected, her hair was long and thick, falling over her shoulders.

"I guess the bear scared you," I told her. "I had to carry you back."

"All the way?" She looked disappointed, which made me curious. "What...what happened to the bear?"

"The storm scared it. Lightning, I think. Are you feeling okay?"

Lightning lit the porch, startling her. "The bear was scared of a storm?"

"I guess so."

"We got lucky, then." She glanced down, brows knitting, and when those lashes lifted, I had to force myself to keep breathing normally. There was a quality to those gray eyes—a glimmer that sucked me right in. "It rains here like it does in Florida."

I nudged her knee with mine. "I think you may be stuck with me for a few more minutes." Really, that was a stupid excuse for not leaving. I needed something better—no, what I needed was to leave. Get up and leave. But then she spoke again.

"I'm sure I look like a drowned cat."

I'd almost prefer the drowned cat. "You look fine. The wet look works for you."

She scowled. "Now I know you're lying."

I was a lot of things, but until recently, a liar wasn't one of them. And apparently, I was as unpredictable as the weather, so much so that I had no idea what I was doing until I shifted and wrapped my fingers around her chin, tilting her head toward me.

"I wouldn't lie about what I thought," I said, and that was the truth.

Kat blinked slowly, and my gaze dropped to her lips again. I really, really needed to stop looking at her lips. Muscles tightened at the thought of tasting them. She'd probably clock me in the face and then lay into me with that razor-sharp tongue of hers. Which made me want to grin.

I leaned forward. "I think I understand now."

"Understand what?" she whispered.

My unwilling fascination with her—I got it. She didn't put up with any of my crap. I was surrounded by people who looked to me to have all the answers, to protect them, to never show fear. And so I put on a big front and swaggered around like nothing frightened me. It was exhausting sometimes. But Kat, she saw right through all my bluster and kept me honest. And I liked that…a lot.

A pink flush stained her cheeks. I chased that color with my thumb. "I like to watch you blush."

She sucked in a tiny breath, and it undid me. Pressing my forehead against hers, I pushed it to the limit. This was insanity, but she smelled of peaches and her skin was soft and her lips looked even softer.

I was caught up in a web there really was no escaping. A web of Kat... One I damn guarantee she had no idea she weaved. A naive beauty, and I'd seen a lot in my eighteen years to know that was a rarity. Something to be cherished.

Lightning struck again, and Kat didn't jump at the thunder this time. She was focused in a way that pleased me, pulled at my control, and teased me with what I could never have. Shouldn't even want, but I wanted... God, did I ever want. And if we continued where we were heading, it would get messy. I already knew what happened when Luxen and humans mixed. I had too much responsibility to be fooling around with her. Too much going on...

But I still wanted.

My fingers slipped along the curve of her cheek as my head tilted. I was going to regret this—holy crap was I ever, but I wasn't stopping. Our lips were only a breath away...

"Hey, guys!" Dee called out.

I jerked back, sliding in one fluid movement and putting distance between us on the swing while Kat

turned a fierce shade of red. I'd been so absorbed in her, I hadn't heard my sister's car or noticed the storm had passed and the sun was out, shining and all.

Great.

Dee came up the steps, her smile fading as her gaze bounced between us and then narrowed. No doubt she was seeing the faint trace around Kat and wondering how the hell that happened. Then she seemed to focus on what she'd just interrupted.

Her mouth dropped open.

It wasn't often that I surprised her…like this. I grinned. "Hey, there, sis. What's up?"

"Nothing," she said. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I replied, jumping from the swing. I glanced at a silent, dazed-looking Kat. Her gray eyes were still hazy and wide. Freaking beautiful. Damn, I needed to nip this in the bud right now, before something worse than just a trace happened. I met her gaze. "Just earning bonus points."

Kat went ramrod straight, her eyes flashing and hands curling in her lap as my words sank in.

Ah, there it was—there was the kitten coming out, claws sharpening. The warm, cuddly creature was gone in an instant. I'd done that. Taken her up and slammed her right back down to earth, to reality. That was all me.

I wasn't proud, but at least this way she'd live. We'd all live.

I spun toward the steps, leaving her with my sister, who was staring at me in confusion. I felt like the biggest ass on the planet.

Hell, in the universe.

The sun had set when my bedroom door burst open and Dee whirled in like a tornado, dark hair streaming from behind her and eyes gleaming with excitement.

"What in the world did I interrupt?" she demanded.

I closed the lid on my Mac before Dee could see what I was looking at. "You're back from the colony early."

She danced over to the bed, rising up on the tips of her toes. "Not like that's really important, but if you must know, I think Ethan was just getting super annoyed with me and decided to let me leave." She paused, grinning mischievously. "Plus, they're having some kind of dinner reception for the females who are getting married Tuesday night and I said I'd come back…with Ash."

My brows rose. "Uh, does she know that?"

"Yes. And she's totally ticked off at me, but she can't say no. But that's not important!" She clapped her hands as she rocked back and forth. "What were you doing on the porch with Katy?"

I sat the Mac on my nightstand. "I was sitting out there with her."

Dee's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, duh, but you weren't just doing that. Don't play with me."

Had Kat said more? The urge to ask rushed to the tip of my tongue, but I mentally punched myself in the face. Wasn't going to go there. "I'm not playing with you, sis."

"That's poppycock!"

"Poppycock," I repeated slowly and then laughed. "Are you high?"

She lifted her hand and flipped me off. "You looked like you were about to kiss her."

A muscle thrummed along my jaw as I leaned back against the headboard, folding my arms behind my head. "I think you are projecting or something."

"While I think Katy is hot, I don't want to make out with her." She winked.

"Glad to hear that," I muttered.

"Ugh, why can't you just admit you were about to do something!" She threw herself onto the bed, shaking the entire frame. Girl looked small but she was like a damn train. "You were going in for the kiss. Your hand was on her chin."

Closing my eyes, I decided the last thing I needed was a blow-by-blow description of how close I came to complete disaster.

"And then add in the fact you made up some lame excuse about keys and bonus points?"

"The bonus points thing wasn't a lie. You used to make me do that all the time," I reminded her.

She punched my leg, causing me to grunt. "Yeah, when I was, like, five years old."

My lips twitched.

"So why did you make up an excuse to hang out with her?" she persisted.

I sighed. "Like I told you when I texted you, I haven't been particularly nice to her and I needed an excuse. Otherwise she would've said no." The last part was definitely not a lie. If I hadn't virtually blackmailed her into going to the lake with me, she would've said no. Tonight? I really hadn't had to say anything. Interesting.

"But why—?"

"Dee," I growled, opening my eyes to find my sister lying on her stomach with her chin in her hands. She was grinning up at me. "Shouldn't you be focused on something a little more important."

She batted her lashes. "I think I am focused on something super important."

I resisted the urge to knock her off the bed. "You can't tell me you didn't notice the trace on her."

"Oh! Yeah. *That*." She tapped pale blue nails against her cheek. "How did that happen?"

For a moment, all I could do was stare at her. Obviously, she wasn't that concerned, which made me fear for her well-being. "We went on a walk—"

"How romantic," she cooed.

My lips turned down at the corners. "It wasn't romantic."

"I think it is," she went on happily. "When Adam and I take walks it always ends with us—"

"If you want Adam to stay alive, I suggest you don't finish that sentence."

She rolled her eyes. "Anyway, so you went on a totally not romantic walk and..."

I was going to knock her off this bed. "And we happened across a bear. It charged us and I had to do something. I didn't think you'd be happy with me if I let a bear maul her to death."

"Gee, you think?"

I mouthed a not very nice four-letter word that included "you" at her.

She giggled. "So how did you explain that one off?"

"Well, the energy kind of knocked her out, and I blamed it on the storm—lightning." I exhaled loudly. "I was lucky."

"Katy was lucky."

My gaze shot to her. "How so?"

Dee moved in one fluid motion, sitting cross-legged in less than a second. "That you were there to save her."

It seemed too obvious to point out the fact that she wouldn't have needed me to protect her if I hadn't dragged her out into the woods in the first place.

"Can I ask you something?" Dee poked my knee with her fingers of death.

I arched a brow. "Do I really have a say in that?"

"No." She flashed a quick grin. "Do you...do you like Katy?"

Every single part of me locked up. My sister waited while a hundred different responses ran through my head. Did I like her? What in the hell kind of question was that? I lowered my arms and sat up a little, throwing one leg off the bed.

"Daemon?"

I didn't look at my sister as I stood. "No."

"What?" she whispered.

"You heard me." I rubbed my palm over my jaw, sighing as I walked over to the dresser and picked up the remote. "Look, I'm sure she's a great girl and friend, and if she wasn't...human, she'd be about three thousand times awesome, but no, I don't like her." Dee was quiet as I returned to the bed, and she didn't look up when I sat back down. Her lips were pursed, and now I felt like shit. "Want to watch a movie?"

"Sure." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes, and I wished I hadn't even looked at her. "Do you think she'll be safe at least? With the trace?"

"Yeah. I've got this." The pressure was back on my shoulders, and I flipped on the TV. "As long as she stays put for the next couple of days, she'll be fine."

Dee moved until she was sitting against the headboard, shoulder to shoulder with me. After a moment, she pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. I started flipping through On Demand and she sighed morosely.

I opened my mouth and then closed it. Another moment passed and I lowered the remote. "I lied." She turned to me. "About what?"

"The first question you asked." I didn't look at her as I shook my head, staring at the list of movies on the screen. "I lied, just a little."

CHAPTER 8

"I was beginning to wonder if you were becoming a recluse or something." Andrew sat on the narrow railing surrounding the raised deck, his legs dangling into empty space. A near-empty bottle of beer was perched on the railing beside him, and if he'd been human, he would've been the poster child for the dangers of underage drinking. "Or if you just didn't like us anymore."

Sitting in a chair with my feet kicked up on the patio table, I smirked. "It would be the latter."

Andrew snickered. "You're a jackass."

I didn't disagree with that statement.

Across from me, Adam mirrored my same position, except he was staring out into the woods, a thoughtful expression on his face. Sometimes being around the brothers was hard, because it reminded me of how it used to be with Dawson.

Andrew and Adam were identical in physical appearance, both tall and strong, blue eyed and blond, but their personalities couldn't be any more different. They really were like Dawson and I used to be. I was the hothead. Dawson was the calm one. Andrew was the asshole and Adam was the peacekeeper.

Not that I'd ever tell Dee, but I was glad it was Adam she appeared to be taking more seriously. I really didn't know how much their relationship had progressed, and I tried not to think about it, but yeah, I was glad. Andrew was too much like me.

As I watched Andrew finish off his beer, my mind wandered. Coming over to their place Tuesday evening didn't feel right, not when Kat had a trace on her, but Andrew had been right. I hadn't seen the guys in a while and Dee had told me that Kat was staying home. She would be okay there, since it was doubtful an Arum would get that close to the colony, and as long as she wasn't out running around publically with Dee, endangering her, I really shouldn't care.

I didn't care.

Dee's question had been haunting me. *Do you like her?* I'd said no, and I had lied a little. What I felt for Kat was complicated and twisty. I liked her, but I didn't. I also liked wolves, but I didn't want one as a pet.

Picking up my bottle of water, I took a long swig of it as Adam glanced over at me. "Do you know when the girls are getting back?"

I raised one shoulder. "Don't know."

"Ash was pissed." Andrew chuckled as he looked over his shoulder. "She said she was leaving as soon as Dee finished stuffing her face with food."

"Gotta love a girl with an appetite," Adam murmured, lips tipping up at one corner.

My eyes narrowed on him.

Adam's grin faded. "Or not."

"Sounds about right," I commented, idly spinning the bottle of water.

Andrew leaned backward and flipped over, landing on his feet like a damn cat. He twisted around, picking up the empty bottle. "I need another drink." He looked over in my direction. "You?"

"I'm good."

"Pansy ass."

I flipped him off.

He chuckled as he disappeared into the house, closing the door behind him. My gaze traveled behind the deck, to the heavy edge of the forest. From our vantage point, I could see the tips of Seneca Rocks. I liked it out here. Like where Matthew lived, there really weren't any other houses nearby, and it was almost always quiet. The only noise came from the wildlife, and as night was steadily falling, the hum of crickets increased. I looked up. Darker storm clouds were starting to roll in.

"I know," Adam announced.

Frowning, I looked over at him. "Know about what?"

He glanced at the door before he continued. "I know about the girl who moved in next door."

The foot I'd been moving stilled. "I'm going to take a wild guess and say Dee told you?"

Adam nodded as he leaned back, folding his arms. "Dee really likes her."

"Hmm."

"I haven't said anything to Ash or Andrew. Not planning to, because you know how they're going to react. I'm guessing Matthew knows?" When I nodded, his thoughtful expression returned. "Got to admit, though, I'm kind of surprised you haven't said anything."

I sat the bottle on the table. "Don't know why you'd think I'd actually bring it up. Not like I sit around and think about the girl."

Adam cocked his head to the side, his grin slow to appear. "Well, I wasn't insinuating that you sit around and think about her, but normally, you'd be bitching to anyone who'll listen about Dee making friends with a human girl."

A muscle flexed in my jaw. "It's not important."

"It kind of is," he replied.

"And I don't sit around bitching about things."

Adam's shoulders shook with a silent laugh, and I started to tell him exactly what I thought about that when my phone vibrated in my pocket. Stretching to the side, I yanked it out of my pocket. Dee's name flashed across the screen.

I answered it. "You done with that dinner thing already?"

Adam perked up across from me, and I decided I really didn't like that. "I think we have a problem," Dee started, her voice pitched high.

Pulling my feet off the table, I tensed. "What kind of problem?"

"Is there any chance that Kat is with you?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

A ball of dread settled in my stomach like lead. "No. No chance in hell."

"Oh no. I just got back to the house and her car is not in the driveway. So I stopped over to just be sure she wasn't there and no one answered." She paused, her breath ragged over the phone. "She's left the house, and she has a trace on her."

I was standing without even realizing it, walking over to the edge of the deck. My voice was low. "You said she was staying in tonight."

"I know." Her voice rose. "That's what she told me, but she didn't."

"Dammit." My hand tightened around the phone. "Of course she didn't."

"Is everything okay?" Adam asked from behind me.

I ignored him as Dee spoke up. "Don't be mad at her, Daemon. She doesn't know it's not safe for

her out there right now. She has no idea. This isn't her fault."

Her fault or not didn't matter. It was still a huge pain in my ass.

"I'm going to go and see if I can find her. I bet she's at the library and I will—"

"No, you won't. You aren't going anywhere. You keep your butt at home." Anger rushed over me, but underneath that, dread was expanding. "I'll take care of it."

"Daemon—"

"I'll text you as soon as I find her." I resisted the urge to turn the phone into a missile. "I'm sure she's fine. Just...just stay home and don't worry."

Hanging up, I dropped the phone back in my pocket. "I've got to go."

Adam stood, concern etched into his features. He already had his phone in his hand, and I hoped like hell Dee knew to keep the whole trace thing to herself. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah." I placed my hands on the railing. "Tell Andrew I'll catch up with him later."

I vaulted over the railing, dropping a good fifteen feet below, landing in a crouch. I rose and took off toward the front of the house. I almost started to go past my SUV, because I could get to the library faster on foot, but how would I explain that to Kat when I found her?

Hell.

Pivoting around, I hurried toward my car and climbed in. Turning the engine on, I threw the SUV into reverse, navigating it around the cars and trees. The drive into town felt like it took an eternity, and I had to have gotten behind every slow-moving ass on the highway. Fat drops of rain splattered off the windshield. Since it started raining, it appeared no one could drive more than twenty miles an hour. My hands clenched the steering wheel until my knuckles bleached white. Anger rolled through me like the storm brewing outside.

I was angry at Kat for not staying put, furious with myself for putting her in a position where I was going to have to search her ass down and come up with some lame-ass reason why I was there.

And pissed off that I hadn't been home to catch her ass leaving.

When I made it into Petersburg, I was ready to run over a small village with my SUV, and since parking was a bitch in the evening and I wasn't in a hurry or anything, I ended up having to leave the car three blocks over, parked behind a diner.

There was a lot of traffic on the main streets, so I had to watch myself. The rain was tapering off and the street lamps were flickering on as I headed down the sidewalk, toward the town library. My mood was dark, matching the clouds ahead, and when I spied the library and didn't see her car, I was ready to destroy something.

Either she had already left or she'd never been here. There was only one other place to check, a less trafficked side road that was behind the library. I picked up my pace, cutting across the narrow lawn in front of the building, and rounded the side.

An icy chill exploded along the base of my neck and powered down my spine, kicking my instinct to shift into my true form into overdrive. The dread exploded like a buckshot.

I could feel *them*, tainting the air and the ground, cloaking the narrow street in unnatural, thick shadows. My brain clicked off and I picked up speed, becoming a blur as I cleared the side of the library. I spotted Kat's car. A light was on inside, but I didn't see her.

The presence of an Arum grew stronger.

Shooting across the road, I came up on her car and I felt it—the oily thickness in the air nearly choking me. Then I saw it in its human form, but the edges of it were shaded out, transparent like dark smoke. I didn't see Kat, but it had something—someone—on the ground, and I knew without seeing her that it was Kat.

And it could already be too late.

This...this was my fault.

The rage and dread whirled through me like a hurricane, and I had no idea how I managed to stay in my human form as I grabbed the Arum by its shoulder. My hand sunk a few inches into it, and then I had ahold of its bone and muscle. I yanked back hard, lifting the Arum into the air and tossing it several feet to the side. I caught a brief glimpse of Kat, and my fury tasted like death in the back of my throat.

The thing twisted in midair, turning to nothing more than shadows before consolidating rapidly into a human mass as it landed on its feet. I shot toward it, catching the bastard in the stomach with my shoulder. It cried out and then pushed back, shoving its hand toward my chest. A curse exploded out of me as I staggered back a step. The arm turned transparent, and I knew what it was going to try to do. Feed.

Yeah, not going to happen.

I spun out of the way, avoiding its grip. Moving as fast as a cobra striking, I grabbed ahold of the Arum and tossed him over my shoulder. He landed near Kat, stunned for a moment.

A soft whimper rattled me. Kat was hurt.

Before I could process this new fear, the Arum popped to its feet. The combination of blond hair and pale skin washed the thing out, and as it charged me, dark shadows blossomed under the thin layer of skin. I caught the Arum by the throat, lifting him into the air.

A series of coughs came from the direction of Kat, and I cursed as I power-bombed the asshole into the road. Asphalt cracked. Tiny rocks that were knocked loose flew into the air.

Hatred bled into the pale blue gaze that met mine, so much cold hatred. We rolled farther away, into the shadows. He landed a punch. I landed more. Taking out the Arum in public like this was risky, but I needed to end this and I needed...I needed to check on her.

Lifting my arm, I brought my hand down onto the Arum's chest as I summoned the Source. Energy, pure and raw and as powerful as a solar flare, burned down my arm. An intense whitish-red light erupted from my hand, flowing into the Arum.

Time froze for a moment as the light washed over the creature, seeping into its chest cavity, beyond its skin, and invading every cell. Bright white light washed over its eyes, chasing after the shadows lurking under its skin.

I rocked off the Arum, just in the nick of time, too. The pale skin disappeared, replaced by a smooth onyx shell. The creature stilled for a moment, its mouth hanging open in a silent scream, and then it exploded into a million wispy fragments that floated up, disappearing into the sky.

The charge backed up into the environment around us. Streetlamps exploded, casting the entire street into darkness. Breathing heavily, I took a step back and looked over to Kat. She was lying on her stomach awkwardly, nearly facedown in the road. Something about that ripped through me.

I crossed the distance between us in a heartbeat, kneeling beside her as I reached out, placing my hand on her shoulder. A soft moan radiated from her, and that tearing feeling deep inside me increased.

"It's okay. He's gone. Are you okay?" Damn. That was a stupid question. She started to lift her head, and I saw the angry red mark on her cheek, like a bright strawberry. Her left eye was swelling. Anger punched through me. She was hurt and in pain, that much was obvious, and her breathing didn't sound right. There was a concerning wheezing quality to it. I wasn't a doctor, but it didn't sound good.

"Everything is okay," I told her, and that was a lie, because as I spoke those three words, I did something so incredibly reckless I might as well have thrown myself in front of a speeding truck.

She was hurt, and instinctively, I knew I could fix some of it, even all of it. I'd never done it before. It was so forbidden, so taboo for our kind it was barely spoken of. One of our most remarkable attributes, the one thing that the Arum could not assimilate after feeding, was our regenerative ability. We healed rapidly from almost all injuries...and we could heal others.

I reached out to the Source, pulled it down inside myself, and then I pushed it into Kat, guiding the light to her chest and her raspy lungs. If anyone walked by right now, they'd see our bodies lit up like a lightbulb, and I counted myself ten kinds of foolish, but I didn't stop. Her eyes were closed, but as the energy began to crackle along her skin, her lashes fluttered as if to open, and I ran my hand gently across her eyes and down her cheek, and she relaxed.

Her breathing evened out a little as she slowly turned her head toward me. "Thank you for..." She trailed off.

"Kat," I called to her, concerned. "Are you still with me?"

"You," she whispered.

"Yes, it's me." I moved my hand to her wrist. She jerked her arm back, and I reached for her again. Since I was in for a penny, I might as well go for the whole screwed-up pound. "I can help you."

"No!" she cried out.

I considered ignoring that as I glanced down at her wrist. She was still hurt, but the worst of her injuries, whatever had been affecting her breathing, had healed. I released the Source and stood, exhaling roughly. A thousand thoughts spun through me, all circling back to what in the hell had I done? "Whatever. I'll call the police."

The last thing I wanted to involve was the police, but Kat needed to be looked at by actual medical professionals. Taking a step back, I pulled out my phone and did just that, keeping a wary eye on her. She struggled to sit up, and I stopped myself from helping her. There was a good chance if I touched her again, I'd end up healing her some more, since my impulse control was so awesome at this point.

"Thank...you," she said, voice hoarse after I hung up the phone.

I winced. The trace on her before had been a soft glow, but after healing her, she was lit up like a fucking neon sign. "Don't thank me." I shoved my hand through my hair and then lowered it to my side. Both hands formed fists as I watched her finally sit up. The mark on her face, the swelling in her eye, made me wish the Arum were still alive so I could kill it all over again. "Dammit, this is my fault."

She stared up at me, confusion and something else I couldn't quite pinpoint etched into her face. Frustration doubled inside me. This was my fault. Like a dumbass, I'd traced her on Saturday. I knew there was a chance there were Arum nearby, and I hadn't made sure she stayed home. Then she was attacked, because the Arum saw that damn trace and knew she could lead it back to us—what it really wanted.

"Light—I saw light," she whispered, lowering her gaze.

"Well, they do say there is light at the end of the tunnel."

She shrank back, cringing.

Shit. That was possibly the most asshole thing I could say. I crouched down. "Dammit, I'm sorry. That was thoughtless." I paused. "How bad are you hurt?"

"My throat... It hurts." She lifted a shaky hand and pressed it to her throat, wincing. "So does my wrist. I'm not...sure if it's broken. But there was a flash...of light."

My gaze zeroed in on her wrist. The skin was quickly deepening in color, becoming a purplish red. I didn't think it was broken. There was a good chance I'd fixed that, but she couldn't know that. No one could know that. I drew a deep breath. "It might be broken or sprained. Is that all?"

"All? The man... He was trying to kill me."

"I understand that. I was hoping he didn't break anything important." I glanced at the top of her disheveled head. "Like your skull?"

"No...I don't think so."

"Okay, okay." I stood, looking around. I needed to do damage control. "Why were you out here anyway?"

"I...wanted to go to the library." She paused for a moment. "It wasn't that...late. It's not...like we are in a crime-ridden...city. He said he needed help...flat tire."

My eyes widened as I turned back to her. "A stranger approaches you for help in a dark parking lot and you go and help him? That has to be one of the most careless things I've heard in a long time. I bet you think things through, right? Accept candy from strangers and get into vans with a sign that reads 'free kittens'?"

She made a soft sound as I began to pace.

"Sorry wouldn't have been helpful if I didn't come, now would it?" I said.

"So why were...you out here?"

I stilled, running a hand over my chest. "I just was."

"Geez, I thought you guys were supposed to be nice and charming."

I frowned. "What guys?"

"You know, the knight in shining armor and saving the damsel in distress kind."

Shaking my head, I lowered my hand. "I'm not your knight."

"Okay..." she whispered, pulling her legs up and resting her head on her knees. Everything about her movements looked painful. "Where is he now?"

"He took off. Long gone by now." I started toward her. "Kat...?"

She lifted her head, and when I didn't speak, she lowered her good arm to the ground and started to stand.

"I don't think you should stand." I kneeled again. "The ambulance and police should be here any minute. I don't want you passing out."

"I'm not going...to pass out." As if on cue, the sound of sirens could be heard.

"I don't want to have to catch you if you do." I glanced down at my hands. The skin had been scraped, but it had already healed "Did...did he say anything to you?"

Her brows knitted as she grimaced "He said...I had a trace on me. And he kept asking...where they were. I don't know why."

Hell. Lowering my chin, I looked over my shoulder. "He sounds like a lunatic."

"Yeah, but...who did he want?"

My attention snapped back to her. "A girl stupid enough to help a homicidal maniac with his *tire*, maybe?"

Her lips thinned. "You're such an ass. Has...anyone ever told you that?"

In that moment, I decided that if she was calling me an ass, she was going to be okay. "Oh, Kitten, every single day of my blessed life."

She stared at me, but I couldn't tell what she was thinking. "I don't even know what to say..."

"Since you already said thank you, I think nothing is the best way to go at this point." I stood. "Just please don't move. That's all I ask. Stay still and try not to cause any more trouble."

Kat frowned and looked like she wanted to say something, but praise all the higher beings in the universe, she remained quiet. The relief was short-lived, because when I glanced down at her, she was shaking so badly her teeth had to be rattling. It was then I realized she was soaked from the rain and

shock was probably kicking in.

Pulling off my shirt, I found myself kneeling beside her again. My shirt wasn't the best thing, but it was better than nothing. I carefully pulled it on over her head, keeping the material away from her bruised cheek. I got her limp arms through the holes, and the noodle quality to those arms worried me a little. I glanced up quickly. Her eyes were closed, thick lashes fanning the tops of her cheeks.

"Kat?"

Too late.

She toppled over to the right, and I caught her before she face-planted onto the cement. Her head lolled to the side and her hair, half up and half down, fell across her one unmarred cheek. Holding her against my chest with one arm, I brushed the hair back from her face. My fingers lingered along her jaw just below her ear. The sound of sirens grew closer, but I concentrated on each breath she took, her chest rising and falling steadily.

Kat was out cold.

"Hell," I muttered, staring down at her as I shifted her so the back of her head was cradled in the crook of my arm.

This was becoming a disturbing trend.

CHAPTER 9

There were few places in this world that I hated as much as hospitals. Luxen didn't get sick—no colds or cancers, no heart disease or strokes. Bumps and bruises could be healed with a touch of a hand. So I avoided these places at all costs.

Tonight it was unavoidable.

I stayed as out of the way as *in*humanly possible, leaning against the wall while Kat's mother flipped her shit. The pea-green curtain fluttered every time someone roamed into the room and back out. The deputies had come and gone, talking to both of us. Robbery gone wrong. I was in the right place at the right time. The police would do everything to try to locate the offender, but good luck there, because there was nothing left of the shithead, but what could I say? I just smiled and nodded and waited for the moment I could get the hell out of here. Actually, I could've already left, but it didn't feel right to do so.

I needed time to think.

My gaze drifted over to the narrow bed. Kat looked tired when my eyes found her. She was looking out the window, her pale face drawn and weary. The splash of red on her cheek wasn't easy to look at. Neither was her swollen eye. It could've been worse. My touch had sped up the healing process there and most likely repaired more serious injuries related to the imprint on her throat, remarkably similar to fingers. It was faint, but it was hard to look at.

Her arm was in a cast. Torn tendon or something. If she hadn't pulled her arm away, I could've fixed that, too. I mean, why not at this point? The trace was still around her, stronger than before, and I had a feeling it wouldn't be fading anytime soon.

Why in the hell hadn't they given her something for the pain yet?

Kat appeared incredibly small in that bed. Alone with me for a few seconds, she glanced over, and I raised a brow. Her gaze immediately flicked away.

Her mom had disappeared in search of a doctor and returned with a middle-age man, graying at the temples, who was vaguely familiar. The doc—Dr. Michaels—started reading off her chart, telling us things we already knew. He looked in my direction, and again, I was struck with this odd sense that I knew him from somewhere.

Probably around town. It was that small.

Dr. Michaels left after handing over some pain meds, and it was about damn time someone gave her something. Her mother hovered by her bed, and my jaw flexed when I saw the wetness gather in Kat's eyes. The girl... Yeah, she was tough stuff. She'd been holding it together this whole time. I started to close my eyes when I sensed my sister's presence. I'd called her on the way in, and no amount of reasoning had convinced her to stay at the house.

Dee rushed right past me. I chuckled. Glad to see that she was worried about me, because you know,

I didn't just fight an Arum or something. "Oh no, Katy, are you okay?"

Kat lifted the injured arm, and damn if she didn't offer a weak smile. "Yes. Just a little banged up."

Dee stared at Kat and then whipped around to me. "I can't believe this happened. *How* could this have happened? I thought you—"

"Dee," I warned.

She straightened, cheeks flushing as she received the silent message. Exhaling raggedly, she turned back to Kat, approaching her bed slowly. "I'm so sorry about this."

"It's not your fault," Kat replied.

My sister sat down, perched on the edge of the bed, distraught and seconds from getting up and kicking me, I'm sure, because she thought this was my fault.

It was.

But not for the same reasons as Dee believed. She was upset that I hadn't gotten to Kat in time, but the truth was, if I'd listened to my own advice and stayed away from her, I never would've traced her in the first place.

They started talking among themselves, and I let my eyes drift closed. Tonight had been... There really weren't any words when it came to the amount of FUBAR that had gone down, and fighting that Arum had drained me. I heard Dee talking about taking Kat home if her mom couldn't, which probably meant I would be the one taking them home.

Ms. Swartz returned, and although Kat was released, there was a huge accident out on one of the highways. Being the nurse on call that night, her mom couldn't leave, but Dee convinced her that we would not only take her home but watch out for signs of a concussion.

Thanks, Dee.

To be honest, I was...okay with that. I really didn't want either of them out there alone right now. Not until that trace was gone. My jaw tightened.

Because if there was one Arum, there were always three more. Luxen were always born in sets of three, so Arum always hunted in fours.

Dee left the ER room to grab a snack, and when I opened my eyes, Kat's stare was fixed on me, but something was off about it. Her eyes were glassy. Pain meds must be kicking in.

I pushed off the wall, making my way toward her. She closed her eyes. "Are you going to insult me again? Because I'm not up to...pear for that."

My lips twitched. "I think you mean par."

"Pear. Par. Whatever." Those heavy lashes lifted.

The bruises and red marks kept drawing my attention. "Are you really okay?"

"I'm great." She yawned. "Your sister acts as if this is her fault."

"She doesn't like it when people get hurt," I said quietly, and then as an afterthought, "and people tend to get hurt around us."

Her unsteady gaze met mine. "What does that mean?"

Dee returned at that moment, grinning. "We're good to go, with the doctor's orders and all."

Thank God.

I moved to Kat's bed, gingerly getting an arm behind her shoulders, helping her stand. The look she sent me, one of dazed bewilderment, was kind of cute. "Come on, let's get you home."

She shuffled two steps and then swayed unsteadily. "Whoa, I feel buzzed."

I glanced at Dee, who raised her brows and said, "I think the pills are starting to work."

"Am I...slurring yet?" Kat asked.

"Not at all." Dee laughed.

Kat hobbled a couple more steps, and I saw this going nowhere fast. Sighing, I scooped her up and then deposited her gently in a wheelchair just outside the ER room. "Hospital rules."

She just stared at me.

We stopped long enough to fill out some paperwork, but Kat wasn't much of a help by that point. The nurses thankfully put most of it aside for her mom to fill out later. Once we got to Dee's car, I picked Kat up and placed her in the backseat.

"I can walk, you know."

I carefully buckled her in, making sure I didn't jar the arm that was in the cast. "I know." Closing the door, I sent Dee a look as I walked around to the other side of the backseat and climbed in. By the time Dee had turned the engine, Kat's head was on my shoulder.

Stiffening, I glanced down at her and then up. Dee wasn't looking at me as she was pulling out of the parking spot. Then I glanced back at Kat. This couldn't be entirely comfortable. It sure as hell wasn't for me. Taking a deep breath, I lifted my arm and placed it around her shoulders. She immediately snuggled up, like a little kitten, with the good side of her face.

This was weird.

There were more moments of us being total asshats to each other than there were of us being actually decent, but the fact she'd do this and that I'd let her, actually aid in the process, was very... yeah, weird.

Her breathing deepened, and one of her hands fell to my thigh, the fingers slowly uncurling. "Kat?" I whispered.

No response.

"Is she awake?" Dee asked from the front.

"Out cold."

Dee let out a shaky breath. "She's going to be okay, right?"

I stared down at Kat, and even in the dark of the car, I could see her scratched-up cheek. "Yeah, she'll be fine."

"She said she was going to stay at home... I could still see it," she said.

"I know." We'd both known the trace was still there, and no one was kicking their own ass more than me. I paused. "Don't worry. I'm not going to let anything happen this time. I swear."

"It's not your fault. I shouldn't have said that in the ER. You didn't know this was going to happen."

I didn't know exactly, but it hadn't come out of left field either. We all knew there was a chance. It was why Dee had tried to convince her to stay home tonight.

"You did something, didn't you?" Dee asked quietly. "It's stronger now."

"I didn't...mean to." A few strands of Kat's hair fell across her cheek. I brushed them back. "It just happened. Shit."

Dee didn't speak again until she hit the highway. "Be honest with me. How badly was she hurt?"

"I don't know." I watched Kat's hand twitch against my leg. "I think... I think it was pretty bad. She seemed to have trouble breathing. That Arum was going to kill her."

"Oh God," Dee whispered.

Looking out the window, I watched the darkened trees blur past, broken up every few moments by headlights. "We... I just need to be more careful."

Dee didn't respond for a long moment. "Adam called. He knew something was up when you left the house. I told him—"

"I know you told him about Kat. He said something tonight." I dragged my gaze from the window, finding Dee's in the rearview mirror. "I'm going to have to tell them."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Adam doesn't care, but..."

Yeah, she didn't need to elaborate. Ash and Andrew would most definitely have a problem with it, but I'd killed an Arum tonight. Couldn't keep the lid on this jar of shit any longer.

We didn't speak the rest of the way, and Kat didn't wake up when we pulled in front of the house. She only stirred, murmuring under her breath when I unbuckled her and carefully drew her out of the car, once again in my arms and tucked against my chest.

"I got her purse and keys," Dee announced, closing the driver's door. "I'm going to unlock the door. You got her?"

"Of course."

Dee's gaze met mine, and I didn't want to know what she was thinking in that moment, but she whirled around and darted across the driveway, toward Kat's house. Twisting at the waist, I kneed the car door shut. I turned, shifting Kat in my arms.

She stirred, sliding her hand up my chest to my shoulder. A shiver rushed over my skin. Wrong as hell. Her lashes lifted, and I stopped a few feet from the car as the corners of her lips lifted up, too. Silvery moonlight glanced over her cheek. "Hey," she whispered.

"Hey."

Her unfocused gaze drifted over my face. "You...you are really pretty."

A surprised laugh burst out of me. "Thanks, Kitten."

Yeah, she was totally high and out of it, but her smile widened as her eyes closed. I wasn't high or out of it when I whispered back to her, "So are you."

I'd never been in Kat's house before, and I don't even know why it felt weird to be inside. Maybe it was because she was passed out. I hadn't investigated the house as I followed Dee into a similar foyer and through a doorway to the right. Dee had turned on a lamp, and soft yellow light enveloped the living room.

Books.

Books were everywhere.

Stacked by the corner of the couch, in a neat pile of five, spines facing out. Two were on the coffee table. One had a shiny bookmark poking out of the top. Three more were on the end table. Another was on the TV stand, and it too had a bookmark shoved in it. Was she reading two books at once? More?

I could barely read one at a time.

"I think we should stay down here," Dee said, sitting in a worn recliner by the window. "Just in case something is wrong."

Looking at Dee, I turned and stared at the couch, the only other available seating. I carried Kat over to the couch and laid her down. I sat beside her, my gaze crawling up to the slow-moving ceiling fan.

Dee talked for a little while, but she quickly fell asleep, virtually leaving me solely responsible for Kat, which was a bad idea in general, since I was doing a real bang-up job of that.

I dropped my elbow on the arm of the couch and rested my cheek in my palm, watching Kat's shoulders rise and fall steadily. I could've turned on the TV, but I didn't want to wake her or my sister.

Flicking my wrist, I managed to turn off the lamp without destroying it with a quick zip of energy. As the darkness surrounded us, the image trying to stir formed in my thoughts. I doubted I would ever

get the scene of that Arum standing over a broken Kat out of my head or forget the raspy sound of panic in her voice when she hadn't realized it was me at her side.

Yeah, tonight was going to linger.

I must've dozed off at some point, because daylight now filtered through the living room as Kat snuggled her way closer. Her head ended up in my lap, and that wasn't entirely comfortable. I shifted her carefully, but damn, I may not be human, but I *was* a guy.

Kat slept soundly, her injured arm curled against her chest and her lips slightly parted. I lifted my head, working a kink out of my neck. It was then that I realized my hand was resting on her curved hip.

Huh.

I had no recollection of doing that. Must've been in my sleep. I didn't move my hand, though. My entire being focused on that hand—which was only slightly better than focusing on where her head was. Through the thin denim of her jeans, the curve of her hip was soft. Warm. I imagined that this was what couples did, though Ash and I were never like this. She could get touchy. So could I, but this? Nah, I don't think we'd ever done anything like this.

Why was I even thinking about that with Kat?

Lack of sleep was getting to me.

Kat suddenly stiffened, and my gaze flew to her face. Her lashes were up. I couldn't see her eyes, but her chest rose sharply. Was she in pain? "You okay, Kitten?"

"Daemon?" Her voice was hoarse, throaty with sleep and sort of, okay, really kind of sexy. "I... Sorry. I didn't mean to sleep on you."

"It's okay," I told her and helped her sit up. Her face was too pale and the purplish bruise around her eye pissed me off. I didn't even want to check out her neck at this point. "Are you okay?" I repeated, eyeing her closer.

Her gaze found mine. "Yeah. You stayed here all night?"

"Yeah." Seemed pretty obvious.

Kat looked at Dee and then swallowed. She lifted the arm in the cast but lowered it back to her lap as she slowly refocused on me. I couldn't zero in on what she was thinking. She looked shocked. Confused. Sleepy. Cute.

Goddammit with the cute shit.

I needed to focus. "Do you remember anything?"

She nodded and then winced. "I was attacked last night."

"Someone tried to mug you." I resisted the urge to ask if she was okay yet again.

Her brows knitted. "He wasn't trying to mug me."

Hell. "Kat—"

"No." She started to stand up, but I circled my arm around her waist, keeping her in place. I didn't want her standing too quickly and falling, cracking her head open, and bleeding all over her precious books. "He didn't want my money, Daemon. He wanted *them*."

Dammit. I stiffened, thoughts racing. "That doesn't make any sense."

"No shit." She frowned down at her injured arm. "But he kept asking about where *they* were and about a trace or something."

"Clearly the guy was insane," I said, keeping my voice low while I willed her to brush it off as such. "You realize that, right? That he wasn't right in the head? Nothing he said means anything."

"I don't know. He didn't seem crazy."

"Trying to beat the crap out of a girl isn't crazy enough for you?" I asked, shaking my head. "I'm

curious what you think is crazy."

Her frown deepened. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" I twisted toward her, careful not to jar her arm. "He was a random lunatic, but you're going to make it bigger than it is, aren't you?"

Kat drew in a sharp breath. "I'm not making this anything. Daemon, that wasn't a normal lunatic."

Frustration thinned my patience. The thing was, she was right. There had been nothing normal about the "man" who had attacked her, but I couldn't let her know that. I needed her to drop this. "Oh, you're an expert on crazy people now?"

"A month with you and I feel I have a master's degree in the subject." She glared at me as she scooted away. She swayed a little.

"You okay?" I touched her good arm. "Kat?"

She shook my hand off, good and angry. "Yeah, I'm okay."

I looked away, tense. She didn't need my shit right now. Obviously she wasn't up for a throw-down between us, and I was actually, legitimately worried about her. She looked worn the hell out, but I had to shut this down. "I know you're probably messed up after what happened last night, but don't make this into something it's not."

"Daemon—"

"I don't want Dee worried that there is an idiot out there attacking girls." My jaw hardened and my voice turned icy. "Do you understand me?"

Her lower lip trembled, and seeing that was like taking a kick to the gut. Yeah, I was an ass. I sucked at empathy and sympathy. The whole assimilation into human society the DOD had forced us into really hadn't worked out that well for me, but that didn't mean I enjoyed kicking someone when she was down.

I started to get up, but when I lifted my gaze from her mouth, our gazes locked. In that moment, I wished I had the ability to change someone's thoughts. That was also probably terrible, but I would remove the memory of the assault. Not just to protect what we were and my family, but to also erase those shadows that lingered in her gray eyes. What happened last night was going to haunt her for a long time, I could tell.

From the recliner, Dee yawned loudly, obnoxiously so.

Kat jerked back, looking over at my sister, who apparently had been awake for a while.

"Good morning!" She chirped like a bird and all but slammed her feet onto the floor. "Have you guys been awake long?"

I sighed heavily. "No, Dee, we just woke up and were talking. You were snoring so loudly we couldn't stay asleep any longer."

She snorted like a little pink pig. "I doubt that. Katy, are you feeling...okay this morning?"

"Yeah, I'm a little sore and stiff, but overall okay."

Dee's smile was forced as she reached up, pushing the disheveled waves of hair out of her face.

"I think I'm going to make you breakfast." Without waiting for an answer, she sprang onto her feet and bolted into the kitchen. Doors opened. Pots clanged off one another.

I sighed again.

"Okay," Kat murmured.

Standing, I lifted my arms and stretched, loosening the taut muscles. More pots banged around in the kitchen. Knowing what I had to do, I lowered my arms and faced Kat. "I care more about my sister than I do anything in this universe. I'd do anything for her, to make sure she's happy and she's safe. Please don't worry her with crazy stories."

Kat flinched as pain splashed across her face, and I knew that glimpse of hurt had nothing to do with her physical injuries but everything to do with the coldness radiating from my words. "You're a dick, but I won't say anything to her," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Okay? Happy?" Happy? Our gazes held once more, and I spoke the truth. "Not really. Not at all."

CHAPTER 10

Kat could no longer be trusted with the whole staying home thing, so when we called a little impromptu meeting of the Luxen kind Thursday night, we did it at our house just to make sure Kat didn't roam off into a snake pit or something.

Dee had spent Wednesday with her, and I continued my creeper status that night by keeping watch over Kat's house. At least I did it from my front porch this time.

Darkness had fallen when the Thompsons and Matthew arrived, everyone piling into the living room. All the lights next door were off, but I knew Kat's mom was home. I was hoping that meant there was little to no trouble Kat could get herself into.

Talking to the Thompsons about Kat was the last thing I wanted to do. Damn. Throwing myself repeatedly off the top of Spruce Knob would be more fun, because this was going to go over like a pile of shit-covered bricks.

I stood in the center of the room, arms folded across my chest, bracing myself. Dee was perched on the edge of a recliner, her hands folded in her lap. Adam was leaning against its arm, and the tense pull of his expression told me he knew why he was here.

Ash was sitting on the couch beside Andrew. Her blonde hair brushed her shoulders as she tipped her head to the side, sighing loudly. My lips twisted into a wry grin. She had no problem letting people know when she was bored or unhappy. Matthew sat on the arm of the couch, back stiff and shoulders straight.

"So what's going on?" Andrew asked, glancing up from the cell in his hand. "The last time we were called together like this, someone died."

My eyes narrowed. Of course, he was talking about Dawson. Not cool.

Ash turned her head to him, blonde brows arched. "Really?"

One shoulder rose. "And?"

Adam sighed. "We need to work on improving your sensitivity later, brother."

"Whatever," muttered Andrew, glancing back at his phone. His finger scrolled across the screen.

Matthew gave a little shake of his head. "What did you want to discuss, Daemon?"

He knew about Kat and he also knew where this conversation was heading, but he was wrangling the convo back to the point at hand. Had to give him props for that. "There is a girl named Kat—"

"Who is incredibly awesome," Dee interjected. "And super nice and smart and—"

"She moved in next door." I cut her off, because frankly none of that mattered. Andrew's fingers stilled over the screen and he looked up, his mouth opening. I went on. "I don't know why the DOD allowed that. Yesterday I had my normal check-in with Vaughn and Lane. I asked them, and Vaughn was the one to answer, giving some lame reason about the government not wanting the house to sit empty for so long. That it was too suspicious."

Ash's gaze sharpened. "Why didn't you tell us about her sooner?"

"Didn't see the point at the time." A muscle along my jaw began to tick, because the look on Ash's face pretty much summed up the amount of BS associated with that statement. "We're talking about it now."

She looked over at Dee. "And let me guess. You're her new best friend?"

Dee met her stare. "So what if I am?"

"I really shouldn't have to explain all the problems with that," Ash retorted. "And I'm sure Daemon has pointed out every one of them."

I had.

"Katy and I are friends," Dee replied, leaning forward in the chair. Beside her, Adam tensed. "That's not going to change, and I'm not going to sit here and let you give me crap about it. It is what it is."

Ash turned wide blue eyes on me. "Daemon—?"

"You heard her." I grinned when Ash's hands curled into fists. Her head was about to spin. "I've been keeping an eye on Kat, getting to know her so we know what we're dealing with."

Andrew snickered. "I bet you have."

I drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Didn't work. "You got something to say, bud?"

He raised a shoulder. "I just think 'keeping an eye on her' is code for something else."

"Keeping an eye on her means exactly what it is," Matthew explained, sending Andrew a look of warning. "The fact that the DOD allowed humans to move next door is suspicious. Daemon is smart by trying to gauge if she or her mother is a risk."

Dee frowned. "Are you trying to say that she could somehow be planted there by the DOD?"

"We don't know," Matthew simply said, and while he had a good point, I didn't think that was the case. More like his general paranoia talking. "Anything is possible, is all I am saying."

My sister's frustration was evident in the stubborn line of her jaw. "Katy is not some kind of government spy."

"Well, if she was, we'd be screwed, since I traced her last week." I dropped that bomb, and everyone but Dee reacted as expected. There were curses. Matthew nearly had the Luxen version of a stroke. Ash looked downright murderous.

Adam sat down on the arm of Dee's chair. "How did that happen?"

"There was a bear. It was charging her." I left out the fact we'd gone on a walk, since no one really needed to know that. "I used the Source to scare the animal off. Kat didn't see me do it. She thought it was lightning." I paused. "I didn't have any other option."

"Yeah, you did." Andrew frowned as he placed his cell on the coffee table. "You could've just let the bear eat her ass. Problem solved."

Ash nodded her agreement.

I didn't even bother responding to that. "The point is, she was traced, and the DOD isn't banging down our doors and locking us in cages. Vaughn and Lane acted yesterday like nothing had changed, but I thought you all should know what happened."

"We should have known about this girl when she first moved in," Ash said, voice thinned with anger.

Dee rolled her eyes. "It wasn't your business."

"It's all of our business," Andrew corrected. "The Elders aren't cool with us living outside the colony as it is. After what happened with Dawson, we have to be careful. In other words, don't run around *tracing humans*, dickhead."

I slowly lifted my hand and flipped him off.

Andrew smirked as he leaned back against the couch, shaking his head. "This is just unbelievable. First it's Dawson and—"

"Don't finish that sentence, Andrew. For real," I warned, my chin dipping down. "I'm not Dawson. This isn't the same thing."

When Andrew opened his mouth, his brother wisely stepped in. "Shut it, Andrew. I really don't want to end the night picking you off the floor."

It was my turn to smirk.

Matthew eyed me closely. "Is that all?"

I shook my head as I kept an eye on Andrew. "No. Kat was attacked by an Arum Tuesday night."

"Damn," Matthew muttered, running a hand through his cropped brown hair. "I... Is she okay?"

Surprise flicked through me. I hadn't expected Matthew to care. "Yes. She's okay." The memory of her struggling to get air into her bruised throat surfaced. "She's going to be okay. I killed the Arum, and she doesn't know what it was. She thinks it was a mugger."

Ash stood fluidly and moved to the window overlooking the porch. She didn't say anything, but she was antsy and that was never a good thing.

"The trace is still on her. It should fade in a couple of days, but we need to be on the lookout for the other Arum."

The conversation steered toward patrolling and how Matthew was going to notify the Elders that we had confirmation of Arum in the vicinity. We needed to train some new recruits to help with the doubled patrols, which was my, Adam, and Andrew's job. Yay us. It wasn't long before everything cycled back to Kat and what we were going to do about it.

"I'm handling it with her," I said, pretty much over this conversation.

Andrew looked like he wanted to say something smart, but one look from his brother shut him up. It was Dee who ended up bringing our little meet-and-greet to a screeching halt. "Why don't we just tell her the truth?" she asked.

I stared at her, unsure I had heard correctly.

Matthew stood, turning to Dee. "You cannot be serious."

"Why not?" Dee raised her hands, her expression earnest. "She's a good person, and she's logical. She's not going to freak out or call the media. Frankly, who would believe her? She'll understand. Trust me."

"Dee," Adam said quietly, kneeling beside her. "You can't tell her what we are."

Anger flashed across her face, deepening the hue of her eyes. "I'm telling you, Adam, she can be_"

"Okay, Dee. Let's say she can be trusted and that she doesn't tell anyone," I said, meeting my sister's gaze. "She takes this shit to her grave, but that's not the only problem. You might trust her. That doesn't mean everyone in this room does."

"Namely me," Andrew commented.

"And what do you think will happen if the Elders find out about Kat knowing the truth?" I persisted, hoping to reason with Dee on a different level. Ash finally faced us again, her expression blank as she watched us. "Or what do you think the government will do? They don't know her. They have no reason to trust her. She'll disappear. Hello. Bethany, anyone?"

Dee sucked in a sharp, audible breath at the reminder of our brother's human girlfriend who "disappeared" along with him last year.

"You don't want to put her in that position, do you?" I asked. "Because that's what you're also

risking by telling her the truth."

For a moment, she held my gaze but then lowered it. She shook her head. "No. I wouldn't want to risk that."

A little bit of relief coursed through me. At least I didn't have to worry about her telling Kat the truth.

Ash folded her slender arms across her chest. "I can't believe you."

Dee glanced up. "What?"

"You have no problem risking our safety, but you worry about hers? Like we mean absolutely nothing?"

"That's not what I feel or what I've said," Dee argued as she glanced back and forth between us. "We can take care of ourselves. And Katy wouldn't throw us in front of a bus. That's all I was trying to say."

I didn't step in as they continued to argue, because Dee needed to wise up. She needed to hear what Ash was saying. Not that it really changed anything. I trusted that Dee wouldn't tell Kat the truth, but she wouldn't stay away from her.

I walked the Thompsons out while Matthew remained inside, talking to Dee. Probably lecturing her, so there was a good chance I was going to be out here a while. Standing on the porch, I watched Adam and Andrew cross the lawn toward their car. The latter was eyeing Kat's house like he wanted to nuke it.

Andrew might be a problem.

"Daemon?"

Twisting around, I found Ash standing there. "Hey."

"I'm sorry about being such a bitch to your sister in there."

I grinned. "No you're not."

She glanced up and to the right, and then laughed. "Okay. You're right. I'm not. She needed to hear it." Two car doors shut. The brothers were waiting for her. "But I'm surprised. I never thought you'd be the one to mess up."

"Well, if I was perfect all the time, no one else would have a chance."

Ash arched a brow and ignored what I said. "How exactly have you been keeping an eye on her?"

Warning bells started going off. I knew what she was getting at, but what the hell? Ash and I had broken up a while ago. Sure, we messed around like exes do from time to time, but she knew the score and even set the rules. "Not sure what you mean by that question?"

Her smile was sugary sweet and sharp as glass. "I think you know exactly what I mean." There was a pause, and I pictured her sharpening her fangs on my bones. "You haven't come around in a couple of weeks. I'm betting if I asked Dee when that girl moved in, it's going to fall around that same time. What do you have to say about that?"

Laughing under my breath, I looked away, my gaze narrowing on the car. "What do I have to say about that? Well, if it were actually your business when it came to what I do, which it's not, I'd have to say you are way off the mark when it comes to why I haven't been around. The reasoning hasn't changed. You know that."

She appeared to mull that over. "Yeah, you don't see us long-term, but that's never stopped us from spending some one-on-one time together."

"She has nothing to do with that."

Ash stopped at the top of the porch steps, half turned away. She wasn't smiling anymore as she looked over her shoulder at me. Challenge burned in her cobalt gaze.

A challenge I had no intention of meeting.

"Prove it," she said.

I stared at the two Luxen males who rarely ventured out of the colony. They weren't very much older than me, but they stood in front of me like two fresh recruits about to enter the marines.

"We're r-ready to begin patrolling," one said, looking everywhere but at my eyes. Yeah, I was going to have to do a hard pass on this guy being ready.

Beside me, Adam chuckled as he eyed the two guys. "An Arum would eat you alive, spit you back out, and then suck you down like a smoothie."

The other Luxen blanched, and I thought he might hurl.

I sighed.

Helping prepare these two asshats on how to patrol for Arum and not get killed in the process was not how I wanted to spend my afternoon.

Especially when Kat was with Dee, and even though I'd asked Dee to make sure they stayed home, since Kat was virtually a glow stick, I knew that my sister ultimately did whatever she wanted.

As did Kat.

But stepping in and making sure members of the colony were able to help with the doubling of patrols would keep them both alive, so I was going to have to deal. And really, it wasn't that bad if I was being honest with myself. I got to be in my true form, and damn, that was like stripping off clothes on a too-hot day. There was nothing like the wind glancing off your essence when you hit speeds that broke the sound barrier. Superman had nothing on a Luxen.

Just thinking about it got my heart pumping.

"This is boring," muttered Andrew.

I smirked.

It had also been damn amusing to drag Adam and Andrew along to help out. Neither wanted to be there. Adam stayed relatively quiet as we ran the newbies around the whole damn mountain, pushing them to run harder and faster. Andrew bitched the entire time. No big surprise there.

The one who looked like he was going to puke stepped forward. I think his name was Mitchell. Maybe Mikey. I was going to go with Mitchell. "I know we're not as strong or fast as any of you, but we are ready."

"Yeah, you're about ready to die," Andrew replied, snorting.

I shot him a warning look. "Way to be motivational."

He flipped me off. "Whatever."

Stepping forward, I clapped my hand on Maybe Mitchell's shoulder. "It's not just about being fast and strong. It's about focusing and preparing for the worst. It's about outsmarting the enemy and anticipating their next move."

"But being fast and strong helps," Andrew chimed in, and I thought maybe I should've left his ass back at the house. "Like I'm stronger than Daemon."

"What?" I dropped my hand and turned around, arching a brow. "Are you on drugs?"

"High on life, man." He winked. "And I'm totally stronger than you."

I chuckled. "If you sincerely believe that, then you *are* high."

"Huh." Andrew shot Adam a look as he swaggered up to me. I watched him snatch up a small rock. "You see that tree over there?" He pointed at an ancient oak several yards away. "I bet I can throw this rock right through the middle."

"And you think I can't?"

"I know you can't." Andrew turned to Maybe Mitchell and his nameless buddy. "What do you think, guys?"

They looked nervous, not wanting to answer.

"I bet Andrew can do it," Adam said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "And I bet you can't."

They were out of their damn minds. "You're going to make me embarrass you."

"I'll take that risk." Andrew tossed the rock up and caught it. "It's a bet, then?"

Why the hell not? I nodded and waved my hand toward the distant tree. "By all means."

"Perfect." Andrew took several steps back and squinted at the huge oak. A second later, he slipped into his true form and let the rock fly.

He didn't throw that rock like a human would. Using the Source, he turned it into a damn missile. It flew through the air faster than the eye could track. Bark splintered when the rock made contact and embedded deep.

Maybe Mitchell let out an exclamation of wonder.

Andrew grinned as he faced me. "Beat that."

I snorted as I picked up a rock that was smaller than my palm. "Easy. And I can do it without even switching forms."

"You know what Dee was telling me the other day?" Adam asked as I stepped back. "It's real interesting."

Ignoring him, I lifted my right arm. The two tools from the colony exchanged looks. The Source rippled down my arm.

Adam continued. "She was saying that Katy ran into Simon, that footballer at school, at the store and thought they made a cute couple. She thinks he'll ask Katy out, too, and you know what happens after a date with that Romeo jock... Someone will be getting—"

I looked at him sharply as I let go of the rock. Adam better not be suggesting what I was pretty sure he was. The only thing Simon looked good with was my fist, sure as hell not Kat.

The twist of Adam's lips told me he was lying. Kat hadn't run into that dumbass.

Glancing back at the tree, I cursed. That tiny moment of distraction cost me and screwed up my aim. The rock had zoomed past the tree, missing it by a mile. Dammit.

Adam laughed as he elbowed his brother. "See, guys, focus actually is as important as strength."

I lifted my hand and flipped them off. Both burst into laughter, and I rolled my eyes as I bent, picking up another rock. This one was about the size of my hand. I turned to them. "I'm not going to miss this time, and I won't be aiming for the trees."

My threat made them laugh all the harder. I scowled as I turned away. At least the two asshats from the colony weren't laughing. They looked scared. A heartbeat passed and then I spun, throwing the rock.

Adam darted to the left, narrowly avoided taking a direct hit. "What the hell?" he shouted, eyes narrowed. "You could've messed up this gorgeous face."

Tipping my head back, it was now my turn to laugh. "I think you need to look in the mirror if you think that's gorgeous."

"Ha," Andrew said, grinning.

"We're identical." Adam shook his head at his twin. "He's insulting both of us, you idiot."

Grinning, I wiped my hands on my jeans, but the humor quickly faded as realization set in, slamming into me with the force of a speeding bullet. The mere mention of Kat's name had distracted me, pulled away my focus. This time it was just a stupid bet, but what if it had been something more serious, like if an Arum had been around?

People could die.

Closing my eyes, I swore under my breath. This thing with Kat…it was getting ridiculous, and it was unacceptable.

Completely unacceptable.

CHAPTER 11

I saw Kat on and off over the next couple of days, usually when I was heading out to my car, and each time, the trace was getting fainter and fainter—thank God.

Whenever she saw me, she seemed to want to speak to me. She would stop or head in my direction, but we didn't talk. Mainly because I wasn't having that. I needed to keep an eye on her to make sure another Arum didn't snatch her up or endanger her, but there needed to be distance between us. That day at training had proven how just the mention of her name could put everyone at risk. She made me weak.

So, *obviously*, that was the only reason I'd gone to Smoke Hole Diner on Sunday afternoon. The trace on Kat had been pale, like a flickering candle creating a whitish glow, so there had been no stopping Dee. From what I'd gathered, she'd dragged Kat into town, loaded her up with school supplies, and then introduced her to Smoke Hole Diner.

I followed them. I wasn't taking any more chances.

Dee had appeared surprised by my presence and Kat had been... Well, she had been annoyed that I had provoked her, and then she had tried to thank me. That was the last thing she needed to do, since the cast on her arm and the bruises on her face would've never happened if I hadn't taken her for a walk that day.

My time at the diner had been short-lived. I'd also been followed. By Ash, who for some reason had been under the impression that we were supposed to meet there. Guess I missed that memo. None of that had turned out well. The moment Ash realized Kat was *that* Katy, I ended up having to drag her fired-up butt out of the diner and had spent the better part of Sunday talking Ash off the ledge.

Ash was still pissed on Monday, according to Andrew.

Needless to say, I wasn't in the greatest mood when I left my house early Tuesday evening and went for a run in the nearby woods. I stayed out there in the muggy August weather until sweat slicked my skin and I'd burned off as much energy as possible.

On the way back, I decided I could go for a gallon of ice cream. I doubted there was any in the house. The moment ice cream was brought in, Dee consumed it like she was starving.

Jogging up the driveway, I slowed as the houses came into view. My gaze went straight to Kat's house. The porch wasn't empty. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone, tapping the screen to turn off the music blaring through the earbuds.

Kat was sitting on the swing, her head bowed and her features pinched. In her hands was a thick hardcover book. A light breeze tossed into her face a strand of her hair that wasn't clipped back. She absently knocked it out of her way. The sun hadn't set yet, but the light was waning and it was still as humid as a bath in hell. Reading couldn't be easy in those conditions, but she was oblivious to the world as I wrapped the headphones cord around my phone.

She had no idea I was even there. I could easily slip into my house unnoticed. She was safe out here. The trace was barely visible now, having faded even more in the hours since I'd last seen her. There was no reason for me to stop or hang around outside. Distance. There needed to be an ocean's worth of distance between us.

So of course I walked my ass right to her house.

Kat glanced up when I reached the steps to the porch, her gaze widening when she spotted me.

"Hey," I said, sliding my phone in my pocket.

She didn't immediately respond. Oh no, she was too busy checking me out, which pleased me to hell. Her gaze dropped, wandering over my bare chest and stomach. Her throat worked as she looked away, cheeks turning pink, and she tilted her head to the side and gave a little shake. "Hey."

Leaning against the railing, I folded my arms. "You reading?"

Her hands tightened around the edges of the book. "You running?"

"Was," I corrected.

"Funny," she said, pulling the book to her chest. The cast on her arm stood out starkly. "I was reading."

"Seems like you're always reading."

Her nose wrinkled. Cute. "How would you know?"

I lifted a shoulder. "I'm surprised Dee isn't with you."

"She's with her...her boyfriend." The corners of her lips slipped down. "You know, I had no idea she had a boyfriend until today. She never mentioned him before."

That made me laugh. "That will do wonders for Adam's self-esteem."

"Right?" Her grin was a flash and it was fleeting. "It's weird."

"What is?"

She cuddled the book closer, like it was a security blanket. "I've spent all this time with Dee and I had no idea she was seeing someone. She never mentioned it. It's just weird."

"Then maybe you're not as good of friends as you think."

Her eyes narrowed as she cut me a look. "Wow. That was nice of you to say."

I shrugged again. "Just pointing out the obvious."

"How about you go point out the obvious elsewhere," she snapped, lowering her book. "I'm busy."

A grin appeared on my lips. The claws were out. "Reading does not equate to being busy, Kitten."

The bow-shaped lips parted. "You did not just say that."

My grin spread.

"That is... It's sacrilegious."

I chuckled as I unfolded my arms. "I don't think that's what that word means."

"It is to book lovers all around the world!" Kat narrowed her eyes. "You don't understand."

"Nope." I lifted myself up and sat on the railing.

She sighed. "And you are also not going anywhere."

"Nope."

Looking down at her book, she slowly pulled a bookmark out of the front and marked the page she'd been reading. Kat closed the book and lowered it to her lap. She stared at it like it would somehow make me disappear. Not likely.

"So..." I drew the word out, turning my head to hide my grin when she sighed loudly. "How's your blog going? Still talking about cats or something?"

"Cats? I don't talk about cats. I talk about books."

I totally knew that. "Huh. I thought you spent all that time on the Internet talking about cats."

"Whatever."

"It makes sense." I looked at her then.

Her gray eyes sparked. "I cannot wait to hear this explanation. And if you can't tell, that was sarcasm."

"I thought it sounded like excitement, but anyway, spending all day on the Internet talking about cats is kind of like preparing to become the crazy cat lady when you're older."

The skin around her mouth tightened. "I would throw this book at you, but I respect the book too much to do that."

Tipping my head back, I laughed.

"Only you would find that funny."

"It *is* funny." Lowering my chin, I saw her fighting a grin. Our gazes collided and held. Silence stretched out between us, thickening the already sultry air.

"So." She drew the word out this time, and I raised my brows as she looked away. "That girl who was at the diner. Ash? She was really...lovely."

"Uh-huh." Another feminine minefield. These girls were crafty as hell.

She pushed the swing with her toes. "You two are seeing each other?"

"We used to date." I tilted my head, curious by the direction of the conversation. "And I'm sure Dee pointed out the fact that we used to date. She would've been all about clarifying that."

Her cheeks darkened in color, and I knew I had been right. "Ash didn't act like things were in the past."

"That's on her."

Kat eyed me. "And that's all you have to say?"

"Yeah." I lifted a brow. "Why would I have to say anything else? Especially to you." I was teasing her, but I was so bad at it, so out of practice, it totally came out dickish. I knew it, but this conversation was quickly turning into a train wreck I was powerless to stop watching.

Her shoulders stiffened and her expression turned impassive. "Why are you over here, Daemon?"

Damn. That was a good question. And one I'd been asking myself over and over since she first moved in.

She continued, her gray eyes cold. "Because if you've come over just to be ignorant, you can turn back around."

I felt myself smile, and I was sure that confirmed just how twisted I was. "But I don't want to turn back around."

"Too bad," she replied, sliding off the swing. "You know what, you can just sit out here and be a jackass with no audience. How about that?"

Kat started past me, and I pushed off the railing and was in front of her before she could even take a breath. Damn, I hadn't meant to move so quickly. She jerked back, pressing the book to her chest. "Holy crap, how do you move so fast?"

"I don't move that fast." I looked down at her. She barely reached my chest, but her personality, her attitude, was so much taller. That piece of hair was loose again, brushing her cheek. "Are you still nervous about school?"

Her brows furrowed. "What?"

I decided to ask the question slowly. "Are. You. Still—"

"No. I heard you." She shifted her weight to her other foot. "But why...why do you care? Why would you—?"

That piece of hair was getting to me, so I reached up and caught it between my fingers. The texture

was soft as silk. Her breath caught, and my gaze flicked to Kat's. Up close, those eyes were really amazing, a startling shade of gray, and the pupils were black and large. Carefully, so I didn't brush the skin of her cheek, I tucked the piece of hair back behind her ear. The swelling in her eye really had gone down, and the skin had mostly healed from the night she'd been attacked, but the patch was pinker than the rest, as if her arm wasn't enough of a reminder.

In a second, I saw her once more, lying on the road, not moving and absolutely helpless. My chest tightened painfully. I pushed the image aside, wondering when I would stop seeing it.

Kat appeared to be holding her breath. Her question cycled around my thoughts. *Why do you care?* I shouldn't. I didn't.

"Daemon?" she whispered.

The sound of my name, spoken without rancor, was a rarity, and it had an electrifying effect. Those pretty pink lips spoke my name perfectly. I wanted to know what my name tasted like on her lips and tongue. Had I thought about kissing her before? I must've, because the sudden need, the almost overwhelming desire to claim her mouth didn't surprise me.

Would she let me kiss her?

Probably not.

Should I kiss her?

Probably not.

If I went ahead and did it, would it blow up in my face?

Yep.

I dropped my hand and took a step back. When I dragged in the next breath I really didn't need, the scent of peaches and...and vanilla surrounded me.

I didn't say anything as I turned around and walked off the porch. And Kat didn't stop me. I didn't look back, but I also didn't hear a door close. I knew she was standing there, watching me.

And I also knew that there was a part of me that cared.

Later that night, long after Dee was home and asleep, I sat in bed with my laptop open. My finger drifted along the touch pad as I scrolled through the blog.

Katy's Krazy Book Obsession.

I laughed under my breath.

Good name.

This wasn't the first time I'd checked it out. The night Dee had returned from the colony, I'd been taking a look at it. Since then, Kat had added ten more reviews. How in the world had she read that many books in that short period of time? Plus she did these other things. Something called Teaser Tuesdays, which were really just a few lines from some book she was reading. There was In My Mailbox, where she filmed herself talking about the books she had either bought, borrowed, or received from a publisher.

I'd watched five of those damn videos.

And every time she picked up a book, her entire face transformed into a wide, brilliant smile, the kind I had yet to see in person and probably never would. She loved those books. No doubt about it.

I clicked on a sixth video, one that was filmed before she moved here, and was shocked to see a different Katy. She was the same, of course, but there was a light in her eyes that seemed to be out

now. I wondered what had turned off Katy's inner light. I swallowed. It was probably me, treating her like an asshole, interfering in her life and almost getting her killed.

I closed out the tab and winged my laptop across the room. Before it slammed into the wall, I lifted my hand, stopping the shiny metallic piece of crap before it shattered into thousands of dollars' worth of tiny pieces. It hovered in the air as if an invisible hand caught it before I slowly lowered it to my desk. I exhaled roughly.

This evening I had wanted to kiss Kat. There was no fooling myself. And it hadn't been the first time. Knew it wouldn't be the last time. I'd already accepted that I was attracted to her, so wanting to act on it made sense. No BFD there.

Wanting something and doing it were two different things.

Wanting something and *really* wanting it were also two different things.

Kind of like how you can want someone when you don't even like them?

Then again, that wasn't entirely the truth. I did like her. Reluctantly. She was smart. The nerdiness was cute. Her fiery attitude was admirable.

But I hadn't been lying when I said that things weren't like they were for Dawson and Bethany. Those two had...they had been in love with each other and neither of them had stopped for one damn second to think about the consequences.

The consequences were all I thought about. The memory of Kat in that last video haunted me, telling me more clearly than all of my arguments that I was just no good for her.

Too bad my body wasn't getting the message.

This was going to be a long night, I thought, as I slipped my hand under the sheet and closed my eyes. A very long night.

CHAPTER 12

The first day of school wasn't exciting to me. For Dee, it was a big deal. The first day of our last year of high school at PHS—that was what she yelled at me when my alarm had gone off for the third time, and we had forty minutes to get ready, eat something, and get to class.

To me, it was stupid that we started school on a Thursday, had two days of classes, and then had the weekend off. Why didn't they just start on a Tuesday?

I barely made it, lucky that I found a pair of jeans and a shirt that was clean. Hell, I was happy that I found a notebook in the back of my car.

PHS was a small high school compared to most. Only a couple of floors, it was beyond easy to get from one class to the next. Through homeroom and first period, I wondered how Kat was doing. Being the new kid had to suck, especially when you moved to such a small town where everyone had grown up together. Kids around here were friends since they were in diapers.

It was when I walked into trig class that I saw Kat near the back of the classroom. I spotted a couple of seats empty on the other side of class and knew that's where I should go.

Instead, I switched my notebook to my other hand and headed straight down the aisle where she was seated. She kept her eyes glued to her hands, but I knew she was aware of me. The faint blush along the tips of her cheekbones gave her away.

Remembering how her breath caught the other night on her porch, I grinned.

But then my gaze slid to the awkward splint covering her slender arm, and my grin faded. Potent rage swept through me at the reminder of how close she'd come to becoming an Arum's play toy. My teeth gnashed as I stalked past and fell into the seat behind her.

Images assaulted me of how she'd looked after the Arum attack—shaken, terrified, and so tiny in my shirt as we waited for the useless police to show up. If anything, this should've served as a reminder to get my ass up and move to a different seat.

I pulled a pen out of the spiral ring on my notebook and poked her in the back.

Kat glanced over her shoulder, biting her lip.

"How's the arm?" I asked.

Her features pinched, and then her lashes swept up, her clear eyes meeting my stare. "Good," she said, fiddling with her hair. "I get the splint off tomorrow, I think."

I tapped my pen off the edge of the desk. "That should help."

"Help with what?" Wariness colored her tone.

Using the pen, I gestured to the trace surrounding her. "With what you've got going on there."

Her eyes narrowed, and I remembered she couldn't see what I could. I could've clarified, made something up right then, but it was so much fun getting a rise out of her. When it looked like she was two seconds from smacking me upside the head with her splint, I couldn't help myself.

I leaned forward, watching her eyes flare. "Fewer people will stare without the splint is all I'm saying."

Her lips thinned in disbelief, but she didn't look away. Kat met my stare and held it. Not backing down—never backing down. Reluctant respect continued to grow inside me, but underneath that, something else was developing. I was two seconds from kissing that pissed-off look right off her face. I wondered what she'd do. Hit me? Kiss me back?

I was betting on the hitting part.

Billy Crump let out a low whistle from somewhere off to the side of us. "Ash is going to kick your ass, Daemon."

Kat's eyes narrowed with what looked a lot like jealousy. I smiled, thinking about how she'd asked about Ash and me. I might just need to change my bet. "Nah, she likes my ass too much for that."

Billy chuckled.

I tipped my desk down and leaned forward even farther, bringing our mouths within the same breathing space. A flash of heat went through her eyes, and I so had her. "Guess what?"

"What?" she murmured, her gaze dropping to my mouth.

"I checked out your blog."

Her eyes shot back to mine. For a second they were wide with shock, but she was quick to smooth her expression. "Stalking me again, I see. Do I need to get a restraining order?"

"In your dreams, Kitten." I smirked. "Oh wait, I'm already starring in those, aren't I?"

She rolled her eyes. "Nightmares, Daemon. Nightmares."

I smiled, and her lips twitched. Dammit, if I didn't know better, I'd think she liked our little fights, too. Maybe she was just as twisted as I was. The teacher started calling out roll, and Kat turned around. I sat back, laughing softly.

Several of the kids were still watching us, which kind of knocked the sense back into me. Not that I was doing anything wrong. Teasing her wouldn't bring the Arum to us or put her in danger—or my sister. When the bell rang, Kat bolted from the class like she was afraid of catching something. Two girls were right behind her. I thought their names were Lea and Cassie. Something like that. Shaking my head, I grabbed my notebook and headed out into the throng of students.

During a class exchange an hour later, I ran into Adam, who fell in step beside me. "There is talk."

I arched a brow. Damn. That sounded ominous. "Talk about what? How everyone drives trucks around here? Or how cow tipping really is a pastime? Or how my sister is never, ever going to seriously get with you?"

Adam sighed. "Talk about Katy, smart-ass."

Schooling my features, I stared straight ahead as we navigated the crowded halls. Both of us were a good head or so taller than most. We were like giants in the land of humans.

"Billy Crump's in your—"

"Trig class? Yeah, I know that already."

"He was talking in history about you flirting with the new girl," Adam said, sliding past a group of girls who were openly staring at us. "Ash overheard him."

With each passing second, my annoyance was hitting an all-new high.

"I know you and Ash aren't seeing each other anymore."

"Yep." I grit my teeth.

"But you know how she gets," Adam continued quickly. "You better be careful with your little human—"

I stopped in the middle of the hall, two seconds from throwing Adam through a wall. Kids shuffled

around us as I spoke barely above a whisper. "She's not my little human."

Adam's gaze was unflinching. "Fine. Whatever. Out of everyone, I don't care if you took her into the locker room and did her, but she's glowing...and so are your eyes," he added, voice low. "And all of this is familiar."

Shit. On. A. Brick. My eyes were doing the diamond thing? Great. Glowing eyes were one step away from a Luxen shifting into their true form. Wouldn't that be fun if I turned into a glowing alien in the middle of a high school hallway? Striving for patience I wasn't known for, I started walking, leaving Adam behind.

I needed to get my shit together.

This back-and-forth crap had to stop. I was beginning to wonder if I had a split personality. Jesus. I needed to stay the hell away from Kat. And that would keep her away from the rest of the Luxen, namely Ash.

When was the moment Katy became different from the herd—from the rest of the humans? Someone I wanted to know? The day at the lake? When we went for a walk? The night the Arum got a hold of her? Or one of the many times she told me off?

Shit.

Adam was right. All of this was familiar, except we'd had this conversation with Dawson over Bethany.

Dammit. This was not happening.

I glided through the rest of my classes bored out of my freaking mind. Many times last year, I tried to convince Matthew to get me a forged high school diploma. No such luck there. The DOD probably thought school was a privilege for us, but what they taught couldn't keep my interest. We learned at an accelerated rate, leaving most humans in the dust. And the DOD would have to approve my request to go to college if that's what I decided. Hell, I wasn't even sure I wanted to go to college. I'd rather find a job where I got to work outside—something that didn't include four small walls.

When lunch rolled around, I was half tempted to call it a day. School wasn't the same without Dawson. His exuberance for everything, even the mundane, had been contagious.

Not hungry, I grabbed a bottle of water and headed to our regular table. I sat beside Ash and leaned back, picking at the label on the bottle.

"You know," Ash said, leaning against my arm, "they say what you're doing is a sign of sexual frustration."

I winked at her.

She grinned and then turned back to her brother. That was the thing about Ash. Even though we'd dated on and off for years, she could be cool...when she wanted to be. Truth was, I think she knew deep down that she really wasn't that into me either. Not like Dawson and Bethany had felt about each other.

God, I was thinking a lot about him today.

He should be here, the first day of our last year. He should've been here.

Lifting my eyes, I immediately found Kat in the lunch line. She was talking to Cassie—no, *Carissa*—the quieter of the two girls in trig. My gaze dropped down to her flip-flops and slowly worked my way back up.

I think I loved those jeans. Tight in all the right places.

It was amazing really—how long Kat's legs looked for someone so short. I couldn't figure out why it seemed that way.

Ash's hand dropped to my thigh, drawing my attention. Warning bells went off again. She was so up

to something. "What?" I asked.

Her bright eyes fixed on mine. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." I focused on her, anything to keep her interest off Kat. As feisty as the little kitten was, Kat was absolutely no match for Ash. I set the bottle aside, swinging my legs toward her. "You look nice today."

"Don't I?" Ash beamed. "So do you. But you always look yumtastic." Glancing over her shoulder, she then turned back and slid into my lap faster than she should have in public.

A couple of the boys at a neighboring table looked like they would've traded in their moms to be in my position.

"What are you up to?" I kept my hands to myself.

"Why do you think I'm up to anything?" She pressed her chest against mine, speaking in my ear. "I miss you."

I grinned, seeing right through her. "No, you don't."

Pouting, she slapped my shoulder playfully. "Okay. There are some things I miss."

About to tell her that I had a good idea of what that thing was, Dee's jubilant shriek cut me off. "Katy!" she yelled.

Cursing under my breath, I felt Ash stiffen against me.

"Sit," Dee said, smacking the top of the table. "We were talking about—"

"Wait." Ash twisted around. I could picture the look on her face. Lips turned down, eyes narrowed. All that equaled bad, bad times. "You did not invite her to sit with us? Really?"

I focused on the painting of the PHS mascot—a red-and-black Viking, complete with horns. *Please don't sit down*.

"Shut up, Ash," Adam said. "You're going to make a scene."

"I'm not 'going to make' anything happen." Ash's arm tightened around my neck like a boa constrictor. "She doesn't need to sit with us."

Dee sighed. "Ash, stop being a bitch. She's not trying to steal Daemon from you."

My eyebrows shot up, but I kept up the prayer. *Please don't sit down*. My jaw locked. *Please don't sit here*. If she did, Ash would eat her alive out of pure spite. I'd never understand girls. Ash didn't want me anymore, not really, but holy hell if she'd allow someone else to go there.

Ash's body started to vibrate softly. "That's not what I'm worried about. For real."

"Just sit," Dee said to Katy, her voice tight with exasperation. "She'll get over it."

"Be nice," I whispered in Ash's ear, low enough for only her to hear. Ash smacked my arm hard. That'd leave a bruise. I pressed my cheek into her neck. "I mean it."

"I'll do what I want," she hissed back. And she would, too. Worse than what she was doing now.

"I don't know if I should," Kat said, sounding incredibly small and unsure.

Every stupid, idiotic thought in my head demanded that I dump Ash out of my lap and get Kat out of here, away from what surely was going to end up being horrible.

"You shouldn't," Ash snapped.

"Shut up," Dee said. "I'm sorry I know such hideous bitches."

"Are you sure?" Kat asked.

Ash's body trembled and heated up. Her skin would be too warm for a human to touch without realizing something was different, wrong even. I could feel her control slipping away. Exposing herself wasn't likely, but she appeared mad enough to do some damage.

I turned my head to look at Kat for the first time since I'd seen her in the line. I thought about the conversation on the porch, when she grinned at me. I thought about how she reacted when I'd told her

about the legend of Snowbird. And I already knew I was going to hate myself for what I was about to say, because she didn't deserve this. "I think it's obvious if you're wanted here or not."

"Daemon!" My sister's eyes filled with tears, and now it was official. I was irrevocably a dick. "He's not being serious."

"Are you being serious, Daemon?" Ash twisted toward me.

My gaze held Kat's, and I clamped down on every confusing and contradictory thought I was having. She needed to leave before something shitty happened. "Actually, I was being serious. You're not wanted here."

Kat opened her mouth, but she didn't say anything. Her cheeks had been pink—the way I liked them —but the color faded quickly. Anger and embarrassment filled her gray eyes. They glistened under the harsh lights of the cafeteria. A sharp pierce sliced through my chest, and I had to look away—because I had put that look in her eyes. Clenching my jaw, I focused over Ash's shoulder on that stupid mascot again.

In that moment, I wanted to punch myself in the face.

"Run along," Ash said.

A few snickers sounded and anger whipped through me, heating my skin. It was ridiculous that I was pissed over other people laughing when I'd already embarrassed her and hurt her more than anyone.

Silence fell over the table, and relief was imminent. She had to be leaving now. There was no way

Cold, wet, and sloppy stuff plopped on the top of my head. I froze, aware enough not to open my mouth unless I wanted to eat...spaghetti? Did she...? Sauce-covered noodles slid down my face, landing on my shoulder. One hung off my ear, smacking me against the neck.

Holy shit. I was dumbfounded as I slowly turned to look at her. Part of me was actually...amazed.

Ash leaped from my lap, shrieking as she shoved her hands out. "You..."

I plucked one of the noodles off my ear and dropped it on the table as I peered up at Kat from underneath my lashes. The laugh came up before I could stop it. Good for her.

Ash lowered her hands. "I will end you."

My humor vanished. Jumping up, I threw an arm around Ash's waist. "Calm down. I mean it. Calm down."

She pulled against me. "I swear to all the stars and suns, I will destroy you."

"What does that mean?" Kat balled her hands, glaring at the taller girl like she wasn't afraid of her one bit, and she should've been. Ash's skin was scorching hot, vibrating just beneath the surface. At that moment, I really started to doubt she wouldn't do something stupid and reveal us in public. "Are you watching too many cartoons again?"

Matthew stalked over to our table, his eyes connecting with mine for a moment. I'd hear about this later. "I believe that's enough," he said.

Knowing not to argue with Matthew, Ash sat down in her own seat and grabbed a fistful of napkins. She tried to clean up the mess, but it was pointless. I almost laughed again when she started stabbing at her shirt. Sitting down, I knocked a clump of noodles off my shoulder.

"I think you should find another place to eat," Matthew said to Katy, voice low enough that only the people at our table could hear. "Do so now."

Looking up, I watched Kat grab her book bag. She hesitated, and then she nodded as if in a daze. Turning stiffly, she stalked from the cafeteria. My gaze followed her the whole way out, and she kept her head held high.

Matthew turned from the table, probably off to do some damage control. I wiped the back of my hand down my sticky cheek, unable to stop myself from laughing softly.

Ash smacked me again. "It's not funny!" She stood, hands shaking. "I can't believe you think that was funny."

"It was." I shrugged, grabbing my water bottle. Not like we didn't deserve it. Looking down the table, I found my sister staring at me. "Dee..."

Tears built in her eyes as she stood. "I can't believe you did that."

"What did you expect?" Andrew demanded.

She shot him a death glare and then turned those eyes on me. "You suck. You really freaking suck, Daemon."

I opened my mouth, but what could I say? I did suck. I'd acted like an ass, and it wasn't like I could defend that. Dee had to understand that it was for the best, but when I closed my eyes, I saw the hurt in Kat's eyes and I wasn't so sure I'd done the right thing...at least the right thing by her.

CHAPTER 13

Dee was giving me the cold freeze. Not that I was surprised. I deserved it after what had gone down during lunch, but getting chewed out was better than the baleful stare sent in my direction as I headed out to patrol.

There was no way I was getting the spaghetti sauce out of my shirt.

I headed out into the dusk, crossed the backyard, and entered the woods. I waited until I was several feet into the dense forest before I started running—and not that human version of it. I picked up speed, dissolving into a form made of only light, racing over the fallen trees and boulders, moving farther and farther away from home. The feeling of running in my true form was like lightning—powerful and fast and exhilarating. It required incredible focus, too, or else I could end up running straight through a tree. I'd done that once and was still picking the bark out of my skin a week later.

You're not wanted here.

Hell. As the unwanted thought broke my concentration, I skidded to a stop several miles in, kicking up loose soil and pebbles.

Closing my eyes, I settled back into my human form and stretched my arms above my head. Loosening my muscles, I emptied my thoughts. It was harder this time. Then, a handful of seconds later, I shed my human form. White light tinged in red flickered over the shadowed tree trunks and grass.

Freedom washed over me again.

I moved forward, seeing the world around me in crystal clarity. Heat rolled off me, and I was careful not to linger in one area too long. I moved silently through the woods, covering miles in minutes. Soon I was near town, where I'd most likely pick up on an Arum.

Combing the county, I couldn't help but think of the time Dawson had been out here. It had been during the winter, right before Bethany had shown up and it all went to hell. He'd found an Arum and had almost been taken out by it.

Dawson would've been drained dry of everything that made us what we were if I hadn't shown up. I hadn't been there when it really counted, though. Saving his life before didn't mean shit when he ended up losing it in the end.

I stayed out until it was late, slipping back into my human form just before I left the woods and returning home well after midnight. Instead of heading in through the back door, I walked around the front and glanced up at the house beside mine.

The bedroom light was on.

Kat was up late.

She probably had her nose stuck in a book, living in a pretend fantasy world while I was actually out there living in the real fantasy world.

There couldn't be two more different people.

People?

I laughed, but it was dry and lacked humor. We weren't even of the same damn species, and yet in that moment, while I walked up the porch steps, knowing she was awake, I felt closer to her than I had to anyone in a very long time.

God, that was a huge problem.

I needed to seriously end this. I needed to get her to stay away from Dee, and I needed to stay away from her.

I knew what I had to do.

Stepping off the porch the next morning on the way to school, I stopped as I heard the engine of Kat's car groaning as it turned over without starting up. The sound was familiar. Battery was dead. Knowing her, she probably left a light on or something.

The hood popped as she unlocked it from the inside. Kat threw open the driver's door and walked around to the front of her car. The faded denim jeans she was wearing should be illegal.

Reaching down to wrap her fingers around the edges, she tensed and then looked over in my direction.

Smirking, I lifted my hand and wiggled my fingers at her.

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Nothing."

She stared at me a moment longer and then turned back to her car, lifting the hood and hooking it into place. Then she stepped back, put her hands on her hips and stared at the engine.

My grin spread.

She reached into the engine and wiggled wires like that was going to do something beneficial, her ponytail bouncing with the effort. Sort of cute. Desperate. But cute. She then clasped her fingers around the hood and leaned in. The cast on her arm was a huge freaking eyesore.

Of course my gaze zeroed right in on a certain asset of hers.

I managed to pull my gaze away before I gave myself a damn eyestrain. Walking toward my car, I opened the passenger door and tossed my books on the seat. I closed the door and then walked across the small patch of grass and onto her driveway.

Kat stiffened but ignored me as I walked up the side of the car. "I don't think wiggling wires is going to help."

Letting go of the hood, she glared in my direction with stormy eyes. "Are you a mechanic or something? A special hidden car talent I know nothing about?"

I laughed under my breath. "You actually don't know anything about me."

Her lips pursed. "I count that as a blessing."

"I bet you do," I murmured as I stepped closer to the front of her car, forcing her to take a step back.

She sighed. "Hello. I was standing there."

I winked at her. "You're not standing there anymore." Using my body to shield what I was doing, I ran the tips of my fingers along the battery, sending a jolt of high-powered energy into it. "Anyway, can you try turning it on one more time?"

"Why?"

"Because."

"It's not going to work."

Turning to her, I smiled tightly. "Just try it, Kitten."

Her cheeks flushed. "Don't call me that."

"I wouldn't call you that if you were sitting in your car, turning it on," I replied reasonably.

"Oh my God," she griped and then pivoted. She stomped around to the driver's side. "Whatever."

I arched a brow as she all but threw herself into the car and turned the ignition. The battery sparked to life and the engine turned over, starting the car. Too bad the hood blocked the windshield, because I would've paid good money to see her face. That being said, I really didn't have time for this crap. This was not part of "the plan" I'd devised last night to push her even further away.

I sighed and lowered the bar, closed the hood, and locked it into place.

Kat was staring out the windshield, lips parted.

"See you at school." I paused, unable to resist adding, "Kitten."

I grinned as I heard her shriek.

When I moseyed on into trig later that morning, the first thing I noticed was that her hair was down where it had been up earlier that morning, and the fact that I noticed the change didn't even register on the screwed-up scale. I liked her hair down. It was long and a little wild-looking, like her hair was constantly in a state of rebellion.

I really needed to stop thinking of her hair as if it had a personality.

Kat was whispering with the two girls—Carissa, and the curly-haired one was *Lesa*. Yeah, those were their names. Their mouths clamped shut, all three of them, the moment they saw me.

Interesting.

Kat bit down on her lip as she sank into her chair.

Even more interesting.

I made my way past her and the girls, taking my seat right behind Kat. Carissa spun around, facing the front, while Lesa kept peeking over her shoulder.

Hmm.

I had a plan when it came to dealing with Kat. I needed to stick to said plan.

Pulling the pen out of my notebook, I poked Kat in the back. She stiffened, but didn't turn around, so I poked her again, this time with a little more effort. She whipped around, her long dark hair flying out around her. "What?"

I smiled at the irritation in her tone. Behind her, I could see that everyone was watching us. They were probably worried she was going to whip out another plate of food, maybe syrupy pancakes this time, and dump it on my head.

Tipping my chin down, I lowered my gaze. "You owe me a new shirt."

Her jaw came unhinged.

"Come to find out," I continued, voice low, "spaghetti sauce doesn't always come out of clothes."

Kat's pink lips parted. "I'm sure you have enough shirts."

"I do, but that was my favorite."

"You have a favorite shirt?" Her nose wrinkled. Cute.

Dammit. Not cute.

"And I also think you ruined Ash's favorite shirt, too," I pointed out.

She tilted her head to the side. "Well, I'm sure you were there to comfort her during such a traumatic situation."

"I'm not sure she'll recover," I replied drily.

Kat rolled her eyes and then started to turn around.

The plan—stick to the plan. "You owe me. Again."

The warning bell rang as she stared at me. "I don't owe you anything."

Tipping the desk down, I leaned in. Scant inches separated our mouths. "I have to disagree." And then, because apparently I sucked at keeping to the plan, I said, "You're nothing like I expected."

Her gaze dropped to my mouth. "What did you expect?"

A hundred things that she wasn't. "You and I have to talk."

"We have nothing to talk about."

I watched her lips form those words, and then I lifted my eyes to hers. "Yes. We do. Tonight."

The tip of Kat's tongue darted out, wetting her upper lip. Holy crap, that got me in a lot of areas. My fingers tightened around the edge of the desk. She nodded and then turned around slowly. Satisfaction flooded me, and I smiled tightly.

And then noticed the teacher and the class were staring at us. Oh well. I lowered my desk back onto all four legs. Someone cleared their throat. The teacher began calling names. I lifted my fingers, one by one off the edge of the desk.

As plain as day, the edge of the desk was sunken along eight different areas. Melted, as if it been too close to an extreme heat. Without even testing it out, I knew the indents would match my fingers.

After school, I ended up getting waylaid by Matthew. He'd wanted to know how I was handling the situation between Ash and Kat. He was actually worried that Ash would do something to harm Kat and potentially expose us.

I wasn't so sure about that.

If Kat had dumped food on Ash somewhere more private, yeah, there would've been a good chance that Ash would've tried to fry her. And Ash had the potential to make Kat's life a living hell at school, but I liked to think that she realized Dee wouldn't stand for it.

I wouldn't stand for it.

What went down in the cafeteria, though, reinforced the likelihood of bad stuff going down the more Kat was around us. She'd already been targeted by an Arum, and that could—that would—happen again. It wasn't necessarily Kat's fault. Actually, it wasn't her fault at all. She didn't understand the dynamics or what she was getting herself into.

Dee had human friends before, but they were more like acquaintances, people she wasn't entirely close to. Kat was different. If she didn't live next door and so close to the colony, then maybe she wouldn't pose such a problem.

Maybe I wouldn't think twice about her.

But none of that was either here or there. With school back in session, there were other people that Kat could buddy up with. Dee would eventually get over it. And everything would go back to being normal.

Time for me to stop screwing around with this.

It was close to eight when I knocked on Kat's door. Her mom's car was gone from the driveway, and for some reason, as I walked over to the porch railing, I wondered if that was why Kat was so into reading. With her mom never around, I imagined she had to be lonely.

Or maybe she just enjoyed reading that much.

The door opened, and Kat stepped out. I opened my mouth, but immediately closed it. Kat had changed since school. And it wasn't just the missing cast, which was thankfully off her arm now. She also had a dress on—a pale blue dress with tiny straps and a lacy hem that showed off her legs and the slope of her shoulders.

Her hair was still down, cascading down her back, and as she closed the door behind her, I had a hard time focusing on what the hell I was doing over here.

She walked over to me, and moonlight sliced over her cheek as she lifted her gaze to mine. "Is Dee home?"

"No." I glanced up at the stars blanketing the sky. Dee would be home soon, though. "She went to the game with Ash, but I doubt she will stay long." I turned to her. "I told her I was going to hang out with you tonight. I think she'll come home soon to make sure we haven't killed each other."

Kat looked away, but I saw the grin. "Well, if you don't kill me, I'm sure Ash will be more than glad to do so."

"Because of spaghetti-gate or something else?" I asked.

She shot me a long look. "You looked mighty comfy with her in your lap yesterday."

"Ah, I see." I pushed off the railing. "It makes sense now."

"It does?"

"You're jealous."

"Whatever." She laughed as she turned away, walking down the steps. "Why would I be jealous?"

I followed her, enjoying the view. "Because we spent time together."

"Spending time together isn't a reason to be jealous, especially when you were forced to spend time with me." She paused and then shook her head. "Is this what we need to talk about?"

I shrugged. "Come on. Let's take a walk."

Her hands smoothed over her dress. I wondered if she wore that for me. "It's kind of late, don't you think?"

"I think and talk better when I walk." Meeting her gaze, I held out my hand. "If not, I turn into the dickhead Daemon you're not very fond of."

"Ha. Ha." Her gaze flickered to my outstretched hand. "Yeah, I'm not holding your hand."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not going to hold hands with you when I don't even like you."

"Ouch." I placed my hand over my chest. "That was harsh."

She snorted. "You're not going to take me out in the woods and leave me there, are you?"

I grabbed my chest as if wounded. "Sounds like a fitting case of revenge, but I wouldn't do that. I doubt you'd last very long without someone to rescue you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

I grinned at her, but it quickly faded. There would be no more grins between us after tonight. We walked in silence, crossing the main road and into the woods, where the moonlight barely cut through the thick trees. We walked side by side, and it was hard not to be aware of her.

"Ash isn't my girlfriend," I said finally, and I don't know why I was telling her this. "We used to date, but we're friends now. And before you ask, we're not *that kind* of friends even though she was

sitting on my lap. I can't explain why she was doing that."

"Why did you let her?" she asked.

"I don't know, honestly. Is being a guy a good enough reason?"

"Not really." She was watching where she walked.

"Didn't think so." I stepped around a broken tree limb. "Anyway, I'm...I am sorry about the whole lunch thing."

Kat tripped.

My hand snapped out, catching her good arm. Once she was upright, she backed off, folding her arms across her waist. Her expression was shadowed but pained.

"Kat?"

She glanced in my direction. "You embarrassed me."

"I know—"

"No, I don't think you do know." She started walking, her hands cupping her elbows. "And you pissed me off. I can't figure you out. One minute you aren't bad and then you are the biggest ass on the planet."

I stared at her retreating back for a moment. All of this would be so much easier since she was mad at me. I deserved that anger, but none of it settled well on me.

"But I have bonus points." I easily caught up to her, keeping an eye out for rocks and exposed roots. "I do, right? Bonus points from the lake and our walk? Did I get any from saving you that night?"

"You got a lot of bonus points for your *sister*," she said. "Not for me. And if they were my bonus points, you've lost most of them by now."

"That blows. It really does."

She stopped walking. "Why are we talking?"

"Look, I am sorry about that. I am." I let out a long breath. "You didn't deserve the way we acted."

In the increasing darkness, she studied me. A moment passed. "I'm sorry about your brother, Daemon."

I stilled, caught completely off guard. I never talked to her about Dawson. Obviously Dee would have at some point, but I knew Dee wouldn't have told her everything. How I should have warned him to stay away from Bethany. How it was all my fault for not keeping my brother safe. "You don't have any idea what happened to my brother."

"All I know is that he disappeared—"

My hand opened and closed at my side. Disappeared? Was that what Dee had told her? It didn't matter. "That was a while ago."

"It was last year." Her voice was gentle. "Right?"

"Oh, yeah, you're right. Just seems longer than that." I cast my gaze to the slices of dark sky peeking between the thick branches. "So how did you hear about him?"

There was a moment before she responded. "Kids were talking about it at school. I was curious why no one ever mentioned him or that girl."

So Dee hadn't brought it up? Interesting. "Should we have?"

"I don't know." Her response was quiet. "Seems like a pretty big deal that people would talk about."

I started walking again, my movements stiff. "It's not something we like to talk about, Kat."

"I don't mean to pry—"

"You don't?" Familiar frustration rose. I knew I shouldn't take my anger out on Kat, but maybe this was the perfect lead-in to pushing her away for good. "My brother is gone. Some poor girl's family will probably never see their daughter again, and you want to know why no one told *you*?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that everyone is so...secretive. Like, I don't know anything about your family. I've never seen your parents, Daemon. And Ash hates my guts for no reason. It's weird that there are two sets of triplets that moved *here* at the same time," she continued, proving that someone had been talking to her. Probably the girls in trig. "I dumped food on your head yesterday, and I didn't get in trouble. That's plain weird. Dee has a boyfriend she's never mentioned. The town—it's odd. People stare at Dee like she's either a princess or they're afraid of her. People stare at *me*. And—"

"You sound like those things have something in common."

"Do they?"

"Why would they? Maybe you're feeling a little paranoid. I would be if I'd been attacked after moving to a new town."

"See, you are doing it now!" she all but shouted as she followed me deeper into the woods. "Getting all uptight because I'm asking a question, and Dee does the same thing."

"Do you think maybe it's because we know you've been through a lot, and we don't want to add to it?" I threw back at her.

"But how can you add to it?"

I slowed down, taking a deep breath as we hit the clearing and the lake came into view. This was all going way off track. "I don't know. We can't."

Kat shook her head as she stared at the water. Stars reflected off the still surface, and I hated that I brought her here to do this. No longer would I look at this place as a haven of comfort or peace.

"The day at the lake." My voice was low. I wanted her to know this. Not that it would matter when this was over, but I needed her to know this. "There were a few minutes when I was having a good time."

She twisted toward me. "Before you turned into Aquaman?"

My shoulders tensed as I lifted my gaze to the sky. For the first time in a long time, I thought about home, our real home, and how different things would be—should be. "Stress will do that, make you think things are happening that aren't."

"No, it doesn't," she said firmly. "There is something...odd here."

"Other than you?"

Irritation rolled off her. "Why did you want to talk, Daemon?"

I lifted my arm and clasped the back of my neck. It was time to get this over with. "What happened yesterday at lunch is only going to get worse. You can't be friends with Dee, not like the kind of friend you want to be."

Kat stared at me. "Are you serious?"

I lowered my hand. "I'm not saying you have to stop talking to her, but pull it back. You can still be nice to her, talk to her at school, but don't go out of your way. You're only going to make it harder on her and yourself."

A long moment passed. "Are you threatening me, Daemon?"

Lowering my gaze to hers, I braced myself. "No. I'm telling you how it's going to be. We should head back."

"No," she said. "Why? Why is it wrong if I'm friends with your sister?"

My jaw tensed. This was a mistake, because I didn't like this—no, I hated doing this. I had a mean streak the size of the equator, but this...this wasn't me. Frustration rolled into a burst of heated energy, stirring the fallen leaves and tossing Kat's hair.

"You aren't like us," I said, and then I really went there. I crossed every line that I knew to drive the point home. "You are *nothing* like us. Dee deserves better than you, people that are like her. So leave

me alone. Leave my family alone."

Kat jerked as if I'd delivered a physical blow, and truth was, what I had done was far worse than anything physical. She took a step back, blinking rapidly.

Then I sealed the deal. "You wanted to know why. That's why."

"Why...?" Her voice cracked. "Why do you hate me so much?"

My control slipped for a moment, and I flinched. I didn't hate her. God, I wished I did, but I didn't, and seeing the tears building in her eyes killed me.

And then, because she was anything but weak, she rallied. "You know what? Screw you, Daemon."

I looked away, my jaw working "Kat, you can't—"

"Shut up!" she hissed. "Just shut up."

She stalked past me, heading back down the path we'd taken. It was too dark for her to make it without busting her ass. "Kat, please wait up."

Unsurprisingly, she didn't listen.

"Come on, Kat, don't walk so far ahead. You're going to get lost!"

She picked up her pace, and then she was running. The urge to go after her was hard to ignore, and I would've easily caught up, but it didn't take a genius to figure out she wanted as much space between us as possible.

I'd hurt her, really hurt her this time, cutting deep. Anything I'd said to her before was nothing compared to what I'd said this time. I had a feeling I'd finally accomplished my mission, but I didn't feel a single ounce of satisfaction.

I heard her stumble up ahead and grunt. Concern flared to life, and I picked up speed. "Kat!"

She ignored me once more and rushed forward. The road was up ahead, and she broke into an allout run. I was closer to her now, only a few feet behind, and I saw her lift her hands and wipe them across her face.

Kat was crying.

I'd made her cry.

She hit the road and my heart stopped. I shouted her name, but there was no way she'd be able to react fast enough. It was too late.

Kat had stepped out in front of a truck.

CHAPTER 14

Two bright headlights enveloped Kat's form, and the truck's loud roar filled my head. Her arms were thrown up, as if she was trying to shield herself. I saw her in my mind, broken and destroyed on the hot asphalt. The fire and life in her gray eyes dulled forever, and rage enveloped me.

I didn't hesitate.

Summoning the Source, I shattered every rule of our kind in a nanosecond. For Kat.

The burst of energy was so powerful and raw, it heated the air around us. Thunder cracked, reverberating through the valley. And the truck stopped. Everything about the vehicle and inside it simply *stopped*, suspended in time. The ground shivered under my feet and traveled outward.

Strained, I held the vehicle back, calling on everything inside me. Tiny bursts of light sparked around the truck. The driver was frozen. Time was frozen except for me and Kat.

My body began to tremble with the effort, and the world took on a whitish tint.

Kat lowered her hands and slowly turned around. Her eyes were wide as she lifted her hand to her chest. She took a step back. "Oh my God..."

I couldn't continue holding the truck back while in my human form. I knew my eyes were glowing by then, iridescent. I had a choice. Any second now I was going to lose control and the truck would continue its original path and barrel into Kat. Or I could endanger Kat and Dee and my race even more by exposing us. But at least Kat would still be alive, for however long she survived the Arum. I didn't hesitate in my choice.

The shift happened almost immediately, starting with my veins first. Intense white light filled them and then washed over me, replacing my clothing and human skin. The tremble moved past my arms, over my chest, and down my body. Power rippled out, gliding over to her.

And then I was completely in my true form, lighting up the whole damn road.

Kat was seeing me for what I really was.

Off in the distance, I heard Dee shouting, but I couldn't afford to lose focus. Not until after I got Kat out of the path of certain death.

Kat looked back at the truck. The vehicle was shaking, as was the driver. I wouldn't be able to hold it back much longer or keep the driver suspended. He would be traced—hard-core traced. So would Kat. I couldn't worry with the driver, though. His out-of-state tags meant once he was unfrozen, he'd be long gone.

The engine in the truck screamed, trying to push through, and I reached out for even more of the source. As the energy coursed through my form, a ball of intense heat grew in my belly, threatening to burn through me. Our kind could channel energy in the form of light, but even we had limits.

Just when I thought I was surely going to lose control, Kat came unstuck. She spun around and took off. I pulled the Source back and it slammed into me, knocking me back a step as the truck roared past

and sapping the last of my energy. The street was empty.

Shit.

Kat was running up the drive. I had to... God, I didn't even know what I was going to do. Thinking was pointless now, especially since I hadn't actually thought about what I was doing from the moment she stepped one foot onto the road. I ran after her. Halfway up the driveway, Dee appeared, but Kat dodged her and kept running, right into the woods.

"Stay back," I shouted at Dee.

"But—"

"I mean it, Dee. Stay back!"

For once, she read the warning in my voice and saw the severity in the situation. She backed off with a look of horror on her face. What happened tonight was what I'd been warning her about this whole time.

Except it had been me who had exposed us.

Branches smacked at me and snagged my shirt as I raced after Kat. Spying her up ahead, I called out, but she didn't stop, and I wasn't going to chase after her all night. I dropped the human speed BS and within a heartbeat, I was on her.

I caught Kat from behind, my arms around her waist. We went down in a tangle of legs. I twisted before we hit the ground, absorbing the brunt of the fall. I rolled, pinning her down in the mossy grass under me.

Kat went crazy.

She slammed her hands against my chest and pushed. "Get off!"

I grabbed her shoulders, forcing her back before she hurt herself. "Stop it!"

"Get away from me!" she screamed, wiggling and trying to use her hips to throw me off.

Any other time, her rough movements would've firmly placed my head in the wrong place. Not now. "Kat, stop it! I'm not going to hurt you!"

Her wild gaze connected with mine, and she stilled underneath me, only her chest rising and falling erratically. Neither of us moved for what felt like an eternity. Panic filled her gaze, mingling with unshed tears.

That cut me. "I won't hurt you. I could never hurt you."

Kat wasn't thrashing anymore. She was staring at me with those wide, beautiful eyes. Some of the panic eased off, but she was still frightened. Her body trembled as she looked away, pressing her cheek to the grass as she squeezed her eyes shut.

What was I going to do?

I couldn't let her tell the world about us. There were only two options at this point. I took care of her, as in what Matthew had volunteered to do. Or I somehow convinced her to keep quiet. I hadn't risked everything to save her from that demon truck to harm her myself now.

Slowly, so I didn't startle her, I placed my finger under her chin and gently turned her head to mine. "Look at me, Kat. You need to look at me right now."

She kept her eyes tightly closed.

I shifted up, bracing my weight on my legs as I clasped her cheeks. Her skin was smooth and too cool. My fingers smoothed over the line of her jaw, and I saw that my hands trembled slightly. I didn't know if I could make her understand, but I had to try. I had to stop the bullet heading straight for her head.

"Please," I whispered.

Her chest rose sharply, and then her lashes swept up. Her gaze tracked over my face, and I knew she

was trying to reconcile what she saw now versus what she'd seen by the side of the road. The pale moonlight broke through the trees, gliding over her cheekbones and mouth.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I tried again. "I want to talk to you. I need to talk to you, do you understand?"

She nodded.

I closed my eyes, letting out a sigh. Weariness invaded me. "Okay. I'm going to let you up, but please promise me you won't run. I don't feel like chasing you anymore right now. That last little trick nearly wiped me out." I opened my eyes, finding her watching me closely. "Say it, Kat. Promise me you won't run. I can't let you run out here by yourself. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she whispered hoarsely.

"Good." Leaning back, I slipped my hand down her cheek and then moved to the side. Crouched on my heels, I watched her scoot away until her back was pressed against a tree. I waited for a few seconds, to see if she was going to freak out. When she didn't, I sat down in front of her. I shoved my hand through my hair, swallowing a month's worth of curses. "Why did you have to walk out in front of the truck? I was trying everything to keep you out of this, but you had to go and ruin all of my hard work."

She pressed a shaking hand to her forehead. "I didn't do it on purpose."

"But you did." I dropped my hand to my lap. "Why did you come here, Kat? Why? I—we were doing well and then you show up and everything is thrown to hell. You have no idea. Shit. I thought we'd get lucky and you'd leave."

"I'm sorry I'm still here." She pressed even further against the tree, tucking her legs to her chest.

I wanted to punch myself. "I'm always making this worse." Shaking my head, I tried again. "We're different. I think you realize that now."

She placed her forehead on her knees for a moment and seemed to collect herself. She lifted her head. "Daemon, what are you?"

Smiling ruefully, I rubbed my palm along my temple. "That is hard to explain."

"Please tell me. You need to tell me, because I'm about to lose it again." Her voice rose.

I met her gaze and spoke the truth. "I don't think you want to know, Kat."

Her breath caught as she stared back at me. Understanding crept into her expression. If she asked me what I knew she wanted to, everything would change. Everything *had* already changed, but if she asked, I would tell her the truth. I would give her enough information to prove that we could trust her.

Or for her to hang herself with.

There were simply no other choices.

Kat exhaled softly. "Are you...human?"

I barked out a short laugh. "We're not from around here."

"You think?"

"Yeah, I guess you've probably figured out we're not human."

She drew in a shaky breath. "I was hoping I was wrong."

I laughed again, even though none of this was funny. "No. We're from far, far away."

Her arms tightened around her legs. "What do you mean by 'far, far away'? Because I'm suddenly seeing visions of the beginning of *Star Wars*."

Why was I not surprised by the fact that she went there? "We're not from this planet."

Kat's mouth opened and then closed. "What are you? A vampire?"

My eye roll was so epic I was afraid my eyes would get stuck there. "Are you serious?"

"What?" Frustration rose in her voice. "You say you're not human, and that limits the pool of what

you can be! You stopped a truck without touching it."

"You read too much." I exhaled slowly. "We're not werewolves or witches. Zombies or whatever."

"Well, I'm glad about the zombie thing. I like to think what's left of my brains are safe," she muttered, and I glanced at her sharply. "And I don't read too much. There's no such thing as that. But there's no such thing as aliens, either."

I leaned forward quickly, curving my hands over her bent knees. Her eyes widened as they locked with mine. "In this vast, never-ending universe, do you think Earth—this place—is the only planet with life?"

"N-no," she stammered. "So that kind of stuff...that's normal for your... Hell, what do you call yourselves?"

After a beat of silence, I leaned back and tried to figure out what the best way to go about this was. I'd never had to tell anyone about us before. This was a first. And she looked like she was seconds away from laughing hysterically. Not necessarily good.

"I can tell what you're thinking," I admitted. "Not that I can read your mind, but it's written all over your face. You think I'm dangerous."

She wetted her lips. "This is crazy, but I'm not scared of you."

"You're not?" Surprise shuttled through me.

"No." She laughed, and it had a concerning edge to it. "You don't look like an alien!"

I arched a brow. "And what do aliens look like?"

"Not...not like you," she sputtered. "They aren't gorgeous—"

"You think I'm gorgeous?" I smiled.

Her eyes narrowed. "Shut up. Like you don't know that everyone on this planet thinks you're good-looking." She grimaced. "Aliens—if they exist—are little green men with big eyes and spindly arms or...or giant insects or something like a lumpy little creature."

I let out a loud laugh. "ET?"

"Yes! Like ET, asshole. I'm so glad you find this funny. That you want to screw with my head more than you guys have already screwed with it. Maybe I hit my head or something." She started to push to her feet.

"Sit down, Kat."

"Don't tell me what to do!" she fired back. There was my Kitten. I let out a sigh of relief. If she could yell at me, she wasn't as afraid as I'd feared. We might just make it through this shit storm.

I stood fluidly, keeping my arms at my sides while I allowed my eyes to change. "Sit. Down."

Kat stared at me—stared at what was likely my green eyes glowing surreally. She sat down. And saluted me.

She literally just saluted me with her middle finger.

Wow. How could I not appreciate that kind of backbone? I grinned even wider. This girl could slay me if I let her.

"Will you show me what you really look like? You don't sparkle, do you? And please tell me I didn't almost kiss a giant brain-eating insect, because seriously, I'm gonna—"

"Kat!"

"Sorry," she muttered.

Closing my eyes, I struggled for patience and calm. When I was sure I could shift without accidentally burning half the forest, I shed my human skin. I knew the moment the transformation was complete because I heard her say, "Holy shit."

To her, I would look like a man made out of light, which wasn't too far from what we really were. I

opened my eyes. Kat had a hand up, shielding her eyes. The light I threw off was intense, turning night into day.

When I was in my true form, I couldn't speak in a language that Kat would understand, so I did something I'd only ever done with those of my kind. This was also forbidden. But so was everything I was doing right now, so really, might as well go the whole nine yards.

Luxen had the ability to transfer our thoughts telepathically to one another. We could communicate that way if we were in our true forms, which wasn't often, but humans could not respond back. We couldn't pick up on their thoughts.

This is what we look like.

Kat gasped.

We are beings of light. Even in human form, we can bend light to our will. I paused. As you can see, I don't look like a giant insect. Or...sparkle.

"No," she whispered.

Or a lumpy little creature, which I find offensive, by the way. I lifted my arm, stretching out my hand to her, palm up. You can touch me. It won't hurt. I imagine that it's pleasant for humans.

She swallowed as she glanced at my hand and then up toward the general vicinity of where my eyes were. The she reached out. Her fingers brushed mine. A jolt of electricity, totally safe, transferred from my hand to hers. Whitish-red light danced up her arm. I smiled as her eyes widened.

Gaining courage, she wrapped her fingers around mine, causing little wisps of light to whip out and circle her wrist. My light enveloped her hand.

Figured you'd like it.

Truth was, I liked it, too. In my true form, I was hypersensitive to, well, everything. I liked her touch. Probably a little too much.

Pulling my hand free, I stepped back. My light slowly faded, and then I returned to the form she was more familiar with. "Kat."

She stared at me, slowly shaking her head.

Perhaps I should've waited on the whole show-and-tell thing. "Kat?"

"You're an alien," she whispered as though trying to convince herself.

"Yep, that's what I've been trying to tell you."

"Oh...oh, wow." She curled her hand, holding it to her chest. "So where are you from? Mars?"

"Not even close." I laughed. "I'm going to tell you a story. Okay?"

"You're going to tell me a story?"

I nodded as I dragged my fingers through my hair. "All of this is going to sound insane to you, but try to remember what you saw. What you know. You saw me do things that are impossible. Now, to you, nothing is impossible." I waited for that to sink in. "Where we're from is beyond the Abell."

"The Abell?"

"It's the farthest galaxy from yours, about thirteen billion light years from here. And we're about another ten billion or so. There is no telescope or space shuttle powerful enough to travel to our home. There never will be." As if our home still existed, I thought as I stared at my open palms. "Not that it matters if they did. Our home no longer exists. It was destroyed when we were children. That's why we had to leave, find a place that is comparable to our planet in terms of food and atmosphere. Not that we need to breathe oxygen, but it doesn't hurt. We do it out of habit now more than anything else."

Recognition flared across her features, and I bet she was thinking about the day at the lake. "So you don't need to breathe?"

"No, not really." I shrugged. "We do out of habit, but there are times we forget. Like when we're swimming."

"Go on."

I waited for a moment, wondering if she could handle all of this, and then decided to go for it. I refused to acknowledge the part of me that wanted her to know everything. The part that wanted to desperately know what she'd think if she knew the real me. "We were too young to know what the name of our galaxy was. Or even if our kind felt the need to name such things, but I do remember the name of our planet. It was called Lux. And we are called Luxen."

"Lux," she whispered. "That's Latin for light."

"We came here in a meteorite shower fifteen years ago, with others like us. But many came before us, probably for the last thousand years. Not all of our kind came to this planet. Some went farther out in the galaxy. Others must've gone to planets they couldn't survive on, but when it was realized that Earth was sort of perfect for us, more came here. Are you following me?"

Her stare was blank. "I think. You're saying there're more like you. The Thompsons—they're like you?"

I nodded. "We've all been together since then."

"How many of you are here?"

"Right here? At least a couple hundred."

"A couple hundred," she repeated. "Why here?"

"We...stay in large groups. It's not...well, that doesn't matter right now."

"You said you came during a meteorite shower? Where's your spaceship?" Her nose did that cute wrinkle thing.

I arched a brow. "We don't need things such as ships to travel. We are light—we can travel with light, like hitching a ride."

"But if you're from a planet billions of light years away and you travel at the speed of light... It took you billions of years to get here?"

Did she really just do that math in her head? "No. The same way I saved you from that truck, we're able to bend space and time. I'm not a scientist, so I don't know how it works, just that we can. Some better than others."

She nodded slowly, but I had a feeling that was just for show. She wasn't freaking out, so that was good news at least.

I continued as I sat back down. "We can age like a human, which allows us to blend in normally. When we got here, we picked our...skin." She winced, and I shrugged. What could I do? It was the truth. "I don't know how else to explain that without creeping you out, but not all of us can change our appearances. What we picked when we got here is what we're stuck with."

"Well, you picked good then."

I grinned as I ran my fingers over the grass. "We copied what we saw. That only seems to work once for most of us. And how we grew up to look alike, well, our DNA must've taken care of the rest. There are always three of us born at the same time, in case you're wondering. It's always been that way." I watched her sit back down, no more than a foot or so in front of me. "For the most part, we're like humans."

"With the exception of being a ball of light I can touch?"

My grin spread. "Yeah, that, and we're a lot more advanced than humans."

"How advanced is a lot?" she asked quietly.

"Let's say if we ever went to war with humans, you wouldn't win. Not in a billion years."

She was frozen, and then leaned back from me. Probably should've kept that little piece of knowledge to myself. "What is some of the stuff you can do?"

I met her gaze. "The less you know is probably for the best."

Kat shook her head. "No. You can't tell me something like this and not tell me everything. You... you owe that to me."

"The way I see it, you owe me. Like three times over," I pointed out.

"How three times?"

"The night you were attacked, just now, and when you decided Ash needed to wear spaghetti." I ticked them off my fingers. "There better not be a fourth."

Confusion marked her expression. "You saved my life with Ash?"

"Oh yeah, when she said she could end you, she meant it." I sighed as I tipped my head back. "Dammit. Why not? It's not like you don't already know. All of us can control light. We can manipulate it so that we're not seen if we don't want to be. We can dispel shadows, whatever. Not only that, but we can harness light and use it. And trust me when I say you don't ever want to be hit with something like that. I doubt a human could survive."

"Okay..." She twisted her hands together, a movement she appeared to be unaware of. "Wait. When we saw the bear, I saw a flash of light."

"That was me, and before you ask, I didn't kill the bear. I scared it off. You passed out because you were close to the light. I think it had an effect on you. Not sure why it affected you then and not now. Anyway, all of us have some sort of healing properties, but not all of us are good at it," I continued, lowering my chin. "I'm okay at it, but Adam—one of the Thompson boys—can practically heal anything as long as it's still somewhat alive. And we're pretty much indestructible. Our only weakness is if you catch us in our true form. Or maybe cut our heads off in human form. I guess that would do the trick."

"Yeah, cutting off heads usually does." Her hands slid to her face and she sat there, cradling her head. "You're an alien."

I raised my brows at her. "There is a lot we can do, but not until we hit puberty, and even then we have a hard time controlling it. Sometimes, the things we can do can get a little whacked-out."

"That has to be...difficult."

"Yes, it is."

She lowered her hands, pressing them to her chest. "What else can you do?"

I eyed her. "Promise not to take off running again."

"Yes," she said, and then nodded. Very cute.

"We can manipulate objects. Any object can be moved, animated or not. But we can do more than that." I reached over and picked up a fallen leaf. I held it between us. "Watch."

Tapping into the Source, I let the heat whip down my arm to the tips of my fingers. Smoke wafted from it, and then a tiny spark flew. Flames, bright and orangey, burst from my fingers, licking up over the leaf. In the time it took for the heart to beat, the leaf was gone.

Kat rose onto her knees and inched closer. I watched her, surprised. Flames crackled over my fingers. She lifted her hand, placing her fingers near the flames. When she pulled her hand back, her eyes were wide with wonder. "The fire doesn't hurt you?"

"How can something that's a part of me hurt?" I lowered my hand, shaking it so the flames were extinguished. "See? All gone."

She scooted even closer. "What else can you do?"

I watched her for a second, and then I smiled before I moved quicker than she could track. One

second I was sitting in front of her, and the next I was leaning against the tree, several feet away.

"How...in the world—wait! You've done that before. The creepy, quiet moving thing. But it's not that you're quiet." She sat back, dazed. "You move that fast."

"Fast as the speed of light, Kitten." I darted forward and then slowly sat down. "Some of us can manipulate our bodies past the form we chose originally. Like shift into any living thing, person or creature."

She glanced down and then back up. "Is that why Dee fades out sometimes?"

What the hell? "You've seen that?"

"Yes, but I figured I was seeing things." Leaning to the side, she uncurled her legs, stretching them out. Of course, that drew my attention, because of...well, legs. "She used to do it when she was feeling comfortable, it seemed. Just her hand or the outline of her body would fade in and out."

I dragged my gaze from her legs and nodded. "Not all of us have control over what we can do. Some struggle with their abilities."

"But you don't?"

"I'm just that awesome."

She rolled her eyes but then popped up straight. "What about your parents? You said they work in the city, but I've never seen them."

I returned to feeling up the grass. "Our parents never made it here."

"I'm...I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was a long time ago. We don't even remember them."

"God, I feel so stupid," she said after a moment. "You know, I thought they worked out of town."

"You aren't stupid, Kat. You saw what we wanted you to see. We are very good at that." I sighed. "Well, apparently not good enough." When I looked at her again, she had this far-off look on her face. "You're handling this better than I expected."

"Well, I'm sure I'll have plenty of time to panic and have a mini breakdown later. I will probably think that I have lost my mind." She bit down on her lip. "Can...can you all control what others think? Read minds?"

I shook my head. "No. Our powers are rooted in what we are. Maybe if our power—the light—was manipulated by something, who knows. Anything would be possible."

Anger sparked in her eyes, and she bristled up like a little angry kitten. "This whole time I thought I was going crazy. Instead, you've been telling me I'm seeing things or making shit up. It's like you've given me an alien lobotomy. Nice."

My eyes narrowed as I stared at her. "I had to. We can't have anyone knowing about us. God knows what would happen to us then."

Kat exhaled roughly, and I could tell she was struggling to let it go. "How many...humans know about you?"

"There are some locals who think we're God-only-knows-what," I explained. "There's a branch of the government that knows of us, within the Department of Defense, but that's about it. They don't know about our powers. They can't," I nearly growled, meeting her eyes. "The DOD thinks we're harmless freaks. As long as we follow their rules, they give us money, our homes, and leave us alone. So when any one of us goes power-crazy it's bad news for several reasons. We try not to use our powers, especially around humans."

"Because it would expose what you are."

"That, and..." I rubbed my jaw, suddenly tired. I didn't want to admit that I'd been putting her in danger. "Every time we use our power around a human, well, it leaves a trace on that person, enables

us to see that they've been around another one like us. So we try not to ever use our abilities around humans, but you...well, things never went according to plan with you."

"When you stopped the truck, did that leave a...trace on me?" When I didn't answer, she started to put it together. "And when you scared the bear away? That's traceable by others like you? So the Thompsons and any other alien around here know I've been exposed to your...alien mojo?"

"Pretty much," I said. "And they aren't exactly thrilled about it."

"Then why did you stop the truck? I'm obviously a huge liability to you."

Damn, wasn't that a loaded question? Andrew and Matthew both would probably demand the same thing if I told them about Kat knowing what we were, and I was really hoping that conversation would never happen. I really didn't know how to answer that question.

Or maybe I did, and I just didn't want to speak it out loud.

Kat drew in a deep breath. "What are you going to do with me?"

I lifted my gaze. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Since I know what you are, that makes me a risk to everyone. You...can light me on fire and God knows what else."

I couldn't believe what she was saying. I knew I'd been a dick to her, but come on. She had to sense there was something more between us. Didn't she? Shit. Maybe not. Maybe I was so good at my douchebag skills, as she called them, she had no clue how I was really starting to feel about her. I pondered telling her everything. How just being around her made me smile more than I had in years. How I admired her spunk and the way she stood up for herself, and especially the way she stood up to me and my bullshit. As a warm feeling started to grow in my chest, I nipped that shit in the bud pronto, with an image of my dead brother and the human he'd fallen for squaring my jaw. No, it was still better if we went our separate ways, but that didn't mean I couldn't ease her fears at least. "Why would I have told you everything if I were going to do anything to you?"

Her lips pursed. "I don't know."

Moving toward her, I reached out, but stopped short when she flinched from me. My stomach sank as my fingers curled around empty air. "I'm not going to do anything to you. Okay?"

She nibbled on that lower lip. "How can you trust me?"

Another loaded question that was hard to answer. This time when I reached out, she didn't pull away. I curved my finger under her chin, holding her gaze to mine. "I don't know. I just do. And honestly, no one would believe you. Plus, if you made a lot of commotion, you'd bring the DOD in, and you don't want that. They will do anything to make sure the human population isn't aware of us."

Kat seemed to process that, and for a moment, our gazes held. We were connected by not just the physical touch but also the truth. When she pulled away from me, I didn't particularly like it.

And I didn't like that I didn't like it.

"So that's why you said all those things earlier?" she asked, her voice small. "You don't hate me?" My gaze fell to my hand as I lowered it. My tongue worked around the words. "I don't hate you, Kat."

"And this is why you don't want me to be friends with Dee, because you were afraid that I'd find out the truth?"

"That, and you're a human. Humans are weak. They bring us nothing but trouble." Yeah, that came out harsher than I'd intended, but that's probably for the best. She needed to know what was at stake—for all of us.

Her eyes narrowed. "We aren't weak. And you're on *our* planet. How about a little respect, buddy." Amusement flooded me. "Point taken." I looked her over. "How are you handling all of this?"

"I'm processing everything. I don't know. I don't think I'm going to freak out anymore."

Happy to hear that. I pushed to my feet. "Well then, let's get you back before Dee thinks I killed you."

"Would she really think that?" she asked slowly as though she were afraid of the answer.

I watched her from where I towered over her and when she met my gaze this time, I knew she saw the coldness in it. "I'm capable of anything, Kitten. Killing to protect my family isn't something I'd hesitate over, but that's not what you have to worry about."

"Well, that's good to know," she murmured.

I cocked my head to the side. "There are others out there who will do anything to have the powers that the Luxen have, especially mine. And they will do anything to get to me and my kind."

"And what does that have to do with me?"

Crouching down, I glanced around us. "The trace I've left on you from stopping the truck can be tracked. And you're lit up like the Fourth of July right now."

Her breath caught.

"They will use you to get to me." I reached out, pulling a leaf from her hair. Then I touched her cheek, where her skin had been torn from the night she'd been attacked. "And if they get a hold of you...death would be a relief."

CHAPTER 15

Kat was quiet most of the walk back. The trace around her was vibrant, like an all-white disco ball. That was going to be so incredibly problematic.

As the trees cleared, she spoke. "Can I...can I see Dee?"

I kept my steps slow so she didn't have to struggle to keep up with me. "I think waiting until tomorrow would be a good idea. I need to talk to her, explain to her what I've told you."

Her gaze turned woeful as we neared the houses, but she nodded. I followed her up the porch steps where light was on, casting a soft glow over Kat's bowed head. Through the windows, I could see that her house was dark. Her mom was at work, as usual. After everything that had gone down, I didn't think her being alone tonight was a good thing.

What if she woke up in the middle of the night and started calling everyone under the sun? Okay. That wasn't exactly probable. Kat wasn't stupid, but she could wake up and freak out. That would be understandable.

I held open the screen door for her as she reached for the main door. "Do you want to spend the night at my place?"

Kat stopped and turned to me slowly. One eyebrow rose. "Come again?"

A chuckle rumbled out from me. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Kitten."

Her lips pinched. "My mind is not in the gutter."

"Uh-huh." I gave her a half grin. "You can stay at *our* house if you'd like. Then in the morning, Dee will be right there."

She didn't speak as her gaze searched mine, and then she nodded. "Okay. I just...I need to grab a few things."

I nodded. "I'll wait for you downstairs."

Again, she studied me like she was trying to figure me out, and then she pushed open the main door. As she walked in, she flipped the light on in the foyer. Glancing over her shoulder, she looked back but didn't meet my stare. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be here."

Kat darted up the staircase, her flip-flops smacking off the steps. While she was upstairs, I didn't stay put. The layout of the house was the same as ours, so when I roamed off to my left, I entered the kitchen. I flipped on the overhead light and scoped out the place. I wasn't really looking for anything. Mostly, I was just curious.

But what I saw tipped up the corners of my lips.

Everywhere I looked, there were books, just as it had been in the living room. Two were on the counter, near a toaster. One was on the fridge, and I had no idea why there'd be one there. There were three on the kitchen table, stacked next to two unopened packages.

How in the world could someone have so many books?

I heard her moving around upstairs. I turned off the light and returned to the foyer. A few seconds later, she started down the stairs, carrying a small tote bag. "I'm ready."

Kat locked up, and then we headed toward my house. On the way, she kept peeking in my direction. I could tell she had more questions. Who wouldn't after finding out they were living next door to aliens? But I figured she had to have a breaking point, and I really didn't want to be the one to push her over the edge. That was one reason I didn't want her talking to Dee.

But I also needed to make sure we were on the same page, that Kat realized what she'd just stepped in and the consequences of knowing what she did.

When we reached the front door, I stopped and faced her. There was no light on, and we stood in the dark. "There's something I just need to make sure of, okay?"

She held the tote close to her body. "All right?"

I lowered my voice just in case Dee was hovering inside the door. She was somewhere in the house. I could feel her. "What I've told you? What you know? I can't stress enough how much of a big deal this is. This goes beyond a normal level of trust. It's my life—our lives—you're holding in your hands," I told her. "I don't expect you to care too much about tossing me under a speeding bus, but you'd also be tossing Dee under it."

Kat stepped closer, so close, her tote bag brushed against my stomach. "I do get that, Daemon. Honestly? What you said earlier was true. No one would believe me. They'd think I was crazy, but I would never do anything to betray Dee." She paused, exhaling softly as she tipped her chin up. "And even though you're a giant douchebag, I wouldn't do that to you, either."

My lips twitched. "Well, that's good to hear."

"I'm serious," she insisted. "I'm not going to tell anyone."

Some of the icy unease faded off, but the thing was, only time would tell if Kat could seriously be trusted. I hoped so. Not just for Dee's sake or mine, but for her own.

I led her into the house and took her upstairs. She was looking around, her gaze bouncing off everything, and I realized this was the first time she'd been in our house. I figured Dee was in her bedroom, and I half expected her to jump out at any movement.

I walked Katy to a guest bedroom almost never used and opened the door. Flipping on the light, I stepped into the stale, cold air of the room. "You can stay in here." I walked toward the bed. It was made. "There're extra blankets in the closet there."

Kat turned slowly, eyeing the closet.

"There's a bathroom right across from this room. My bedroom is next door," I explained as I rubbed my palm over my chest. "Dee's bedroom is down the hall. Just let...let it all go for tonight. She'll still be here in the morning."

She nodded.

My gaze flickered to hers. Dark smudges of exhaustion had formed under her eyes. I suspected she'd be out cold the moment her head hit that pillow. "Do you need anything else?"

"No."

I stood there for a moment, feeling like there was something else I needed to say, but I couldn't grasp on to any words, so I nodded and then turned toward the door.

"Daemon?"

Stopping, I twisted around.

She was nibbling on her lower lip. "Thank you for saving my life tonight. I would be a pancake if you hadn't."

I didn't respond to that, because there was really wasn't a reason for her to thank me.

"And..." She stepped forward, lowering the tote. "And thank you for telling me the truth. You can trust me with it."

My lashes lifted and I met her earnest stare. I wanted to believe her. "Prove it."

It wasn't lost on me as I left the room, closing the door behind me, that I had parroted Ash's words. Heading down the hall, I stopped at Dee's door and gently rapped my knuckles on it.

The door flew open, and my sister was standing there, eyes shining. "Does she hate me?" she whispered.

"What?" I frowned, stepping inside and closing the door. "God. No. She doesn't hate you."

Dee folded her hands together. "Are you sure? I've been lying to her, and how can she like me when all I've done—"

Wrapping my arm around her shoulders, I drew her in for a hug. "She understands why you couldn't be honest, Dee. She doesn't hate you for it."

She face-planted in my chest, and when she spoke, her voice was muffled. "You told her?"

"Yeah." I lowered my cheek to the top of her head and quickly told her what had happened with the truck. "I didn't have a choice."

Dee was quiet for a moment. "Yeah. Yeah, you did, Daemon."

I knew what she was referencing, and I hated that Dee believed if it had come down to it, that I would do that.

"I also think it's nice you brought her over here," she continued.

No response to that.

"She thinks I'm a freak, doesn't she?" she muttered.

I laughed as I pulled back. "No. She doesn't."

She didn't look like she believed me. "Kat's tired. She's barely standing on her feet. Give her till tomorrow and then you can jump all over her, okay?"

Dee relented, and after chatting with her for a few moments, I headed back to my bedroom. Burned the hell out, I changed into a pair of sleep pants and was about the throw myself on the bed but was dying of thirst.

I really needed to put a small fridge up here.

Sighing, I walked out of the room. The hallway bathroom light was on as I headed downstairs. I grabbed a bottle of water and made my way back up, my brain strangely empty of all concerns, which proved just how tired I was.

As I neared my door, the bathroom door opened and Kat stepped out in the hallway. She froze. I froze. Shit. I became a damn statue.

Kat clutched a toothbrush and toothpaste in her hands. Her hair was up in a messy knot and the thin wisps around her face were damp. She'd washed her face, and looked like she'd gotten more water on the dark blue shirt she wore than she did her face. Speaking of that shirt...

It was all that she was wearing. And it was thin. And I was getting an eyeful that I very much appreciated.

The visual packed an intense punch and there was no stopping the way my body, which could be so freaking human at times, reacted. The shirt was loose and bulky, ending at midthigh, and good Lord, those thighs...

Who knew a shirt could be so damn sexy?

Her face was as red as a ripe tomato, but she...she was checking me out in the same way I was checking her out. Her eyes were most definitely not on my face, so I didn't feel too much of an ass

for staring at certain areas of her. Not when her gaze was trained on my stomach and then my chest... and then back down to where the pajama bottoms hung.

Kat sucked her lower lip in between her teeth.

Aw, hell.

I swallowed a groan, and she must've heard the noise, because her gaze flew to my face, and that blush deepened like a sunburn. She darted for the extra bedroom. "G-Good night."

"Night," was all I managed.

I walked into my bedroom and quietly closed the door behind me. Making it to the bed, I flopped down on it and stared at the ceiling.

It was going to be another long night.

It was weird, how I felt after telling Kat the truth. I thought I'd be more ill at ease. I'd never told a human before, and it had been bad enough when Dawson told Bethany the truth. I don't know why I wasn't as pissed off or panicked this time around.

Instead, I was more...relieved. I didn't have to pretend anymore or hide what I really was around her. I didn't have to be the constant douchebag she liked to call me. Sure, I needed to keep her at a distance, but at least I could explain the stakes in a way she could understand now. Home had once again become the sanctuary it had been before Kat moved in next door.

Like I said, it was weird.

I'd stayed MIA Saturday morning while Dee talked to Kat. I figured they needed their time to work through the big discovery, and when Kat finally headed next door sometime that afternoon, Dee explained that she'd actually shown Kat one of Dee's strongest abilities.

In her true form, Dee had a knack at mirroring the image of another person. Most of us could do it, but for only short times. Dee could hold the mirror image for a hell of a lot longer than all of us.

Dee had apparently made herself look like Kat.

I kind of felt bad for Kat at that point.

I stood in the kitchen, rinsing off plates before placing them in the dishwasher as Dee bounced around. Excitement buzzed in her voice as she went over every detail from her talk with Kat. I couldn't hide my grin, just like Dee couldn't hide her relief.

"I told her that you can do just about anything," she said. "She asked what you could do after I mirrored her."

My grin spread. I bet Kat loved hearing that.

"I totally reinforced the fact that the government doesn't know about all our abilities and how important it is that they never find out." She bounded over, grabbing the plate out of my hand and placing it in the dishwasher. "It didn't seem like you told her much about the Arum."

The grin on my face started to slip.

Dee closed the dishwasher door and danced over to the kitchen table. "I explained what happened to our planet and how the government doesn't realize that the Arum are a totally different species."

I slowly turned around. "What else did you tell her?"

"I elaborated on the whole trace thing." Her forehead scrunched. "She didn't seem surprised by that, so I'm guessing you talked to her about some of it. I told her she didn't have to worry. We would keep an eye on her, and now since she knows what she's dealing with, I think it will be easier to keep her

safe."

"Yeah." I shoved my fingers through my hair. I didn't mind that Dee had talked to Kat about this stuff. After all, I had started the conversation last night, but I wondered how Kat was handling all of this.

"She can really be trusted," Dee continued on as I lowered my hand. She picked up the jug of tea and walked it to the fridge. "She knows what will happen if the DOD finds out that she knows about us. She's not going to say anything, Daemon."

I nodded as I folded my arms across my chest. "No one else needs to know that she knows the truth. Not even Adam."

Dee opened her mouth.

"I mean it, sis. Adam is a good guy. He's not like Andrew, but you know this is a big deal, especially after...after Dawson and Bethany. The others will worry, especially Matthew. We can't take the risk that one of them will panic and report Kat."

Her eyes widened as she closed the fridge door. "Do you think one of them would do that?"

I considered that question. "I don't know. I want to say no, but...anything's possible. And there's always the risk that one of them might accidentally say something in front of the other Luxen. We just need to be careful."

Dee fiddled with the hem of her shirt. "Okay. No one else needs to know."

Pushing away from the sink, I started toward the stairs and then changed my mind. "I'm going to go check on Kat. You want to come?"

She started to speak and then smiled broadly. "Nah. I think I'll stay here for now. I'll see her later."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why are you smiling like you're high?"

"No reason." She rocked back on her feet, smiling so wide I thought her face might crack. "No reason at all."

Frowning, I shook my head and pivoted around. I made it to the door before Dee called out, "Take your time."

I shot her a dark look over my shoulder, and she burst into a fit of giggles. Whatever. I crossed the front yard and saw Kat through the kitchen window. Well, I saw the white glow around her... I headed for the back door and knocked.

The door swung open, and unfortunately she wasn't wearing only the shirt like last night. Actually, that was probably a good thing. But that trace on her. Damn. The others were going to see it first thing Tuesday morning, after Labor Day, and I was going to have to come up with one hell of an excuse.

"Hey?" she said, sounding unsure.

I nodded in response.

Wariness flickered over her face. "Um, do you want to come in?"

Not feeling down when it came to enclosed spaces and Kat, I shook my head. "No, I thought maybe we could go do something."

Her brows flew up, and I almost laughed. "Do something?" she asked.

"Yeah. Unless you have a review to post or a garden that needs tending."

"Ha. Ha." She started to close the door.

I lifted my hand, stopping the door without touching. Shock replaced the irritation, and I grinned. "Okay. Let me try that again. Would you like to do something with me?"

She hesitated. "Where did you have in mind?"

I pushed away from the house, walking backward as I shrugged. "Let's go to the lake."

"I'll check the road before I cross this time," she said, and I turned around. "You're not taking me

out in the woods because you changed your mind and decided your secret is not safe with me, are you?"

I busted out laughing. "You're very paranoid."

She snorted. "Okay, that is coming from an alien who apparently can toss me into the sky without touching me."

"You haven't locked yourself in any rooms or rocked in any corners, right?"

Her eyes rolled when I glanced over at her. "No, Daemon, but thanks for making sure I'm mentally sound and all."

"Hey." I raised my hands in mock surrender. "I need to make sure you aren't going to lose it and potentially tell the entire town what we are."

"I don't think you need to worry about that for several reasons," she replied drily.

I gave her a pointed look. "You know how many people we've been close to? I mean, really close to?"

She wrinkled her nose, and I wondered where her mind went, and that made me chuckle. "Then one little girl goes and exposes us. Can you see how hard that is for me to...trust?"

"I'm not a little girl, but if I could go back in time and do it all over I wouldn't have stepped out in front of that truck."

"Well, that is good to know."

"But I don't regret finding out the truth. It explains so much. Wait, can you go back in time?" Her expression was serious. "The possibility hadn't crossed my mind before, but now I honestly wonder."

I sighed, wanting to laugh. "We can manipulate time, yes. But it's not something we'd do, and only going forward. At least I've never heard of anyone being able to bend time to the past."

"Jesus, you guys make Superman look lame."

I smiled as I dipped my head to avoid a low-hanging branch. "Well, I'm not telling you what our kryptonite is."

A moment passed. "Can I ask you a question?"

I nodded as our feet kicked at the leaf-covered ground.

"The Bethany girl who disappeared—she was involved with Dawson, right?" she asked.

I tensed. "Yes."

"And she found out about you guys?"

Several seconds passed before I could decide how to answer this question. "Yes."

Kat glanced at me. "And that's why she disappeared?"

"Yes." More or less, that was the truth.

"Did she tell someone? I mean, why did she...have to disappear?"

"It's complicated, Kat."

"Is she...dead?"

When I didn't answer that question, she stopped. I looked back, and she was digging a pebble out of her sandal. "You're just not going to tell me?"

I grinned at her.

"So why did you want to come out here?" She shook the rock out and placed the sandal back on. "Because it's fun for you to be all evasive?"

"Well, it is amusing to watch your cheeks get all pink when you're frustrated."

Her cheeks burned brighter.

I winked and started walking again. Her questions were valid, and I was being a jerk about it, but there really weren't easy answers to those questions. The lake came into view. "Besides the twisted

fact that I like watching you get all bent out of shape, I figured you'd have more questions."

"I do."

"Some I won't answer. Some I will." I glanced over at her, and she didn't look upset at me. I felt like I needed to take a picture to capture that moment. "Might as well get all your questions out of the way. Then we don't have a reason to bring any of this up again, but you're going to have to work for those questions."

She arched a brow. "What do I have to do?"

I glanced out over the lake and smiled. "Meet me on the rock."

"What? I'm not wearing a bathing suit."

Kicking off my shoes, I turned my smile on her. She blinked once and then twice before quickly looking away. "So? You could almost strip down—"

"Not going to happen." She crossed her arms.

That was a damn shame.

"Figured," I replied. "Haven't you ever gone swimming in your clothes before?"

Her lips pursed. "Why do we have to go swimming for me to ask questions?"

My gaze zeroed in on that mouth for way too long before I lowered my gaze. "It's not for you, but for me. It seems like a normal thing to do." I shifted my weight. "The day we went swimming?"

"Yes." She took a step toward me.

Lifting my gaze, I met her stare. I took a deep breath. "Did you have fun?"

Kat tilted her head to the side. "When you weren't being a jerk and if I ignore the fact that you were bribed into it, then yes."

Smiling, I looked away. One of these days, maybe, I'd tell her that I hadn't been bribed. "I had more fun that day than I can remember. I know it sounds stupid, but—"

"It's not stupid." Her response was immediate and genuine. Then she shocked the hell right out of me. "Okay. Let's do this. Just don't go underwater for five minutes."

Relaxing, I laughed. "Deal."

While I pulled off my shirt, she slipped off her sandals. I could tell she was watching me from under her lowered gaze. I waited for her to change her mind, but she grinned at me, and I...shit. There was a weird tugging in my chest as I watched her walk up to the water's edge and dip her toes in.

"Oh my God, the water is cold!" she shrieked.

I could do something about that.

"Watch this." Winking at her, I turned back to the lake. I let go of my human form. White light spread out from my chest and over my form. I shot off the ground, moving incredibly fast. To her, I probably looked like nothing more than a fiery ball. I hit the center of the lake. In my true form, heat radiated off me, warming the lake as I whipped around, under the water.

As I neared the rocks, I shifted back into the form Kat was more comfortable with as I hauled myself up on the rocks.

"Alien powers?" she asked.

Water sluiced off my skin as I leaned over the edge of the rock, motioning her forward. "Come in, it's a little warmer now."

She didn't look like she believed me when she placed her foot in. Her body jerked as she glanced up at me, her eyes wide. "Any other cool talents?" she asked as she waded over to the rocks.

"I can make it so that you can't even see me."

When she reached the side of the rocks, she placed her hand in mine. I pulled her up easily, and once she gained her footing, I let go and scooted back, giving her room.

She shivered as she sat on the sunbaked rock. "How can you do things without me seeing?"

Leaning back on my elbows, I stretched out my legs. "We're made of light. We can manipulate the different spectra around us, using them. It's like we're fracturing the light, if that makes any sense."

"Not really."

"You've seen me turn into my natural state, right?" When she nodded, I went on. "And I sort of vibrate until I break apart into tiny particles of light. Well, I can selectively eliminate the light, which allows us to be transparent."

She tucked her knees against her chest. "That's kind of amazing, Daemon."

I smiled as I folded my arms behind my head and lay back. "I know you have questions. Ask them."

Kat slowly shook her head. "Do you guys believe in God?"

"He seems like a cool guy."

She blinked. "Did you guys have a god?"

"I remember there was something like a church, but that's all. The Elders don't talk about any religion," I explained.

"What do you mean by 'elders'?"

"The same thing you'd mean. An old person."

She scrunched her nose.

That made me grin. "Next question?"

"Why are you such an ass?"

I laughed under my breath. "Everyone has to excel at something, right?"

"Well, you're doing a great job."

Closing my eyes, I welcomed the sun soaking into me. "You do dislike me, don't you?"

Kat didn't respond right off. "I don't dislike you, Daemon. You're hard to…like. It's hard to figure you out."

"So are you," I admitted and then decided to rock this whole honesty thing. "You've accepted the impossible. You're kind to my sister and to me—even though I admit I've been a jerk to you. You could've run right out of the house yesterday and told the world about us, but you didn't. And you don't put up with any of my crap." I laughed. "I like that about you."

"You like me?"

"Next question?" I said smoothly.

Kat leaned in closer. "Are you guys allowed to date people—humans?"

I shrugged one shoulder as I glanced over at her. "'Allowed' is a strange word. Does it happen? Yes. Is it advised? No. So we can, but what would be the point? Not like we can have a lasting relationship when we have to hide what we are."

She appeared to consider that. "So, you guys are like us in other, uh, departments?"

I sat up, arching a brow. "Come again?"

Her cheeks flushed in the sunlight. "You know, like sex? I mean, you guys are all glowy and stuff. I don't see how certain stuff would work."

Like sex?

She was legit asking me if we could have sex?

The question made me want to laugh. It also made me want other things that had to do with what she was thinking, and the fact that I physically responded that way so quickly was a bit disconcerting.

It was also interesting.

And I was also an idiot.

My lips curled up in a half smile and before I could really think about what I was doing, I moved,

rolling her onto her back before she could blink an eye. She sucked in a soft breath. I hovered over her, my wet hair falling forward as I braced my weight on my hands. A droplet of water sneaked free, landing on her cheek. She didn't even notice it.

"Are you asking if I'm attracted to human girls?" I lowered myself, and our bodies met in all the areas that counted. With our wet clothes, it felt like there was barely anything between our skin. She was amazingly soft under me, and I could feel her shallow breaths. As close as we were, I saw the way her eyes dilated. I shifted my hips just the slightest and I felt her gasp in every part of me. "Or are you asking if I'm attracted to *you*?"

Our eyes met and held. Silence stretched out between us, and I knew she had her answer.

And I also knew I needed to get off her before I engaged in total dumbassery.

Taking more effort than it should have, I rolled off her. When I spoke, there was no mistaking the change in my voice. "Next question."

Kat didn't sit up. "You could've just told me, you know?" She turned her head toward me. "You didn't have to *show* me."

True dat.

"And what fun would there be in telling you?" I turned *my* head toward her. "Next question, Kitten?" "Why do you call me that?"

"You remind me of a little fuzzy kitten, all claws and no bite."

Her lips twitched. "Okay, that makes no sense."

I shrugged.

A moment passed. "Do you think there are more Arum around?"

That was a tough one. I tipped my head back, studying her to determine how real she wanted me to get. "They are always around."

"And they're hunting you?" Her voice dropped.

I flipped my gaze to the sky. "It's the only thing they care about. Without our powers, they are like...humans, but vicious and immoral. They're into ultimate destruction and whatever."

"Have you...fought a lot of them?"

"Yep." I rolled onto my side, facing her. "I've lost count of how many I've faced and killed. And with you lit up like you are, more will come."

Her gaze momentarily lifted. "Then why did you stop the truck?"

"Would you have preferred I let it pancake you?" I asked, referencing what she had said that night.

"Why did you?" she persisted.

I clenched my jaw. "Honestly?"

"Yes."

"Will it get me bonus points?" I asked softly.

Her chest rose with a deep breath, and then she lifted her hand. She brushed back the strand of hair that had fallen across my forehead. Her fingers grazed my skin, and I stilled, closed my eyes briefly. Such a soft, innocent touch, but it hit me hard.

"Depends on how you answer the question," she said.

When I opened my eyes, her features were tinged in white. She pulled her hand back, exhaling softly. I eased onto my back, my arm against hers. "Next question?"

Kat folded her hands together over her stomach, and she didn't pull away. "Why does using your powers leave a trace?"

Much safer ground. "Humans are like glow-in-the-dark T-shirts to us. When we use our abilities around you, you can't help but absorb our light. Eventually, the glow will fade, but the more we do,

the more energy we use, the brighter the trace. Dee blurring out doesn't leave much of anything. The truck incident and when I scared the bear, that leaves a visible mark. Something more powerful, like healing someone, leaves a longer trace. A faint one, nothing big so I'm told, but it lingers longer for some reason.

"I should've been more careful around you," I continued. "When I scared the bear, I used a blast of light, which is kind of like a laser. It left a large enough trace on you for the Arum to see you."

"You mean the night I was attacked?" Her voice was hoarse.

"Yes." I scrubbed my hand down my face. "Arum don't come here a lot, because they don't think any Luxen are here. The beta quartz in the Rocks throws off our energy signature, hides us. That's one of the reasons why there are a lot of us here. But there must have been one coming through. He saw your trace and knew there had to be one of us nearby. It was my fault."

"It wasn't your fault. You weren't the one who attacked me."

"But I basically led him to you," I pointed out.

As my words sank in, she paled. Fear filled her gaze. I hated that, and like earlier, I was concerned with how much of this information she could handle.

"Where is he now? Is he still around?" she asked. "Is he going to come back? What—"

Reaching between us, I found her hand and squeezed gently. "Kitten, calm down. You're going to have a heart attack."

Her lips parted slowly. "I'm not going to have a heart attack."

"Are you sure?" Her hand felt warm and small inside mine.

"Yes." That earned me another epic eye roll.

"He isn't a problem anymore," I explained.

She turned her head more fully toward me. "You...you killed him?"

"Yeah, I kind of did." I wasn't trying to scare her, but she needed to know I would kill anyone who threatened my family...and now her.

"You kind of did? I didn't know there was any 'kind of' in killing someone."

"Okay, yes, I did kill him." I heard the startled catch in her breath. "We're enemies, Kitten. He would've killed me and my family after absorbing our abilities if I didn't stop him. Not only that, he would've brought more here. Others like us would've been in danger. *You* would've been in danger."

"What about the truck? I'm glowing brighter now," she said. "Will there be another?"

When there was one Arum, there were usually three more. Maybe we'd get lucky this time. "Hopefully there are none nearby. If not, the traces on you should fade. You'll be safe."

"And if not?"

"Then I'll kill them, too." And that was the truth. "For a while, you're going to need to stay around me, until the trace fades."

"Dee said something like that." She bit down on her lip. "So you don't want me to stay away from you guys anymore?"

"It doesn't matter what I want." I glanced down at our hands. It struck me then that I'd been tracing the alphabet on her hand. I had no idea. "But if I had my way, you wouldn't be anywhere near us."

Kat yanked her hand free. "Gee, don't be honest or anything."

"You don't understand," I said. I was determined that she understand the danger not staying away from us originally had put us all in. I didn't want to be cruel, but she had to know what was at stake. "Right now, you can lead an Arum right to my sister. And I have to protect her. She's all I have left. And I have to protect the others here. I'm the strongest. That is what I do. And while you're carrying the trace on you, I don't want you going anywhere with Dee if I'm not with you."

Sitting up, she turned toward the shore. "I think it's time I head back."

Aw hell, she really wasn't getting it. When she started to stand, I caught her arm. Her skin immediately warmed under my palm. "Right now, you can't be out there by yourself. I need to be with you until the trace fades."

"I don't need you to play babysitter." Her jaw jutted out stubbornly. "I'll stay away from Dee until it fades."

"You're still not getting it." God, I wanted to shake her. "If an Arum gets a hold of you, they aren't going to kill you. The one at the library—he was playing with you. He was going to get you to the point that you'd beg for your life and then force you to take him back to one of us."

"Daemon—"

"You don't have a choice. Right now, you're a huge risk. You are a danger to my sister. I will not let anything happen to her."

Anger flushed her face. "And then after the trace fades? Then what?"

"I prefer that you'd stay the hell away from all of us, but I doubt that's going to happen. And my sister does care for you." I let go of her elbow and leaned back, beyond frustrated. "As long as you don't end up with another trace, then I don't have a problem with you being friends with her."

Her hands balled into fists. "I'm so grateful to have your approval."

I forced a smile. How much more clearly did I need to put it out there for her? She was in danger and she was a risk. This...this wasn't personal. "I've already lost one sibling because of how he felt for a human. I'm not going to lose another."

"You're talking about your brother and Bethany," she stated.

"My brother fell in love with a human...and now they're both dead."

CHAPTER 16

Sometimes Kat was as open as a picture book. Everything she thought and felt plainly visible on her face. I watched as the irritation eased away, replaced by sympathy I wasn't comfortable seeing.

"What happened?" she asked quietly.

Part of me wanted to ignore the question. To say something ignorant and distract her, but there was another half of me that wanted to...to talk about it, to really talk about it. That part won out. "Dawson met Bethany, and I swear to you, it was like love at first sight. Everything for him became about her. Matthew—Mr. Garrison—warned him. I warned him that it wasn't going to work. There was no way we can have a relationship with a human."

I stared over her shoulder, at the tree line. "You don't know how hard it is, Kat. We have to hide what we are all the time, and even among our own kind, we have to be careful. There are many rules. The DOD and Luxen don't like the idea of us messing with humans. It's as if they think we're animals, beneath them."

"But you're not animals," she said, a bit fiercely. It was kind of cute watching her come to my defense for once, even though I probably didn't deserve it.

"Do you know any time we apply for something, it's tracked by the DOD?" I shook my head, disgusted. "Driver's license, they know. If we apply for college, they see it. Marriage license to a human? Forget it. We even have a registration we have to go through if we want to move."

"Can they do that?" Shock flooded her voice

I laughed drily. "This is your planet, not ours. You even said it. And they keep us in place by funding our lives. We have random check-ins, so we can't hide or anything. Once they know we're here, that's it. And that's not all. We're expected to find another Luxen and to stay there."

Her gaze sharpened. "That doesn't seem fair."

"It's not." I sat up, draping my arms over my bent knees. "It's easy to feel human. I know I'm not, but I want the same things that all humans want—" What was I saying to her? I cleared my throat as my jaw worked. "Anyway, something happened between Dawson and Bethany. I don't know what. He never said. They went out hiking one Saturday and he came back late, his clothing torn and covered with blood. They were closer than ever. If Matt and the Thompsons didn't have their suspicions before, they did then. That following weekend, Dawson and Bethany went out to the movies. They never came back."

Kat closed her eyes.

"The DOD found him the next day in Moorefield, his body dumped in a field like garbage. I didn't get to say good-bye. They took his body before I could even see him, because of the risk of exposure. When we die or get hurt, we resort back to our true form."

Her voice was soft when she spoke. "Are you sure he's...dead then, if you've never seen his body?"

"I know an Arum got him. Drained him of his abilities and killed him. If he were still alive, he would've found a way to contact us. Both his and Bethany's bodies were taken away before anyone could see. Her parents will never know what happened to her. And all we know is that he had to have done something that left a trace on her, enabling the Arum to find him. That's the only way. They can't sense us here. He *had* to have done something major."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I know there's nothing I can say. I'm just so sorry."

Lifting my chin, I gazed up at the sky. The weight of losing Dawson was like a hundred-pound ball of lead settling in my stomach. It hurt. Still hurt like it was yesterday. Still woke up some nights and found myself in his bedroom, wishing I could just see him one more time.

"I...I miss the idiot," I said raggedly.

Kat didn't say anything, but she leaned over, wrapping her arms around me. I stiffened out of surprise. She didn't seem to notice, because she squeezed me tight, and then she let go, pulling away.

I stared at her, shocked to my very core. After the things I said to her a handful of minutes ago, she did this? Hugged me?

She lowered her gaze to her hands. "I miss my dad, too. It doesn't get any easier."

The breath I let out was harsh. "Dee said he was sick but not what was wrong with him. I'm sorry... for your loss. Sickness isn't something we're accustomed to. What was it?"

"It was brain cancer. It started off with just headaches. You know? He'd get these terrible headaches and then he started having vision problems. When that happened, he went in for testing and he had cancer." She glanced up at the sky, her brows knitting together. "It seemed like it happened so fast after that, but I guess, in a way it hadn't been. I got time with him before he..."

"Before what?" I watched her, unable to do anything but that.

Her smile was sad. "He changed toward the end. The tumor affected things. That...that was hard, you know?" Shaking her head, she lowered her chin. "But I have all the memories of the good times, like when we worked out in the garden together or went to the bookstore. Every Saturday morning we did the garden thing. And then every Sunday afternoon, since I could remember, we went to the bookstore."

I was beginning to see why she loved gardening and reading so much. It kept her close to her father. We'd both suffered so much loss. "Dawson and I...we used to go hiking together all the time. Dee's really never been big on that."

She grinned a little. "I can't really picture her climbing a mountain."

I chuckled at that. "Agreed."

As daylight turned to dusk, and stars started to fill the sky, we...we just talked. I told her about the first time Dawson morphed into someone else and got stuck. She talked to me about how her friendships fell apart after her father got sick. I found it interesting that she took the blame for that. We talked until the air took on a chill, and it was time for us to head back.

Truth be told, I really didn't want to return to reality. I enjoyed this. Kat. Me. Talking. Never thought I would, but I did. I really did.

Comfortable silence surrounded us as we walked back to our houses. There was a light on in the living room of Kat's house, so her voice was low when she turned to me. "What happens now?"

I didn't answer.

I had no idea what happened now.

I spent most of Sunday listening to Dee and Kat talk about books and how book boyfriends were universally better than real boyfriends while they sat in the living room. And since I was a guy, maybe not human, I really wanted to disagree with that statement, but once they started listing the attributes of some of these dudes in the books Kat carried around with her, there was no way anyone could compete with that.

I felt like I needed to warn Adam or something.

Matthew was having a cookout on Labor Day, which Kat had found hilarious that aliens were celebrating Labor Day...up until Dee was leaving. For a multitude of obvious reasons, Kat couldn't go with Dee. She tried not to show it, but the smile she wore while she sat on our front porch didn't reach her gray eyes.

"I don't have to go over there," Dee said, sensing what I did. "I can stay—"

Kat opened her mouth, but I jumped in. "You've gone every year. You have to go this year or it's going to look strange."

She worried on her lower lip as she glanced at Kat. "Are you going to be okay here?"

"Why wouldn't she be?" I demanded, folding my arms.

Kat shot me a glare.

"Her mom has to work today, so she's spending the day alone," Dee answered before Kat could reply.

I cocked a brow. "How is that different from any other day?"

Kat's lips pursed.

"Don't be a jerk." Dee's eyes narrowed. "It's different, because today is a holiday."

Kat opened her mouth again.

"It's Labor Day," I pointed out drily. "It's not like it's Thanksgiving or Christmas. I'm not even sure it's a real holiday."

"Oh, it's real. It's on calendars and stuff," Dee insisted. "It's a holiday."

I rolled my eyes. "It's a stupid holiday. Kat is—"

"Is right here, in case you all forgot that." Kat stood, dusting off the back of her jeans. She shot me a baleful glare before turning to Dee. "I'll be okay. Daemon, and God knows I hate saying this, is right. It's just Labor Day. It's no big deal. Adam is going to be there, right?"

Dee nodded while I eyed Kat.

She smiled again. "Go have fun with him."

By the time my sister finally got her butt in her car and left, I had been prepared to Hail Mary throw her all the way to Matthew's house. I wasn't sure I'd make it, but I was willing to try.

As Dee's tires crunched over the gravel, Kat moseyed on past me, and my gaze tracked her, riveted by the way her hips swayed. Did she realize how she walked? Jesus.

"Where are you going?" I asked, lashes lowered.

She stopped on the porch steps. "Um, going next door."

"Huh," I murmured, leaning against the side of the house.

Her lips turned down at the corners. "Aren't you going to the cookout?"

I shook my head. "That's never been my thing."

"Really? A cookout has to be a 'thing' to do?" she challenged.

"Whether it's my thing or not, it's kind of irrelevant. Someone needs to be here with you."

Those full lips dipped into a scowl. "I don't need a babysitter—"

"Yeah, you kind of do."

Kat faced me, and it became obvious that she was ready to fully engage. It took a Herculean effort

not to smile. After yesterday, the time spent at the lake, something shifted between us. A connection I wasn't sure how to handle had been forged.

"I do not need a babysitter, Daemon." Her hand closed over the railing. "I'm just going over to my house and I'm—"

"Going to read a book?"

Fire was seconds away from shooting out of her eyes. Maybe even her mouth, too. "What if I am? There's nothing wrong with reading."

"I didn't say that there was." I smiled.

"Whatever." She pivoted and stomped down the steps.

I should've let her go. As long as she stayed here, when I was around, she would be safe, and the bonus was Dee wasn't with her. But as I watched her stalk toward her house—her empty house—I cursed under my breath and pushed off from where I was standing.

"Hey," I called out, unfolding my arms.

Kat kept walking.

Sighing, I shot off the deck. She didn't see me, not until I appeared in front of her. Jerking back, her hand flew to her chest. "Holy crap," she gasped. "A warning would be nice."

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans. "I called out."

"And I ignored you!" Lowering her hand, she drew in a deep breath. "What do you want?"

"Not to be ignored."

Her head tilted to the side. "Really?"

My lips twitched. "Yes."

She shook her head as a warm breeze tossed loose strands across her face. "For some reason, I don't think that's the case."

"Maybe not." I stepped toward her, slowly this time. "I have some cow meat in the fridge. We could make hamburgers."

"Cow meat?" Kat caught the strand of hair and tucked in behind her ear. "That...is a gross way of saying hamburger meat."

"It is, isn't it?" I started past her, bumping her arm with my elbow. "We can have our own little cookout. I've got a grill."

Kat stared straight ahead as I kept walking.

"Are you coming or not?"

Her back was to me, and for a long moment I thought she was going to ignore me, and well, that would be really awkward. Especially if I had to go back to her, throw her over my shoulder, and force her to eat my grilled cow meat, because I would do it. No one should eat cow alone, I'd decided. Plus, I really wasn't going to analyze why I didn't want to think of her spending the holiday alone.

Kat turned around, catching that piece of hair again and wrapping it behind her ear. "Do you have cheese?"

I arched a brow. "Uh. Yes."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Swiss cheese?"

"Yeah, I think so."

A second passed and then she smiled, flashing straight, white teeth. "Okay. Only if you make me a Swiss cheese hamburger and you don't refer to it as cow meat."

Dipping my chin, I felt the corners of my lips quirk up. "Deal."

Dee ended up taking the fall for why Kat looked like she was lit up like the Vegas Strip. It had been her decision, and it had made sense, since I wasn't sure anyone would've believed I'd make the same mistake twice.

As expected, Matt wasn't thrilled about it. None of them were. I didn't blame them.

And also, as expected, when I told Kat she had plans that evening, as in sticking around so I could keep an eye on her, she stated she had other plans. Everyone and the lamppost knew she didn't have other plans.

Kat was just being stubborn.

After school on Tuesday, I followed Kat home. She'd gone to the post office first, which pissed me off. The girl looked like a lightbulb to the Arum. She knew that, and still moseyed her sweet behind to the post office to pick up an armful of packages.

Packages that contained books.

As if she needed more books.

When I had pointed that out to her in the parking lot, she stared at me like I'd kicked a small child into oncoming traffic and had stated quite firmly, "You can never have too many books."

Then on the way home, she brake-checked me when I'd ridden up her bumper too close to get her to drive faster than I could walk. Didn't she get that every minute out here we were exposed? I worried every day until I could get her home, next to me, where I could protect her.

I blew my horn at her several times. It was either that or ramming the back end of her busted-ass Camry.

It had taken forever to get to her house, and the moment I parked my SUV, I was the poster child for impatience. I got up and went to her driver's side. Apparently, I had moved too fast.

"Jesus!" She rubbed her chest. "Would you please stop doing that?"

"Why?" I rested my arms on the open window. "You know about us now."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you can't walk like a normal human being. What if my mom saw you?"

I grinned. "I'd charm her into believing she was seeing things."

Opening the door, she barely waited for me to step back as she shoved past me. "I'm having dinner with my mom."

I popped in front of her.

Kat squeaked and took a swing at me. "God! I think you like to do that to piss me off."

"Who? Me?" I widened my eyes. "What time is dinner?"

"Six." She stomped up the steps. "And you are not invited."

"Like I want to eat dinner with you."

She raised her hand, flipping me off.

I grinned. "You have until six thirty to be next door, or I'm coming after you."

"Yeah. Yeah."

Spinning around, I smiled as I headed over to my house, wondering if she realized she had left all those precious books in her car.

Dee showed up a little after four, but it wasn't until it was close to the time when Kat was supposed to be here that she opened up the freezer and flipped out.

"Where is the ice cream?" Her voice was strained.

I leaned against the counter. "What ice cream?"

"What ice cream?" she repeated slowly, disbelief ringing in her voice. "The half a gallon of rocky road ice cream that was in the freezer yesterday!"

"Huh."

"I can't believe you ate all the ice cream, Daemon!"

"I didn't eat all of it."

"Oh, so it ate itself?" Dee's shriek could burst eardrums. "Did the spoon eat it? Oh wait, I know. The carton ate it."

"Actually, I think the freezer ate it," I responded drily. Dee whipped around and threw the empty carton at me, turning the damn thing into a speeding baseball. It smacked off my arm, stinging. I caught it before it hit the floor. "Ouch. That wasn't very nice."

She glared at me as I tossed the carton in the trash. It was then that I heard someone in the living room. Turning around, I headed for the room. It was Kat. I glanced at the clock and my lips twitched. It was a couple of minutes after six thirty. Leaning against the frame of the door, I crossed my arms and waited for her to realize I was there.

When she saw me, all she did was stand there and...stare. Her gaze moved over me like she hadn't seen me before, and I found that interesting. I raised a brow. "Kat?"

She looked away quickly. "Did you get hit by an ice cream carton?"

"Yes."

"Damn. And I missed that."

"I'm sure Dee would love to do a replay for you."

Kat grinned at that.

"Oh, you think this is funny." Dee burst into the living room, car keys in hand. "I should be making you go to the store and get me rocky road, but because I like Katy and value her well-being, I'm going to get it myself."

Kat's eyes widened. "Can't Daemon go?"

I smiled at her.

"No. If the Arum comes around, he's only going to see your trace." Dee grabbed her purse. "You need to be with Daemon. He's stronger than me."

Kat sighed heavily, and if I had feelings, I'd be offended. "Can't I go next door?"

"You do realize your trace can be seen from the outside?" I pushed out of the doorway. "It's your funeral, though."

"Daemon," Dee snapped. "This is all your fault. My ice cream is not your ice cream."

"Ice cream must be very important," Kat murmured.

"It is my life." Dee swung her purse at me but missed. "And you took it from me."

I rolled my eyes. "Just get going and come right back."

"Yes, sir!" She saluted me. "You guys want anything?"

Kat shook her head, and when Dee walked to the door, I shot over and gave her a quick one-armed hug. "Be careful."

"As always." She waved good-bye and darted out the door.

"Wow," Kat said. "Remind me never to eat her ice cream."

"If you do, even I wouldn't be able to save you." I flashed a grin at her. "So, Kitten, if I'm going to be your babysitter for the evening, what's in it for me?"

Her eyes narrowed. "First off, I didn't ask you to babysit me. And you made me come over here. And don't call me Kitten."

I laughed. "Aren't you feisty tonight?"

"You ain't seen nothing yet."

Grinning, I walked into the kitchen. "I can believe that. Never a dull moment when you're around." I paused when I realized she was still standing in the middle of the living room. "Are you coming or not?"

"Going where?"

"I'm hungry."

"Didn't you just eat all of the ice cream?"

"Yeah, still hungry."

"Good Lord, aliens can eat."

I glanced over my shoulder, finding that she still hadn't moved. "I have this strong inclination that I need to keep an eye on you. Where I go, you go." I waited for her to move and when she didn't, I winked at her. "Or I can forcibly move you."

"All right," she huffed and then stomped past me, plopping down at the kitchen table.

I grabbed a plate of leftover chicken from the fridge. "Want some?"

Kat shook her head and then rested her cheek on her hand as she watched me move around the kitchen. Whenever I glanced over at her, she had a thoughtful look on her face.

I brought my plate to the table and sat across from her. Yesterday, during the little impromptu cookout, we really hadn't talked. Strangely, it hadn't been an awkward silence between us. It had been...nice. "So how are you holding up?"

She dropped her gaze. "I'm doing okay."

"You are." I took a bite of the cold chicken. "You've accepted all of this. I'm surprised."

"What did you think I'd do?"

I shrugged. "With humans, the possibilities are endless."

She chewed on her lower lip. "Do you think that we are somehow weaker than you because we're human?"

"It's not that I think you're weaker, I know you are." I eyed her over my glass of milk. "I'm not trying to be obnoxious by saying that. You are weaker than us."

"Maybe physically but not mentally or...morally," she argued.

"Morally?"

"Yeah, like, I'm not going to tell the world about you guys to get money. And if I was captured by an Arum, I wouldn't bring them back to you all."

"Wouldn't you?"

An emotion I couldn't read flashed across her face as she leaned back in the chair. "No. I wouldn't." "Even if your life was threatened?" Disbelief colored my tone.

Kat shook her head as she laughed. "Just because I'm human doesn't mean I'm a coward or unethical. I'd never do anything that would put Dee in danger. Why would my life be more valuable than hers? Now yours...debatable. But not Dee."

I didn't want to believe her, but I realized I did as I went back to eating.

"So how long will it take for this trace to fade?"

Looking up, our eyes met. I picked up my glass of milk and took a long drink. The hollows of her cheeks flushed. "Probably a week or two, maybe less." I squinted, checking out the glow. "It's already starting to fade."

"What do I look like? A giant lightbulb or something?"

I laughed, because she kind of did. "It's a soft white glow that's around your body, kind of like a

halo."

"Oh, well that's not too bad. Are you done?" When I nodded, she grabbed my plate and stood, surprising me. She walked over to the sink, placing the plate there. "At least I don't look like a Christmas tree."

I followed her, bending my head down next to hers when I spoke. "You look like the star atop the tree."

Kat gasped and spun around, her eyes wide. Of course, she hadn't heard me move. She leaned back, gripping the edge of the counter behind her. "I hate it when you do that alien superspeed thing."

As I stared down at her, I smiled. Her cheeks were flushed prettily again. Didn't take a genius to know our proximity affected her, and not in a bad way. "Kitten, what are we going to get into?"

Her eyes darted over my face and then she blurted out, "Why not hand me over to the DOD?"

Caught off guard, I took a step back. "What?"

"Wouldn't everything have been easier for you if you handed me over to the DOD? Then you wouldn't have to worry about Dee or anything."

Damn, that was a good question. One I had asked myself over and over again. A question I knew everyone would ask if they ever found out that Kat knew about us. "I don't know, Kitten."

"You don't know?" she asked. "You risk everything and you don't know why?"

Irritation pricked at my skin. "That's what I said."

The widening of her eyes clearly spelled out the disbelief she was feeling. I didn't have a good enough reason for not turning over her. The DOD would love all over me if I had, and as much as I hated them, it worked to all of our benefits to keep them happy. There had to be a reason and I—

I cut off that thought. This conversation was leading to something far too serious. I didn't have time for that.

Leaning in, I dropped my hands on either side of her hips and lowered my chin. "Okay. I do know why."

Her breath caught. "You do?"

I nodded. "You wouldn't survive a day without us."

"You don't know that."

"Oh, I know." I tilted my head to the side, and while I was teasing her, I was also telling her the truth about what would happen if she ended up with the DOD. "Do you know how many Arum I have faced? Hundreds. And there have been times I barely escaped. A human doesn't stand a chance against them or the DOD."

"Fine. Whatever. Can you move?"

I grinned.

And Kat quickly lost her patience. She planted her hands in my chest and pushed—pushed hard. I didn't budge. My grin turned into a smile. "Asshole," she muttered.

She made me laugh. I really should have moved out of the way, but she was just so much fun to tease and I hadn't laughed this much in a very long time. I think deep down, neither had she. "You have such a mouth on you," I told her. "Do you kiss boys with that thing?"

Her cheeks turned bloodred. "Do you kiss Ash with yours?"

"Ash?" My smile disappeared. "You would like to know that, wouldn't you?"

Kat smirked. "No, thank you."

I didn't believe her for one second. I leaned in until only a few inches separated us. The scent of peaches and vanilla surrounded me. "You aren't a very good liar, Kitten. Your cheeks get red whenever you lie."

My brain clicked off when her cheeks turned an even brighter color. Before I knew it, my hand was wrapped around her arm. I wasn't gripping her. No. I was *holding* her, and her skin was warm under mine. I dragged my gaze to hers, and I couldn't look away.

Energy coursed through my body, causing my skin to hum. Tension practically crackled between us, and damn, it was hard to ignore that.

Part of me didn't want to. "I have a strange idea that I should test this out."

Her gaze slipped to my mouth. "Test what?"

"I think you *would* like to know." I grazed my hand up her arm, swallowing a groan when I felt her shiver. I stopped at the nape of her neck, under the heavy veil of hair. In the kitchen light, her hair was a deep brown, but I knew out in the sun, it was streaked with red. "You have beautiful hair."

"What?"

Yeah, that kind of came out of nowhere. Weird.

"Nothing." I slowly worked my fingers through the strands, and hell, they were as soft as I imagined. And yep, I'd imagined how it felt before. An ache filled me.

When my eyes made their way back down, I saw that her rosy lips had parted. She looked like she was waiting for a...for a kiss, and God, she was...

Damn. Kat was...she was beautiful.

A beautiful pain in my ass.

It took every ounce of energy I had to not lean down and kiss her. But that would be a bad idea on so many levels, I couldn't count them all.

Slipping my hand out from her hair, I reached behind her and picked up a bottle of water I'd left there earlier. Her eyes widened as she slumped against the counter.

I turned back to the kitchen table before she could see me smiling. "What was it that you were asking, Kitten?"

"Stop calling me that."

I took a drink as I faced her. "Did Dee pick up a movie or something?"

"Yeah," she said, rubbing her hands up and down her arms. "She mentioned it earlier in class."

"Well, come on. Let's go watch a movie."

Kat actually listened and followed me into the living room; she lingered in the doorway while I found a DVD near Dee's schoolbag. Picking it up, I saw what it was and flipped it over. "Whose idea was this?"

Kat shrugged.

I read the description and then muttered, "Whatever."

She cleared her throat as she inched into the room. "Look, Daemon, you don't have to sit and watch a movie with me. If you have other things you want to do, I'm sure I will be fine."

Glancing up from the movie, I shrugged. "I have nothing to do."

"Okay." She hesitated for a moment and then walked over to the couch.

I popped the movie in and then sat on the other end of the couch. The TV came on, and Kat's sharp glance brought a smile to my face. My smile spread when I looked over at her a few seconds later and found her staring at me. "If you fall asleep during this movie, you'll owe me."

She frowned. "Why?"

"Just watch the movie."

Kat's gaze flipped to the TV, and after a few moments, I shifted to get comfortable. It was hard, because I was so damn aware of her sitting right there. I'd already forgotten what the movie was about by the time the first scene appeared on the screen.

and that was about how long I lasted without finding myself staring at Kat.	

CHAPTER 17

I didn't sleep well Tuesday night, so after snagging the obsidian blade off my dresser, I'd ended up doing patrols at three in the morning. There had been no sign of Arum nearby, but I knew it was only a matter of time before another one was seen. I wanted to catch it before it caught us.

Or Kat.

Wednesday morning was a blur, and for the most part, I was too distracted to put much effort into annoying Kat. She got one pen poke from me and that was all. My mind was in a dozen or so different places. Last night I had thought a lot about Dawson. I had thought a lot about Dee and how I knew she wanted to leave this area. I had thought a lot about what the Thompsons or Matthew would do if they found out about Kat. I thought a lot about *her*.

As I went through the morning, I felt a hell of a lot older than I should, than I was.

Things didn't improve for me when I strolled into the cafeteria and spotted Kat in the lunch line. She wasn't alone. That asshole was with her—Simon Cutters. I didn't like the dude—never had. He was a touchy punk, and I didn't think he was all talk and no action when it came to the girls. And of course, he was sniffing around Kat.

A god-awful, unfamiliar emotion swirled inside me. I didn't want to put a name to it, didn't want to even acknowledge it, but all of a sudden I wanted to beat the ever-living crap out of Simon. I wanted to show him that he wasn't even worthy of speaking to Kat.

Simon waited for her at the end of the line.

Oh hell no, I was not okay with this.

I stalked past the line, to where Simon was standing in front of Kat.

She was staring at her plate. "We have a test next week, right?"

Simon nodded. "Right before the game, too. I think Monroe does that—"

Coming right up on Simon, I crowded him as I reached for a drink, forcing him to take a step back from her. Kat's chin jerked up as surprise flickered across her face.

I grabbed a carton of milk off the cart, flipping it in my hand as I turned toward Simon. We were the same height, but he was bulkier than me, and because of that, the idiot probably thought he could take me. I really hoped he wanted to find out.

"How you doing, Simon?" I asked, flipping the milk.

Simon took a step back, blinking as he cleared his throat. "Good—doing good. Heading over to my—uh, my table." Apparently he didn't want to see if he could take me. Shame. "See you in class, Katy." Kat frowned as she watched Simon scuttle off, then she looked up me. "Okay?"

"Are you planning on sitting with Simon?" The question came out of my mouth before I could stop it.

"What? No." She laughed. "I was planning on sitting with Lesa and Carissa."

"So am I." Dee bounded in from nowhere, balancing a plate in one hand and two drinks in the other. "That is if you think I'd be welcome?"

That ugly, weird feeling settled heavy on my chest. Not waiting to hear Kat's response, because of course Dee would be welcome, I pivoted and headed back to where I saw the triplets sitting with a couple of others.

"Hey," Adam said as I dropped into the seat next to him. I lifted my chin in response, which earned me a low, "O—kay."

I sat my history text on the table and cracked it open.

"Someone is in a mood," Andrew said under his breath.

Without looking up, I muttered, "Someone wants to die."

Andrew laughed, unaffected by the statement. "What were you doing talking to Simon?"

I shrugged. "Just saying hi."

Beside me, Adam sent me a long look. "That's...odd."

"It's nothing," I said, and then started flipping the pages of my textbook. A few moments later, I felt holes being burned into the top of my head and glanced up, finding Ash scowling at me. "What?"

"Why are you being a dick?"

I raised my brows. That really didn't even warrant a response. About to turn back to whatever the hell I was looking at in the textbook, I found myself searching the tables until I saw a certain grayeyed human girl.

Kat was smiling as she picked up her drink, her pink lips moving as she said something to Lesa. The girls laughed. Kat picked up the slice of pizza as Dee angled her body slightly, and then Kat's gaze roamed over our table and our eyes collided—met and then held.

Space separated us, but it didn't feel that way. I waited for her to look away. She didn't. I knew I should before Ash or Andrew noticed, because they would, but I didn't look away, either. Oh no, I continued eyeballing her, thinking of last night in my kitchen, how she had been waiting for me to kiss her. I knew that she had been.

And I knew that she wouldn't have stopped me.

Even from where I sat, I could see her lips part and her cheeks turn pink.

"You are really starting to bother me," Ash said, voice low, and when I didn't respond, her foot slammed into my shin. "Hello. Am I invisible?"

Frowning, I dragged my gaze away from Kat and looked at Ash. Her eyes burned like sapphires. "How could you ever be invisible?"

Her lips curled up in a tight smile. "I don't know. I'm feeling like I am right now."

"Huh," I murmured, taking a drink of my milk.

The small smile faded. "Don't sound too concerned," she said drily. "Wouldn't want you to stress yourself out over there."

I didn't reply as I placed the carton of milk down and returned to...chapter oh-who-the-hell-cares? I lasted about three minutes before I looked up and was staring at Kat again. Just like last night.

Screw me.

Leaning against the side of my SUV, I stared down the empty back road several miles from the base

[&]quot;How are things going with your new neighbors?"

of Seneca Rocks. Officer Lane had been waiting for me when I left school Thursday afternoon. With one flash of the Expedition's headlights, I knew he wanted me to go to our regular meeting place.

The only thing not regular was the timing of the check-in and the fact that Vaughn wasn't with him. Couldn't be too disappointed about Vaughn. Maybe he fell off the face of the earth.

I raised one shoulder in response to Lane's question, keeping it casual even though I didn't like the line of questioning. Wasn't the first time I'd been asked, but it was usually Vaughn doing the asking. "It's going. They seem pretty cool."

"No problems then?" Dark glasses shielded Lane's eyes.

Defining the word "problem" would be interesting. "Nope."

"That's good." Lane looked down the road. "I was worried."

Unease stirred in my gut. "Why?"

"You don't like humans," he answered honestly. "And with one moving in right next door, I figured you'd be pissed about that."

I snorted at Lane's frank honesty. Can't say I actually liked Lane, but he was better than Vaughn. When Dawson...when he died, Lane had seemed genuinely upset, unlike Vaughn, who obviously hadn't cared. "I wasn't happy. You knew that when I asked you and Vaughn about why they were allowed to move in, but what can I do?"

"Nothing," replied Lane. He folded his arms as his chin turned toward me.

I shrugged again. "Where's your buddy?"

"Vaughn?" One side of Lane's lips curled, almost like the idea of him being friends with Vaughn disgusted him. I knew there was a reason I tolerated Lane. "He's off doing something with Husher."

Now it was my turn. My lips curled in revulsion. Nancy Husher. Man, I disliked that woman. Didn't trust her, which was bad, because she was pretty high up there in the DOD, but luckily, we didn't have to deal with her often.

"A couple of weeks ago, there was an abnormal burst of energy around here," Lane stated, changing the subject to something else I didn't want to talk about. "It was tracked back to the main access road outside of your house."

I was betting "a couple of weeks ago" was code word for Kat stepping in front of a speeding truck.

Lane shifted his weight, which was slight. "You all playing football again?"

I almost laughed. Dee had made that up the last time we'd been asked about unusual activity. We didn't play any Luxen form of football and we sure as hell didn't toss around balls of energy, but it had been the perfect excuse. I nodded. "With the Thompsons. We got a little out of hand."

"Your new neighbors didn't see this, did they?"

I clenched my jaw. "We're not stupid. They weren't home."

Lane nodded. "Good to hear."

Pushing off the side of my SUV, I unfolded my arms. "Anything else?"

Officer Lane shook his head.

I opened the driver's door and was about to climb in when he stopped me. "Be careful, Daemon. With your new neighbors, it's not just going to be me or Vaughn keeping an eye on you. You might want to lay off the football."

Saturday evening was going to be the night that I locked Kat in her house. Swear to God, deities, and whoever else, it was going to happen.

"You're going to let me do this," she said, her eyes a stormy gray as she glared at me. "Because I'm not just going to sit here and do nothing."

"I never said you have to sit here. I don't want to sit here, either."

Her chin raised a notch. "No one is making you stay here, then!"

"Really?" Derision dripped from my voice. "I think you know why I'm here."

Kat tossed her head back and groaned. "I just want to go to this bookstore Carissa was telling me about. It's in town."

I knew which one she was talking about. Not like it was hard. There was only one bookstore in town. It was a used one, and the owner sometimes had no idea what they had in their store or its value. "And while the last thing I want to do is spend Friday night in a bookstore, all I'm saying is that I'm going with you."

Her little hands balled into fists. "Can't you see why I don't want you to go? You don't want to, and you're going to make it a terrible experience."

I rolled my eyes. "I will not."

She crossed her arms and stared at me pointedly.

"Seriously."

Looking over my shoulder, toward the woods, Kat sighed heavily. "Look, I get that I shouldn't go by myself. That it's—"

"Dangerous and stupid," I supplied helpfully.

The line of her jaw hardened, and a moment passed. "Yeah, I get that it's dangerous, but—"

"That should be the end of the conversation right there."

Kat lowered her frustrated gaze to mine. "But it's Friday evening, and Dee went to the movies with Adam, and I'm...I'm stuck here with—"

"With me?" I raised both brows as I crossed my arms, mirroring her stance.

She sighed again. "I don't want to sound like a jerk, but I don't...you don't even like me most of the time. I mean, one minute you're really cool and are actually fun to be around and the next—like the last couple of days—you have been such a jerk."

I hadn't been the friendliest since the day in the cafeteria. I didn't like the shit with Lane and the questions he'd been asking. I didn't like the shit with Simon. I didn't like that I didn't like the shit with Simon. I didn't like the shit with the Thompsons, namely Andrew and Ash, who were not at all secretive about their growing contempt when it came to Kat. I didn't like the shit with Matthew, whose paranoia was damn near contagious. I didn't like the shit with Dee, because she acted like nothing was wrong and everything was unicorns vomiting rainbows.

I didn't like the shit with Kat in general.

Needless to say, my mood was shit.

The center of Kat's cheeks were slightly pinker than the rest of her face, and even though her gaze was steady, I knew my mood swings affected her. The girl was mentally strong—an emotional powerhouse—but I wasn't easy on her. No way, nohow. And even though it was her who moved into this house and it was her who walked out in front of that truck, none of this was her fault.

Rubbing my palm along my jaw, I met her gaze. "I promise I'll behave."

She cocked her head to the side. "I don't believe you."

"You really don't have to." Reaching into the pocket of my jeans, I pulled out my car keys. "Come on. I know what bookstore Carissa was talking about. If you want to see it, we're going to have to leave now before it closes."

Kat didn't move.

"You're gonna want to see it." I jumped off the porch, landing nimbly in front of the steps. "They have like a bunch of books they sell for like fifty cents a piece." Her eyes lit up like the faint glow

around her.

I backed up toward my driveway. "If you're lucky, the actual owner will be there."

She uncurled her arms. "Why would that make me lucky?"

"Because he looks like Santa Claus."

Kat blinked, and then a surprised laugh burst out of her. The sound did a weird thing to my chest, something I ignored as I opened the driver's car door. "You're coming, right?"

Finally, after what felt like forever, she got into the SUV and immediately turned up the radio, the universal sign that indicated "don't talk." The ride into town was quiet, and I kept my mouth shut as we walked into the tiny used bookstore that smelled like dust and old pages.

Unfortunately, the owner wasn't working, but Kat didn't seem to care. The moment she stepped inside, it was like Christmas morning to her. A smile appeared and it didn't leave as she buzzed from one overstocked shelf to the next, oblivious to the clouds of dust she stirred up every time she pulled a book out of a pile. There was no one else in the narrow shop besides the older lady behind the register, who had her nose in a book.

I stood back, out of her way, and I'd pulled out my phone, opening up *Candy Crush*, but I wasn't paying attention to the game. Hell, I was still on the damn candy trail. I was watching her. I couldn't help it. Especially when she bent over, scanning the lower shelves.

Uncomfortable, I shifted my legs. Didn't help. Images flooded me. Kat starred in all of them. The costar was the red bikini. Heat moved under my skin, and I ground my molars. I needed to think about something—anything else.

Kat stretched up, reaching for a book several shelves above her, and the shirt she wore rode up, revealing a thin slice of skin above her jeans.

Aw, hell...

She clutched a book to her chest, and I was really, really envious of that book.

I shifted again. Still didn't help.

She spun around, heading for a wire bin full of small paperbacks covered with bare-chested men and women in fancy, old-school dresses. She dug around until she stacked a pile of them on the outside and then looked at me. "Can you help me?"

Slipping my phone in my pocket, my walk toward her was a bit...awkward. "What's up?"

"Hold your arms out, please."

I did what she asked.

And a few moments later, I was holding a pile of romance books.

I had no idea how my life veered so far off track that this was what I was doing on a Friday night, but a part of me wasn't all that upset. Which of course upset me even more.

Kat ended up leaving the store with more books than any human needed, and the whole way home she smiled that...that beautiful smile I rarely ever saw. She chattered about the books, and even though I didn't respond to anything she said, she kept going on.

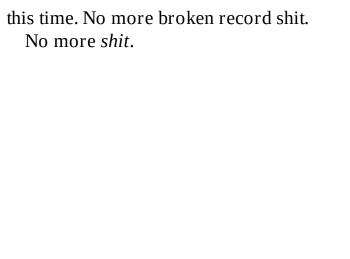
She was actually happy.

I knew the moment I opened my mouth I was going to ruin that, like I always did. I thought about the fact that I knew none of this was her fault. And I thought about the fact that this whole time Dee had been careful around her and I hadn't. In my attempts to keep Dee safe and Kat in the dark, I put Dee at risk and exposed what we were.

In reality, I was the problem.

And my attraction to Kat didn't help the situation. Made it all the more dangerous.

Kat's trace was going to fade soon, less than a week. After that, I needed to keep my space. For real



CHAPTER 18

Days became shorter, and with each day that passed, the warm breeze swirling through the valley chilled. Leaves turned into bright shades of gold and red before sifting to the ground, announcing the arrival of autumn.

By mid-October, Kat's trace had completely faded. It had done so four days after our trip to the used bookstore in town, and I'd done what I told myself I needed to do.

With the exception of seeing her in class and whenever Dee had her over at the house, I stayed away from her. Of course, I still annoyed the hell out of her when I had a chance. Because really, there were very few things that amused me as greatly as poking her with my pen in trig and watching her gray eyes turn stormy.

I was really beginning to wonder if the pen was subconsciously symbolic for something else. That "something else" didn't amuse me. Oh no, it did something else.

I knew she was spending more time with the girls from our class. Therefore so was Dee, and while it irked me that my sister was becoming more and more involved with humans, there was nothing I could do to stop that.

The reality was, unless she eventually moved into one of the colonies, she would always be surrounded by humans. She would always grow close to one of them. Hell, if Adam and her didn't work out, she could end up...falling for one.

Just thinking about that made me want to punch a hole through the ozone.

There was one other thing that made me want to do that.

Simon Cutters.

The over-touchy jackass was getting on my bad side, and I might have lost my cool just a tad bit when he started talking to Kat in trig class. His backpack took a trip to the floor, and being the good guy that I was, I tried to warn Kat about Simon. That conversation hadn't ended well.

Kat had accused me of being jealous. *Me*? Of *Simon*? Was she insane? There was no way I was jealous of any human. Whatever. If she wanted to help the guy most likely voted to knock someone up on prom night *study*, then it was her planned parenthood. Not mine.

Up until Dee had informed me between classes, with a downright devilish gleam to her eyes, that Simon had asked Kat to homecoming and she had accepted. Fire coated the inside of my mouth as my sister bounced away, so pleased one would think she was just awarded a lifetime supply of rocky road. Why would she be happy about that? Everyone knew how Simon was and no one, not even Kat, could be that naive.

There were more important things I could focus on, like if there was a new episode of *Ghost Investigators* this week or not, but when I spotted Kat walking all the way to the back of the parking lot after school, near the football field and track, I couldn't let it go. "Kat!"

She turned around, squinting as a gust of chilled air blew the long strands of dark hair across her face. I approached her slowly, realizing that this was the first time in...in weeks that we were actually somewhat alone.

The strap on her bag was twisted, cutting into her shoulder. I reached out and fixed it, straightening the strap. "You know how to pick a parking spot."

A moment passed before she responded. "I know."

We walked to her car, and while she placed her bag in the backseat of her Camry, I waited with my hands in my pockets and tried to come up with a nice, non-jerk way of saying she needed to change her mind when it came to Simon. The "are you insane?" argument didn't seem like it would be very helpful, but that was what my brain kept cycling back to.

Closing the door, she faced me. "Is everything okay? It's not...?"

"No." I shoved my fingers through my hair. "Nothing...uh, cosmic-related."

"Good." She leaned against the car, her hands clasped together. Her keys dangled from her fingers. "You scared me there for a second."

When I twisted toward her, it left only a few inches between us. "I hear you're going with Simon Cutters to the dance."

Kat brushed a strand of hair out of her face. The wind tossed it right back. "News travels fast."

"Yeah, it does around here." I snagged the piece of hair this time and tucked it back behind her ear. My knuckles brushed against her cheek, and what felt like electricity danced from her skin to mine. "I thought you didn't like him."

"He's not bad," she said, shifting her gaze to the people on the track. "He's kind of nice, and he asked me."

Kind of nice? "You're going with him because he asked you?"

Her gaze sharpened as it returned to mine. She nodded as she fiddled with the keys. "Are you going to the dance?"

I hadn't been planning on it. Shifting my stance caused my leg to brush her thigh. "Does it matter?" Her lips pursed. "Not really."

"You shouldn't go with someone just because he asked you."

She glanced down at her keys, and I had the feeling she wanted to stab me with them. "I don't see why this has anything to do with you."

"You're my sister's friend, and therefore it has something to do with me." My reasoning was total bunk.

And Kat knew that, because she gaped at me. "That is the worst logic I have ever heard." Whipping around, she headed toward the driver's door, stopping in front of the hood. "Shouldn't you be more concerned with what Ash is doing?"

"Ash and I aren't together."

Shaking her head, she started walking again. "Save your breath, Daemon. I'm not backing out because you have a problem with it."

Did she always have to be so damn stubborn? I cursed under my breath as I trailed after her.

"I don't want to see you get into any kind of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" She yanked open the car door.

Catching the door, I arched a brow. "Knowing you, I can't even begin to imagine how much trouble you'd get in."

She glared up at me. "Oh yeah, because Simon's going to leave a trace on me that attracts killer cows instead of killer aliens. Let go of my car door."

"You are so frustrating," I snapped. Although there were some cows around these parts that could probably take her out. "He has a reputation, Kat. I want you to be careful."

For a moment, she stared at me, and I thought she got what I was saying. "Nothing is going to happen, Daemon. I can take care of myself."

I was wrong. "Fine."

What happened next could only happen to someone like Kat. I let go off the door at the same exact second she was yanking it back. "Kat—"

The door caught her fingers, and her yelp of pain was like being doused with cold water. Bright red blood appeared on her pointer finger, and the rest were a deep red. "Christ!" she squeaked. "That hurt."

My hand was wrapped around her palm before I even realized what I was doing. Heat flashed from my hand to hers, and she inhaled softly.

"Daemon?" she whispered.

The redness faded from her bruised fingers. I lifted my gaze to hers. Our eyes locked. Her pupils were dilated in shock, and what I was doing sank in—what I had done.

I had healed her.

Dropping her hand, I gave a little shake of my head. "Shit..."

"Did you...is there another trace on me?" she asked as she wiped the blood off her finger, revealing completely healed skin. "Holy crap."

I couldn't believe what I'd done.

Kat hadn't been seriously injured. Just a scratch and some sore fingers. She would've been fine. I swallowed as I scanned her. A barely-there white glow surrounded her. It wouldn't be that noticeable, probably not even to others. "It's faint. I don't think it will be a problem. I can barely see it, but you might—"

"No! It's faint. No one will see it. I'm fine. No more babysitting." Her eyes widened as she drew in a shallow breath. "I can take care of myself."

Denials formed on the tip of my tongue, but she...she was right. Kat was a hundred percent right. I straightened, stepping back from the car. "You're right. Obviously you can, as long as it doesn't involve car doors. You've lasted longer than any human that's known about us."

Kat opened her mouth, but I turned around, stalking back toward the middle of the parking lot. Anger boiled inside me, but not at her. The first time I'm around her alone for a handful of minutes, I ended up healing a very minor injury like a freaking idiot.

Apparently I needed to work on my self-control.

Glancing over to the right, I laughed drily when I spotted Simon on the field. He was carrying his helmet as he jogged toward the center, where a group was huddled together.

My eyes narrowed as I lifted my finger on my right hand.

The helmet flew out of his hand, knocking into his shoulder pads. Caught off guard, he stumbled to the side and then went down on one leg, staring at the fallen helmet like it was a pit viper. The guys in the huddle laughed. My lips twisted into a wry grin.

Yeah, I really needed to work on my self-control.

Slapping the mayo on the piece of bread, I hummed under my breath, as loudly as I could to drown

out the conversation from the kitchen. It wasn't working.

"He's going to think you're the hottest chick there," Dee said, her voice pitched obnoxiously loud.

I glanced up at the ceiling, exhaling loudly through my nose.

"Um, that's good." Kat cleared her throat. "I guess."

Picking up the lid, I nearly broke the mayo jar as I screwed it back on.

"You guess?" Dee laughed. At this point, I'd swear she was yelling. "Girl, he's not going to be able to keep his hands *off* you."

I smushed the slice of bread down, my jaw grinding until there was a good chance I was going to crack my molars.

"I'm pretty sure the same thing can be said about Adam when he sees you in the dress you got," Kat replied.

Dee giggled. "That's what I'm hoping for."

Oh for the love of everything in this world and the universe...

There was a pause. "You sure about the dress, though? It's kind of low-cut."

I closed my eyes, swallowing a groan.

"Oh, I'm sure," Dee assured her. "I'm so sure."

All but slamming the sandwich down on my plate, I was seconds from tossing myself out the kitchen window, but then I heard Kat saying she was heading back home and a few seconds later, the door shut.

I moved silently to the window by the table that overlooked the front yard. Kat appeared in the waning light, her backpack bumping off her lower back as she crossed the driveways. That ponytail of hers swayed with each step. As did her hips. My gaze dropped.

It was a couple of days after the day at her car and the tiny trace wasn't at all visible. Thank God. But I still worried and I—

"What are you doing?" Dee asked.

So caught up in being...well, sort of creepily watching Kat, my sister had sneaked up on me. That never happened. I turned around slowly. "Nothing. What are you doing?"

The look on her face screamed she didn't believe me. "Nothing."

I arched a brow.

She mirrored the gesture. "My 'nothing' means I'm not checking someone out from the kitchen window."

My eyes narrowed.

"You know," she continued, walking over to the counter. "You could've come into the living room and stared at her in person. You didn't have to hide in your bedroom and then in the kitchen."

"I wasn't hiding."

"Uh-huh." She spotted my turkey sandwich. "Did I tell you—"

"That's my sandwich. Don't..." Too late. I sighed as I watched her take a huge bite. "Help yourself."

"Thank you," she said as she chewed. "You make awesome sandwiches."

"I know," I grumbled.

Dee grinned as she leaned against the counter. "Did I tell you about the awesome dress Katy bought?"

Pulling out the kitchen chair, I dropped down in it and stretched out my legs. "Why would you tell me about her dress?"

"I didn't, but I'm sure you heard us talking about it."

"People in the next state heard you talking about it, Dee."

She ignored that. "It's stunning and Katy looks amazing in it."

My jaw was starting to ache again.

"Like she's going to look so hot at the dance, so hot." Dee paused, taking another huge bite of *my* sandwich. "Oh, and did I tell you Simon is taking her out?"

I counted to ten before answering. "Yes, Dee, you told me, and I think you're a crappy friend for allowing her to go with him."

"I am not a crappy friend!" She stomped her bare foot and rattled the chairs. "I know Kat isn't in trouble with him. She'll be fine. *Anyway*, did you know about the party after the dance?"

"Everyone knows about the party after the dance."

She waved the sandwich like she was saluting me with it. "Well, since you know everything, smart-ass, then you know Simon invited Kat."

I stilled. "She's not going with him to that damn field party."

"Oh. Yes." Dee smiled broadly and downright evilly. "Yes, she is."

No way. All anyone did at the party was get drunk and get laid, namely Simon. If he was taking her there...

My stomach churned.

"Don't worry, Adam and I are going. She'll be okay there." She finished off the sandwich, not even saving me a tiny piece. Then again, I didn't have much of an appetite right now. "Too bad you're not going to see Kat in her dress since you're too cool to go to homecoming."

"I never said I wasn't going."

Dee plastered a blank look on her face. "You didn't? Huh. I was pretty sure you said something like..." She deepened her voice. "'I'd rather punch myself in the nuts then go to that stupid dance.' Or something like that."

My lips twitched. "That was last year."

"When you were dating Ash."

I said nothing.

"So you're going to the dance?" she asked, flipping the long wavy black hair over her shoulder. When I said nothing, the blank look faded. "I bet you're going to that damn field party, too."

I smiled tightly. "What color is Kat's dress?"

Dee struggled to keep her expression bland and failed. Her eyes glimmered. "You're going to love it. That's all I'm going to say. You're just going to have to wait and see."

Adjusting my tie, I stepped out of the SUV and grabbed my tux jacket off the backseat, slipping it on. Immediately, I wanted to strip the damn thing off.

Homecoming.

Practically the last place on earth I wanted to be. A night of watching sweaty, gawky human teenagers paw all over each other wasn't my idea of a fun night. But I had little choice.

I glanced over at Ash. Standing beside her brother, dressed in a white gown, she really did look great. Too bad it was never, ever going to work between us. Our feelings for each other, even if she refused to admit it, had morphed into a more familial thing.

Andrew looked over at me as he messed with his cuff links. His brows inched up. "I don't even know why you're coming to this, man."

His sister made an impatient noise in her throat. "I have to agree, but can we move this conversation inside?" She waved a slender hand at the school. "I have people I need to make jealous."

I smiled. "Do tell?"

"My dress." She twirled around, and I swore it was see-through for a second. I squinted. Yep. It was definitely see-through in certain areas.

I couldn't help it. My smile spread, especially when Andrew looked away, his face paler than it was a few seconds before.

"My dress could feed a small village for a year, which means these...people haven't ever seen the likes of such beauty and perfection," Ash continued.

Shaking my head, I laughed. Ash...well, she was an acquired taste.

As the three of us headed in, I knew they'd never believe me if I told them why I really was here.

It had to do with one sweaty, gawky human teenager pawing all over one human in particular. The conversation I had with Kat a week ago, when we had been by her car, had replayed over and over in my head. Granted, the whole healing-her-hand thing had veered me off track, and even though we hadn't talked about her homecoming date since then, I hadn't forgotten about it. Definitely not after learning that Kat might've agreed to go to the damn party in the field afterward.

There was no way I could stay home. Instinct was screaming that she was going to need me. Or it was a really messed-up territorial need to...to do what?

Go in there, beat the crap out of Simon, and claim my girl?

Uh, no, because beating the crap out of humans would probably end in death, and she wasn't my girl. No way in holy hell was Kat my girl.

Ash disappeared into a flock of several girls who were already squawking and squealing about her dress. Forcing myself to breathe and not zoom around the room, popping all the balloons that probably took an entire day to blow up, I found the nearest empty table and sat. Following suit, Andrew did the same. He started talking about some football game I could give two craps about, and I zoned him out.

And waited.

And waited some more.

And then I saw Simon's jock—douchebag friends head toward the door, and I knew that meant Kat was here. Leaning back in my chair, I casually looked over my shoulder. Something unexpected happened to my chest. It felt like someone had walked right up to me and socked me in it. I might have stopped breathing. Right there, surrounded by humans, in front of Andrew, who was still running his mouth about some game.

"Oh Mary, mother of baby Jesus," I muttered, eyes narrowing.

Kat stood by the door, her hands clasped around a tiny clutch as her gaze bounced around the gymnasium nervously. The dress...aw man, that dress should be illegal. Tight around the breasts and waist, then flowing over her hips like a river of crimson silk. Her hair was up, revealing a long, graceful neck I'd never really noticed before. That was weird, because her hair was always up it seemed, but then again, that amount of cleavage was never showing before. Except when she wore that bikini. Speaking of red...

Red.

Red was my favorite color.

Dee had been so right about the damn dress.

Kat wasn't cute. She wasn't even sexy. She was beautiful—absolutely breathtakingly beautiful. Not that I hadn't noticed that before, but now? Now was something entirely different.

I watched her bolt as soon as she spotted Lesa, and an approving smile spread over my lips. *That's right, Kitten,* I thought, *stay away from Simon. He so doesn't deserve to be in the same time zone as you.*

I had no idea how long I watched her, but I eventually lost sight of her in the crowd. Part of me wanted to get up, punch Andrew in his mouth to shut him up, and go find her. But that would raise eyebrows, so I remained there, gripping the back of my chair so hard it groaned under the pressure.

Then she reappeared with my sister, skirting the dance floor. She stopped, twisting gracefully until her gaze landed on my table as if she'd been looking for me. Something inside me roared a male approval.

Our eyes locked, and there was that sucker-punch feeling again, except it moved lower, into my stomach. I was mesmerized, enthralled. Her lips parted and—

And Simon pushed through the crowd, blocking her from me. Every muscle in my body locked up as a primal urge rushed through me. I started to stand, but at the last moment, forced myself to sit back down.

A few seconds later, Ash arrived at the table. She was saying something, but I didn't really hear her. Then Andrew leaned over, snapping his fingers in my face. "Man," he said. "What's your deal?"

"Shut up."

"Nice." Andrew got up. "I'm getting something to drink."

"Peace out," I murmured, keeping an eye on Simon...and Simon's hands. I did not like them.

"Do you want to dance?" Ash asked, surprising me. I'd thought she'd left. "Or do you want to sit here and glower?" When I didn't answer, she huffed as she stood. "Whatever. You're boring."

I barely acknowledged that she'd actually left that time and that I was sitting at a table alone, like a dork. My gaze was trained on the couple. Couple? God. It was insulting to Kat to even refer to her and Simon as a couple.

But I could deal. What Kat was doing really wasn't any of my business. In reality, she could do whatever she wanted. If that meant dancing—

Simon's hand glided down the front of her dress, causing Kat to jerk back. Her angry expression was lost in a sea of faces and...well, that was it. I was on my feet before I even realized it, moving between dancers, my hands curling into fists.

I stalked up to them, stopping behind Kat. "Mind if I cut in?"

Simon's eyes shot wide, and he must've seen his impending doom in my face, because he dropped his arms and took a step back. "Perfect timing. I needed to get a drink anyway."

I arched a brow and then turned to Kat, dismissing the idiot. "Dance?"

She stared back a moment, then carefully placed her hands on my shoulders. "This is a surprise."

Damn if it wasn't. We really hadn't talked since the day at her car. Like I'd said then, the trace was so faint it hadn't been recognizable. Didn't mean I hadn't kept an eye on her when she went into town, with and without Dee. She just didn't know that I was there.

I wrapped an arm around her waist and took one of her hands in mine. And damn if she didn't feel right in my arms, perfect actually.

Stupid and oddly wishful thinking.

Her incredibly long lashes swept up, and eyes warm but wary searched mine. A pretty flush spread across her cheeks and down her throat. I'd do something terrible to know what she was thinking. I pulled her closer.

Confusion and a...richer emotion marked her features. "Are you having a good time with...Ash?"

"Are you having a good time with Happy Hands?"

She sucked in her lower lip, and I bit back a groan. "Such a constant smart-ass."

I laughed, and she shivered in my arms. "The three of us came together—Ash, Andrew, and me." Why was I telling her this? My hand slipped to her hip and I cleared my throat, looking over the top of her head. "You...you look beautiful, by the way. Really too good to be with that idiot."

Her eyes widened. "Are you high?"

"Unfortunately, no I'm not. Though I am curious why you would ask."

"You never say anything nice to me."

"Good point." Damn, I was a dick sometimes. Well, most of the times. I lowered my chin, and she jumped when my jaw grazed her cheek. "I'm not going to bite you. Or grope you. You can relax."

She was silent, so I took that as a good thing. Acting on instinct, I guided her head to my chest and then placed my hand on her lower back. Dancing like that was normal. Nothing for anyone to freak over, including me.

Breathing in that peachy scent of hers, I closed my eyes and let the music guide us. There was something strangely intimate about slow dancing. Not the bumping and grinding kind that left little to the imagination, but this—two bodies melded together, drifting to the same beat, touching in all the right places. Intimate.

Okay, maybe I was high.

My hand curled against her back. "Seriously, how's your date going?"

When I glanced down, she was smiling. "He's a little friendly."

"That's what I thought." I searched for him in the crowd, wanting to knock him out. "I warned you about him."

"Daemon," she said, sighing. "I have him under control."

I snickered. "Sure looks like it, Kitten. His hands were moving so fast I was beginning to question if he was human or not." She stiffened in my embrace. "You should sneak out of here and go home while he's distracted. I can even get Dee to morph into you if need be."

Kat pulled back, and I immediately missed the way she felt in my arms. "It's okay if he gropes your sister?"

Well no, but... "I know she can take care of herself. You're out of your league with that guy."

We'd completely stopped dancing by this point. A storm was brewing, and it had a name: Kitten. I almost smiled.

"Excuse me?" she said. "I'm out of my league?"

Didn't she get it? "Look, I drove here. I can let Andrew and Ash catch a ride with Dee, and take you home." Sounded like a good plan to me, but the look on her face said it was no-go. "Are you actually considering going to the party with that idiot?"

"Are you going?" She pulled her hand free.

"It doesn't matter what I'm doing." And I wasn't ready to let her go yet. "You're not going to that party."

"You can't tell me what to do, Daemon."

Frustration whipped through me. Didn't she get that I was trying to look out for her? This wasn't a "who is the boss of me" contest. "Dee is taking you home. And I swear, if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you out of here, I will."

Her hand fisted against my chest. "I'd like to see you try."

I smiled. "I bet you would."

"Whatever. You're the one who's going to cause a scene carrying me out of here."

I made a sound low in my throat, but she actually smiled up at me, a mixture of smugness and

innocence. "Because your local alien teacher is watching us as we speak. What do you think he's going to believe when you toss me over your shoulder, buddy?"

Son...of a biscuit. She was talking about Matthew.

"Thought so," she said.

I was still seriously considering throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her out of here with the whole school watching. I think I also wanted to kiss her...with the entire school watching. Probably do things that would make that flush turn a deeper shade of red.

Her glare turned defiant, and damn if a part of me didn't really, really like that.

A smile formed on my lips. "I keep underestimating you, Kitten."

CHAPTER 19

The field where all the keg parties were held was roughly two miles outside of Petersburg and was accessed by a beaten-down dirt road that most would miss unless they knew it was there. I parked near the road, so I didn't end up blocked in.

Climbing out of the car, I slipped my keys into my pocket as I scanned the lines of vehicles haphazardly parked. Off in the distance, the orangey glow from the bonfire beckoned as I closed the door. The scent of gasoline and burning, damp wood was strong. Shadows moved around the fire. Laughter rang out, mingling with shouts. Music blared from speakers.

I'd left the dance a few minutes after Kat walked out with Simon. Ash and Andrew were still back at the school, and I wasn't sure if they would end up here or not. Field parties weren't their thing. I'd been to a few, with...with Dawson. I wasn't really keen on Dee being here, even with Adam, but she wasn't who I was worried about.

I knew Kat could handle herself. Deep down, I knew that. How could I not? But that didn't mean she didn't need help or that she wasn't in over her head with someone like Simon.

Walking around the cars, trampled cornstalks crunched under my steps. As I neared the bonfire, a girl stumbled out from behind a truck, blocking my path. A red Solo cup dangled precariously from her fingers as she teetered on heels. Dark brown hair was piled up and clumps of dried grass and cornhusks clung to her silvery dress.

The girl, whom I vaguely recognized, couldn't have been older than fifteen. Her chin lifted, and her glazed eyes roamed over me. "Daemon?"

Unable to figure out her name, I nodded. "Are you okay?"

"Yep." She giggled, raising her cup to her lips. "Why you ask?"

I arched a brow. "You have dirt and pieces of corn all over your dress."

Another giggle echoed out of her. "I might've fallen a time...or four. These shoes—" She lifted her leg to show me and wobbled suddenly. My hand snapped out, catching her arm and steadying her as she continued to lift her heeled foot. "These shoes are ah-mazing, but they are not suited for field parties."

"No doubt," I murmured, letting go of her arm when I was sure she wasn't going to face-plant on the car next to her. "Are you here with someone?"

"Uh-huh. I'm here with Jon. He's my boyfriend," she explained, grinning as she swayed forward. "Unless you wanna be here with me, then I'm not here with anyone. Jon doesn't exist. Nope."

I smiled slightly. "Sorry, babe, but I'm here for someone else."

"For shame!" She smiled broadly and then whispered, "That was bad of me to say Jon doesn't exist, right? He's really nice. Can it be our secret?"

Amusement flickered through me. "It'll be our secret."

"Yay!" She hobbled unsteadily as she clapped her hand against her cup. Beer sloshed over the side.

I could've left the girl there, roaming aimlessly for whatever reason between cars, but that seemed wrong for a multitude of reasons. "Let's go find Jon."

Turned out Jon wasn't in much better shape when we found him sitting by the fire. Based on what the girl had said, they hadn't even made it to the dance. When I deposited her with Jon, he stared at me like he half expected me to dropkick him into next week.

Scoping out the groups huddled around the fire, unease formed in my gut when I didn't see Kat or Simon among them. I headed to my right, eyeing the smaller groups near the thick outcropping of trees. Couples. Lots of couples. If Kat was among them, I'd...

What would I do?

I stopped walking right then, standing in front of the truck with its doors open, blasting music. What would I do if I saw Kat with Simon, doing those things the couples were doing in the shadows of the bare trees? What could I do? She had every right to be with him. She wasn't...

Kat wasn't mine.

Acid churned in my gut as I wheeled around. Dee was standing there, the light from the fire reflecting off the angles of her face. Her eyes were unnaturally bright. "Have you seen Kat?" she asked.

The unease exploded. "You haven't?"

"I saw her about five minutes ago. She was heading over to me, but then I lost track of her. She was with Simon, but..." Her nose wrinkled. "I just need to find her." My hands curled into loose fists. "I thought you weren't worried about Kat being with Simon."

Adam appeared at Dee's side. "I don't think there will be a problem—we don't think that, but Simon is pretty trashed, so..."

I didn't like what I was hearing. "Where did you see her last?"

"She was over there." Dee pointed to the other side of the fire, closer to the woods. "But she's not there anymore."

No shit.

We split up at that point and it took a couple of minutes to find someone who was about 70 percent certain that they had seen Kat head into the woods with Simon. That little piece of knowledge made me want to bang my head off the rough tree bark. I wanted to shake my sister. Whatever happened to the all-touted girl code? Wasn't it some kind of unspoken law that required them not to let one another roam off with questionable dudes?

I followed a worn man-made trail, preparing myself for the fact that I just may find Kat and she might not want to be found. Actually, that was the high likelihood here. Just because Simon was a touchy jackass who was currently trashed, didn't mean Kat needed rescuing or that she wanted rescuing.

If she was fine, I was going to walk away. She didn't even need to know that I was here. If she was okay, I needed to—

"Simon, *stop*!" Kat's shriek cut through the muted hum of music.

Instinct flared and I shot off like a bullet. A second was too long, but I found her and rage erupted inside me like a violent volcano. The son of a bitch had her pinned against a tree. His hands were on her. His *body*. His *mouth*.

They didn't hear me or see me, but that bastard *felt* me when I slammed my hand down on his shoulder and tore him away from her. Cocking back my arm, I nailed him in the face. His feet left the ground and for a very happy moment he was airborne. He hit the ground, legs and arms sprawled,

with a not so satisfying *thud*.

I bent over him, grabbing the collar of his wrinkled dress shirt. "Do you have a problem understanding simple English?"

"Man, I'm sorry," Simon slurred, grasping my wrist. "I thought she—"

"You thought what?" I hauled him up with little effort, recognizing and enjoying the flare of fear in the human boy's eyes. I wanted to rip the motherfucker apart, limb from limb. Then I wanted to piece his ass back together. Rinse and repeat about a half a million times. "That no meant yes?"

"No! Yes! I thought—"

Close to absolutely destroying him, I raised my hand and froze him. Simon was a statue, his hands in front of his face. Blood pooled under his nose. Eyes wide and unblinking. Stepping back, I dragged in a deep breath.

"Daemon," Kat said from behind me. "What...what did you do?"

I glared at the frozen idiot. "It was either this, or I'd kill him."

Out of the corner of my eyes I saw Kat step around me. Her back was to me as she poked Simon's arm. "Is he alive?"

"Should he be?" I asked.

Kat looked over her shoulder at me, her eyes shadowed, but I saw what she was thinking in that moment, and I wanted to murder his ass. It didn't matter that I had warned her about him. This wasn't her fault. She didn't ask for it. Those things shouldn't be crossing her mind.

I tensed. "He's fine. Right now, it's like he's sleeping."

"God, what a mess." She backed up, wrapping her arms across her chest. "How long will he stay like this?"

"As long as I want. I could leave him out here. Let the deer piss on him and the crows crap on him."

A laugh choked out of her. "You can't...do that, you know that? Right?"

I shrugged.

"You need to turn him back, but first, I'd like to do something."

While I waited to see what she wanted to do, she unfolded her arms and walked right up to Simon. Without saying a word, she kicked him right between the legs.

"Whoa." I let out a strangled half laugh. "Maybe I should've killed him."

Kat shot me a look.

Frowning, I waved a hand, unfreezing Simon. He doubled over, cupping his hands between his legs as he moaned, "Shit," over and over again.

I pushed Simon back a few steps. "Get the fuck out of my face, and I swear if you so much as look at her again, it will be the last thing you do."

The idiot wiped a hand under his bloodied nose as he looked over at her. "Katy, I'm sorry—"

He had a death wish.

"Get. Out. Of. Here," I warned, taking a threatening step forward.

Simon spun around and took off, stumbling and limping over bushes. A white glow burned around him. He was traced. I didn't give a shit. Dead silence fell between us. Even the music seemed to have disappeared. I took a few precious seconds to calm myself down. It wasn't working. I started walking, a couple of feet between us because my fury was too close to the surface. I knew my eyes were glowing at this point, and I knew there was a good chance Simon had seen that briefly.

Something shimmery on the ground caught my attention.

Kat's shawl.

Snatching it off the ground, I turned around and headed back to where Kat still stood. It was the first

time I was getting a good look at her. Curls had slipped free, falling around her face. Her eyes were bright, even in the darkness. My gaze dropped. The front of her red dress was torn.

I was going to kill Simon.

Cursing under my breath, I handed the shawl to her. She took it with shaking hands.

"I know," she whispered, pressing the shawl to the front of her ruined dress. "Please don't say it."

"Say what? That I told you so?" Disgust dripped from my tone. "Even I'm not that much of an ass. Are you okay?"

She nodded and drew in a deep breath. "Thank you."

I watched her shiver. The shawl hid nothing, covered nothing. Shrugging off the tux jacket, I stepped around her and draped it over her shoulders. "Here." My voice was rough. "Put this on. It will...cover up everything."

Kat looked down at herself, and her shoulders tensed. She shoved her arms into my jacket and then tugged the edges together. Pressing her lips together, she fiddled with it, not looking at me, not looking at anything.

I was so going to kill Simon.

Besides murdering him very slowly, I also wanted to...I wanted to gather Kat close. I wanted to hold her, and the urge was intense and entirely unfamiliar to me. I wasn't even sure she'd want my comfort. I wasn't even sure I could give it.

But I hated seeing her like this.

Placing the tips of my fingers against her cheek, I smoothed back some of the wild strands of hair. Her gaze lifted. Those beautiful gray eyes were full of tears.

"Come on," I whispered. "I'm taking you home."

Her gaze searched mine, and then she nodded. She took one step before she said, "Wait."

Was she really going to argue with me now? "Kat."

"Won't Simon have a trace on him, like me?"

"He does."

"But-"

"It's not my problem right now." I took her hand, steering her down the worn path. Truth was, the trace on Simon was strong enough to attract the attention of an Arum, and I knew it made me terrible, but I didn't care. Not right now.

We reached my car, and I opened the passenger door for her. She peeked over at me and then climbed in. I closed the door and headed around the front of the SUV while I pulled out my phone. I texted Dee, letting her know I was taking Kat home. I didn't mention what happened. That was up to Kat if she wanted to go into detail.

Once inside, I passed a short look in Kat's direction. "I let Dee know I was taking you home. When I got here, she said she saw you but couldn't find you."

She nodded as she yanked on the seat belt. The jerky motion caused the belt to get stuck. Frustration poured out of her. "Dammit!"

Leaning over the center console, I gently pried her icy fingers off the strap and tilted my head as I pulled on it. My jaw grazed her cheek and then my lips, and I liked to think that last part was accidental. But I wasn't sure. I locked down those thoughts, ignoring the rush of sensations the brief touches conjured. The seat belt was twisted, and I set about straightening it. As I flipped the strap over, the back of my knuckles brushed across her chest. The jacket I'd given her had gaped open, probably while she struggled with the restraint, and there was nothing between the back of my hand and the swell of her chest.

That *hadn't* been on purpose.

I jerked my hand back as I lifted my gaze to hers.

Holy shit, when did we get this close?

There was maybe an inch between our mouths, and her sweet breath danced over my lips. The back of my damn hand tingled like I'd shoved it into an electric socket—a really soft electric socket. As if compelled, my gaze lowered to her parted lips. I wanted...

What I wanted was wrong, way wrong. Kat had almost been assaulted, for Christ's sake.

I clicked her seat belt in and then returned to my side of the SUV, turning the key. Reaching over, I kicked on the heat, then I clutched the steering wheel, damn near cracking it as I navigated my way out of the field strewn with cars.

We didn't talk.

Thick, strained silence filled the inside of the car. I glanced over at Kat several times during the drive. Her head was resting back against the seat and her eyes were closed. I didn't think she was asleep. Not when her hands were so tightly balled in her lap.

I had no idea what she was thinking, but if she was thinking half of what was going through my head, she had to be going crazy over there. Because I was still thinking about killing Simon. I was thinking about how Kat looked standing there, her eyes filling with tears. I thought about the front of her dress torn and how close...how close she came to something horrific happening. And I wanted to kill Simon more. I was also thinking about those moments when we first got in the car and how close our mouths had been.

I was thinking about the fact that I wanted to kiss her.

And I shouldn't want that. I couldn't want that.

Halfway to the house, I decided I needed to hear her voice, to know that she was okay over there. "Kat?" She didn't respond. Her eyes remained closed, and I figured she was ignoring me. For some reason, I sensed that—

Then I felt it.

As if the air conditioner had suddenly been cranked on high, a blast of iciness slammed into me. My gut clenched. Several feet ahead, a black shadow formed in the center of the road.

"Shit!" I slammed on the brakes.

Kat jerked in her seat, her hands landing on the dashboard as the SUV skidded to a halt. A second later, the car turned off, engine, lights—everything.

Well, hell...

The shadow contorted, taking shape. Within a heartbeat, a man stood where the shadow had been. Dressed in dark jeans and a leather jacket, I thought it looked pretty damn stupid wearing sunglasses at night. This one was identical to the one I killed the night at the library.

And he brought his brothers.

A shadow slipped from the side of the road, and then another. Two more joined the one in the center of the road. Three of them.

"Daemon," Kat whispered. "Who are they?"

My vision tinted with a fierce white light. "Arum."

CHAPTER 20

Normally I would've welcomed this throw-down, especially after dealing with Simon. I had some pent-up aggression I really wanted to beat out of something, but not with Kat nearby. I didn't want her exposed to these creatures. They could kill her with a snap of their wrists.

Kat needed to get out of here.

That was the priority.

Keeping my eyes on the Arum, I reached down and yanked up my pants leg. My fingers brushed the leather binding around one end of the obsidian blade and I pulled it free.

"This is obsidian—volcanic glass." I placed it in her shaking hands, wrapping her fingers around the fashioned handle. "The edge is wicked sharp and will cut through *anything*. It's the only thing on this planet, besides us, that can kill the Arum. This is their kryptonite."

Kat stared at me, shaking her head silently.

"Come on, pretty boy!" yelled the Arum in the front, his voice sharp as razors and guttural. "Come out and play!"

Such clichéd assholes.

Ignoring them, I cradled her cheeks, forcing her terrified gaze to mine. "Listen to me, Kat. When I tell you to run, you run and you don't look back no matter what. If any of them—any—chase you, all you have to do is stab them anywhere with the obsidian."

"Daemon—"

"No. You run when I tell you to run, Kat. Say you understand."

Her chest rose and fell heavily. "Please don't do this! Run with me—"

"I can't. Dee is at that party." I held her gaze. "Run when I tell you."

Kat's lips trembled, and I let my gaze soak in her features for one more second, committing the height of her cheekbones to memory, along with the bow shape of her lips and those endless gray eyes. Then I let go and opened up the car door. I rounded the grille on the SUV, smiling at the three Arum. "Wow. You guys are uglier as humans than in your true form. Didn't think that was possible. You look like you've been living under a rock. See the sun much?"

The one in the center bared his teeth like a wild animal. "You have your arrogance now, like all Luxen. But where will your arrogance be when we absorb your powers?"

"In the same place as my foot." My hands balled into fists.

The middle Arum tilted his head in confusion.

It was never fun when I had to explain what I meant. "You know, as in up *your ass.*" I smiled and the two Arum hissed. "Wait. You guys look familiar. Yeah, I know. I've killed one of your brothers. Sorry about that. What was his name? You guys all look alike to me."

Their forms started flickering in and out, turning from human to shade and back again. My goal

was to get them really pissed and a hundred percent focused on me so that Kat could slip away. It appeared to be working.

"I'll rip your essence from your body," the Arum growled, "and you will beg for mercy."

"Like your brethren did?" I retorted. "Because he begged—he cried like a wounded animal before I ended his existence."

And that was it. The Arum bellowed in unison, the sound of howling winds and death. I threw up my hands, summoning the Source. It rose inside me, powerful and all-consuming, and then spread outside of me, tapping into the tiny particles of energy that existed inside everything on this planet. The very air around me heated, causing a series of loud cracks.

God, it felt *real* good to let loose.

An earthy scent filled the air as the nearby trees lifted. Dirt clung to their thick roots. I flicked a finger. The closest tree, a large elm, slammed into the back of an Arum, knocking him several yards down the road. Trees flew into the road, one by one, but the other two Arum were just a little bit smarter than the one peeling himself off the cracked asphalt.

I pulled on the Source again. Chunks of asphalt cracked and gave way along the shoulder of the road. Pieces of it lifted in the air, spinning as it turned a bright orange, heated like lava. I winged those suckers at the Arum as the two blinked in and out, avoiding the branches from the trees. One of the Arum threw his hand back.

Then they were done playing. So was I.

As the smell of burned tar filled the air, I shifted into my true form. One of them rushed me as I slammed my hands together. The Source rippled out, hitting the nearest Arum. The blast spun him up in the air, a direct and lethal hit, momentarily knocking him into his human form. Dark sunglasses shattered. Pieces floated in the air, suspended. Another clap followed, and the Arum exploded in an array of dazzling lights that fell like a thousand twinkling stars.

I threw out my arm again, and the other Arum flew back several feet, spinning and tumbling through the air, but he landed in a crouch.

It was time for Kat to go.

Run. I spoke to her in my true form. Run now, Kat. Don't look back. Run!

All I heard was the car door open and then everything was lost in the sound of the Arum howling. The other one was back and the remaining one was circling me. I darted to the right as one of them released a dark essence, a ball of shadow-filled energy that would be fatal if it hit me. I spun out as it shot over my shoulder. Like a thick glob of oil, when it smacked into one of the fallen trees, the energy ripped it in two.

Damn.

Pulling the Source, I formed a ball of iridescent light in the palm of my hand and then hurled the plasma ball right back at them.

The Arum weren't as fast as me, but they were avoiding the balls, and I knew, in my bones I knew what they were doing—wearing me down, tiring me out, like we were boxing. We all were moving, darting back and forth. My hold on my true form flickered.

The Arum seized that one moment of weakness.

One rushed me from the front and, as I braced myself for a full-body attack, the other sped up. I twisted, trying to keep it in sight. A second where I took my eyes off one, and I made a huge mistake. Twisting at the waist, I threw out another blast of energy, but it fizzled out before reaching the Arum, skidding across the road in a shower of sparks.

Shadowy arms went around my neck from behind, immediately chilling. Ice drenched me as I

reached up, allowing fingers to form. I wrapped them around the arm choking me, but he brought me down to one knee.

"Ready to beg?" the Arum in front of me taunted, taking human form. "Please do. It would mean a lot to hear the word 'please' leaking from your lips as I take everything from you."

Light crackled all around me as I lifted my head. Still in my true form, I called on the Source one last time.

"Silence to the end, eh? So be it." The Arum stepped forward, lifting his head. "Baruck, it is time." Baruck forced me to stand. "Do it now, Sarefeth!"

There was no way I was going down like this. No way in hell. Dee was at that party with Adam. They'd find her. And Kat was out there, somewhere and too close. Hell no. This wasn't happening. This wasn't going to happen to my sister. This wasn't going to happen to Kat. Energy built and expanded just as the one in front of me—Sarefeth—shifted into his true form, nothing more than smoke. I drew on the power as he slammed his hand against my chest, *into* my chest. My back bowed as I ground down. Pain exploded in every cell, startling me. Never had I felt anything like that. It seized every part of me, forcing a scream out of me as I briefly shifted into my human form.

Without any warning, the Arum in front of me, the one named Sarefeth, jerked his hand free from me and spun away. Pain still rippled throughout me, causing me to shift back and forth between forms, but I…I had to be hallucinating, because I saw her.

Kat was standing a few feet behind Sarefeth, like some kind of warrior princess, hair wild and red dress torn, the obsidian blade glowing red in her hand. Then Sarefeth exploded, breaking into pieces and floating up to the sky.

Baruck released me as I shifted back into my true form. I tried to push past the pain of the feeding as Baruck started toward Kat, but the Arum changed course, shifting into nothing more than a shadow, pulling the darkness into him, fleeing toward the other side of the road like a coiled snake and disappearing into the night.

Then Kat was at my side, on her knees. "Daemon—Daemon, please say something."

My light flared, throwing off heat that had to be too intense for Kat. I slowly became aware of my hands pressing into the cracked and burned pavement. I thought I heard Kat cry, and that—that forced me to pull it together. I shifted into my human form and reached out, grabbing her arm as she started to scuttle away.

"Daemon, oh God, are you okay?" She was back at my side, her palm pressed to my cheek. The feeling of her hand... *God*. "Please tell me you're okay? Please!"

Slowly, I lifted my head and placed my other hand over hers, the one against my cheek. "Remind me to never piss you off again. Christ, are you secretly a ninja?"

Kat laughed and sobbed in the same breath, and then she threw herself at me. I caught her and barely stopped myself from tumbling over backward. My hand delved deep into the mass of hair that had fallen free, and I held her just as tightly as she clung to me. She pressed herself to me like she was trying to become one with me, and even though my skin felt raw, the pain was nothing compared to the feeling of her right in that moment.

I pressed my forehead against her shoulder. "You didn't listen to me."

"I never listen to you." She squeezed me hard before pulling back. Her gaze roamed over my face. "Are you hurt? Is there anything I can do?"

"You've already done enough, Kitten." Gathering my strength, I pushed to my feet, bringing her along with me. I took in the destruction around us. "We need to get out of here before anyone comes."

Stepping back, I summoned the Source one last time and lifted my hand. Trees lifted off the road

and rolled to the sides, clearing a path, and then we made our way back to the car. It roared to life as soon as I turned the key. I glanced over at Kat. She was shaking in the seat. "Are you okay? Hurt in any way?"

"I'm okay. It's just...a lot, you know?"

A lot? I coughed out a laugh, but there was no humor to it. I hit the steering, frustrated. "I should've known there would be more coming." I should've been more prepared. "They travel in fours. Dammit!"

"There were only three of them," she said.

"Yeah, 'cuz I killed the first one." Leaning back, I pulled out my cell. I needed to call Dee. The others needed to be warned that there was still one more out there, and since three of his brothers had just been killed, he was going to be seeking some nasty revenge.

Kat concerned me.

What she had just witnessed would bring a grown man to his knees in terror and shock. But she was quiet as I called Dee and then Matthew, and remained so on the trip home. Whenever I glanced over at her, I'd see a tremor make its way through her, but she wasn't freaking out.

Kat blew me away.

This human girl was strong, with a core made out of steel. She was holding it together. Not only that, she had most definitely saved my life. I was man enough to admit that. If she hadn't intervened when she did, I don't know if I would've broken Baruck's hold. I owed her my life. I could've died out on that road, and there would be two Arum and not one gunning for my family—for Kat.

Because she was lit up like the moon again.

The houses were dark when I pulled into the driveway. Turning off the engine, I looked over at Kat as I opened the car door. The overhead light was triggered, casting a soft light against her pale cheeks. She didn't move. "Kat?"

Blinking slowly, she turned her cheek toward me. "Yes?"

Asking if she was okay seemed stupid. My gaze dropped to her hand. She was still holding the obsidian blade. I reached over, gently easing it out of her grasp. Her eyes rose to mine. "I want you to stay the night at our place," I said. "You're traced again, and even though I doubt the Arum will find his way here, I'd rather be safe than sorry."

Her lips parted. "But if I'm traced, isn't it more of a risk that I'm in the house with you—with Dee."

My jaw tightened. "If an Arum tracks you to your house, we're right next door. It's virtually the same. Plus Dee is with Matthew and Adam right now. Andrew is there, too."

"But it's not," she reasoned quietly. "If he—if it—comes after me, then at least you—"

"I want you in my house," I cut in, ignoring her logic. "Okay?"

Kat stared at me for a long moment and then nodded. She climbed out, and I followed her into her house. Once the foyer light flipped on, I realized she was missing a shoe and her knees were a scratched, dirty mess. All of her was. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but she limped ahead, pulling herself upstairs.

My eyes drifted shut as my hand tightened around the leather binding on the obsidian. My shoulders sagged with fatigue.

When I had talked to Matthew, he asked if Kat had seen what had gone down. There was no way I

could lie or hide the truth. I'd answered with a yes.

"We're going to have to talk about this later," he'd replied.

And I knew later was going to come real quick.

Opening my eyes, I saw Kat appear at the top of the steps, carrying a tote. She was still dressed in her ruined gown, my jacket swallowing her. Exhaustion clung to her every step, and she walked as if she was ready to sit down and take a nap.

Kat had saved my life.

No matter what Matthew or the Thompsons ended up thinking or saying, I was going to have her back. She had mine.

I met her halfway, taking the tote from her, and then after she locked up, we headed over to my house.

"I told my mom I was staying with Dee," she said, clearing her throat. "I called when I was upstairs."

"Cool." I opened the front door, and a rush of cold air greeted us. Kat shivered. "Sorry. We keep it pretty cold at night."

"I remembered," she murmured, glancing at the stairs leading to the second floor. The skin across her cheekbones was drawn and pale. "It's okay."

Once we were in the guest room, Kat groaned as she peered into the tote. "I'm such an idiot. I brought regular clothes with me. Nothing to sleep in. I'm going to have to go back over."

"I'll find you something. Just give me a second." I went to Dee's room and grabbed a pair of bottoms and an old shirt, knowing she wouldn't mind. When I returned, Kat had shrugged off my jacket and laid it across the dresser. She held the front of the dress together as I placed the borrowed clothes on the bed.

Again, I wanted to say something to her, but nothing of any value came to mind. Kat gathered up the clothes and shuffled into the bathroom in the hallway. I went into my room, took a shower in the bathroom attached, and then quickly changed into a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. I checked my phone, scrolling through the texts from Dee and then Andrew, who had heard about what happened via Adam. Dee was coming back home, as soon as they found Ash. Matthew would make sure of it.

I found myself back in the hallway, near the bathroom. The water was turned off, and as I stood there, I thought I heard her laugh. It wasn't a happy laugh. Concern ratcheted up.

"Are you okay in there?" I said to the closed door.

There was a pause and then, "Yeah."

I hesitated and then wheeled around, walking into the guest bedroom. I sat on the edge of the bed. Kat could probably use some space right now, but I... *Shit*. I reached up, rubbing the center of my chest, where the Arum had got me. I didn't want her to be alone right now.

I didn't want to be alone right now.

A few minutes passed and Kat walked in, and I lifted my gaze. Her hair was damp, darkening the shoulders of the gray shirt I'd found. Shadows had formed under her eyes, and she was still too pale, but she was so...so not plain. Not average. Not like anyone I'd ever known. Realizing that was like taking a direct hit from an Arum. I didn't know what to do with it.

Kat stopped a few feet from the bed. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, lowering my hand, sort of shocked that she was asking about my well-being. "Whenever we use our powers like that, it's like...losing a part of ourselves. It takes a bit to recharge. I'll be fine." I paused. "I'm sorry you had to go through any of this. I didn't say thank you. You should've run, Kat. They would've...killed you without thinking twice. But you saved my life. Thank you."

Her mouth opened and then closed as she rubbed her arms. It seemed to take her a moment to respond. "Will you stay with me tonight?" She then added in a rush, "I'm not coming on to you. You don't have to, but—"

"I know." I felt the same way. I just wanted to hold her, reassure myself we were both okay. I stood, and it felt like my stomach dropped to my feet. "Just let me check the house again, and I'll be right back."

Before I left the room, she was already in the bed, and when I glanced back at her, she had the covers tugged up to her chin and was staring at the ceiling. A small smile pulled at my lips as I made quick work of double-checking the doors. Then I grabbed my phone out of my room. Dee would be home soon, and if I was smart, I could've just told Kat that. Sit up with her and wait until a more appropriate bedmate appeared, but that's not what I did.

I returned to the guest bedroom and got a little stuck in the doorway when I saw her in the bed again. She should be in *my* bed. As soon as that mess of a thought entered my head, I pushed it right back out, blaming the night's drama. Shutting the door behind me, I went to the large bay windows overlooking the front yard.

Kat scooted over to the edge of the bed as I walked around to the other side, and I hid my smile. You'd think we were sharing a tiny bed based on how far she moved over. I climbed in beside her, leaving the comforter at my waist. My temperature ran way higher than hers.

Neither of us spoke.

Both of us lay there, side by side, staring at the ceiling. If anyone said a year ago I'd be lying in a bed with a human girl like this, I would've told them to get off drugs.

Biting down on my lip, I turned my head toward hers. A handful of seconds passed before she looked over at me. I grinned at her.

Kat laughed, and yeah, I liked that sound. "This...this is so awkward."

My grin spread. "It is, isn't it?"

"Yes." She giggled.

It sounded crazy to laugh after everything, but my laughter joined hers. This was ridiculous. Everything. Ninety percent of the time we lived to annoy the crap out of each other. I knew that went both ways, but I'd saved her life in the past. She saved mine tonight. And here we were, sharing a bed for no real reason. At least on my side, the shit was funny.

And Kat was...there were no words.

I reached over, catching the tiny tears that had coursed down her cheeks. They weren't sad tears. Our eyes locked as I lowered my hand. "What you did back there? It was sort of amazing," I murmured.

One side of her lips twitched up. "Right back atcha. Are you sure you're not injured?"

I grinned. "No. I'm fine, thanks to you." Shifting away from her, I turned off the lamp on the nightstand the good ol'-fashioned way—the human way.

The room was plunged into darkness. "Am I glowing?" she asked.

Well, duh. She'd gotten a dose in the field and I'd lit that street up with the Source like a carnival. "Like a Christmas tree."

"Not just the star?"

I rolled onto my side, close enough to her that my hand brushed her arm. "No. You're super bright. It's kind of like looking at the sun."

She held up her hand, and that was cute. "It's going to be hard for you to sleep then."

"Actually, it's kind of comforting. It reminds me of my own people."

"The whole obsidian thing?" She looked over at me. "You never told me about that."

"I didn't think it would be necessary. Or at least I'd hoped it wouldn't be."

"Can it hurt you?"

"No. And before you ask what can, we don't make a habit of telling humans what can kill us," I replied evenly. "Not even the DOD knows what's deadly to us. But the obsidian negates the Arum's strengths. Just like the beta quartz in the Rocks throws off a lot of the energy we put off, but with obsidian, all it takes is a piercing and...well, you know. It's the whole light thing, the way obsidian fractures it."

"Are all crystals harmful to the Arum?"

"No, just this type. I guess it has something to do with the heating and cooling. Matthew explained it to me once. Honestly, I wasn't paying attention. I know it can kill them. We carry it whenever we go out, usually hidden. Dee carries one in her purse."

She shuddered. "I can't believe I killed someone."

"You didn't kill *someone*. You killed an alien—an evil being that would've killed you without thinking twice. That was going to kill me." I absently rubbed at my chest. "You saved my life, Kitten."

Kat didn't respond, and I knew it was going to be hard for her to understand.

"You were like Snowbird," I said after a few moments.

"How do you figure?" she asked.

I smiled slightly. "You could've left me there and run, like I said. But instead you came back and you helped me. You didn't have to."

"I...I couldn't leave you there." The next breath she took was audible. "It wouldn't have been right. And I would've never been able to forgive myself."

"I know." I stifled a yawn. "Get some sleep, Kitten."

She was quiet for all of five seconds. "But what if the last one comes back?" I paused, realizing a new fear. "Dee's with Mr. Garrison. He knows I was with you when they attacked. What if he turns me in? What if the DOD—"

"Shh," I murmured, finding her hand with mine. I ran my fingers over the top of hers. "He won't come back, not yet. And I won't let Matthew turn you over."

"But-"

"Kat, I won't let him. Okay? I promise you. I won't let anything happen to you."

This time it was her soft inhale that I heard, and I knew my promise was bold and it was a big deal, but it was one I wouldn't break.

CHAPTER 21

I wasn't sure if I was dreaming, but if I was, I didn't want to wake up. The scent of peach and vanilla teased me, invaded me.

Kat.

Only she smelled that wonderful, of summer and all the things I could want and never have. The length of her body was pressed against mine, with her hand resting on my stomach. The steady rise and fall of her chest became my entire world, and in this dream—because it had to be a dream—I felt my own chest matching her breaths.

Every cell in my body sparked and burned. If I were awake, I'd surely take on my true form. My body was on fire.

Just a dream, but it felt real.

I couldn't resist sliding my leg over hers, burrowing my head between her neck and shoulder, and inhaling deeply. Divine. Perfect. Human. Breathing became more difficult than I'd ever imagined. Lust swirled through me, heady and consuming. I tasted her skin—a slight brush of my lips, a flick of my tongue. She felt perfect underneath me, soft in all the places I was hard.

Moving over her, against her, I loved the sound she made—a soft, wholly feminine murmur that scorched every piece of me. "You're perfect for me," I whispered in my own language.

She stirred under me, and I dreamed her responding, wanting me instead of hating me.

I pressed down, sliding my hand under her shirt. Her skin felt like satin underneath my fingertips. Precious. Prized. If she were mine, I'd cherish every inch of her. And I wanted to. Now. My hand crept up, up, up. Her skin was so smooth, so soft.

Kat gasped.

The dreamy cloud dissipated with the sound I felt all the way through me. Every muscle locked up. Very slowly, I pried my eyes open. Her slender, graceful neck sloped before me. A section of skin was pink from the stubble on my jaw...

The clock on the wall ticked.

Shit.

I'd felt her up, in my sleep.

I lifted my head and stared down at her. Kat watched me, her eyes a smoky, wonderful gray and questioning. Double shit.

"Good morning?" she said, her voice still rough with sleep.

Using my arm, I pushed up and even then, knowing that none of it had been a dream, I couldn't look away from her, didn't want to. An infinite need was there, in her, in me. Demanding that I kneel to it, and I wanted to—dammit, did I ever want to.

The only thing that got to me, that cleared the layers of lust and idealistic stupidity out of my head,

was the trace shimmering around her. She looked like the brightest star.

She was in danger. She was a danger to us.

With one last look, I shot across the room with inhuman speed, slamming the door behind me. Every step away from that room, from that bed, was painful and stiff. Rounding the corner, I almost ran into my sister.

Dee studied me, eyes narrowed.

"Shut up," I muttered, heading past her.

"I didn't say anything, jerk-face." Amusement betrayed her words.

"Don't say anything," I warned.

Once inside my bedroom, I quickly changed into a pair of sweats and slipped on my sneakers. Running into my sister cooled most of me down, but there was a raw edge to my nerves, and I needed to be out of this house, away from her.

Not even bothering to change my shirt, I picked up speed, shooting through the house and out the front door. The moment my sneaks touched the porch, I took off and darted into the woods in a burst of speed. Overhead skies were gray and bleak. Drizzle pelted my face like a thousand tiny needles. I welcomed it, pushing and pushing until I was deep in the woods. Then I shed my human skin, taking my true form as I shot among the trees, moving until I was nothing more than a streak of light.

I wanted that—I wanted Kat.

That wasn't an entirely new thought or realization. From the moment I saw those legs, I'd pictured said legs wrapped around me, tangled with mine, more than a time or two. And then she'd rocked that red bikini? Wanting her wasn't new, but the intensity of what I felt this morning was.

I wanted Kat so badly it neared physical pain.

Had it been because of last night? Her saving me? Or had it been earlier, seeing her with Simon and that dress? Or had it been building from day one? None of it mattered.

This was wrong.

Think of Dawson. Look at what had happened to him. Did I want to take the same risk? Leave Dee all alone? But even now I could feel her skin, taste it—sweet and sugary like candy. Hear that wonderful sound she made over and over again, haunting every mile I put between us.

An idea began to form—one that Dee would hate, but I didn't see any other option. I could go to the DOD and request a move to one of the other communities. We'd be giving up our home, leaving behind our friends and Matthew, but it would be for the best. It was the right thing to do. Dee would be safe.

It would keep Kat safe.

Because Dee couldn't stay away from her, and neither could I. But no matter where I went, what I was running from would still be with me—Kat. She wasn't just back in the house, in that bed. She was with me now, inside me. And there was no outrunning that.

When I returned from my run, everything felt under control. I had a plan, one I would act on. I entered the house, determined.

Andrew's car was parked outside, and I really hoped the whole clan wasn't here already. Then again, I knew the inevitable confrontation with Matthew and the Thompsons would happen fast.

Dee was waiting for me in the living room. She opened her mouth.

"Where's Kat?" I asked, and then mentally punched myself in the nuts. Asking about her right off the bat didn't seem like I had everything under control.

My sister cocked a brow. "She went next door a few minutes ago. Her mom is home, but she's coming back over in a few minutes." She took a deep breath. "Daemon—"

Adam roamed out from the kitchen, an apple in his hand. "Andrew and Ash are pissed."

Lifting my forearm, I wiped the sweat beading across my forehead. "And that's different from any other day?"

He smirked. "Well, they can't believe you guys kept this a secret—the whole Kat knowing about us. They're on their way over here now."

"With Matthew." Dee folded her arms across her waist. Worry filled her gaze. "He's also not very happy, Daemon. I'm afraid he's going—"

"He's not going to do anything." I pinned Adam with a hard look. "You're not pissed?"

"Not really." He raised a shoulder as he bit into the apple, chewing thoughtfully. "I mean, she's known for a while, right? Dee made it sound like she has and she hasn't said anything yet, so why would she now?"

"She won't," Dee and I responded at the same time.

I shot my sister a wry look while she grinned. "I'm taking a shower." I turned, starting for the stairs.

Glancing over her shoulder at Adam, Dee trailed after me. "Kat is coming back over here, like in ten minutes."

"Okay."

"Everyone else is coming over here," she added.

I was halfway up the stairs when it hit me. Twisting around, I stared down at Dee.

"Kat knows that they know and that they are coming over. She wants to be here, and I think it's a good idea."

I came down a step as my brows rose. "Having her here with three Luxen who disliked and distrusted her already is a good idea how? Unless we're considering making it easier for them to try to fry her a good idea."

"Andrew and Ash are a lot of talk. You know that," Adam said from the foyer. "They won't hurt her."

"I won't let them."

Dee's eyes widened, and yeah, I'd thrown that right out there. God only knows what Dee thought anyway, especially after this morning. She blinked. "*Anyway*, I think it's a good idea for them to actually see her—to see that she can be trusted. I'm not worried about Ash or Andrew. It's Matthew who needs to be convinced. You know that."

That was true. I wasn't willing to believe that Ash and Andrew were all talk, but they wouldn't go to the DOD or the Elders. Matthew would, but he was also a fair and logical person. If he was convinced that Kat wouldn't run her mouth, then he would back down, and having Kat here for them to see that she would keep quiet was probably the only way to convince Matthew. Plus, I would be here to make sure Kat stayed safe during the initial face-off.

"Okay," I said, turning back around to grab a quick shower first. I made it to my bedroom with Dee right behind me.

She closed the door and waited for me to face her. "What's going on between you and Katy?" she asked.

Immediately, I thought of Kat this morning, her soft body tucked under mine. "Nothing is going on, Dee."

Doubt crossed her face. "You slept with her last night." I almost choked on my own spit as I toed off my sneakers. "I didn't sleep with her."

"You were in the same bed with her, so that's sleeping together even if it's not *sleeping* together." She narrowed her eyes. "I want to know what's going on."

Part of me wanted to tell her it was none of her business, but all that would do was increase her suspicions. "Look, she was stressed out last night and scared. Between what happened at that damn field party and then coming face-to-face with three Arum, she needed someone with her. I was that someone. That's it. It's not a big deal."

Dee was silent as she twisted her hair in her hands. "It is a big deal." Then she smiled broadly while I stared at her. "It's a *very* big deal."

After a quick shower and change of clothes, I headed downstairs. Kat was there, glowing like a damn star. She looked up when I entered the room. Her gaze moved from mine and then down, way down, and a pink flush swept across her cheeks. I watched it spread down her throat and disappear under her collar. I wondered just how far that blush traveled.

Hell.

"They're here," Adam said, heading for the front door.

Kat stiffened, but remained quiet and alert. As the crew rolled in, I sat down on the arm of the recliner she was sitting in. My position was clearly noted by everyone.

Dee smiled like she'd just figured out the key to life.

When Ash and Andrew spotted the traced Kat and where I was sitting, their faces slipped into scowls so deep I wondered if they'd be stuck that way.

Matthew looked like he wanted to vomit. He came to a complete stop in the middle of the room. "What is she doing here?"

"She's lit up like a freaking disco ball," Ash said accusingly. "I could probably see her from Virginia."

Kat's eyes narrowed.

"She was with me last night when the Arum attacked," I explained. "You know that. Things got a little...explosive. There was no way I could cover what happened."

Matthew ran a hand through his hair. "Daemon, of all people, I expected you to know better, to be more careful."

My brows furrowed together. "What the hell was I supposed to do exactly? Knock her out before the Arum attacked?"

Ash arched a brow. The look on her face said she totally supported that idea.

"Katy has known about us since the beginning of school," I said. "And trust me when I say I did everything possible to keep her from knowing."

Andrew sucked in a sharp breath. "She's known this entire time? How could you allow this, Daemon? All of our lives have been in the hands of some human?"

Dee rolled her eyes. "Obviously she hasn't said a word, Andrew. Chill out."

"Chill out?" Andrew's scowl matched his sister's. "She's a stupid—"

"Be careful with what you say next." My skin started to hum. "Because what you don't know and what you can't possibly understand will get a bolt of light in your face."

Ash swallowed thickly as she looked away, shaking her head. Silence fell as my message was read loud and clear.

"Daemon," Matthew said, stepping forward. "Threatening one of your own for her? I didn't expect this from you."

My shoulders stiffened. "It's not like that."

"I'm not going to tell anyone about you guys." Kat spoke for the first time. "I know the risks to you and to me if I did. You all don't have anything to worry about."

"And who are you for us to trust?" Matthew asked. "Don't get me wrong. I'm sure you're a great girl. You're smart and you seem to have your head on straight, but this is life or death for us. Our freedom. Trusting a human is not something we can afford."

I didn't like where this was heading already. "She saved my life last night."

Andrew laughed. "Oh, come on, Daemon. The Arum must've knocked you around. There is no way a human could've saved any of our lives."

"What is it with you?" Kat snapped, fiery as ever. "You act like we're incapable of doing anything. Sure, you guys are whatever, but that doesn't mean we're single-celled organisms."

A choked laugh came from Adam.

"She did save my life," I repeated, wrangling everyone's attention. "There were three Arum that attacked, the brethren of the one I killed. I was able to destroy one, but the two overpowered me. They had me down and had already begun reaching for my powers. I was a goner."

"Daemon," Dee whispered, paling. "You didn't tell us any of this."

Doubt colored Matthew's voice when he spoke. "I don't see how she could've helped. She's a human. The Arum are powerful, amoral, and vicious. How can one girl stand against them?"

"I'd given her the obsidian blade I carry and told her to run."

"You gave her the blade when you could've used it?" Ash sounded stunned. "Why?" Her eyes darted to Kat. "You don't even like her."

Kat frowned.

"That may be the case, but I wasn't going to let her die because I don't like her," I replied, and the words didn't sit well with me. This wasn't the time to piss Ash off even more by disagreeing. I didn't look at Kat to see her response. I didn't want to know.

"But you could've been hurt," Ash protested. Fear thickened her voice. "You could've been killed because you gave your best defense to her."

I sighed. "I have other ways to defend myself. She did not. She didn't run like I told her. Instead she came back, and she killed the Arum who was about to end me."

Reluctant pride shone in Matthew's eyes. "That is...admirable."

"It was a hell of a lot more than admirable," Dee interjected, turning a wide stare on Kat. "She didn't have to do that. That has to account for more than being admirable."

"It's courageous," Adam said quietly, staring at the throw rug. "It is what any of us would've done."

"But that doesn't change the fact that she knows about us," Andrew shot back, casting his triplet a scornful look. "And we are forbidden from telling any human."

"We didn't tell her," Dee said, stirring restlessly. "It kind of happened."

"Oh, like it happened last time." Andrew rolled his eyes as he turned to Matthew. "This is unbelievable."

Matthew shook his head. "After Labor Day weekend, you told me that something occurred but you took care of it."

"What happened?" Ash demanded. "You're talking about the first time she was glowing?"

"I walked out in front of a truck," Kat muttered.

Ash stared at me, her blue eyes growing to the size of saucers. "You stopped the truck?"

I nodded.

The anger washed away from her face as she blinked rapidly. "Obviously that couldn't be explained away. She's known since then?"

"She didn't freak out," Dee said. "She listened to us, understood why it's important, and that's it. Until last night, what we are hasn't even been an issue."

"But you lied to me—both of you." Matthew leaned against the wall, between the TV and overflowing bookcase. "How am I to trust you now?"

Out of the corners of my eyes, I saw Kat lift two fingers to her temple.

"Look, I understand the risk. More than any of you in the room." I rubbed the heel of my palm where my chest still ached from where the Arum had gotten me. "But what is done is done. We need to move forward."

"As in contacting the DOD?" Andrew asked. "I'm sure they'd know what to do with her."

My voice was low and calm, but that was not how I felt. "I'd like to see you try that, Andrew. Really I would, because even after last night, and I'm not yet fully charged, I could still kick your ass."

Matthew cleared his throat. "Daemon, threats aren't necessary."

"Aren't they?" I challenged.

A heavy silence fell in the room, broken only when Matthew spoke again. "I don't think this is wise. Not with what...with what happened before, but I'm not going to turn you over." He looked at Kat, sighing heavily. "Not unless you give me reason to. And maybe you won't. I don't know. Humans are such...fickle creatures. What we are, what we can do, has to be protected at all costs. I think you understand that. You're safe, but we aren't."

Andrew cursed under his breath and Ash looked ready to throw something, but it was Matthew's call. He was like our very own Elder. All of us knew that. A bit of relief eased the tension in my muscles. At least I wasn't going to have to fight those I'd grown up with and considered family.

"You said there was one Arum left?" Adam asked, shifting the conversation. "What's the plan? He knows there are Luxen here obviously. He's going to come back."

"He won't wait. They're not known for being patient." Matthew moved over to the couch and sat down next to Dee. "I could contact the other Luxen, but I'm not sure if that would be smart. Where we may be more confident in her, they won't be."

"And there's the problem that she's a megawatt lightbulb right now," Ash added, her upper lip curling. "It doesn't even matter if we don't say anything. The moment she goes anywhere in town, they are going to know that something big happened again."

"Well, I don't know what I'm supposed to do about that," Kat replied.

"Any suggestions?" I asked. "Because the sooner she's not carrying a trace, the better all of this is going to be."

"Who cares?" Andrew rolled his eyes. "We have the Arum issue to worry about. He's gonna see her no matter where we put her. All of us, right now, are in danger. Any of us near her are in danger. We can't wait around. We have to find the last Arum."

Dee shook her head. "If we can get the trace off her, then that will buy us time to find him. Getting rid of the trace should be the first priority."

"I say we drive her out to the middle of nowhere and leave her ass there," Andrew muttered.

"Thanks." Kat rubbed at her temples with her fingers. "You're so very helpful with all of this."

He smiled back at her. "Hey, just offering my suggestions."

"Shut up, Andrew," I said.

Andrew's eyes rolled once more.

"Once we get the trace off her, she'd be safe," Dee insisted as she tucked her hair back, face pinched. "The Arum don't mess with humans, really."

"I have an idea," Adam said. Everyone looked at him. "The light around her is a by-product of us using our power, right? And our power is concentrated energy. And we get weaker when we use our powers and use more energy."

Matthew's gaze sparked with interest. "I think I'm following you."

"I'm not," Kat muttered, and my lips twitched.

"Our powers fade the more we use them, the more energy we exert." Adam turned to me. "It should work the same with our traces, because the trace is just residual energy we are leaving on someone. We get her to exert her own energy; it should fade what's around her. Maybe not completely, but get it down to levels that aren't going to draw every Arum on Earth to us."

Matthew nodded. "It should work."

I rubbed at my chest. "And how are we going to get her to exert energy?"

Andrew grinned from across the room. "We could take her out to a field and chase her around in our cars. That sounds fun."

Kat dropped her feet onto the floor. "Oh, fuc—"

My laugh cut her off, earning me a dark look from one very pissed-off little kitten. "I don't think that's a good idea. Funny, but not a good idea. Humans are fragile."

"How about I shove my fragile foot up your ass," she retorted, and that made me grin...up until when she pushed me clear off the arm of the chair. "I'm getting a drink. Let me know when you guys come up with anything that won't potentially kill me in the process."

I watched her hurry out of the room, smiling faintly. Man, she was not a happy camper right now. Couldn't blame her. Refocusing on the room, my gaze collided with Ash's. Aaand there was another person who did not appear to be feeling warm and fuzzy.

"This could work," Dee said, smoothing her hands over her legs. "We just get her to exert energy, and that's not that hard. Running will do it. Jumping jacks. Jogging in place. Sit-ups—"

"Sex," Andrew supplied.

Everyone looked at him. The last thing I needed to think about was the words "sex" and "Kat" in the same sentence.

"What?" He chuckled. "I'm not suggesting anyone have sex with her—"

"Dear God," Matthew muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"But you all were listing things that burn energy, and sex will do that."

Dee was staring at the carpet. Adam looked oddly embarrassed, and Ash pushed to her feet and started to walk. "That's disgusting for a list of reasons that have nothing to do with her being a human." She stopped beside me and stared with an icy glare. "You can do better than that."

"She could do better than us," I replied without even thinking, and damn, it was the truth.

Shock splashed across Ash's face, and then she started past me, heading toward the kitchen. I caught her arm and met her stare. "Don't do anything that's going to make me unhappy."

"Everything makes you unhappy," she spat back.

"I mean it, Ash." I ignored her comment. "If I have to come in there and break you two up, I'm not going to like it."

Her lips curled. "What do you think I am? Geez." She pulled her free. "I'm not going to hurt her. I just want something to drink."

Part of me felt like I should follow Ash, but Matthew was already eyeballing me like I was seconds away from making babies with a human, which wasn't even something I was sure could happen. There weren't any screams or shouts of rage coming from the kitchen, but I kept one ear out for just that as the conversation continued around me.

This had actually gone better than I thought it would, almost too easy. Unease sprouted like a noxious weed and it continued to grow, making me restless. I stood and walked over to the window. Pulling the curtain back, I peered outside even though I wasn't sure what I was looking for.

Matthew announced that he would speak to the DOD and the colony. The destruction that had been caused to the road last night would've already been discovered, and the DOD would be monitoring the display of energy already. Luxen against Luxen throw-down. That's what we were going with. While the DOD didn't know exactly what we could do, the full extent of our powers, they did know we had greater strength than humans. It was probably likely they'd buy that two of us could have wreaked that havoc. Maybe. If we were very, very lucky they would.

Kat returned to the room, a bottle of water in her hand. Our gazes met and then held for a brief moment. She looked away quickly, sitting on the edge of the recliner. She was pale as she sucked her lower lip in between her teeth, and when Ash reappeared with nothing in her hands, I could only guess what she had said to Kat in the kitchen.

"Can we talk for a moment?" Matthew asked in a low voice.

I nodded and then glanced over at Dee. She smiled, obviously getting the message I didn't need to say. She would keep an eye on Kat for me. Matthew and I stepped outside. "What's up?" I asked even though I already knew where this conversation was heading.

"Let's take a walk," he suggested.

I followed him off the porch and in the opposite direction of Kat's house. I decided to not beat around the bush. "I know you're worried about Katy, but she's not going to say anything," I said, shoving my hands into the pockets of my jeans as we reached the first outcropping of trees. "I know that's hard to believe, but she's had plenty of chances to say something. And what I said about her saving my life last night? I wasn't exaggerating, Matthew. I was able to take out one of the Arum, but two of them tag-teamed me. The one she killed had been feeding on me."

Matthew sucked in an unsteady breath. "You came too close, then."

"I did," I admitted quietly, ducking my head under a low-hanging branch. "It won't happen again."

He didn't respond immediately, so I continued on. "You should've seen her, Matt. I told her to run and to hide, but she came back. Like a freaking ninja," I said, barking out a short laugh. I could still see her standing there. "Stabbed the Arum with the obsidian blade like she'd done it a million times. It was...yeah, it was amazing."

"Sounds like it." He walked side by side with me. "Not many humans would've done that. She's a brave girl."

"Yeah." I smiled slightly. "Yeah, she is."

Matthew's steps slowed to a stop. "It's not her I'm worried about, Daemon."

Frowning, I stopped and looked at him. "It's not?"

His expression was open. "No. It's you."

"Me?" I laughed again. "You need to add a little more detail to that statement."

"All of this is so very familiar to me. No, let me finish," he said when I opened my mouth. "I know you're not your brother and this isn't the same situation, but you obviously care about Katy. She's not like the other human girls you've had...relations with."

Huh. I had no idea Matthew kept that close of an eye on me.

"Katy is different to you, and you're different around her. You threatened us to protect her, and that's all the evidence that I need to know this situation could escalate very quickly. None of us took a stronger hand with Dawson, and look where that ended. I cannot allow that to happen to you."

Looking away, I slowly shook my head as I watched a tiny brown bird hop along one of the narrow branches. Kat was different. I couldn't deny that. "I can't keep her away from Dee."

"Dee's not the problem," Matthew informed me.

A muscle began to tick in my jaw, and then I laughed again for the third time. "I was thinking that it might be smart if Dee and I left. If we found another colony and moved there. Dee wouldn't be happy with that, but..."

"That's not what I want to hear, and I hope you're not so...invested in this girl that leaving here—leaving us—is the only viable option. That means things have already gotten out of control, and that is not you."

Was it the only option? If it was, then what did that say? I shook my head. "It's not."

Matthew clamped his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "You are like a brother to me, Daemon. I trust you with my life, and I know you're going to make this situation right. You're going to help get that trace off as her as quick as possible, using whatever means necessary," he said, his blue eyes sharpening. "You're going to take care of this and none of us are going to have to worry about history repeating itself. We're going to move on from this and take care of the Arum, and then everything...everything will be okay. Can you do that? For Dee? For all of us, but most importantly, for you and for *her*."

"I'm not—"

"You don't need to lie to me, Daemon, and I don't even need you to confirm or deny what is beginning to start between you and Katy, but you know—you know more than anyone if you continue down this path, it's not just your fate you're sealing. It's Katy's fate also." Matthew withdrew his hand, his expression somber. "You don't want to be the reason she disappears or is killed. I know you don't. So take care of this. Soon."

CHAPTER 22

Matthew's words haunted me throughout Saturday and into Sunday morning. Man, he'd nailed it all on the head, hadn't he? Things were already getting out of control between Kat and me, and nothing had really happened between us. At least not physically, if I wasn't counting yesterday morning, but there was something between us.

And neither of us liked it.

I did a lot of thinking, even when I went out on patrols Saturday night. Matthew had been right. I needed to get this trace off Kat as soon as possible, and then once I took care of the last Arum, things...things would be normal.

Things had to get back to normal.

Leaving really wasn't an option, at least not right now, and the likelihood of the DOD approving something like that was slim to none. So I needed to take care of this. I couldn't allow myself to think of anything else.

Dee was with Adam, and I figured now was no better time to start getting that trace off Kat. After all, she didn't want to be at risk or a danger to anyone else. Before I left, I grabbed the piece of obsidian from my bedroom. Rain poured down as I darted across the lawn, moving fast enough that the sheets of chilly rain barely hit me. Her mom's car was gone, as usual. I knocked on the door.

A few seconds passed before the door inched open, revealing a very...sleepy-looking Kat. She squinted up at me, brows knitted together. Her hair was a mess of waves, falling haphazardly over her shoulders. She was in pajamas and I was pretty sure she wasn't wearing a—

"What's up?" She broke the silence.

"Are you going to invite me in?"

Her lips formed a thin line as she stepped aside. I walked in, scanning the rooms. "What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Your mom's not home, right?" Figured I'd better double check before we started getting down to business.

Kat shut the door. "Her car's not outside."

The claws were out today. "We need to work on fading your trace."

"It's pouring outside." She stalked past me, grabbing the remote to turn off the TV. I beat her to it, flipping it off before she could hit the button. "Show-off," she muttered.

"Been called worse." I frowned as I faced her, finally getting a good look at what she was wearing. I laughed. "What are you wearing?"

Her cheeks burned bright. "Shut up."

I laughed again. "What are they? Keebler elves?"

"No! They're Santa's elves. I love these pajama bottoms. My dad got them for me."

My laugh faded off. "You wear them because they remind you of him?"

Kat nodded.

The green and pink bottoms were ridiculous looking, but I understood why she wore them. It made me think of something I remembered hearing the Elders say. "My people believe that when we pass on, our essence is what lights the stars in the universe. Seems stupid to believe in something like that, but when I look at the sky at night, I like to think that at least two of the stars out there are my parents. And one is Dawson."

"That's not stupid at all." She paused as the hostility faded from her expression. "Maybe one of them is my dad."

I looked at her and quickly looked away. "Well, anyway, the elves are sexy."

She snorted. "Did you guys come up with another way to fade the trace?"

"Not really."

"You're planning on making me work out, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's one of the ways of doing it."

She plopped down on the couch. "Well, there isn't much we can do today."

I arched a brow. "You have a problem going out in the rain?"

"When it's almost the end of October and cold, yes, I do." She picked up a checkered afghan and placed it in her lap. "I'm not going out there and running today."

I sighed. "We can't wait around, Kat. Baruck is still out there, and the longer we wait, the more dangerous it is."

"What about Simon? Did you ever tell the others about him?"

I'd actually forgotten about him until Saturday evening. "Andrew is keeping an eye on him. Since he had a game yesterday, it faded most of his trace. It's very faint now. Which proves that this idea is going to work."

She fiddled with a ragged edge on the quilt, peeking up at me. Reaching into the pocket, I pulled out the obsidian blade. "This is another reason why I stopped over." I placed it on the coffee table. "I want you to keep this with you, just in case. Put it in your backpack, purse, or whatever you carry."

Kat stared at it a moment and then lifted her gaze. "Seriously?"

I focused on the blade. Matthew would flip his shit if he knew I was giving it to her. "Yeah, even if we manage to get the trace to fade, keep this on you until we finish off Baruck."

"But don't you need it more than I do? Dee?"

"Don't worry about us."

A moment passed. "Do you think Baruck is still here?"

"He's still around, yes." No point in lying to her. "The beta quartz throws off our presence, but he knows we're here. He knows I'm here."

"Do you think he's going to come after you?"

Her question caught me off guard. "I killed two of his brothers and gave you the means of killing the third. Arum are vengeful creatures, Kitten. He won't stop until he has me. And he will use you to find me, especially since you came back. They've been on Earth long enough to recognize what that can mean. That you would be a weakness to me."

Her nose did that cute wrinkling thing whenever she was perturbed. "I'm not a weakness. I can handle myself."

Damn straight she could.

Kat glanced up at me, and I realized I was staring at her like a freak. I glanced around the room. "Enough talking. We have stuff to do now. I don't know what we can do in here that will make a damn

bit of difference. Maybe jumping jacks?"

Her response to that was to open her laptop. Nice. Good to see she didn't even attempt to pretend to listen to me. Her nose did the wrinkle thing again and she gave a little sigh as she eyed something on her screen.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." She went to close the lid, but I wasn't having that. I kept it open. She glared up at me. "Stop using your freaking object thing on my laptop. You're going to break it."

Amused, I walked around the coffee table and sat beside her. On the screen was a girl...with pigtails. "Is that you?"

"What does it look like?" she grumbled.

A slow smile crept over my face. I'd seen these things before on her blog, but I couldn't let her know that. Nothing like adding cyberstalking to what seemed like real-life stalking. "You film yourself?"

Kat took a deep breath, and it took every ounce of my self-control to not check out her chest when she did that. "You make it sound like I'm doing a live perv show or something."

I choked on my breath. "Is that what you're doing?"

"That was a stupid question. Can I please close it now?"

"I want to watch it."

"No!" Horror filled her voice. You'd think there was an Arum in the room.

I cast her a sidelong glance, and her eyes narrowed as she turned back to the screen. The little arrow moved over the page and clicked on the play button.

"I hate you and your freaky alien powers," she muttered.

A few seconds later, the video started and there Kat was, showing off books, talking in an excited way I'd only heard her do a few times. While the video played, she sat beside me, her jaw locked down and her face the color of blood. It was obvious she filmed the video either last night or this morning. It ended with her smiling broadly at the camera.

Dammit.

She was such a...freaking nerd—a hot freaking nerd.

"You're even glowing in the video," I said, and my voice sounded rough to my own ears.

Kat nodded.

"You really have a thing for books." I closed the lid on the laptop. "It's cute."

Her head whipped toward mine so fast I worried she'd strain a muscle. "Cute?"

"Yeah, it's cute. Your excitement," I said, shrugging. "It was cute. But as cute as you are in pigtails, that's not going to do anything to fade the trace on you." I needed to focus. Standing, I stretched my arms above my head. When I glanced down at her, she was eyeing the section of skin that was exposed when my shirt rode up. "We need to get this trace off you."

She was still staring at my stomach.

I lowered my arms. "The sooner we get the trace off you, the less time we have to spend together."

And that got her attention. Her eyes snapped to mine. "You know, if you hate the idea of being around me, why doesn't one of the others come over here and do this? I actually prefer any of them to you, even Ash."

"You're not their problem. You're my problem."

Her laugh was harsh. "I'm not your problem."

"But you are," I said, and that was the truth. Probably could say it a little nicer, but oh well. "If I had managed to convince Dee not to get so close to you, none of this would've happened."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I don't know what to tell you. There isn't much we can do in here that's going to make a difference, so we might as well count today as a loss and spare each other the pain of breathing the same air."

I shot her a bland look.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. You don't need to breathe oxygen. My bad." She shot to her feet, knocking the poor quilt to the floor. "Can't you just come back when it stops raining?"

"No." I moved back and leaned against the wall, folding my arms. "I want to get this over with. Worrying over you and the Arum isn't fun, Kitten. We need to do something about this now. There are things we can try."

Kat was two seconds from losing it, and I loved it. Her hands curled into tiny fists. "Like what?"

"Well, the jumping jacks...an hour or so should do it." I was only half serious when I made the suggestion, but then my gaze dropped over the front of her shirt. Suddenly, I wanted nothing more than to see her jump around. "You may want to change first."

Please say no. Please say no to changing.

She took a deep breath. "I'm not doing jumping jacks for an hour."

And that was a damn shame. Crimson stained the tips of her cheeks. A sure sign she was angry. I couldn't help myself, so I pushed at her again. "You could run around the house, up and down the stairs." I met her eyes and grinned. "We could always have sex. I hear that uses up a lot of energy."

Her mouth dropped open. "That will never happen in a million years, buddy." She took a step forward, raising her pointer finger at me. "Not even if you were the last— Wait, I can't even say last human on the face of this Earth."

"Kitten," I murmured, sort of offended.

"Not even if you were the last thing that looked like a human on the face of this Earth. Got that? *Capiche*?"

I tilted my head to the side and smiled. She was really on a roll now. Eyes bright and face flushed. Part of me hated to admit it, but she was amazing when she was like this. Absolutely amazing.

"I'm not even attracted to you. Not even a little bit. You're—"

I was in her face before she had a chance to blink. "I'm what?"

"Ignorant," she said, taking a step back.

"And?" I matched her steps, compelled. Compelled by what? I didn't know. I came over to work the trace off of her and instead we were arguing with each other after a moment of nice conversation.

"Arrogant. Controlling." She took another step back, but I didn't let her get far. Oh no, I was all up in her face, sharing the same air. "And you're...you're a jerk."

"Oh, I'm sure you can do better than that, Kitten." And I knew she could. Kat had a mouth on her. Speaking of which, my gaze dropped. Her lips parted. Dammit. "Because I seriously doubt you're not attracted to me."

She laughed—the sound low and husky. Sexy. "I'm totally not attracted to you."

I took one more step, and her back was against the wall. Staring down at her, I think I may've forgotten to force my lungs to inhale and I definitely forgot the whole point of coming over here. There was only one thing I was thinking about. "You're lying."

"And you're overconfident." She wetted her lips, and heat pounded through my body. "You know, the whole arrogant thing I mentioned. Not attractive."

Man, she was so full of it. She'd say anything to keep arguing. Placing my hands on each side of her head, I leaned down, my mouth so close to hers I could almost taste her. I doubted her lips would be sweet. More like one of those red-hot Fireball candies.

I really, really liked that candy.

"Every time you lie, your cheeks turn red," I told her.

"Nuh-uh," she said.

I slid my hands down the wall, stopping beside her hips. "I bet you think about me all the time. Nonstop." As much as I thought about her, which was...nonstop, so it only seemed fair and right that she did the same.

"You're insane." She pressed back against the wall, her chest rising and falling sharply.

"You probably even dream about me." My gaze dropped to her mouth again. *Fireball*... "I bet you even write my name in your notebooks, over and over again, with a little heart drawn around it."

She laughed this breathless sound. "In your dreams, Daemon. You're the last person I think—"

Tired of arguing, I kissed her...just to shut her up. And yeah, I'd keep telling myself that. Just keep right on with that train of thought. That's why I was kissing her. No other reason.

But the moment our lips met, a shudder rolled through my body and I half growled, half moaned. Because I was right—her mouth was like a hot-as-hell Fireball.

Kat wasn't arguing anymore.

No, she was shivering.

Kissing really wasn't necessary anymore and I should stop, needed to stop, but then she pushed off the wall, fitting her body against mine. Her fingers sank in my hair and she moaned against my mouth.

This was so not about shutting her up.

Something came unhinged in me. Like a lock that had been turned. Or a dam that burst. Or, hell, it was like being struck by lightning, run over by a truck, and then shocked back to life. I was moving and doing without really thinking.

My hands gripped her hips, and I lifted her up. Her legs went around my waist and she was kissing me right back with a passion that almost startled me, and I was hoping she didn't notice that my hands were trembling. Hell, my entire body was shaking. There was a fire under my skin, and I was out of control. Seconds away from going full Luxen on her and what good would that do?

Aw hell, it didn't matter. Not when I pressed into her and she made this beautifully feminine sound that really had my blood pounding. And I could feel it building in me. Pure power—and it had nowhere to go but out. This had been building for months. Maybe always leading to this.

I never wanted someone as much as I wanted Kat.

Then we were moving along the wall. A lamp toppled over. Kat didn't seem to mind, thank God, because I was beyond the point of caring about anything other than who was in my arms.

Kat.

Vaguely, I was aware of the TV switching on and off. I tried to rein it all back in, but her hands went to my collar and then she was wiggling down, pulling at the buttons. I could only obey her silent command. I moved back and let her take off my shirt.

I'd pretty much let her do anything at this point. Kind of scary...and all kinds of hot.

I captured her cheeks, pulling her back to my hungry mouth. Man, I couldn't get enough of her taste, of how she gave it right back to me on all fronts. Her hands went to the button on my jeans.

There was a cracking sound in the house. Most likely something had just gone up in flames. But we were moving toward the couch and then we were on it, our hands everywhere, tugging on clothes, on each other. Our hips were molded together like our lips.

Kat whispered my name, and I was crushing her against me one second and then the next, I was giving up space to explore—for me to explore. Sliding over her arm, down the front of her shirt and

lower, and her shirt was off. I don't even know how, but it was.

"So beautiful," I said, because she was beautiful. Damn, she was, and that flush I'd seen yesterday did spread everywhere. It took me a long time to lift my gaze, but when I did, I kissed her again. Kissed her until I knew she needed air, claiming her mouth as long as I could.

My body took over completely, rolling against hers, but something else clicked inside me. Another hidden door was opening. I slowed down, taking my time. Where everything had been so frantic and crazed, it was now more tender and controlled. I was still shaking, though, on the verge of...

Of not being able to stop—not wanting to, of needing her more than I should.

You don't want to be the reason she disappears or is killed.

I stilled and forced my lungs to work like hers. Inhaling ragged breaths that weren't enough, I lifted my head and opened my eyes. I knew they were glowing, speaking a thousand things I couldn't say and she'd never understand. Probably not want to hear, either.

Our gazes locked. The look in her eyes, the way her body melted into mine, I knew she'd let me do...anything. But if I didn't stop now, I wouldn't stop ever. And even though I was prone to moments of "great dickdom," as Kat would say, it wasn't right. Not under these conditions. Not on a freaking couch.

Not when her life was in my hands.

And I kept messing up with her. I was the one who traced her and led an Arum to her at the library. I was the one who pissed her off and all but chased her into a street. I was the one who exposed our kind. I was the one who was repeatedly putting her in danger.

So I said the only thing that came to mind. The only thing I knew that would snap both of us back into a cold, harsh reality.

I forced my lips into the half smile I knew always got under her skin and said, "You're barely glowing now."

CHAPTER 23

After all this time, I'd finally succeeded in keeping Kat away from Dee. Instead of feeling satisfied about that, I felt like shit.

I was such...such an asshole.

Since Sunday afternoon, Kat kept to herself. I made the mistake of poking her with my pen in class Monday and the look she gave me shriveled up very important body parts. All she had said to me was that I blew up her laptop, and then she didn't speak to me. She didn't come over to the house to spend time with Dee and by Wednesday, my sister was super suspicious of what had happened.

Not like everyone wasn't already suspicious over how quickly Kat's trace had faded. No one asked. Except Andrew. He'd asked if I had sex with Kat.

I'd punched him Monday after school, hard enough to break his nose.

Andrew had laughed, and of course his nose had healed immediately.

You're barely glowing now?

As if that had been the sole reason why I'd kissed her, why I got my hands on her or got her on that couch, under me and topless. Use any means necessary, Matthew had said, but I doubted he'd meant that. And I was real with myself. I'd gone over there Sunday to work the trace off her. I was prepared to make her go running in the rain or up and down the staircase inside. I hadn't planned on kissing her.

I hadn't planned on any of that happening.

I was a dick, but I wasn't that big of a dick.

What had happened between us was because I wanted her and she *had* wanted me back. It had nothing to do with the trace, nothing to do with who we were. It didn't matter in those moments that it had been wrong or that we spent more time fighting each other than anything else. The only thing that had mattered was how she'd felt, how she'd tasted, and the way she'd whispered my name.

But it had been wrong.

Wasn't it?

Needless to say, my mood was knee-deep in Shitville, and it being Halloween didn't help. In class, I'd overheard Lesa and Kat making plans to give out candy at the former's house. Although Kat's trace was barely there, I didn't like the idea of her being out there when Baruck was still roaming around.

Without a trace, an Arum wouldn't be drawn to her, but Baruck had seen Kat. He would be able to recognize her, so like a creep, I'd followed her to Lesa's house and watched over her. I stayed down a block, and when I saw her leave in her Camry, I headed back home, beating her there, since I'd gone the Luxen route.

Dee had the front porch decked out with carved pumpkins that had tiny lights in them. I was

surprised she hadn't broken out the string ghosts and bats like she normally did.

The moment I stepped into the house, I smelled something weird and burned. Frowning, I headed into the kitchen. Dee was hovering over a baking sheet. There was another on the kitchen counter. Dark, burned specks covered that sheet. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Baking pumpkin seeds," she replied, brow furrowing as she placed her hands over the sheet.

"You know, you could just use the oven."

"What fun is that?" She twisted toward me, eyes narrowing. "You need to leave."

"Excuse me?"

"You need to leave," she repeated. "Kat is on her way over here. We're going to watch a bunch of stupid horror movies."

Leaning against the counter, I poked at one of the charred pumpkin seeds. "Sounds like fun."

"It's going to be a ton of fun, but you need to go. I don't know what went down between you two."

"Nothing," I murmured, glancing at the window beyond the kitchen table.

Dee snorted. "Yeah, that's what she said, and I don't believe her. I don't believe you, and whatever happened made her avoid me for days. So I don't want you here, because you will ruin the night."

"Ouch." I placed my hand over my chest and faked a wince.

Dee shoved me. "Whatever. Go hang out with Adam."

I was planning to do that already. Adam and Andrew wanted to see if they could lure Baruck out, but there was an irresponsible part of me that wanted to stay here until Kat showed up. I wanted to see her even though I knew she was going to ignore me, but after what I'd done, that took dickdom to a whole new level.

Pushing off the counter, I dropped a kiss atop Dee's head. "I'll be with Adam and Andrew. We're going to try to lure the Arum out."

Fear flickered across Dee's face, and then she steadied herself. "Be careful."

"Always," I replied.

Eyeing the baking sheets one more time, I hoped she didn't try to make Kat eat any of them. Yikes. Snagging my keys off the counter, I headed out and met up with Adam and Andrew in the parking lot of Smoke Hole Diner. They'd come the fastest way possible.

Andrew swaggered up to the driver's door. "What's the plan? Same as the last couple of nights?"

I glanced at Adam, who hung back a few feet. "Yep. Light up in the woods closest to the roads. Run away and see if you can draw them out. I'll drive around and see if I can sense him."

We'd been doing this with no such luck since Sunday, one of us taking turns doing the driving, which was by far the most tedious of assignments. I'd rather get out there in my true form than sit behind the wheel.

"I'll head toward town," Adam said.

Andrew shot his brother a look. "I guess I'll go away from it."

Smirking, I shook my head as I pulled out of the parking lot. The streets were still pretty busy. Parents taking their kids back to their homes after trick or treating in town. Others were on their way to parties. At a red light, I saw a Ninja Turtle in the driver's seat of a car next to me.

Heh.

I cruised up and down the highway, circling back through town a couple of times and killing almost two hours before my cell rang. It was Adam.

"Talk to me," I said.

"We spotted him." Adam was breathing heavily. "Baruck. He's heading toward the colony. Andrew is coming, but I've lost track of him."

"Shit." Glancing up in the rearview mirror, I saw the road was empty behind me. I yanked the wheel to the right, spinning the SUV around. Tires spun out on the gravel along the road as I hit the gas. "Get there now."

"On it."

Hanging up on Adam, I immediately dialed Dee. She answered on the third ring, exasperation dripping from her tone. "This better be good, Daemon, because—"

"Baruck has been spotted. He's heading toward the colony."

"What do you mean?" she said.

My hand tightened on the phone. "He's going toward the colony and he's going to pass right by our house. We're on our way. Is Kat still with you?"

"Katy is with me, but her trace is barely noticeable!"

I hit the gas pedal to the floor. "It still can be seen. Just stay inside, Dee. Keep her there."

"Okay," she whispered. "Be careful. I love you."

Fury roared through me. The son of a bitch probably had no idea how close he was actually getting to the colony or to where Dee and Kat were. With the beta quartz so close by, it would throw him off, but it was too close for comfort. I needed to ditch the wheels, but I was too close to town and too many cars were around to do it without drawing attention. Andrew and Adam were fast. They'd get there before—

My cell went off again, this time from Dee. A knot formed in my gut as I answered it. "What?"

"It's Katy," she said, voice shaking. "She made me trace her—"

"What?" I hit the brakes, nearly causing the van behind us to rear end. "She did what?"

"She made me trace her and then she left, trying to draw the Arum away from here. She's going where the field party was. Daemon, she's *glowing*."

My heart lodged in my throat. Fury and horror slammed into me like a punch to the chest. I wanted to reach through the phone and strangle my sister. How could she let Kat do this? But there wasn't time to yell at her. That would definitely come later. My head started working quickly. "Get in touch with Adam and Andrew, but text me her number now."

"Daemon—"

"Dammit, Dee, text me her number now!" I shouted, my heart pounding as I hung up. Why would Kat do this? It was suicide. Why? A second passed and then Dee's text came through. Hitting the numbers, I waited as the phone rang.

"Hello?" Kat's voice was another hit to the chest.

I lost it.

"Are you out of your freaking mind?" I yelled into the phone, swerving around a slow-moving sedan. "This has to be the stupidest thing—"

"Shut up, Daemon!" she screeched. "It's done. Okay? Is Dee okay?"

Is Dee okay? Did she not realize what she had just done?

Kat was insane!

"Yes, Dee's okay. But you're not! We've lost him, and since Dee said you're glowing like a goddamn full moon right now, I'm betting he's after you."

There was a pause. "Well, that was the plan."

"I swear on every star in the sky, I'm going to strangle you when I get my hands on you." I was literally going to do it. "Where are you?"

"I'm almost to the field," she said. "I don't see him."

"Of course you don't see him." Good God... "He's made of shadows—of *night*, Kat. You won't see

him until he wants you to. I can't believe you did this."

"Don't you start with me!" she yelled back. "You said I was a weakness. And I was a liability back there with Dee. What if he came there? You said yourself he'd use me against her. This was the best I could do! So stop being such a damn jerk!"

No.

Oh no.

For a moment, I didn't even see the road in front of me. The horror nearly consumed me. "I didn't mean for you to do *this*, Kat. Never something like *this*."

Her deep breath was audible. "You didn't make me do this."

I pressed my lips together. "Yeah, I did."

"Daemon—"

"I'm sorry. I don't want you hurt, Kat. I can't—*I can't* live with that." Once those words were out, there was no taking them back. They were the truth. "Stay on the phone. I'm going to find a place to ditch the car and I'll meet you. It won't take more than a few minutes to get there. Don't get out of the car or anything."

"Okay," she said and then, "maybe this wasn't the strongest idea."

I barked out a short, harsh laugh as I spied the last of the headlights disappearing in the rearview mirror. I pulled over. "No shit."

"So, um, the not living with your—" She broke off suddenly as I killed the engine and threw open the car door. "Daemon?"

"What?"

"I think—" A scream cut her off.

My skin chilled. "Kat?"

Nothing.

"Katy!"

No answer.

Oh no. No. No.

Tossing the phone into the SUV, I slammed the door shut and then took off for the wooded line, switching into my true form and picking up speed. I ran faster than I ever had before, my form barely touching the ground. Scenarios swirled in my head. Kat beaten. Broken. Dead. I couldn't get the thoughts out of my head.

Only minutes had passed, maybe two by the time I reached the clearing, but it was more than enough time for Baruck to have seriously injured Kat or worse. I flew past the burned-out remains of the bonfire, nothing more than charred logs and scattered ash. Through the trees, I spied a bright white light rise too far in the air to be Kat unless...

I dug in, clearing the first stand of trees, and then I saw him—I saw *Kat*. The Arum held her up in the air with a hand around her throat, and his other was *inside* her chest. He was feeding on her. Rage tasted like metal in the back of my throat. I shifted into my human form as fury erupted out of me in a roar.

The Arum's shadowy head turned over his shoulder just as I slammed into him, breaking his hold on Kat. She fell to the ground in a messy heap and she didn't get up. I landed in front of her in a crouch, the Arum several feet away.

I rose as the Arum did, both of us eye to eye.

"You've come to die with her? Perfect," Baruck said in his human form, rapidly moving from left to right. "That makes this so much easier, because I think I might have broken her. She tasted good,

too. Different somehow," he taunted. "Not like a Luxen, but still worth it in the end."

Launching myself at Baruck, I threw him several feet away with one powerful blast of the Source from an outstretched arm. "I'm going to kill you."

Baruck rolled onto his back, choking with laughter. "You think you can take me, Luxen? I have devoured those stronger than you."

I hit him with another blast of light, drowning out the rest of what Baruck was saying. The ground trembled with the impact of all that focused energy. The hit had knocked Baruck down, but I knew he wouldn't stay there. Shifting into my Luxen form, I rushed him. We collided like thunder and hit the ground rolling, brawling like two humans, but our blows would've killed a human with one shot.

Pinning Baruck down, I slammed my fist into his throat, but at the last minute, he shifted and pulled his legs back, kicking me off to the side. I landed and rolled, popping to my feet just as I saw Dee race past the Arum, heading for Kat. There was no time to even process my sister's presence.

Bright, orangey balls of fire formed on the tips of my hands. They shot out past Baruck, fizzling out before they slammed into trees, turning the world amber and gold. Heat blew back, tossing crackling embers into the sky.

One slammed into the Arum's shoulder, spinning him around. He ducked the other, and it hit the tree behind him, burning a hole deep into the truck. Over the chaos, I heard Dee begging, "Katy, talk to me. Please talk to me!" Then she screamed my name. "Daemon!"

My heart stopped.

I turned just as Baruck did. Dee had Kat in her arms. The Arum released his own essence. A dark bolt slammed into Dee, knocking her back from Kat, who slumped to the ground. I shouted as Dee sprang to her feet. Her eyes burned an intense white and then she flew forward, aiming straight for Baruck.

Spinning back, I released another blast and then another, but Baruck dodged my attack and went straight for Dee. I raced forward, but it was too late. He caught Dee, and for a heart-stopping moment, darkness swallowed her. She hit the ground, her body twitching.

I charged Baruck, tackling him. Branches shook, scattering leaves to the grass. I rolled atop Baruck, summoning the Source as I lifted my hand just as I saw Dee push to her feet. The moment of distraction was all it took.

Everything happened so fast.

Dee flickered in and out, blood trickling from her nose as she squared her shoulders and started toward us. Under me, Baruck lifted his arm and released another blast, shooting it straight at Dee.

Kat crashed into her at the second the blast hit them, knocking her aside a second before darkness surrounded them, and there was a scream. I couldn't tell if it belonged to my sister or Kat.

Everything was falling apart.

Both of them crashed to the ground. Kat was on her back and the front of her shirt was washed with a dark substance. A metallic scent filled the air. Blood. Dee was beside her, on her side, her limp arm fallen across Kat's. Dee slipped into her true form.

Never take your eye off your enemy.

The blast caught me in the back, sending me through the air, ass over teacup. Pain made it difficult to hold form, and I felt myself slipping back and forth. My thoughts were consumed with my sister... and Kat.

Kat stood no chance against Baruck.

I smacked into the ground, stunned as I heard the Arum's voice in my head. Three for one ssspecial.

Trying to maintain one form, I twisted and my gaze cleared. Kat—I was next to Kat, so close I

could touch her. She was alive. Her chest rose and fell in shallow breaths. She was staring at me, her lips moving, but there were no words. I tried to sit up, but aftershocks forced me down. My muscles spasmed. It was like being hit by a supercharged Taser.

It'sss over. All of you will die. Baruck advanced.

I turned toward Kat, saw the tears blurring her eyes. This wasn't right. She didn't deserve any of this, and I'd brought it all to her—everything.

Our eyes locked. I wanted to tell her I was sorry. I was sorry she moved here and met us. Not in the way she'd think—that it was her fault, but that she had no idea what she was stepping into. I wanted to turn back time, stop her from going to the library and erase the spaghetti incident, because without that, we would've never talked in the woods that night and she would've never walked out in front of that truck. So many mistakes.

Kat would be safe right now, watching stupid Halloween movies, maybe even in the arms of some guy who would never hurt her or put her in harm's way. *She would be safe*. Out of my reach, but safe nonetheless.

Most of all, I wanted to go back and change the way I'd acted toward her. Because now, as she shuddered on the damp ground, as death loomed over us all, I was willing to acknowledge the one thing I'd been hiding from. The one thing that had truly terrified me.

I never wanted to push her away.

As selfish as it was, I was glad she had moved here. It was too late for us, but I cared for her...more than I should, but I did. It was too late.

Too late to tell her how I felt, to touch her, to just hold her, to make up for every terrible thing I'd done and said. It was too late for me.

But she was going to walk out of here. She was going to live if it was the last thing I did.

Letting my human form go, I was at my most vulnerable, but I was going to need everything. I extended an arm toward her and she reached out, her fingers disappearing in my light.

I focused everything into that touch, sending a jolt of energy into her body, knowing that whatever was in us would do its thing, healing her from the inside out. It would give her a chance to get away. Hopefully Baruck would be more focused on me.

A sob rocked her body, and I squeezed her hand. Then I saw her eyes flare with realization. She knew what I was doing, what it meant.

"No." Her voice was a hoarse, tired whisper.

She tried to pull away, but I held on, ignoring the desperate panic in her eyes. I squeezed her hand. I wasn't letting go. Not now.

Not ever.

Suddenly she sat up and grabbed my sister's arm while she still held my hand. A pulse of light went through me, shining so bright that Baruck seemed to disappear. It arced high in the air, crackling and spitting. It went down into Dee. Her light connected with mine.

Baruck's shadow halted.

The arc of light streamed above and shot *down*, right into the center of Kat's chest. A second later she was above us, slipping free from my grasp, and she was above me, hovering, her hair flying out around her. Power built among the three of us, kicking the regenerative abilities into high gear. As it sparked, Dee and I slipped back into our human forms.

Dazed, I pushed to my knees, reaching for Kat. What was she doing...?

I could feel her pulling the particles out of the air, holding them close to her. It wasn't possible, but power coiled inside her, a tremor of the very same power shuddering deep inside me. This...this

wasn't possible.

Screaming, she let it go.

Climbing to my feet, I stared in awe as it smacked into Baruck's chest. The air pulled tight and snapped. Intense light flared, and I threw my arm up, shielding my eyes. When it receded, Baruck was gone and Kat...

Oh, God.

"Kat?"

She was on her back and her chest...it barely moved. The scent of death was in the air. I shot to her side, dropping to my knees. She let out a rattling breath and raw panic exploded in my gut.

All of this... We came this far—I saved her and she took everything I'd given her, and instead of getting the hell out of there, she used it to save us.

She scarified herself for us.

I didn't deserve that. No way did I deserve this from her.

I pulled her into my arms, and she felt as light as a breath, as if a part of her that made her whole was already gone. "Kat, say something insulting. Come on."

Dee stirred and rose to her feet, panic filling her voice. I didn't take my eyes off Kat. Moving my fingers along her face, wiping away the traces of blood...but there was so much. Under her nose, the corners of her lips, her ears...and even pooling under her eyes.

This wasn't right.

I knew what I had to do. "Dee, go back to the house now."

"I don't want to leave," Dee protested, wrapping her arms around her waist as she stumbled closer. "She's bleeding! We have to get her to a hospital."

Kat's eyes fixed on me, but she didn't move. Horror climbed through my chest, digging in with claws.

"Go back to the house now!" I yelled, and then forced myself to take it down a notch. Dee couldn't know what I was about to do again. "*Please*. Leave us. Go. She's okay. She...she just needs a minute."

I turned my back on Dee, pushing the tangled waves of hair out of Kat's face. When I was sure Dee was gone, I let out a ragged breath. "Kat, you're not going to die. Don't move or do anything. Just relax and trust me. Don't fight what's about to happen."

There was no sign she'd heard me, but I wasn't giving up. No way. Lowering my head, I pressed my forehead against hers. My body faded out, and I slipped into my true form. Heat coursed from me into her.

Hold on. Don't let go. I knew she was beyond hearing me, but I kept talking as I cradled her head. *Just hold on.*

Focusing on her, I felt myself slip inside her. Then I could see it all: bones knitting, cuts healing closed, torn muscles repairing, and blood flowing through her veins fast, but flowing without obstruction. She had been a mess, and it killed me to know what kind of pain she had endured.

I felt something click inside *me*. For a moment, I felt a strange feeling—a fluttering in my chest, next to my own heart, like our hearts were one, beating in sync, but then...then something else was happening. There was a tearing inside me, a rendering of my being—splitting into halves.

Her lips brushed mine. Colors swirled around me—bright reds and whites. It was like there wasn't *me* or *her*...it was us, only us. And I could feel an indiscernible pull toward her, a give and take. This was forbidden—healing her as many times I had, but this...this was more, because she had been on the verge of the unknown, teetering into oblivion and I'd pulled her back.

What am I doing? If they find out what I've done...but I can't lose her. I can't. Please. Please. I can't

lose you. Please open your eyes. Please don't leave me.

I'm here, she said, but not out loud, and opened her eyes. *I'm here*.

Shocked, I jerked back, the light fading out of her. But something...something had been left behind. I could feel it. I didn't know what exactly, and I didn't care right then. She was alive. We all were alive, and that was what mattered.

"Kat," I whispered, and she shivered in my arms. I sat back, nestling her close to my chest and holding her up.

Her eyes were filled with wonder and a dose of confusion. "Daemon, what did you do?"

"You need to rest." I paused, bone-tired, weary to my core. Even I had my physical limits, and I'd blown past them tonight. "You're not a hundred percent. It will take a couple of minutes. I think. I haven't healed anyone on this level before."

"You did at the library," she murmured, spreading her hands up my arms. Like it was the first time she'd ever touched me. "And at the car..."

I smiled tiredly. "That was just to help with a sprain and bruises. That was nothing like this."

Kat turned her head, staring over my shoulder. Her cheek brushed mine slightly, but it felt like a thousand soft-as-silk touches to me. I felt her stiffen.

"How did I do that?" she whispered. "I don't understand."

Good question. I buried my head in her neck, breathing in her vanilla and peach scent, committing it to memory. "I must've done something to you when I healed you. I don't know what. It doesn't make sense, but something happened when our energies joined. It shouldn't have affected you—you're human."

My words didn't seem to calm her. No shit. They weren't calming me much, either. My hand shook as I smoothed a strand of hair from her face. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay. Sleepy. You?"

"The same." But I felt amazing in a weird way. I ran my thumb over her chin and then her lower lip. I kind of felt like a kid going to Disney World for the first time and that was odd, because I'd never been to the land of mouse ears. Never wanted to go.

"I think, for now, it would be best if we kept this between ourselves—the whole healing thing and what you did back there," I said. "Okay?"

She nodded but otherwise remained still as my hands traced the lines of her face, removing the smudges and dark spots. Our gazes met and I smiled, really smiled in a way I hadn't in a long time.

And I stopped thinking.

Splaying my fingers across her cheeks, I kissed her softly. Keeping it gentle and slow, something I never really practiced before but wanted with her. Parts of me, places hidden from most, opened up. I tipped her head back and it was like the first time—was the first time, because this was what I wanted, perhaps even needed. The innocent touch left me breathless—a first.

I pulled back, laughing. "I was worried that we'd broken you."

"Not quite." Full of concern, her eyes searched my face. "Did you break yourself?"

I snorted. "Almost."

She took a little breath, her lips forming a faint smile. "What now?"

My lips responded to hers, and I breathed in the late-night air, the scent of damp grass, and rich soil. I breathed in *her*. "We go home."

CHAPTER 24

Colonies were all the same.

Human. Luxen. Arum. Ant.

Nothing but a whole ton of crazy Kool-Aid I didn't want to come within five miles of, and I wouldn't be, but they had something I needed—that Kat needed.

She really owed me for this.

Picturing some of the ways she could repay me for this visit...that movie would never end. I kicked back in the sterile living room. All white—couches, carpet, walls, and pillows. It was like they had something against color. It made me want to spill something on purpose.

When Ethan Smith returned, he carried a small leather pouch in his hands. He took one look at me and his dark brows arched over eyes the shade of violets. "I know you're not the most patient of our kind, but it does take time to craft these things."

Yeah, almost three whole days of my life I'd never live again. Most of it had been spent searching the state for more Arum and an entire day looking for the perfect piece of obsidian, but I was itchy to get back to Dee...and Kat. I didn't like the idea that she was glowing like a disco ball on steroids.

Ethan didn't hand the bundle over. Of course not, because that would be too easy at this point. "May I ask why you need this?"

"May I say no and you'll drop the conversation?"

A small, tight smile appeared on the older Luxen's face. "Your arrogance will one day be your downfall."

That among other things, not that I was mentioning any names or anything.

Irritation flashed across Ethan's face. "Not that I don't appreciate all you do for the colony, but your—"

"Personality could use an improvement," I cut in, thinking of Kat. "I get it. Trust me."

Ethan tipped his head to the side. Hair was starting to gray along his temples. "I hope so. It would be a shame to our race if something unfortunate happened to you."

I met his odd, amethyst-colored stare with my own. "I'm sure it would be."

The other Luxen was the first to break contact. "Does this have anything to do with the light show over the weekend?"

"Yes. I killed a couple of Arum and lost a few blades in the process, so I wanted something for Dee to wear just in case another happens." I sat forward, dropping my hands between my knees. "It's the same thing I told all the other Elders, Ethan."

"Hmm, I do believe it sounds familiar." He handed over the bundle, and the weight of the obsidian felt familiar. I slipped it in my pocket, ready to bounce the hell out of there. "Though, I must say I have never seen such a display of power. It was remarkable."

Unease trickled down my spine as I stood. There was something about Ethan, a quality I could never put my finger on, that sort of gave me the creeps. "Well, I am just friggin' awesome."

"Yes, you are." Ethan rose fluidly and straightened his pressed shirt. "Still, I am positive the Department of Defense will question it."

I stopped at the door, turning back to him. "And if they do?"

"We'll tell the DOD nothing if they ask, like we normally do, but if you bring them to our doorstops too often, you won't just have them to worry about. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Anger replaced the unease and I gritted out, "Yeah, I get what you're saying."

"Daemon?"

Facing him once more, my jaw was clenched so hard I was going to need to see the dentist. "Yes?" Ethan clasped his hands together and smiled. "One more question."

I was going to throw myself out a window. "Go ahead."

"This human girl your sister and you have been associating with?" Ethan said, and I stiffened but wasn't surprised. The Elders were as bad as the DOD, if not worse. "Will she be a problem?" he asked.

"No." But you will be if you mention that "human girl" again. That I didn't say out loud or in our language, but the look on my face got the message through loud and freaking clear.

Ethan nodded and didn't stop me again.

Switching into my true form, I only took a few seconds to leave the colony and reach the cluster of houses. Not knowing if Kat's mom was out roaming about, I flipped back into human form before I stepped out of the woods.

The strangest damn thing happened as I headed up our driveway. Warmth shot over the nape of my neck, followed by an almost pleasant tingle between my shoulder blades. Along with that weirdness, another sensation prodded me. A feeling of completion. What the hell?

I think I needed a nap.

As soon as I hit the porch, a weird, warm shiver crawled along the base of my neck and I knew Kat was inside. I couldn't explain how I did or why, but I knew it in my core.

Pushing open the living room door, I headed through the foyer and my eyes found Kat before anyone else. She was sitting on the couch, thick lashes lowered, hiding those gray eyes. Her hair was down, falling around her face, over her shoulders, and down her back.

I stopped there, incapable of moving, too quick for her to notice. Seeing her, well, it did things I hadn't been ready to delve into before. Hell, I really didn't even know at what point I had become ready.

Probably happened somewhere between when I thought she was dead and when she wasn't.

I dropped onto the couch beside her, watching her. I knew she was aware of me on this intrinsic level. The faint blush creeping across her cheeks confirmed it.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

Silence fell as Dee and Adam turned to her. I arched a brow, fighting a laugh as the heat raced across her cheeks and down her throat. "Well hello, honey, I've been out boozing and whoring. I know my priorities are pretty off."

Her lips thinned. "Dick."

My sister groaned. "Daemon, don't be a jerk."

"Yes, Mommy. I've been with another group, searching the whole damn state to make sure there aren't any Arum that we're not aware of," I said, offering a better explanation.

Adam leaned forward. "There aren't any, right? Because we told Katy she didn't have anything to

worry about."

My gaze flickered to him briefly. "We haven't seen a single one."

Dee hooted happily and clapped her hands. She turned to Kat, smiling. "See, nothing to worry about. Everything is over."

Kat smiled. "That is a relief."

I filled Adam in on the trip, leaving out most of the conversation with Ethan Smith, but the whole time my attention was more focused on Kat. Hyperaware of every small movement she made, every muscle that twitched and then relaxed, and every breath she took.

"Katy? Are you even here, right now?" Dee asked.

"I think so." Kat smiled again, but something was off about it. My eyes narrowed.

"Have you guys been driving her crazy?" I sighed. "Bombarding her with a million questions?"

"Never!" cried Dee. Then she laughed. "Okay. Maybe."

"Figured," I muttered, stretching out my legs. A second later, I glanced at Kat. Our eyes locked. Tension filled the room, and I wondered what was going on behind those eyes.

Dee cleared her throat loudly. "I'm still hungry, Adam."

He laughed. "You're worse than I am."

"True. Let's go to Smoke Hole. I think they're having homemade meatloaf." Dee hopped to her feet and kissed my cheek. "Glad you're back. I've missed you."

I smiled up at her. "Missed you, too."

When the door shut behind Dee and Adam, Kat turned to me. "Is everything really okay?"

The urge hit me right then. I wanted to hold her, because she must've been worried to ask that question, and it seemed like the right thing to do. Of course it was. How many times had I held Ash when she was upset? Or, in a different way, Dee, when she was upset?

"For the most part." Before I knew what I was doing, I reached out with one hand, running my fingers over her cheek. A shock transferred to my fingertips, much like static, but so, so different. "Hell."

"What?" Her eyes shot wide.

I sat up and scooted close enough that our legs touched, not ready to go into what I suspected had happened between us when I healed her. "I have something for you."

Confusion flickered across her face. "Is it going to blow up in my face?"

I laughed as I reached into the front pocket of my jeans, pulling out the leather pouch. I handed it over to her, watching as she tugged on the little string and carefully turned the pouch upside down, like she was afraid a grenade would fall out. But when she saw the obsidian pendant, her lashes swept up and she was clearly surprised.

Pressure clamped down on my chest as I smiled. A different feeling, like when you're about to get on a roller coaster. I really never felt that way before. "Believe it or not, even something as small as that can actually pierce Arum skin and kill them. When it gets really hot you'll know an Arum is nearby even if you don't see one." I picked up the chain, holding the clasps. "It took me forever to find a piece like this since the blade turned to crap. I don't want you to take this off, okay? At least when... Well, for the most part."

The look of surprise hadn't faded as she twisted around and pulled her hair out of the way. As soon as I got the tiny hook clasped, she faced me. An earnest pull to her expression had replaced the shock. "Thank you. I mean it, for everything."

"It's not a big deal. Has anyone asked you about your trace?"

She shook her head. "I think they're expecting to see one because of all the fighting."

I nodded, relieved that was one less thing to worry about for now. "Hell, you're bright as a comet right now. The sucker has got to fade or we'll be back to square one."

Kat stared at me a moment, her eyes sharpening. "And what is square one, exactly?"

"You know, us being...stuck together until the damn trace fades." Well, that kind of sounded like crap.

"After everything I've done, us being around each other is being stuck together?"

Oh crap.

"You know what? Screw you, buddy. Because of me, Baruck didn't find your sister. Because of what I did, I almost died. You healed me. That's why I have a trace. None of this is my fault."

"And it's mine? Should I have left you to die? Is that what you wanted?"

"That's a stupid question! I don't regret that you healed me, but I'm not dealing with this hot and cold shit from you anymore."

"I do believe you protest too much with the whole liking me part." I grinned, knowing the claws were about to come out. "Someone sounds like they are trying to convince themselves."

Kat took a deep breath, causing her chest to rise. "I think it would be best if you'd stay away from me."

"No can do."

"Any of the other Luxen can watch over me or whatever," she protested. "It doesn't have to be you." Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. "You're my responsibility."

"I am nothing to you."

"You're definitely something."

She looked like she wanted to hit me. I kind of wanted her to try, and honestly, I don't know why I liked to mess with her so much. "I dislike you so very much."

"No. You don't."

"Okay. We need to get this trace off me. Now."

One idea came to mind. "Maybe we can try making out again. See what that will do to this trace. It seemed to work last time."

Her cheeks flushed and a certain light filled her eyes. "Yeah, that's not going to happen again."

"It was just a suggestion."

"One that will never. Happen," she said. "Again."

"Don't act like you didn't have as much fun—"

Kat smacked me in the chest—hard, too. I couldn't help it. I laughed, and she made this cute little sound of disgust as she started to push away. Her small hand moved across my chest and it took everything in me not to grab her hand and do…well, other stuff with it.

I arched a brow. "Are you feeling me up, Kat? I'm liking where this is heading."

Her lips parted as she continued to press down. My pulse picked up a little as I watched her. Blood drained from her face. "Our heartbeats...they're the same. Oh my God, how is this possible?"

"Oh crap." Not how I wanted to start off this conversation.

Our eyes locked, and I placed my hand over hers and squeezed. I suspected as much. This only confirmed it, but what I knew about my kind healing humans was so limited, and what I did know was more like whispers and rumors.

"But it's not too bad," I said. "I mean, I'm pretty sure I morphed you into something and this whole heart thing proves we must be connected." I grinned. "Could be worse."

"What could be worse exactly?" Her voice had risen.

"Us being together." I shrugged. "It could be worse."

"Wait a sec. You think we should be together because of some kind of freaky alien mojo that has connected us? But two minutes ago you were bitching about being stuck with me?"

"Yeah, well, I wasn't bitching." I just had a moment of really bad word choice. "I was pointing out that we are stuck together. This is different...and you're attracted to me."

Her eyes narrowed much like a pissed-off cat. "I'll get back to that last statement in a second, but you want to be with me because you now feel...forced?"

I shifted. "I wouldn't say forced exactly, but...but I like you." Kat didn't immediately respond, and I prepared myself. "Oh no, I know that look. What are you thinking?"

"That this is the most ridiculous declaration of attraction I've ever heard," she said, standing. "That is so lame, Daemon. You want to be with me because of whatever crazy stuff that happened?"

I rolled my eyes as I stood. "We like each other. We do. It's stupid that we keep denying it."

"Oh, this is coming from the dude who left me on the couch topless?" She shook her head, sending locks of brown hair flying. "We don't like each other."

"Okay. I should probably apologize for that. I'm sorry." I took a step forward. "We were attracted to each other before I healed you. You can't say that's not true, because I've always...been attracted to you."

And it hit me then how freaking true that was.

From the very first time I'd seen her standing on my porch—the first argument, the first time she called me a douche, and from the very first time I realized how strong and brave she truly was, I'd been attracted to her. I'd wanted her.

Perhaps I had protested too loudly this whole time.

"Being attracted to me is as lame a reason to be with me as the fact we're stuck together now."

"Oh, you know it's more than that." I paused, sort of dumbstruck by the fact that a year ago I would have died of laughter if someone had said I'd be where I was right now, saying what I was. "I knew you would be trouble from the start, from the moment you knocked on my door."

Kat laughed drily. "That thought is definitely mutual, but that doesn't excuse the split personality thing you've got going on."

"Well, I was kind of hoping it did, but obviously not." I flashed a quick grin. "Kat, I know you're attracted to me. I know you like—"

"Being attracted to you isn't enough," she said.

"We get along."

She shot me a bland look.

I couldn't stop the grin that time and tried for a, "Sometimes we do."

"We have nothing in common."

"We have more in common than you realize."

"Whatever."

I caught a piece of her hair and wrapped it around my finger. "You know you want to."

She hesitated a moment before she snatched her hair free. "You don't know what I want. You have no clue. I want a guy who wants to be with me because he actually wants to be. Not that he's forced to be out of some kind of twisted sense of responsibility."

"Kat—"

"No!" Her hands balled into fists as she drew in another deep breath. "No 'sorry.' You have spent months being the biggest jerk to me. You don't get to decide to like me one day and think I will forget all of that. I want someone to care for me like my dad cared for my mom. And you aren't him."

"How can you know?"

She stared at me a moment and then turned toward the door as if she planned on leaving. This conversation was so not over. I moved faster than she could track, appearing in front of the door.

"God, I hate when you do that!" Kat shrieked.

I stared down at her. "You can't keep pretending that you don't want to be with me."

She stared back with a look of fierceness I found incredibly sexy and...and yeah, I respected her for that, too. But then that look faded as she pressed her lips together. Sadness had crept in her eyes. "I'm not pretending."

Bull. Shit.

There had been hesitation before she had said that. There had been so much more that powered her words other than anger or frustration. She was afraid and she was sad. I got that. I had been a dick to her. There really wasn't an excuse in the world to make up for that, and like I'd realized when I'd been holding her in my arms in the field, I didn't—couldn't—let her go. "You're lying."

"Daemon."

I placed my hands on her hips and tugged her forward. The warmth of her body cascaded over mine, and I closed my eyes briefly, taking in a deep breath that tasted of Kat. "If I wanted to be with..." My hands tightened on her hips, and she swayed a little closer, until our legs brushed once more, proving that her words were at odds with what she wanted. I dipped my head and she shivered. "If I wanted to be with you, you'd make it hard, wouldn't you?"

Kat lifted her head. "You don't want to be with me."

Oh, I had to disagree with that. My lips spread into a smile. "I'm thinking I kind of do."

A pretty flush moved down her neck, and I wanted to chase it with my lips "*Thinking* and *kind of* aren't the same thing as knowing."

"No, it's not, but it's something." It was more than anything. "Isn't it?"

Shaking her head, she pulled away. "It's not enough."

I met her stare and sighed. Her stubbornness was something I loathed and was incredibly attracted to, which I guess made me sort of twisted. "You are going to make this hard."

She didn't say anything as she sidestepped me, and I let her get to the door this time.

"Kat?"

She faced me. "What?"

I smiled, and saw her gray eyes light up. "You do realize I love a challenge?"

Kat laughed softly and turned back to the door, giving me the middle finger. "So do I, Daemon. So do I."

Watching her leave, I had to admit that she looked just as good walking toward me as she did walking away.

I did love a challenge. And I never lose.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I was first approached about writing Oblivion, I thought it was a great opportunity to give the Lux fans a little bit more of Daemon. I didn't plan on actually writing Obsidian, Onyx, and Opal (which is available in the digital version of Oblivion), but that was what happened. So you don't get just a taste of what it's like in Daemon's head. You get a whole heaping of it.

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BONUS CONTENT

Continue reading on for Onyx and Opal as told from Daemon's point of view.

ONYX

Book 2 of the Lux series, as told from Daemon's point of view.

CHAPTER 1

Kat was ignoring me.

No big surprise there. She had done the same thing during school. As if pretending Homecoming night hadn't ended with her almost dying and me saving her. Like if she tried hard enough, she could pretend that everything was normal and it would make it all go away.

Make me go away.

That wasn't going to happen anytime soon, and it had nothing to do with the fact that Kat was glowing like a Hummer-sized streetlamp. It had everything to do with the fact that I was so freaking done fighting what I wanted. Over the whole forbidden-fruit shit. Moving on from the mentality that I couldn't go after what I wanted because of what I was—what Kat was. Damn, I knew what I wanted wasn't going to be easy. Nothing in life ever was, but that didn't change how I felt.

I wanted her.

And I knew that under all the frustration and all the fighting, Kat wanted me. I just had to prove it, but right now I wanted to throw her over my shoulder, carry her home, and lock her ass in a room.

Kat coasted her Camry into a parking spot outside the post office, and I pulled in next to her, facing the opposite direction. Rolling down my window, I pinned her with a glare. "What part of going straight to the house did you not understand? I feel like we've had this conversation before."

Her lips pursed as she returned the glare. "There might be books in there waiting for me."

I sighed. "There might be Arum hanging around ready to eat you."

Kat wasn't falling for my logic, especially after I returned from practically scouting the entire state and not finding one. "You're here, so it's okay."

"Yeah, but I'm trying to be proactive about this and not reactive." When she rolled her eyes, I opened the driver's door. "You're a pain in my ass," I told her.

Raising her middle finger, she scratched her cheek.

I arched a brow as my lips twitched into a grin. "Nice, Kitten."

She smiled at me and then spun around, swaying her hips across the parking lot. With those faded jeans hugging her curves, it was a nice view, so I wasn't complaining about that.

Not until she jumped in a puddle the size of the Great Lakes.

Muddy water sprayed in the air, catching my legs. I growled low in my throat. "You're like a two-year-old."

She hopped up on the curb and cast a glare over her shoulder before stalking into the squat building. I waited for her at the end of the aisle as she went to her PO Box.

"Yay!" she squeaked, her face lighting up as bright as the trace around her as she reached into the box, gathering up an armful of yellow-enveloped packages. She cuddled them close to her chest, like it was a swaddled baby in her arms.

Cute. Nerdy cute.

Kat elbowed the box closed and then twisted the little key, locking it. She faced me, and our gazes collided and held for a moment. A faint pink blush zinged across her cheeks. She quickly averted her eyes.

She brushed past me, quiet as we walked outside, and then, because she couldn't let me down, she jumped in the puddle again.

I jumped to the side, but it was too late. From my knee down, my left leg was soaked. "Jesus."

She grinned as she hurried to her car, opening the back driver's door. I quietly followed her, stopping at my SUV to watch her, well, bend over and shove her books inside. She straightened suddenly and looked over her shoulder at me. Something about the look she sent me, part innocence, part rebellious, was a huge turn-on.

Then again, practically everything she did was a turn-on.

I groaned under my breath as she returned to situating the boxes like they held breakable family heirlooms. Closing my eyes briefly, I bit down on my lip when the image of Kat formed. She was on her couch, under me, wearing those damn elf pajama bottoms. Nothing else. My stomach shifted. I was hungry for food and for her.

"I need pancakes," I announced, opening my eyes. Of course, my gaze zeroed right in on a very attractive part of her.

Kat shut the door and faced me. "Are you staring at my butt?"

My lips curved into a smirk as I slowly dragged my gaze up to hers, letting my stare linger in certain areas. That blush was back, spreading down her throat, under the light blue sweater she wore, and her gray eyes had deepened.

There it was. What I felt was in her eyes. There was no hiding that.

"I would never do such a thing," I said.

She snorted.

"Pancakes," I said again.

"What is with you and pancakes? Why do you keep saying it?"

"Do you have pancake mix at home?" I asked, ignoring her question.

Kat frowned in confusion. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good." I grinned. "You're going to make me some pancakes."

She gaped at me. "I am not making you pancakes. There's a Waffle House somewhere. You're welcome to go get yourself some pancakes—"

I moved forward so quickly that she couldn't track it. I was right in front of her, our bodies nearly touching, and I could see the moment her pupils expanded slightly. "I know there's a Waffle House nearby, Kitten. But that's not what I want." Raising my hand, I tapped the tip of her nose with my finger. "I want you to make me pancakes."

She jerked back, scowling at me. "I'm not making you pancakes."

"You are." I pivoted around and headed for my car. Once inside, I grinned at where she still stood. "You are *so* making me pancakes."

Kat sat across from me, her lips pressed together as she watched me lift the fork to my mouth. My stomach rebelled at what I was doing. Something about these pancakes didn't look right. First off,

they were the size of a small moon. Secondly, when I cut into the lopsided stack, the middle was runny, and that just wasn't right. And when I lifted a piece on my fork, a yellowy powdery substance puffed into the air.

Maybe demanding that Kat make pancakes was a bad idea.

I glanced over at the messy counter. The griddle was covered with batter, as was most of the counter and the front of Kat's sweater. My gaze fell back to the pancakes. If I were human, I'd be afraid of doing what I was about to do.

I shoved the piece in my mouth and almost spit it right back up. My throat closed off as I forced myself to chew. The maple syrup didn't even cover up the dry yet wet, tasteless chunk of flour. I willed the mess to go down my throat and stay there as I smiled tightly at Kat. A moment passed.

A peal of giggles erupted from her. "I can't believe you actually ate a piece."

My mouth felt coated. I'd never get the taste out. "Why?"

"I'm pretty sure they don't taste good." She sat back in her chair, letting her hands fall to her lap. "They don't look like the pancakes my mom makes."

Nope.

These pancakes were a strange whitish yellow that was somehow nowhere near the color of normal pancakes. I willed my glass of milk closer and then picked it up, downing nearly half the tall glass.

Kat giggled again.

"Okay. These are terrible," I admitted, placing the cup on the table. "How can you mess up pancakes?"

"I don't know. I never made them." She raised a shoulder. "I kind of eyeballed the whole 'add water' part."

I stared at her, sort of dumbfounded. "All you have to do is add water. It's not that hard."

Her lips twitched as she ducked her chin. "Guess you should've gone with Waffle House then."

My eyes narrowed as I pushed my plate back. "There's a huge part of me that hopes you messed them up on purpose."

"And why's that?"

"Because if you can't make pancakes then I'm not sure we can be friends."

"Oh." She placed her hand to her chest. "I'm so heartbroken."

"You should be," I told her, lowering my lashes. "I'm a good friend."

Kat snorted, but what she didn't say hung in the air between us. Kat and I had not gotten off on the right foot and spent the whole summer and most of autumn at war, mainly because of me. I fully admitted that, and if I could go back and change the way I treated her, I would. I'd realized that when I was fighting Baruck and had come close to losing not only my life, but also my sister's and hers. The thing was, even I couldn't go back in time. I could only move forward.

It was time to change the subject. "Has anyone said anything to you about the trace—Dee or Matthew?" I asked, knowing the Thompsons wouldn't talk to her. Well, Adam would talk to her, but he wasn't a problem.

"Dee said something in the beginning, but it's been easy to explain away. Everyone knows I was there when..." She wet her lower lip, the action drawing my attention. "When you fought Baruck. So they don't think anything is too strange."

"Good," I murmured.

She yawned loudly as she stood and picked up our plates. Her steps were slow as she walked the plates over to the trash. I glanced at the wall clock. It wasn't even six in the evening. "Is your mom working tonight?"

"Of course," she replied, dumping the pancakes into the trash. The line of her spine stiffened as she walked over to the dishwasher. "She's always working."

My head cocked to the side, and a moment passed. "You don't like that, do you?"

She glanced over her shoulder at me as she opened the dishwasher's door. "Mom has to work a lot." She shoved the plates in and then went for the bowl, placing it in the sink. "The bills don't pay themselves."

"I get that."

She looked away from me as she fiddled with the faucets. "Not all of us have the government dumping money on us because we're aliens."

I raised a brow at that.

Kat yawned again. "It does get kind of...lonely here."

"I can imagine," I murmured, not liking the idea of her being alone whenever she was home and she wasn't with one of her friends or me.

She didn't say anything for a long moment. "I get you feel like you have to do the babysitting thing, but I'm not going anywhere. I have a test to study for and biology homework. You don't have to stay here."

Pushing to my feet, I made my way to where she was standing. "You can—"

Kat gasped as she spun around. "God, Daemon! Do you constantly have to do that? Geez," she said, leaning back against the counter. "You're like a ninja stealth alien."

One side of my lips tipped up. "I wasn't even that quiet."

"Yeah, you were. Like a ghost," she said, lifting her chin so our eyes met. "A creepy ghost."

I chuckled. "Why am I a creepy ghost?"

"I don't know," she murmured, her gaze dropping to my mouth and then lower, to my chest. "You're all up in my personal space."

I was totally up in her personal space. There wasn't more than an inch or two between our bodies. When I forced my lungs to inhale, I caught the peachy scent that was all hers. "Sorry."

"You're not sorry at all."

"True." I tilted my head to the side and saw a tiny speck of pancake batter next to her ear. How in the world did she get it there? Reaching out, I pressed my thumb against her cheek. Her chest rose on a sharp inhale, causing my gaze to flicker back to hers. "You have pancake batter there."

Kat's lips parted, and her wide gaze fixed on mine as I swept my thumb along her cheek, smoothing away the tiny piece of batter. My hand lingered even though the spot was long gone, fingers spreading along the side of her neck. The way we stood, so close to each other, with her head tilted back and my hand on her, made it appear as if we were seconds from kissing. All I would have to do is lower my mouth a couple of inches. I stilled just thinking of that.

God, I wanted to taste her mouth again.

Doubted she'd be down for that, though. Probably punch me. Those thick lashes lowered, shielding her eyes. On second thought, she would be all over it, but when we came up for air, she'd be spitting mad.

Kat wanted me, but she wasn't ready to admit it. Nowhere near it. She thought what I felt for her wasn't as strong as what her parents had felt for each other, and she didn't want to settle. Couldn't blame her for that. Truth be told, I wasn't exactly sure what it was that I did feel for her. Lust? Hell yes. I wanted all over her and in her, but it was more than that. There was a deep fondness for her. I respected her. My chest did damn strange things when I was around her, thought about her. I *cared* about her. Strongly.

I just didn't know what all that spelled exactly.

But I wanted to find out, *needed* to find out. One thing I knew, whatever I was feeling had nothing to do with the fact that our hearts were beating in tandem—whatever that meant—or anything that I might've done to her when I'd healed her.

"Kitten?" I slid my fingers along the nape of her neck.

"Don't call me that," she said with a shiver.

I lowered my chin, and we were so close that when I tilted my head to the side, my nose grazed hers. She didn't pull back or push me away. "But I like calling you that."

"But I don't care," she replied.

I grinned. "Kat?"

"What?" she whispered.

There was a lot I wanted to say to her, so much, and I knew all of it would send her running. Ignoring the near-primal need to really get all up in her personal space was harder than facing down a hungry Arum. I pulled back just enough to see her pretty face, letting my hand slip off her neck. "I'll clean up."

Kat blinked. "Huh?"

My grin kicked up a notch. "I'll clean up. You can go start your homework or whatever."

The flash of disappointment was so quick I might've imagined it. "Okay. Sounds good to me." She darted out from between the counter and me. "Have fun!"

Looking over my shoulder, I watched her shuffle out of the kitchen, the bounce and sway from earlier out of her step. Sighing, I turned back to the mess.

Why in the hell had I offered to clean up?

I was half tempted to just fry everything as I grabbed the bottle of dish detergent and squirted some of the blue liquid into the bowl too big to go in the dishwasher. My mind wandered as I cleaned up. We needed to work on getting the trace off for pure safety's sake. When I was done, I was going to have to pull her away from her homework and get her physical.

My mind immediately swan-dived into certain activities that were physical.

I pushed those thoughts aside as I waved my hand, drawing the griddle over to the sink. Kat and I hadn't talked about what had gone down at Homecoming since the day I returned. I knew she was holding it together, because damn, that girl was strong, but that didn't mean I wasn't worried about how she was dealing with everything.

And that wasn't even taking into consideration the fact that something had most definitely happened when I'd tried to heal her when Baruck was coming down on us. Somehow she had tapped into the Source, and no human could do that.

None that I knew of.

It had changed her. How? I didn't know yet. All I could hope for was that whenever the trace faded, anything that I might've done to her disappeared also.

Cleaning up the kitchen took about fifteen minutes. When I was done, I headed out, turning the ceiling light off as I went. The low murmur from the TV lured me to the living room. Kat was going to hate me, but she was going to have to stop whatever she was doing, get up, and get...

I stopped midstep and stared.

Kat was tucked into the corner of the couch, her bio textbook open in her lap. Tiny toes peeked out from the hem of her jeans, brushing the gap between the cushions. Her arms were folded against her stomach, and the side of her head was resting against the cushion. The obsidian necklace had crept out from under her sweater and had slid to the side, resting against her arm.

She was out cold.

Knowing there was no way I could wake her, I walked over to her. Carefully, I picked up the textbook and closed it, placing it on the coffee table. Grabbing the quilt off the back of the couch, I placed it over her legs.

Then, without really thinking about it, I placed one hand on the arm of the couch, braced myself, and then bent down. I pressed my lips to her cool cheek and then drew back. Fiddling with the quilt for a few moments, I made sure it covered her and then stepped away.

I could leave now. Kat wasn't going anywhere.

But as I stared down at her, even as the tension in my face softened, I let myself go *there*. For just a second, I let the full weight of what had happened, what I had done, settle on my shoulders.

I closed my eyes.

I'd broken so many rules. Exposed what I really was. Told Kat the truth. Healed her, not once but countless times. I almost laughed, but none of it was funny. Her life was in danger, would continuously be in danger, especially if she remained around us—around me—and I was such a selfish prick, because now…

Now I wasn't staying away from her.

CHAPTER 2

I waited about ten seconds before I leaned forward and poked Kat with my pen. Her shoulders rose on a sigh, and then she twisted around in her seat. Gray eyes met mine. "Good morning, Kitten."

She eyed me warily. "Good morning, Daemon."

As I tilted my head, hair fell forward, almost into my eyes. I needed to get a haircut someday. "Don't forget we have plans tonight."

"Yeah, I know. Looking forward to it," she said drily.

The excitement almost knocked me over.

I leaned forward, tipping my desk down as I did so. To my right, I could see Carissa and Lesa watching us. The corner of my lips curved up.

"What?" she said when the silence increased between us.

"We need to work off your trace," I said, low enough that only she could hear. We'd lost yesterday when it came to working the trace off. We couldn't lose tonight.

Kat picked up her pen. "Yeah, I figured as much."

Because I liked getting a rise out of her, watching her get all feisty, I said, "And I have this really fun idea of how we can do it."

She surprised me when she smiled.

"Liking the idea?" My gaze dropped to her full lips.

"Not in this lifetime, buddy," she replied.

I almost laughed. "Resistance is futile, Kitten."

"So is your charm."

"We'll see."

Rolling her eyes, she faced the front of the classroom. Our teacher strolled in, looking older than he had yesterday. I wasn't done with Kat. I poked her again.

Turning around, she glared at me. "What, Daemon?"

I moved lightning quick. With a grin, I swiped my fingers along her cheek, like I'd done last night when she had pancake batter on her face. This time I got a tiny piece of fuzz out of her hair. I was so damn helpful.

Kat stared at me.

"After school," I reminded her.

She didn't respond, but I knew she understood. Kat might fight me tooth and nail on, well, everything, but she wasn't dumb.

Throughout class, Kat looked like she was about five seconds from passing out in front of me. She yawned so many times I began to wonder if she was going to injure her jaw. This wasn't normal for her, especially since she had slept through the evening last night. When I left around ten, she was still

asleep.

At the end of class, Kat dragged herself out of her seat and headed for the door. I trailed behind her, barely listening to what Carissa and Lesa were chattering about. We parted ways at that point.

The morning dragged by and I ended up skipping the period before lunch so I could head down the street to grab something more appetizing than whatever the school was trying to pass off as food. I think meat loaf was on the menu, and I was sure that whatever was in that stuff was not meat. As I ordered a sub, I spied smoothies on the menu. Weren't strawberries Kat's favorite? Grinning, I added one of those and then grabbed a freshly baked cookie.

No one looked in my direction as I strolled in through the doors and made my way to the cafeteria. It had always been that way. Our kind could come and go as we pleased. It helped that there were Luxen on staff, not just Matthew.

As I walked down the hall, a warm tingle danced across the nape of my neck, filling me with a measure of unease. It had happened when I'd returned with the piece of obsidian and again when I arrived at school yesterday and was near math class. The same today. It happened whenever I was near her. It had to be a product of healing her on such a...a major level like I had. Whether it was permanent or would fade with the trace was a wait-and-see kind of thing.

The hum of conversation and the scent of mystery were heavy as I walked through the open double doors. I scanned the tables, spying the Thompsons near the back. My gaze collided with Ash's. Her eyes narrowed, and I looked to my right, immediately spotting Kat. Her back was to me, but the rigidness in her shoulders told me she knew I was there. My sister sat across from Kat, two plates in front of Dee. Nothing in front of Kat.

Cutting around the line still picking up food, I walked up and dropped down in the empty seat next to her. Without saying a word, I handed over the smoothie, well aware that everyone at the table was eyeballing us.

Kat's eyes widened a bit, but like I expected, she didn't refuse the smoothie. She took it from me, her fingers brushing mine. A shock of electricity jumped from her hand to my skin. She moved her hand away and took a sip.

Peeking up at me through thick, dark lashes, she said, "Thank you."

I smiled at her.

"Where're ours?" Lesa quipped.

Looking across the table, I laughed. "I'm only at the service of one person in particular."

Kat scooted her chair over, away from me. "You are not servicing me in any way."

I moved my chair closer to hers. "Not yet."

Lesa watched, her eyes glimmering with amusement.

"Oh, come on, Daemon. I'm right here." Dee frowned at me. "You're about to make me lose my appetite."

"Like that will ever happen." Lesa rolled her eyes, and that was so true.

I pulled my sub out and then the little bag. Fishing out an oatmeal cookie, I handed it to Dee. Her face lit up like I'd handed her a diamond. She pulled a Gollum, snatching it from my hand and holding it close.

"Don't we have plans to make?" Carissa asked softly.

"Yep." Dee grinned at Lesa. "Big plans."

Kat lifted a hand, wiping it across her forehead. "What plans?"

"Dee and I were talking in English about throwing a party," Carissa explained, and I swear, that was the most I'd ever heard her speak. "Something—"

"Huge," Lesa said.

"Small." Carissa's eyes narrowed at her friend. "Just something with a few people."

Excitement poured off Dee. "Our parents are going to be out of town that Friday, so it works out perfectly."

Kat glanced at me, and I winked while wondering exactly when this said party was going to happen.

"That's so cool that your parents are letting you have a party at your house," Carissa said.

That caught my attention.

"Mine would stroke out if I even suggested something like that," she continued.

Dee shrugged one shoulder as she avoided my gaze. "Our parents are pretty cool."

Yeah, as in "our parents are long since dead." Taking a huge bite out of my sub, I decided to see where Dee was going with this conversation. So far our house was going to be the party spot. Interesting. It took quite a bit of effort to not ask Dee, right in front of everyone, why she thought this was a grand idea.

Kat was quiet as Dee and their friends discussed this party that was apparently taking place on a Friday a few weeks from now. I was doubtful that it was going to remain small.

"You okay with all of this?" Kat whispered to me.

Honestly? Hell no. But whatever. I shrugged. "Not like I can stop her."

She eyed me as disbelief crept into her features, and I didn't blame her for that. A handful of months ago, I would've shut down this conversation in a nanosecond. Why I wasn't doing it now I wasn't sure. Actually I was.

By then, the trace would be off Kat, and she'd have no reason to put up with me being attached to her hip. Having a party meant Kat would be in *my* house. I liked that.

I pulled out a cookie full of chocolate chips. "Cookie?"

She glanced at my hand, and the tip of her pink tongue sneaked out, wetting her lower lip. "Sure."

Partly because I wanted to get a rise out of Kat, I lifted the cookie higher. Admittedly more controlled by the other half of me that was ridiculously affected by everything she did, I leaned toward her. "Come and get it." I placed half the cookie in my mouth, leaving the other half there for her taking.

Delicate brown brows furrowed together as she stared at me, but the confusion quickly gave way to understanding. Her lips parted as a fire swept across her cheeks. I arched a brow, waiting for her—daring her.

Dee choked. "I think I'm going to hurl."

She made no move to take the cookie, but she didn't punch me in the stomach, so I considered this a win...of some sort. I took the cookie. "Time's up, Kitten."

Kat still stared at me.

Highly amused with myself, I broke the cookie in half and handed over the large piece. Kat snatched it with slim fingers. All but shoving the cookie in her mouth, her brows were pinched and eyes a stormy gray. A laugh rushed its way up my throat, cutting off when I caught my sister gawking at me.

I shot her a bland look.

She returned said look with her widened eyes.

Popping the piece of cookie in my mouth, I glanced over at Kat. She was fiddling with the chain around her neck, the one connected to the piece of obsidian I'd given her. Amusement evaporated at the very blunt reminder that a very real danger still existed as long as Kat was still traced.

I needed to get it off her.

Now.

Kat had gone to the post office after school. Again. I wanted to shake her when we finally got back to the house, but then she'd drop yet another massive armful of packages and I'd never hear the end of that.

Moving fast once outside my SUV, I beat her to the porch and ended up having to wait for her to make her way from her car to the steps. I leaned against the railing at the top, arching a brow as she shuffled on up, at the speed of a three-legged turtle.

"You didn't come straight home after school," I pointed out.

She dug her keys out of her bag with her free hand. "Obviously I had to go to the post office." Opening the door, she dropped the pile on the table inside the foyer.

"Your mail could've waited." I followed her into the kitchen. "What is it? Just books?"

Heading to the fridge, she grabbed a bottle of OJ from the fridge. "Yeah, it was *just* books."

I stared at her back. "I know there probably aren't any Arum around right now, but you can never be too careful, and you have a trace on you that will lead them right to our doorsteps. Right now, that's more important than your books."

Shooting me a dark look over her shoulder, she placed the bottle on the counter and grabbed a glass out of the cabinet. "Drink?"

I sighed. "Sure. Milk?"

She gestured at the fridge. "Help yourself."

"You offered. You're not going to get it for me?"

"I offered orange juice," she replied, taking her glass to the table. "You picked milk. And keep it down. My mom's asleep."

Shaking my head, I pushed away from the doorframe and helped myself to a glass of milk. I brought it back to the table, sitting next to her. She'd pulled her hair up when she got into her car after school, and with all that dark hair pulled back, there was no mistaking the faint ruddy flush to her cheeks. My eyes narrowed on her. What was she thinking about right now?

She carefully rolled the glass between her palms. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Depends," I replied smoothly.

"Do you...feel anything around me?"

"Other than what I felt this morning when I saw how good you looked in those jeans?"

"Daemon." She sighed. "I'm being serious."

"The back of my neck gets all warm and tingly." I traced a circle on the table with my finger. "Is that what you're talking about?"

She peeked over at me, and the corners of my lips tipped up slightly. "Yeah, you feel it, too?"

"Whenever we're near."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Does it bother you?" I asked, serious. She didn't answer as she stared at her drink, and I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. I took a sip of my milk. "It could be a...side effect of the healing." I paused, thinking of how flushed she looked. "Are you feeling well?"

"Why?"

"You look like crap." Which was only partly true.

She glanced at me. "I think I'm coming down with something."

I frowned as I stared at her. "What's wrong with you?"

"I don't know. I probably got alien cooties."

I snorted. "Doubtful. I can't afford for you to be sick. We need to get you outside and try to work your trace off. Until then, you're a—"

"If you say I'm a weakness, I will hurt you." Anger flooded her voice. "I think I proved that I'm not, especially when I led Baruck away from your house and *I* killed him. Just because I'm human doesn't mean I'm weak."

My brows flew up as I sat back in my chair. "I was going to say that until then, you're at risk."

"Oh." She grinned faintly. "Well, then, I'm still not weak."

Something about her impassioned rant got to me. I quickly moved out of the chair and knelt down beside her so I was looking up at her. "I know you're not weak. You've proven yourself. And what you did this weekend, tapping into our powers? I still can't figure out how that happened, but you're not weak. Ever."

Kat stared down at me, the lines of her face softening.

I fought a smile as I stood. "Now I need you to prove you're not weak. Get off your butt and let's work off some of that trace."

She groaned. "Daemon, I'm really not feeling well."

"Kat..."

"And I'm not saying that to be difficult. I feel like hurling."

I folded my arms, not missing how her eyes tracked the way my shirt stretched over my shoulders. "It's not safe for you to be running around when you look like a damn lighthouse. As long as you carry the trace, you can't do anything. Go anywhere."

She pushed up from the table. "I'll get changed."

Taking a step back, I stared at her in surprise. "Caving in so easily?"

"Caving in?" She laughed drily. "I just want you out of my face."

I chuckled deeply. "Keep telling yourself that, Kitten."

"Keep using your ego steroids."

A burn started under my skin as she walked toward the doorway. I moved faster than she could see, blocking her exit. Her eyes narrowed and then flared as I prowled toward her. She backed up, placing her hands on the kitchen table behind her.

"What?" Kat demanded.

There wasn't an ounce of fear in her steely gray eyes as I placed my hands on her hips. The moment I touched her, the hard glint in her gaze gave way to something else. She warmed as I bent my head, brushing my lips against her chin. Kat gasped at the contact and swayed toward me.

Dropping my hands, I stepped back. Our gazes met. "Yeah, not my ego, Kitten. Go get ready."

Her jaw jutted out and then she stomped past me, flipping me off on the way. I laughed and then listened to her climb the steps, plodding the whole way up, completely past caring about the fact that her mom was home, likely asleep.

I turned back to the table, picking up the two glasses. I washed them out and then placed them in the dishwasher, the small niggle of unease growing in the pit of my stomach. Was she really sick? Or being difficult despite what she claimed? Because that girl lived to make things difficult with me. I didn't get the whole sickness thing. I mean, I understood humans going through colds, flus, and worse, but it was a foreign concept to our kind. We didn't get sick. Ever.

About five minutes later, Kat returned to the kitchen, dressed in loose nylon pants and a long-

sleeved thermal. She looked sort of...adorable as she stalked past me and went out the front door.

Kitten had her hackles up.

She was halfway off the porch when I stepped outside, quietly closing the door behind us. "You sure you can do this?" I asked.

Halting on the steps, she twisted around. "I didn't think you were really giving me an option in there."

Now I sort of felt like an ass, because, well, I was an ass. I walked to the steps. "Look, Kat, if you're really not feeling well, I'm not—"

"I'm okay," she said, turning away and hurrying down the steps.

Watching her for a few seconds, I cursed under my breath and then joined her in the driveway. We started off with a light jog, and I figured once she was warmed up and I was sure she wasn't going to keel over on me, we'd pick up the pace.

But we only made it to the end of the access road leading to our houses before Kat stopped suddenly, planting her hands on her hips.

Slowing down, I stopped and faced her. "Hey..."

Shaking her head, she dipped her chin. Her shoulders rose high as she dragged in a deep breath. A moment passed. I stepped toward her.

"I...need to go home," she said quietly.

Before I could respond, she pivoted around and started power walking up the road. I called out to her, but she didn't answer. Concerned, I followed her back to the house.

"Kat!"

"I'm done for the day," she said, running up the porch steps. She threw open the front door. I started up the steps after her, really worried now, but she turned on me, holding up her hand. "I'm fine. Please. I just n-need to get in here. Please just leave me alone."

I drew up short, pressure slamming into my chest. *Please just leave me alone*. Those words were a plea, a *sincere* plea, and they hit me square in the stomach. I didn't stop her when she rushed inside, barely stopping to close the door behind her.

I didn't go after her.

CHAPTER 3

I frowned as I reached the top of the stairs, and Dee's bedroom door opened. Out came Adam, his blond hair sticking up in every direction like someone had run her fingers—

Oh hell no, I could not allow my mind to go there.

"Hey, man," he said, looking at everything but me in the hallway as I passed him.

I was worried about Kat, but I also wasn't thrilled with what was obviously going down in Dee's bedroom. She was my sister. It was required that I not be okay with that. "You heading home, Adam?"

He stared at my sneakers. "Yeah. Uh, I think Andrew is, um, going to—"

"I really don't need an explanation." I folded my arms and didn't beat around the bush. "What are you doing with my sister?"

"What am I doing?" Adam stopped, lifting his hand to his chest and rubbing his palm along the *wrinkled* front of his shirt. "I'm being with her."

I felt the Source ripple across my skin and tint my vision diamond white. "You want to clarify that, bud?"

Adam had the common sense to just ignore that. "You know I really care about her, right?" His voice dropped low. "I'm not just messing with her. I would never do that, and that has nothing to do with the fact that you'd kill me if I was."

"I would," I agreed.

He shook his head, lowering his hand to his side. "I wouldn't do that to her. I wouldn't hurt her. I...I *really* care about Dee."

There was no mistaking the seriousness in his tone. He wasn't playing me. Truth was, Adam wasn't like that—like Andrew…or like me.

Correction. Like how I used to be, emphasis on the past tense, and boy, was that one hell of a wake-up call. I nodded and started back down the hall.

Adam stopped me. "I mean it, Daemon, you can trust me with her...with her heart."

Looking over my shoulder, I met his steady gaze. "I know."

He stood there for a moment, nodded, and then headed out. I almost made it to my bedroom before Dee's door creaked open and she stuck her head out. I sighed, preparing for a major rant about staying out of her life.

"Hey," she called out.

Stepping back from my door, I faced her, surprised to find her smiling instead of glaring at me. "Hey?"

She walked out into the hall, the hem of her dress swinging around her knees as she clasped her hands behind her back. "You love me."

"Uh." I glanced around the otherwise empty hall. "Yeah."

Tilting her head to the side, several curls snuck loose from the knot. "You were making sure Adam cared about me."

I arched a brow.

"You're a good brother," she said.

"Yeah..." I winked. "Older brother."

Dee laughed as she walked up to me. Stretching up on the tip of her toes, she pressed a kiss to my cheek. "Thank you."

I started to ask for what, but I figured it out. Slowly. I shook my head at her and then went into my room. I wasn't entirely surprised when Dee followed me in. "Do you know why you're also an awesome *older* brother?" she asked.

Moving toward the bed, I waved my hand. The towel from the morning shower flew off the bed, straight toward the open door leading to the bathroom. "Because I'm awesome in general."

"Nope." She hopped up so she was sitting on the edge of the desk. "You haven't yelled at me about the party Friday night."

I sat on the bed, eyeing her as I kicked off my shoes. "It would've been nice to have a heads-up about it."

"Actually, I mentioned it yesterday, but you were watching something on TV, so you weren't paying attention to me." She flashed a bright smile while I frowned at her. "But you're not going to make a big deal about it."

"How do you know?"

"Because you would've already if you were." She swung her legs like a five-year-old. "I just...want to do something different, and we've never done anything like that before. Dawson would've loved..." She trailed off, lowering her chin.

She didn't need to finish her statement, because I already knew what she was going to say. Dawson would've been all over the idea of having a house party. Because Dawson pretty much loved everything while I was the exact opposite.

"Anyway," she said, exhaling deeply. "I just want to do something fun. All of us could use that."

I leaned back. Wait a second. Wasn't Kat's birthday coming up? Yes. It was. I'd overheard her saying her birth date when she was taken to the hospital after the Arum attack. Damn, I hoped she was feeling better by then. Would suck to spend your birthday sick. Then again, I didn't think humans stayed sick *that* long. I started to tell Dee that Kat wasn't feeling well, but realized if I did, Dee would go right over there and it seemed like Kat wanted to be alone.

Please just leave me alone.

Damn, I wanted to check on her. It was killing me not to, but her coming down with a bug or flu wasn't a national crisis. I needed to chill. Plus, she had said she was fine.

After I resisted the urge to point out that the party might be a bad idea, Dee eventually disappeared back into her room, working on her English assignment. I ate the rest of the leftover pizza and then spent the next several hours trying to entertain myself.

There wasn't a damn thing on the TV. No *Paranormal Hunters* marathon or anything. The internet bores me. Dee had finished up whatever she was working on and had gone over to Adam's house, because apparently they needed to hang out more than once in a day. They were probably sucking face again—God, I wished I hadn't even had that thought, because now I sort of wanted to barf up the pizza I ate—and picking up a book required waaay too much effort.

And books made me think of Kat and her middle finger.

She didn't want me? Yeah, and people in hell didn't want ice water. God, what a stupid-ass saying.

People in hell were dead. They didn't drink water, iced or not.

Flipping onto my back, I groaned. Night had fallen, so instead of turning on the lamp like a good, normal human, I lifted my hand. White light with a reddish tinge radiated from my open palm and lit up the ceiling. Night-lights? Ha. Who needed one?

My gaze followed a thin crack, starting at one corner of the ceiling and spreading to the middle, webbing out into a million tiny crevices. The foundation of the house was most definitely damaged.

As was my brain right now.

I couldn't remember the last time I felt this restless. Well, that was a lie. The night and morning before I'd learned that Dawson had died, it was like this. Equally tired and hyper, I was keyed up and too damn lazy to do anything. An itching deep under the skin, a stirring to take on my true form and do...what?

"Jesus," I muttered, letting the light fade out around my palm.

Sitting up, I swung my legs off the bed and stood, stretching out cramped and tight muscles. Sleep so wasn't happening anytime soon. I could always do some patrols. Yay.

Man, I was about as exciting as a game of golf.

A year ago, I would've called up Ash. She was always good with easing a serious case of boredom. Or Dawson, and I would have...

I derailed that train of thought before it could completely form.

I wouldn't be calling Ash, and there was no Dawson.

Leaving the bedroom, I hurried downstairs and out the front door. Brisk November wind slammed into me as I stopped in the driveway.

Not going to look. Not going to look. Not going to look.

Twisting around, I looked up at the house beside mine, to the bedroom on the second floor. Lights were off. Wonder what Kat would do if I woke her up and said we had to work off the trace? And I wasn't thinking about the running kind of workout. Horizontal cardio. Hell, stand up, sit down, on the floor, *anywhere anytime* kind of cardio. I wasn't picky.

Body said yes please, common sense said no.

Kat would punch me in the face.

Hmm. Maybe then I could ask her to kiss it and make it better.

I'd taken a step toward her house before I stopped myself. Kat hadn't been feeling well earlier. Humans were so ridiculously fragile. They could die tripping over a damn chair leg. Car accidents could kill them. Colds turned into pneumonia and *killed* people.

Mental note: pick up vitamin C before school tomorrow and force it down Kat's throat.

Spinning around, I sighed and started toward the lake. From there I could head down toward the colony, make sure everything was kosher, and keep circling until I was ready to collapse. Sounded like a damn good plan.

Halfway there, that strange tingling whenever Kat was near—and not the fun kind—broke out across the nape of my neck. It couldn't be her.

I picked up my pace.

She had no reason to be out in the woods in the middle of the night. It was late and cold and—Holy crap.

As the still waters of the lake came into view, so did Kat.

My pulse sped into uncharted territories. Was I dreaming? Because she was standing there with her back to me, her bare feet sinking into the loose soil at the edge of the lake, and she was only in a loose white shirt. Those legs—God, I really had a thing for her legs—and her long hair blowing in

the breeze.

This was a mirage created to torment me, no doubt.

"Kat?"

Slowly, as if it took some great effort for her to move, she turned, and I knew this was no dream. Tonight just got a hell of a lot more interesting.

"What are you doing, Kitten?" I asked.

She stared at me for so long I started to get a bit worried. "I...I need to cool down."

She needed... Understanding whipped through me. "Don't you dare go into that lake."

Because Kat never, ever listened to me—why start now?—she moved backward. Water lapped at her ankles and then her knees. "Why?"

"Why?" I took a step forward. "It's too cold. Kitten, don't make me come in there and get you."

Considering how fast I was and how incredibly slow all humans were, I was a little boggled by how quickly Kat went into the lake. Her head slipped under, and I knew it had to be freezing.

What in the hell was she doing? Kat could be weird at times. After all, she really thought she could convince herself that she wasn't obsessed with me, but this? There was no logical explanation.

Shooting forward, I hit the lake at breakneck speed and sank down, wincing as icy water swept over my head. I grabbed her around the waist and shot back up, not even touching the water or the ground until I had her safely on her feet.

So I could strangle her. Hello. Colds. Pneumonia. Death. Jesus.

"What's wrong with you?" I demanded, grasping her shoulders and giving her a light shake. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Don't." She pushed at me weakly. "I'm so hot."

My gaze drifted all the way down, getting hung up on several areas. I'd seen most of it before, but she was...wow. Like no one else and a whole slew of warm and fuzzy things.

"Yeah, you're hot," I said, ignoring the near primal urge to take her down on the grass and do all kinds of things. "The whole wet white shirt... It's working, Kitten, but a midnight swim in November? That's a little daring, don't you think?"

Kat stared up at me with eyes that were kind of glassy, and then she wiggled free, heading back toward that lake.

I caught her before she took two steps and turned her toward me. Okay, I was starting to get worried again. "Kat, you can't get in the lake. It's *too* cold. You're going to get sick." I brushed back the hair plastered to her cheeks and felt how hot she really was. "Hell—sicker than you already are. You're burning up."

Blinking once and then twice, she leaned into me, pressing her cheek against my chest. I think she *sniffed* me before saying, "I don't want you."

Yeah, and I would be voted Most Friendly in the high school yearbook. "Uh, now is not the time to get into *that* conversation."

Her arms went around me, and my brows shot up. I kind of liked this Kat. "But I do want you," she said.

Those words did something outrageous to my chest. I held her tighter. "I know, Kitten. You aren't fooling anyone. Come on."

She let go, her arms hanging limply at her sides. "I...I don't feel good."

"Kat." I pulled back and grasped her face, holding her head up since it didn't seem like she could by herself. Unease from earlier returned and it unfurled in my belly, quickly spreading its icy tendrils into every nook and cranny. "Kat, look at me."

A second later, her legs went out from underneath her. Letting out a ripe curse, I caught her, cradling her against my chest. "Kat?"

Nothing.

Pressure clamped down on my chest. Her head fell back like it wasn't connected to any muscle or bone. "*Kat*!"

Still nothing, and holy shit, panic exploded and my brain clicked off. Whirling around, I took off, running faster than I ever have. I hit her porch in half a second and by the time I placed her down on the bed, because I thought she'd be more comfortable that way, I had yanked out my cell phone and called Dee. She answered on the third ring, her voice a bit breathless.

"Something is wrong with Kat. I need you here. Now."

That was all I said. The call disconnected. Pure terror had its claws in me as I cupped her cheeks. "Kat, open your eyes. Talk to me."

Her chest rose in shallow breaths, but she didn't open her eyes and she didn't speak. Preparing to slip into my true form to heal her, I stopped at the very last second. Had I done this to her? Made her sick by healing her? We were forbidden to heal humans. No one ever really told us why, and this could be the reason.

Could we kill them?

"Shit."

This couldn't be happening. I didn't save her life to be the reason why I lost her all over again. That was too fucking cruel, and I would never—

Dee appeared in Kat's doorway, her hair messy from obviously running the miles between the Thompsons' house and ours. Her lips way too swollen for me even to go there. She took one look at the bed and was beside us in an instant. "What happened?"

"I don't know." I grabbed for the blanket to cover her, but I didn't know if that would help or hurt, so I threw it back toward the foot of the bed.

"Is she wet?" Dee placed her hand on Kat's forehead and jerked back. "Oh my God, she's burning up. What was she doing?"

"She was by the lake and got in. I got her out, but she passed out." Hovering over her, I felt absolutely helpless and useless. "Kat, wake up! Come on, girl, wake up."

Stricken, Dee clasped her hands together. "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know what's wrong with her!"

Dee paled.

Closing my eyes, I let out a breath. "I'm sorry. She just...she won't wake up."

"It's okay. I'm sure she'll be okay." Dee placed a hand on my arm. "It's probably the flu. Humans get really high fevers."

"But fevers are bad for humans, right? Brain damage or something like that." Panic socked me right in the gut again, and I looked down at Kat. Her cheeks *were* way too flushed. "Come on, Kitten, open your eyes."

"Oh God..." Dee whispered.

Heart pounding, I wanted to put my fists straight through the wall.

"Daemon! You need to calm down."

My sister's voice drew my attention. Plumes of plaster fell from the ceiling. The damn house was starting to shake.

Calming down was not easy. I didn't know what to do—how to make Kat better without unintentionally screwing her up.

Dee fluttered around the bed like a nervous hummingbird. "I could get something cool—a washcloth. That might help until her mom gets home."

"Yeah," I said, sitting beside Kat. I was vaguely aware of my sister leaving the bedroom and rummaging around in the bathroom. Brushing her damp hair back, I winced at how hot her skin was. How had I not noticed right off the bat that something was wrong? Hell, she was walking around in just a T-shirt. That wasn't normal.

Returning with the cool washcloth, Dee tossed it to the floor. "What am I thinking? She's soaked now and it's not helping."

Kat turned her head slowly, pressing against my palm, and my heart freaking fluttered. My fingers splayed across her too-warm cheek. She murmured something too low for me to understand, so I leaned closer. "Kat?"

Her body shuddered. "Daemon..."

"I'm here."

She shuddered again, turning her head away. Her face pinched, and she called out for me again, and the sound of my name was like being hit by an Arum. These tiny, pitiful sounds escaped her parted lips.

"We need to get her into something dry. Maybe that will help?" my sister offered.

She didn't sound convinced, but I nodded. Moving as fast as lightning, Dee grabbed a dry nightgown out of one of the dressers. It was some kind of sleep jersey, with the number eleven on the back.

Even though I didn't want to leave her side, I pushed away from the bed and turned my back, giving Kat privacy as Dee changed her out of the soaked shirt.

It didn't help.

Nothing did, and when she started shivering uncontrollably, I was about to lose my freaking mind. I wrapped her in a blanket, but her body was shaking so hard the bed trembled.

I couldn't take it anymore. "We need to take her to the hospital."

Dee agreed, not that it mattered. One way or another, I was taking her there. Gathering her in my arms, I started down the stairs. I was outside, letting my human skin shed away when my sister stopped me.

"Daemon, we have to *drive* there."

"Too slow."

She grabbed my arm, her eyes meeting mine. "I know you're worried, but we can't show up there with no car. There's no way we can explain that. We need to take the car. I'll drive."

I exhaled harshly.

"I'll drive really fast and break every speed limit there is, but we need to do this like normal people would."

Dammit, she was right, and I hated that.

Climbing into the back of Dee's Jetta, I held Kat close. I didn't know what to do. So I spoke to her in my native language, then realized she probably couldn't hear it since it wasn't something we spoke out loud.

But the strangest thing happened.

Kat stilled, and her breathing deepened.

Gathering her against my chest, I bent over, pressing my forehead to her flushed one, and kept talking to her, telling her about this stupid TV show I'd seen the other day, knowing she couldn't hear me, but it was something and that's all I had. And after I recapped the show, I closed my eyes and told

her in my own language the truth.

I don't know how to make you better. I wish I did, but please stay with me. I need you, and I can't lose you. Not now. Not ever.

CHAPTER 4

Running my hands through my hair, I paced around the uncomfortable plastic chairs in the hospital waiting room. Dee was sitting in one, her knees tucked against her chest and her cheek resting against her knees. An older couple sat on the other side, and I was confident that I was probably going to see someone die before anyone came out and checked on the man.

A nurse had immediately taken Kat when we arrived, forcing me to place her down on one of those rolling beds with a thin mattress. I hadn't wanted to let her go, let some human guy who looked a few years older than me wheel her off behind doors I wasn't allowed to pass.

Her mother had been there. She'd stepped out into the waiting room long enough to thank us and to tell us she would let us know what was happening once she knew.

That was three hours ago.

"She's going to be okay," Dee said when I passed her on my ten-hundredth lap. "She has to be."

No. That wasn't correct. There was no "has to be" anything in life, especially when it came to humans. Their fragility was the only thing constant. Humans were here one second, caught a fever, and could be gone in the next hour.

Closing my eyes, I stopped pacing and reached up, rubbing the back of my neck. There was no warm tingling. She was either too far away in the hospital or...

God, if something had happened to her, I didn't know what I would do. I couldn't even wrap my head around it, couldn't fathom it.

"Daemon," Dee said quietly, urgently.

Opening my eyes, I turned around to see Kat's mom coming out of the double doors. Dee was already standing, but I beat her to it. "Is Kat okay?"

Eyes shadowed, she motioned us back toward the hall as she held the door open. My heart pounded erratically as we wasted no time crossing the distance. Once inside, I saw a man waiting for us. I was struck by the odd sense of familiarity as I stared at the dark-haired doctor. It took me a second to realize he was the same doctor who'd treated Kat the night she was attacked at the library.

Ms. Swartz smiled tiredly as she nodded and ran a hand over her polka-dot scrubs. "Katy is...she's okay."

My knees felt weak as I stepped back, leaning against the wall.

"Oh, thank God." Dee placed her hand over her mouth.

I forced my lungs to take a deep breath. "What...what is wrong with her?"

"It appears that she's caught some kind of virus. There are some really nasty ones going around right now," the doctor said, and when I simply stared at him, he smiled reassuringly. "I'm Dr. Michaels, by the way. I'm not sure if we've officially met." He extended his hand.

My gaze dipped to his palm, and then I reached out, shaking it. Might've been my imagination but

his smile faltered a bit, but then all I was focused on was the fact that I hadn't killed Kat. "What kind of virus?"

"That's what Dr. Michaels is going to find out," Ms. Swartz said, placing a hand on the doc's arm. "It's a really, really good thing you guys brought her in when you did. Her fever was—" She broke off with a sharp inhale and looked away, swallowing hard as she dropped her hand. "It's just a good thing you brought her in."

Dr. Michaels reached over, gently squeezing Ms. Swartz's arm. "It is. You two did great."

"We knew we needed to bring her in." Dee glanced at me. "She was so...out of it."

"Well, we have her now," Dr. Michaels assured us. "We're going to keep her for observation, maybe for a couple of days, just to make sure everything is okay."

Ice knotted in my gut. "For a couple of days? That doesn't sound like everything is okay with her."

Her mom stepped closer, patting my arm, surprising me. "She had a really high fever—still does, but it's going down. It will be a wait-and-see sort of thing. Hopefully we won't have to keep her in here long."

"Okay." I nodded. "Can I— Can we see her?"

"That wouldn't be wise," Dr. Michaels answered. "Not until we're sure what type of virus she has and if she's contagious." His pale blue eyes met mine. "We wouldn't want you or this young lady catching something and getting sick."

That wouldn't be a problem.

"Understandable," Dee replied and then faced Kat's mom. "Will you let us know how she's doing?"

Kat's mom promised that she would and then mentioned that it was late and that we should be getting home before *our parents* worried. I was reluctant to leave, wanting to see Kat with my own eyes, but that wasn't going to happen. Not without causing a small riot, and that was the last thing anyone needed. Dee looped her arm through mine, tugging me toward the doors. Dr. Michaels's voice stopped us.

"I'm going to take good care of her," Dr. Michaels said, watching us with a patient smile. "Don't you worry."

I was behind the wheel on the way back home, my jaw aching from how tight I was clenching it. It took everything in me not to turn back around and find a way to see Kat. Went against my very grain.

"She's going to be okay," Dee said for what had to be the twentieth time. "It's just some kind of virus. She'll be fine."

I didn't lose my cool with her, no matter how many times she said it, because I knew it was making her feel better about everything. So she could keep on saying it.

"You know, she wasn't acting right at lunch." Dee was staring out into the darkness beyond the window when I glanced at her. "She didn't eat anything. Not until you brought the smoothie and cookie in."

My hands tightened on the steering wheel as I flicked my attention back to the road. "She's been tired the last two days, too."

There was a pause. "Poor Katy."

I didn't respond, because I was busy mentally punching myself in the face. She'd been exhausted yesterday, not eating, and had said she didn't feel well earlier, and I'd pushed her to work off the

trace. Freaking pushed her when she had some kind of virus. I might've made her sicker.

"You okay over there?"

"Yeah." I cleared my throat. "I..."

A moment passed. "What?"

"I was worried that I...that I'd done something to her," I said after a moment.

Dee twisted in her seat toward me. "What could you have done to her to make her sick?"

Healed her on what had felt like a complete cellular level, bringing her back from the brink of death. That sounded about right, especially since there had to be a reason that was forbidden other than the possible exposure risk, but Dee didn't know that and it needed to stay that way. It had to. "I was just pushing her to work off the trace." Which was true. "So I worried that I did something, you know?"

Silence.

So much so, that I glanced over at her briefly, finding her watching me.

"Did you...did you do something else?" she asked quietly, her voice small.

"No," I said, and I lied. "I didn't do anything else."

Kat didn't wake up.

Not on Saturday.

She didn't open her eyes on Sunday.

On Monday, her mom said that her fever hadn't gone down far enough, but her vitals were better. Dee and I visited her, and she had...she wasn't really there. She murmured words a couple of times. Once I thought she said my name. It was hard to see her like that.

There was no change on Tuesday.

I ended up staying home that day, too keyed up to go to school. Dee was worried, probably because she thought I was going to do something stupid, and I was. In the middle of the night, way past visitation time, I'd made it to the hospital parking lot before common sense took over.

What was I doing?

I could move fast, but even if I timed it right and got through the secured doors, I didn't know where Kat was. I could find out, but it would be risky. If someone found me in her room, that was going to be hard to explain.

Halfway across the parking lot, I spied a black Ford Expedition rolling into the visitors parking lot. My gut tightened. The vehicle was unmarked. Definitely DOD. Its presence could be a coincidence, but it was a wake-up call. I went home and I stayed there, feeling caged in.

I ghosted through classes Wednesday morning, wondering what the hell I was doing in school. I could give two shits about whatever was being taught. By the time I made it to lunch, I was ready to start tossing people headfirst through windows just for breathing around me.

Bypassing the line, I stalked over to where the Thompsons were sitting. Dee was with the girls, and I couldn't go over there. Not just because Kat wasn't there, but because I knew they'd be talking about Kat.

And I...I just couldn't sit and listen to that. Weak. Yeah, weak as hell.

I dropped down next to Andrew and leaned back, stretching out my legs as I fixed my gaze on the Viking mascot painted on the wall.

"You look like a grizzly bear," Ash said.

Raising a brow, I folded my arms. "Do I?"

"Yeah," she replied. "I know it's November and some guys do that whole no-shave thing, but you should really shave your face."

I smirked.

Andrew stopped whatever he was saying to the guy next to him and looked over at me, brows raised. He opened his mouth and then wisely closed it.

"Okay," Ash muttered. "Nice to have you here, you know, warming up the table with your sparkling personality."

Matthew was standing near the painted mascot with another teacher, a human, listening to whatever was being said as he kept an eye on our table. Matt had called last night, but I hadn't been in the mood to deal with him.

Looking away, I watched Adam get up from where Dee was sitting with Carissa and Lesa. He skirted the tables, walking over to ours, a bottle of water in his hand. He sat down next to his sister, and she said something to him too low for me to hear.

Simon the Jackass snagged my attention. He was sitting two tables behind us, laughing loudly. My hand ached, wanting to connect with his face again. I stared at him until he must've sensed it, because the smile faded from his face and he looked between the shoulders of two meatheads, right at me.

Simon blanched.

I smiled at him and it wasn't a nice smile.

He quickly looked away, his throat working on a visible swallow. God, I hated that guy. What he tried to do to Kat wasn't something I'd ever forget.

Adam tapped his fingers on the table. "Katy's mom texted Dee a few moments ago. She's waiting for her to text back."

I stilled, a shiver of dread curling down my spine. I told myself that it had to be good news or no news, because I doubted Kat's mom would text Dee if something bad had happened.

"What's going on with her anyway?" Ash's lips curled as if she had something sour in her mouth.

Adam sighed as he glanced at his sister. "I told you. She has some kind of virus or something. She's been in the hospital."

My jaw clenched.

"Whatever," Ash muttered, turning her attention to her plate of what I thought might be a burrito.

"She's been out of it for days," Adam added.

Ash poked the burrito with her fork. "Like in a coma?"

"She's asleep," I corrected, ignoring the tightening in my chest.

"Maybe we'll get lucky," Andrew replied, low enough for only us to hear. "And she won't wake up."

I reacted without even thinking.

Springing out of my seat, I grabbed a fistful of Andrew's shirt and hauled him out of his seat. He didn't get a chance to blink before I introduced his face to the shiny surface of the table. The *thump* was nice and fleshy and wholly satisfying. Andrew popped up and whirled around, facing me.

Ash gasped as she pushed back from the table. "Daemon!"

In a damn heartbeat, Matthew was by my side, grabbing my arm. He tried to shove me back, but I wasn't going anywhere. "Go," he said.

I ignored him as I got all up in Andrew's face and warned, "You better hope she does."

Matthew grabbed my arm, this time using the strength he had, and hauled me back a good inch. He

shoved again. "Go."

Eyeing Andrew for a few more moments, I pivoted around. A lot of eyeballs were on me. I didn't care. As I walked out of the cafeteria, Matthew was right behind me, waiting until I got out in the hallway before he jumped my ass.

"What in the hell was that?" he demanded.

I didn't say anything as I paced in front of the lockers. Blood pumped through me. I was itching for a fight, for something to work out all the frustration pounding through me.

"You went after one of your own." Matthew spoke low as he planted a hand on my shoulder, stopping me. "After Andrew of all people. What has gotten into you?"

Kat had gotten into me.

And I had been scared when I couldn't get Kat to open her eyes and I was scared right now, because she hadn't woken up. Those words didn't come out as I stared at Matt. Not exactly. "He said he hoped we got lucky and Kat never woke up."

Matthew blinked slowly, his hand spasming on my shoulder. "This is over *her*?"

Looking away, I shook my head as my jaw worked. He didn't get it. None of them did. Things had changed.

"I thought we agreed that you would take care of this with Kat."

I met his stare. "I don't know what you think we agreed on."

Surprise flared in his bright blue eyes. "You said—"

"It doesn't matter what I said, Matthew. Things have changed." I stepped back, out of his grasp. "I...I care about her, and that's all you need to know. That's all any of them need to know."

Shock gave way to trepidation and then dawning understanding. Blood drained from Matthew's face, but I turned away from him. I started walking down the hall, having no idea where I was going, but anywhere other than here was a better choice.

"Daemon," Matthew called out, but I kept going.

The cell phone in my pocket vibrated. I reached in and pulled it out. The text was from Dee, and it was only two words. The two best words in the history of mankind.

Kat's awake.

CHAPTER 5

Kat came home from the hospital on Thursday. Dee had gathered up all her missed assignments and spent the better part of Thursday evening with her. From what I gathered from my sister, Kat was feeling fine. She didn't act sick or look it. None of this was from firsthand observation.

I stayed away Thursday.

I wasn't even sure why. Maybe it was because I didn't trust myself if I did see her. Okay. That was probably it, because there was a good chance I would be all over her in a second, touching her, feeling her. Making sure that she was alive and well. That would be too much for her.

It would be too much for me.

Dee said Kat was coming back to school this morning—Friday—and as I walked toward trig class, my heart was pounding like a steel drum and the back of my neck was warm. Tingling. Kat was here.

I walked into class, and my gaze found her without even trying. Seeing her sitting there talking to Lesa and Carissa was like taking a punch to the chest to restart the heart. And she looked more than fine. Kat looked beautiful. Dark-chocolate-colored hair fell over her shoulders, thick and shiny. The centers of her cheeks were flushed in a pretty, healthy way. She was smiling, and goddamn, she was beautiful.

I wanted to walk right up to her, yank her to her feet and against me. I wanted to feel her warm breath on my skin and taste her lips. Maybe I should've gone and seen her last night, but I had no idea my reaction to her was going to be so damn intense.

Walking became a little difficult at that point. Doing what I wanted wouldn't be entirely appropriate, and I was also a bit distracted by a very important observation. Strangely, there was no trace around her.

Kat twisted around in her seat, facing me. "I need to talk to you."

"Okay," I said.

"In private," she whispered.

Perfect. Because what I had in mind required privacy. "Meet me in the library at lunch. No one really goes in there. You know, with all those books and stuff."

She wrinkled her nose at me, and I fought a smile as she flipped back to the front of class. Relieved that Kat was here and she was normal, I picked up my pen and tipped my desk forward. I poked her in the back.

"Yes?" she whispered.

I grinned. "You look a lot better than the last time I saw you."

"Thanks."

My gaze glided over her, and I spoke low so only she could hear. "Know what? You're not glowing."

Shock splashed across her face. "Like, at all?"

I shook my head.

Kat stared at me a moment longer and then slowly turned back around. Class started and I righted my desk, sitting back in my chair. A huge amount of relief was currently lifting some of the weight off my chest, but my mind kept going back to Kat's absent trace. Was it the fever?

Or was it something else?

Instead of heading for the cafeteria like I normally would, I bypassed the noisy room and kept walking down the hall. A few students were milling through the wide hallway, and as I hung a right, I nearly plowed into some dude I'd never seen before.

The brunette guy jumped back. "Whoa," he said, a grin splitting his tan face. "Sorry about that, man."

I nodded in response and the guy stepped around me, disappearing toward the cafeteria I assumed. The musty-smelling library was busier than I thought it would be during lunch. A young librarian sat behind the circulation desk, her eyes widening when she saw me walk in.

Was it that odd to see me in here?

I smirked.

Probably.

A couple of underclassmen sat at the computers, eating their lunches. I turned down the first aisle and found myself in the back of the library. Eastern European culture. Doubted anyone at this school would be frequenting this part of the library.

There were maps of places virtually unpronounceable tacked to the tiny cubicle wall. The longer I waited, the more I felt like I needed to work on my world history knowledge, because I had no freaking clue there were so many countries in Eastern Europe.

The odd shiver along the back of my neck announced Kat's presence before she appeared at the end of the stacks. I grinned when she spotted me and raised her brows. She took her sweet-ass time walking over, and when she stepped into the cubicle, I made no attempt at giving her space.

I'd decided I'd like to be all up in her personal space. "I was wondering if you were ever going to find me."

She dropped her backpack against the wall and sat on the desk across from me. "Embarrassed someone would see you and think you're capable of reading?"

My lips twitched. "I do have a reputation to maintain."?

"And what a lovely reputation that is," she retorted quickly, and it might make me a freak, but when she mouthed off at me, it turned me on.

Totally turned me on.

I stretched out my legs to accommodate that fact. "So what did you want to talk about?" I dropped my voice and was rewarded with a shiver. "In private?"

"Not what you're hoping."

I smirked. Funny that she thought she knew what I wanted. Cute.

"Okay." She gripped the edge of the desk. "How did you know I was sick in the middle of the night?"

The question caught me off guard, bringing back memories of her pale and out of it, and the

feeling of helplessness that I'd dwelled in while she'd been in the hospital. I didn't want to think about it. "You don't remember?"

Her eyes met mine for a moment, and then she stared at my lips. My grin went up a notch, and her gaze flew to the map over my shoulder. "No. Not really."

Interesting. "Well, it was probably the fever. You were burning up."

She was back to staring at me. I liked that. "You touched me?"

"Yes, I touched you." And I wanted to touch her again, and not for the reasons I was touching her then. "And you weren't wearing a lot of clothes. And you were soaked...in a white T-shirt. Nice look. Very nice."?

She flushed prettily. "The lake... It wasn't a dream?"

I shook my head.

"Oh my God, so I did go swimming in the lake?"

Her visible distress over the least important thing that had happened out of everything was sort of adorable. And telling. I moved away from the desk and was so close to her, I could feel her warmth. "You did. Not something I expected to see, but I'm not complaining. I saw a lot."

"Shut up."

"Don't be embarrassed." I tugged on the sleeve of her cardigan, and she smacked my hand away. I grinned. "It's not like I haven't seen the upper part before, and I didn't get a real good look down—"

Kitten had claws. Couldn't forget that. She came off the desk with a mean right hook. I was faster than her and jerked back, catching her hand before it connected with my face. Since I had her wrist, I used it to my advantage. I did what I'd been wanting to do since I saw her in class this morning. I hauled her against my chest, immediately pleased by that, and lowered my head. "Don't hit, Kitten. It's not nice."

"You're not nice." She tried pulling away, but she wasn't going anywhere. "Let me go."

"I'm not sure I can do that. I must protect myself." I dropped her hand.

"Oh, really, that's your reason for—for manhandling me?"

"Manhandling?" I moved forward until she was pressed against the cubicle desk. "This isn't manhandling or whatever the hell that is."

She didn't say anything at first, but I knew where her brain had gone, which was right where my brain operated pretty much every time I was with her. Her eyes dilated. Her pulse picked up. Even her lips had parted.

"Daemon, someone is going to see us."

"So?" I carefully picked up her hand. "Not like anyone is going to say a thing to me."

She dragged in a deep breath. "So my trace has faded, but this stupid connection hasn't?"

I'd been hoping that the weird connection was going to end when the trace did. "Nope."

"What does that mean, then?"

"I don't know." I didn't really care at this moment. I slipped my fingers under her sleeve, smoothing the tips over her soft skin. I liked the jolt of electricity. Added bonus of touching her.

"Why do you keep touching me?"

"I like to."

?"Daemon..."?She placed her hand against my chest, and satisfaction swelled inside me.

"But back to the trace. You know what that means."?

"That I don't have to see your face outside of school?" she said.

Such a mouth. I laughed, and her eyes flared wide. "You're no longer at risk."

"I think the not-seeing-your-face part outweighs the safe part."

"Keep telling yourself that." I brushed my chin along her hair, savoring the feeling as I moved on to her cheek. I could feel her heartbeat revving, crashing in her chest. God, I wanted her. Some would say it was wrong, but I wanted her. "If that makes you feel better, but we both know it's a lie."

She tipped her head back, her eyes flashing up at me. "It's not a lie."

"We're still going to be seeing each other," I murmured. "And don't lie. I know that makes you happy. You told me you wanted me."

She blinked. "When?"

"At the lake." I tilted my head. Our mouths were so close. It would take nothing for me to kiss her, but it would be worth everything. "You said you wanted me."

Her other hand landed on my chest. "I had a fever. Lost my mind."

"Whatever, Kitten." I dropped my hands to her soft hips and lifted her back up on the edge of the desk. "I know better.

"You don't know anything," she breathed.

"Uh-huh. You know, I was worried about you." I eased in between her legs. "You kept calling out my name, and I kept answering, but it was like you couldn't hear me."

She blinked as she lowered her hands down my stomach. I wondered if she even knew she was feeling me up. Or when her hands reached my sides that she tugged me closer, against her. "Wow, I must've been really out of it."

My eyes met hers, and in spite of the heat building at the base of my spine, when I looked down at her, I saw her lifeless and limp in my arms. I tasted that fear again, and I spoke the words I couldn't admit to Adam. "It...scared me."

Surprise flickered across her face, but I didn't give her time to really think about that. I lowered my mouth to hers, and the moment we touched, her fingers dug into my sweater. She could tell me all she wanted that she didn't desire this, but she wanted it as badly as I did, if not more.

I focused on the seam of her lips with my tongue, teasing her, working her, slowly coaxing her open. And when she did, I wanted to shout, but that would require me lifting my mouth from hers. Her arms looped around my neck and then she was kissing me back just as urgently, just as feverishly.

And I wanted more.

My hands slipped under her shirt, spreading along the bare skin of her sides. I hadn't forgotten what her flesh felt like. I couldn't get the damn memory of it out of my head. I knew she couldn't either. This was meant to happen, and I wasn't surprised when her lower body tipped against mine and she moaned against my mouth, and her response had me wanting to find a much bigger area than this cubicle and more—

Something snapped around us, popped, and then cracked. The smell of burned ozone immediately filled the cubicle.

I pulled away, and breathing heavily, I looked over my shoulder. An old-ass computer was smoking. Heh. Electronics did not fare well around us. I turned back to her, ready to pick up where we'd stopped, but the moment my gaze centered on her, I knew that wasn't going to happen.

Her walls were up. She was pissed, looking like a cat that was about to get dumped in bathwater. She pushed—she pushed hard—and surprised, I let go, moving back a step. Something weird unfurled in my chest. A deep twinge of...of *hurt*. Well, now that I knew how that felt, it sucked. Sucked ass.

"God, I don't even *like* this—kissing you," she said.

Oh, wait the hell up. Not true. I straightened to my full height. "I beg to differ. And I think this computer tells a different story, too."

A nasty little look pinched her features, and for some messed-up reason, it made her cuter. "That—

that will never happen again."

I arched a brow as I stared at her. Yeah, it would most definitely happen again. Challenge thrown down. Challenge accepted. "And I think you've said that before." When her face looked like she swallowed something sour, I sighed. "Kat, you enjoyed that—just as much as I did. Why lie?"

A moment passed, and then she shook her head. "Because it's not real. You didn't want me before." "I did—"

"Don't you dare say you wanted me, because you treated me like I was the Antichrist! You can't just undo that because there's a stupid connection between us." She sucked in a sharp breath, the flush leaking out of her face. "You really hurt me then. I don't think you even know. You humiliated me in front of an entire lunchroom!"

Looking away, I dragged my hand through my hair. She was right. I had hurt her. I had embarrassed her. I couldn't go back and change that, even though I wished I could. "I know. I'm...I'm sorry for how I treated you, Kat."

She stared at me for a few seconds and then bit down on her lip. "Even now, we're all the way hidden in the library, as if you don't want people to know you made a mistake that day and acted like a dick. And I'm supposed to be okay with that now?"

What the hell? My eyes widened. Did she think I was hiding her? "Kat—"

"I'm not saying we can't be friends, because I want to. I do like you a lo—" She cut herself off. "Look, this didn't happen. I'm going to blame aftereffects of the flu or say that a zombie ate my brain."

My brows furrowed. "What?"

"I don't want this with you." She started to turn, but I caught her arm. Her eyes narrowed on me. "Daemon..."

I looked her dead on. "You're a terrible liar. You do want this. Just as badly as I do. You want this as badly as you want to go to ALA this winter."

Her mouth dropped open. "You don't even know what ALA is!"

"The American Library Association midwinter event." I was quite proud of this. "Saw you obsessing over it on your blog before you got sick. I'm pretty sure you said you'd give up your firstborn child to go. Anyway, back to the whole you-wanting-me part. You do want me."

Kat drew in a deep breath as a weird mix of amusement and irritation flashed across her face. "You are way too confident."

"I'm confident enough to wager a bet."

Her eyes rolled. "You can't be serious."

I grinned. "I bet that by New Year's Day, you will have admitted that you're madly, deeply, and irrevocably—"

"Wow. Want to throw another adverb out there?" Her cheeks were bright red.

Winking at her, I came up with another one. "How about irresistibly?"

"I'm surprised you know what an adverb is," she muttered.

"Stop distracting me, Kitten. Back to my bet—by New Year's Day, you'll have admitted that you're madly, deeply, irrevocably, and *irresistibly* in love with me."

Kat choked on a laugh.

"And you dream about me." I released her arm and folded mine across my chest, cocking an eyebrow. "I bet you'll admit that. Probably even show me your notebook with my name circled in hearts—"

"Oh, for the love of God..."

"It's on," I promised, and I meant it. For real.

CHAPTER 6

Friday evening I went out on patrols, mainly to stop myself from finding some reason to bother Kat so I didn't come across as having a one-track focus, er, obsession. Who was I kidding? I totally had a one-track focus. It was weird. I had never been this wrapped up in someone before. I guessed it was normal.

I couldn't shake the taste of her kiss, the sound of her breathy gasps, or the way she had melted into me like warm butter. All day my brain had been replaying those hot moments in the library.

Which made class kind of awkward.

I circled around the colony and then traveled to the edge of the county, staying in the thick woodland. There wasn't a single sign that an Arum was around. Good news, but I knew it wouldn't stay that way.

It was a little after ten when I shifted back to my human form seconds before I stepped out of the woods and onto the road leading up to our houses. A few steps and I felt the warm shiver along the back of my neck. My gaze went to Kat's house and then mine, and there she was, coming out of our house.

"Kitten."

"Hey." She looked everywhere but at me. "Where, um, so what have you been doing?"

"Patrolling." I stepped onto the porch, and even though she was eyeballing a crack in the porch floor, I smiled a little as I stood close to her. Close enough to feel the warmth rolling off her tense body. "Everything is all quiet on the western front."

Her lips twitched. "Nice reference."

I lowered my head close to her temple. "It's my favorite book, actually."

Kat's head jerked toward mine and our mouths almost lined up. "I didn't know you knew how to read the classics."

Smirking lazily, I stepped closer. Our legs and arms brushed. "Well, I usually prefer books with pictures and small sentences, but sometimes I step out of the box."

She laughed, and I wanted to shout my approval. "Let me guess, your favorite kind of picture book is the one you can color in?"

"I never stay in the lines." I winked.

"Of course not." She looked away, swallowing. The laughter and the smile died off. "I've got...to go."

I swung around. "I'll walk you home."

"Um, I live right there."

"Hey, I'm being a gentleman." I offered my arm. "May I?"

Laughing under her breath, Kat shook her head, but she folded her arm around mine. She started to

walk, but I bent at the knees and scooped her up in the air. She squeaked as one hand fisted the front of my shirt. "Daemon—"

"Did I tell you I carried you all the way back to the house the night you were sick? Thought that was a dream, eh? Nope. Real." I went down one step as she stared wide-eyed at me. "Twice in one week. We're making this a habit."

Our gazes met, and then I grinned at her. A second passed, and I shot off the porch, moving so fast that the wind muffled her surprised shriek. I stopped on her porch and smiled down at her. "I was faster the last time."

"Really," she said slowly, dumbfounded. "You...going to put me down?"

"Mmm." Our eyes met again. My arms tightened, holding her close. I didn't want to put her down. "Been thinking about our bet? Wanna give in now?"

Her lips thinned. "Put me down, Daemon."

Reluctantly, I placed her on her feet, but I couldn't quite bring myself to remove my arms. "I've been thinking."

"Oh, God..."

"This bet really isn't fair to you. New Year's Day? Hell, I'll have you admitting your undying devotion to me by Thanksgiving."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sure I'll hold out until Halloween."

I frowned. "That's already passed."

"Exactly," she muttered.

A laugh burst out of me, and she shook her head. A strand of hair fell across her cheek. I caught it, tucking it back behind her ear. Her lips pressed together as the back of my knuckles glided over her skin. My fingers lingered along the soft skin behind her ear. God, I wanted...

Wanted so damn much.

I stepped back and turned around before I went too far even though I wanted to take a stick of dynamite to the invisible line drawn between us. I'd done that earlier today, in the library. Going there again in one day would cause Kat to build walls that would take a lot to knock down.

Staring up at the sky, I counted to ten. "The stars... They're beautiful tonight."

Kat stepped so she stood beside me. "Yeah, they are." There was a pause. "Do they remind you of your home?"

"I wish they did. Memories, even bittersweet ones, are better than nothing, you know?"

She brushed the same piece of hair back when it fell forward again. "The Elders—do they remember anything about Lux?"

I nodded.

"Have you ever asked them to tell you about it?"

I started to respond, but then laughed. "It is that simple, right? But I try to avoid the colony as much as possible."

"What about Mr. Garrison?"

"Matthew?" I shook my head. "He won't talk about it. I think it's too hard on him—the war and losing his family."

A long moment passed and she said, "I'm sorry."

I looked at her, confused. "Why would you apologize?"

"I...I'm just sorry for everything...you guys have had to go through."

Holding her gaze for a moment, I then looked away, laughing drily. "Keep talking like that, Kitten, and I..."

"You what?"

I would gather you close and never let go. Not like I could say that. I smiled slightly, tilting my head to the side. "I've decided to go easy on you. I'll keep New Year's Day as the deadline."

Kat started to respond, but I backed off the porch before she could, letting what I said and what I didn't say linger in the space between us.

CHAPTER 7

Kat was acting...weird in class on Monday. Weirder than normal. Like she expected someone to jump out of thin air in front of her. She was quiet through trig, and I worried that she was getting sick again, even though she appeared to be fine.

Classes dragged. As usual.

I hit the cafeteria at lunch and immediately wished I'd gone out to grab something to eat. The slab of meat on my plate appeared to be Salisbury steak and gravy. Maybe. Wasn't sure.

As I turned, I started toward where Kat was sitting with Dee but drew up short. Adam was with them, as were Lesa and Carissa. My gaze shot to where we normally sat. Ash looked bored, her short blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. Andrew looked nuclear.

Considering I hadn't really talked to Andrew since I planted his face in the table, I should probably try being less of a douche.

I sat down next to Andrew, dropping my plate. The other Luxen jerked. "Hey," I said, sitting down.

He shot me a look as he stabbed his plastic fork in the mashed potatoes. "Thought you'd be over there today." With his back to the table Kat was at, he directed his thumb over his shoulder.

"I like to spice things up," I replied.

Ash twisted toward me. Under the table, one of her long legs brushed against mine. She smiled when I arched a brow at her. "It's got to be super boring over there. You missed us."

I didn't respond.

"Actually, I think they're talking about the party you're having on Friday." Andrew shoved a fork full of mashed potatoes into his mouth. "Thanks for the invite, ass."

My lips curled up on one side. "You're welcome."

"It's not his party. It's Dee's." Ash moved again, and this time I felt her foot brush against my calf. "But we're invited. I'm not going to miss the first-ever party at your house, not with your *parents* not in town."

Since others were at the table, I saw right through most of what she was saying. I shifted my leg, moving it away from her. "Yeah. It's going to be awesome."

Her eyes narrowed.

Andrew leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Do you think a party is a good idea?"

"Nope." I bit into the gravy-covered steak. Tasted like flour and sawdust, sort of like Kat's pancakes.

"And you're okay with it?"

I sighed, forcing myself to eat the crap. "Not really."

Andrew started to say something, but high-pitched laughter from the table caught his attention. He glanced over my shoulder and I looked behind me. It was a girl—a cheerleader, I think. Kimmy?

Kami? Tammy? No clue.

"She's such a slut," the girl said, wrinkling her nose. "She went after Simon."

I had a really bad feeling about this conversation.

The guy sitting next to her, one of the football players, grinned. "From what Simon says, Katy knows how to use her mouth. Maybe you should take some lessons from her."

My vision damn near turned red as the girl responded angrily. Hands fisting, I started to turn around and pick up one of them, if not both of them, and throw them into the wall.

Ash put her hand on my arm and spoke with her voice low. "Don't. You need to not do whatever it is you're planning to do."

"I'm not planning to do anything," I gritted out. What in the actual hell was Simon saying about Kat? It was total bullshit.

Ash jumped in, distracting me before I could say anything. "Leave it alone," she warned. "It's just people being dumb."

More like people just being seconds away from being blasted into next week. Forcing myself to turn back around, I promised that I would so deal with *that* shit later.

Her bright blue eyes fastened on her brother. "Anyway," she said, tipping her chin. "Have you heard from *Uncle* Lane or *Uncle* Vaughn recently?"

My brows lifted and I almost choked on my spit. Uncle Lane and Uncle Vaughn? Shit. That was actually almost funny, except... "Come to think of it, no, I haven't heard from either of them."

"Neither have we." Andrew had finished off his potatoes and was eyeing mine. They may have been instant and tasted like paste, but I'd shank him if he reached for them. "Kind of strange, isn't it?"

Yeah, that was strange. Our DOD babysitters hadn't gone longer than two weeks without checking in, and it had been... Shit, how long had it been since I'd last seen one of them? A while. Their absence, now that I thought about it, didn't sit very well, especially after the light show that had gone down on Halloween.

"All right, I'm out." Ash stood, leaving her plate on the table. "See you losers later."

I had no idea where she was going, but my mind was whirling around the officers' absence. Normally the DOD would be all up in our business after something like that, and all I'd seen was the black tinted-out Expedition at the hospital when...when Kat had been there.

I glanced over at Kat's table, and all thoughts of the DOD dropped to the wayside. My hand tightened around the plastic fork.

Some guy was sitting next to Kat. No—wait. I'd seen him before. He was the guy I'd almost run over in the hallway Friday. Kat knew him? The guy smiled at something she said. Kat tipped her head back. Strands of long dark hair fell back over her shoulders as she laughed.

The plastic fork snapped in my hand, startling me.

"Whoa." Andrew eyed me. "You're not going to slam my face into the table again, are you?"

"Do you know who that is?" I asked instead.

"Who?"

I jerked my chin over at the table. "That guy."

Frowning, Andrew looked over his shoulder. "The guy sitting next to Katy?"

"Yeah." I let the shattered pieces of the fork fall to the table.

Andrew turned around, facing me. "I have no idea, man. He must be new."

The guy laughed this time and then he leaned in against Kat, bumping her shoulder with his like he was her new best friend.

What. In. The. Hell.

Something in my chest fisted. This bitter, acidic sensation shot through my veins as I watched Kat and this guy. I didn't know what it was, couldn't put a name to it, but I didn't like it. Not one bit.

I shouldn't even be paying attention to this. The whole thing with the absentee DOD was far more important. Should be top freaking priority, but I couldn't stop staring at their table. Every time this asshole laughed or Kat smiled, I wanted to walk over there and toss the dude through one of the glass windows. Probably would get into some trouble over that, but I was seriously debating it. There was a damn near primal urge to claim what was—

Kat looked over at my table, and even though there was a sea of bodies between us, our gazes connected. The fisting in my chest increased. I don't know how long we stared at each other, but the only thing that broke it was the warning bell ringing overhead, signaling the end of lunch.

Standing up quickly, she picked up her plate and started to reach for her bag. The guy beat her to it. Picking it up off the floor, he draped the strap over her shoulder. Blood roared in my ears.

"Yo. Dude." Andrew leaned across the table and clamped his hand on my shoulder. My head swung sharply in his direction. His voice was low. "Your eyes."

I blinked, forcing the whitish tint from my vision as I pulled back from Andrew. Rising to my feet, I looked over at the table. Kat was gone. So was the guy. And that sour feeling was burning a hole right through my gut.

I waited for Dee outside her last class. She stepped out, swinging her bag over her shoulder. Spotting me, she raised her dark brows. "Whatcha doing here?"

Pushing off the wall, I fell in step beside her. "Maybe I just wanted to walk my sister to her locker."

Dee snorted. "Yeah. Okay. And I'm not going to my locker. Don't need to."

"Perfect." Having already dropped my stuff off at mine, I shoved my hands in the pockets of my jeans. "What are you doing now?"

"Not sure. Might go see Adam. Might go home." Stepping sideways to avoid knocking into a smaller boy, I carefully edged past the crowd. It was a mass exodus. "You're not hanging out with Kat?"

"Uh." She focused straight ahead, her eyes wide. "No."

I wet my lips as we hit the double doors. I opened them with my elbow, letting Dee pass through. "And why is that? You two not BFFs anymore?"

Her lips pursed. "I think she's busy today."

A boulder formed in my stomach. "Kat busy? Doing what?"

"You say that like she doesn't have a life," she said, sliding me a pinched look as we left the sidewalk and cut across the grass toward the parking lot.

I started to defend myself and then realized that I kind of did sound like that. "Sorry," I muttered. "I just meant that she's usually with you."

"Well, you do know she has other friends, like Carissa and Lesa."

Relief pecked through me as a gust of cold wind smacked into us. "Is she with them?"

"No." Dee sighed as she stopped at her Jetta. Opening the car door, she threw her bag in and faced me. "I'm not even sure why I'm telling you this, because I have a feeling you're not going to be happy, but she went with someone to Smoke Hole diner."

And all the relief was gone in an instant. "With that guy from lunch?"

Dee nodded, and she exhaled loudly. "And he's coming to the party Friday night."

I stared at her. "What in the actual fu—?"

"I didn't really invite him. The girls did, and you know, it's not a big deal. He is actually pretty nice and he's normal," she said, meeting my eyes. "And I think Kat needs—"

"She doesn't need normal," I snapped.

Her emerald eyes brightened. "Then what does she need, Daemon?"

Me.

I wanted to shout that from the top of Spruce Knob, scream it in everyone's face. Not weird or anything. But I was pissed. Stepping around Dee, I left her standing there and headed toward my car. I got in behind the wheel and cranked the engine.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I headed toward the house. I wasn't going to the diner. It would be messed up even for me to do that. Once I hit the highway, I reached into my pocket and dug out my cell phone. Tapping on the screen, I hit the contacts and started scrolling until I found the contact I was looking for.

Kitten.

I started to hit her name, but cursed under my breath. Shoving the phone back in my pocket, I focused on the road ahead. I should go see Matt and ask if he'd heard from *Uncle* DOD recently. That was important.

Except once I got all the way home, I sat in the driveway for a damn eternity and then peeled out of it. I wasn't even kidding myself. I knew where I was going. I was that messed up. But it was like I had to see it for myself that she was really at a diner with some ass who just waltzed into town.

I pulled into the parking lot of Smoke Hole and killed the engine. Seconds away from opening the car door, having no idea what I was doing, I felt the warm shiver along the back of my neck. My gaze cut across the parking lot and I saw them standing under a tree talking. Branches shook above them, scattering dried leaves. I reached back, rubbing my hand along the nape of my neck. If I felt her, didn't she—

The guy leaned toward her just as a loud *crack* echoed through the parking lot. A thick, skull-crushing branch broke free, spiraling down on them. I was out of the car, my heart dropping and my eyes never leaving them. If that branch hit Kat, it would...

Kat shot toward the guy and a rush of power rippled over the parking lot, lifting the hairs along my arms, and the branch.

It stopped.

It froze, suspended in midair.

And I hadn't done it.

CHAPTER 8

The branch hung as if tethered by an invisible string until the guy stepped aside. Crashing to the pavement, the branch cracked the cement.

"Wow..." I heard the guy say. "That would've killed me." He stepped toward Kat, reaching out to her. "Katy...it's okay." The guy looked up, spotting me. He stopped moving.

Shock and anger warred inside me as I wrapped my hand around her upper arm. "Kat."

Her shoulders sagged as she turned to me, lowering her head. Long dark strands fell forward, shielding her face. "Sorry," she whispered.

Pressure clamped on my chest.

"Is she okay?" the guy asked, sounding worried. "The branch—"

"Yes. She's fine. The falling branch scared her," I gritted out. "That's all."

The guy stared at us. "But—"

"See you later." I didn't have time for this. Turning Kat, I walked her back toward her car. "Are you okay?"

Kat stared straight ahead and nodded. She didn't speak as I gently pried the car keys from her fingers. I heard the guy call out her name, but it didn't seem like she heard him. I opened the car door.

"Get in," I said quietly.

Surprisingly, Kat obeyed me without a fight. She slipped into the car, and I closed the door behind her. Sparing the guy a brief glance, I started around the front of the car. He was still standing there, staring at us. My jaw clenched as I got in her car. Thoughts raced at a rapid clip. I didn't stop that branch. That guy sure as hell wasn't Luxen. That left one person.

Kat.

It was impossible. Stopping the branch was something only a Luxen could do. An Arum might've pulled something like that off if it had recently fed, but Kat...Kat was human.

Was.

Dammit.

The inside of her car smelled like damn peaches. She turned wide gray eyes on me and when she spoke, her voice was hoarse. "How...how are you here?"

I pulled out of the parking spot. "I was driving around. I'll have Dee and Adam get my car."

Kat looked at the passenger window, at that boy. A shudder rocked her. "Daemon..."

My jaw worked as I waited for traffic to clear so I could pull out. Obviously, she wasn't too shocked by what had gone down, and that meant one thing. Kat was keeping a whole lot from me. There was so much wrong with this situation that I barely knew where to start.

"You'll pretend like nothing happened," I said. "If he brings it up, you'll tell him that he moved out of the way. If he even suggests that you...that you stopped that branch, you laugh it off."

"I need to act like you did in the beginning?" she asked.

I nodded curtly and pulled out onto the road. "What just happened back there never happened. Do you understand me?"

Kat nodded.

Silence ticked away the minutes as I drove. Neither of us spoke on the way back to her house. My knuckles ached from how tightly I was gripping the steering wheel. I had to ease off so I didn't damage it. I used the time to gather my thoughts and figure out what the hell happened and how we were going to deal with this.

I didn't speak until I parked the car in her driveway and slipped the keys out of the ignition. Sitting back, I looked at her. "We need to talk. And you need to be honest with me. You don't seem surprised you just did that."

Kat nodded.

Anger rolled off me. I opened my mouth, about to demand why she hadn't come to me with something so damn important, but I shut it and shook my head. We climbed out of the car and headed into her empty house, warmed by the central heat kicked on high.

Kat sat in the recliner and wrapped her arms around herself. "I was planning on telling you."

"You were?" I stood in front of her, hands clenching and unclenching at my sides. "When, exactly? Before or after you did something that puts you at risk?"

She flinched. "I didn't plan on this happening! All I wanted was to have a normal afternoon with a boy—"

"With a boy?" I spat, anger flaring.

"Yes, with a normal boy!" She drew in a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I did plan on coming to you tonight, but Blake asked me to grab something to eat with him, and I just wanted one freaking afternoon with someone like me."

Blake? That was his name? Forget that. I frowned. "You have friends who are normal, Kat."

"It's not the same thing!"

Understanding hit me. She didn't want normal *friends*. She wanted a normal *guy*. Yeah, that stung like a bitch. "Tell me what's been happening."

Her eyes met mine, and then her gaze dipped to her hands. "I think I did get alien cooties, because I've been moving things...without touching them. Today, I opened the door to Mr. Garrison's classroom without touching it. He seemed to think it was a drafty hallway."

Tension brewed inside me. "How often has this been happening?"

"On and off for around a week. The first time it was my locker door, but I thought it was a fluke, so I didn't say anything. Then I thought about wanting a glass of tea, and the glass flew out of the cabinet and the tea started pouring itself in the fridge. The shower turned itself on, doors opened, and a couple of times, clothes flew from my closet." She sighed. "My room was a mess."

A snicker escaped. "Nice."

Her hands balled into fists. "How can you think this is funny? Look at what happened today! I didn't mean to stop the branch! I mean, I didn't want it to hit him, but I didn't consciously stop the damn thing. The whole healing-me thing—it *changed* me, Daemon. If you haven't guessed it yet, I couldn't move things before. And I don't know what's wrong with me. I get a splitting headache and feel exhausted afterward. What if I'm dying or something?"

Dying?

I moved toward her, sitting down on the arm of the chair. Kat shrank back, plastering herself against the chair. "Why do you have to move so fast?" she demanded. "It's...wrong."

"Sorry, Kitten. For us, moving fast is natural. It's actually more effort to slow down and appear 'normal,' as you put it." I paused and then spoke the truth. "I guess I just forget I have to pretend around you."

She winced and looked away. Her mouth moved, but there were no words spoken out loud. I sighed as I resisted the urge to touch her. "You're not dying."

"How do you know?" Kat lifted her gaze to mine.

"Because I'd never let that happen," I promised.

Her breath caught. "What if I'm turning into an alien?"

Turning into an alien? I wanted to laugh, but managed to stop myself. "I don't know if that's possible."

"Moving stuff with my mind shouldn't be possible."

Good point. "Why didn't you tell me when this first happened?"

"I don't know," she admitted quietly. "I should've. I don't want to put you guys at risk. I swear I'm not doing it on purpose."

Her silence on what was happening was a product of her trying to protect us—Dee. Me. And she feared that I'd think she was doing this on purpose? Damn. That got me in the feels. Straight sucker punch. My vision changed, washing the room in a whitish light. "I know you aren't doing anything on purpose. I wouldn't have thought that."

Her chest rose sharply as I held her gaze. A moment passed and I said, "I don't know if it was a product of my healing you those times or when you connected with us during Baruck's attack. Either way, it's obvious that you're using some of my abilities. I've never heard of this happening before."

"Never?" she whispered.

"We don't heal humans." I pursed my lips, thinking back to the time when Dawson had come home, blood on his torn clothing. It hadn't been his. Bethany. Had something happened to Bethany and he'd healed her? This wasn't the first time I'd wondered about this, but what if he had? Did it matter in the end? I shook my head. "I've always thought it had something to do with exposing our abilities, but now I'm wondering if it's more than that. If the real reason is because we...change humans."

She swallowed. "So I am turning into an alien?"

My lips twitched. "Kitten..."

"How do we stop this?"

I had no idea, and it wasn't like I could ask someone, but an idea occurred to me. Our hearts were beating at the same rate. That was established. She was somehow using some of my abilities. Just how connected were we? I stood. "I want to try something, okay?"

Her brows rose. "Okay."

Closing my eyes, I let myself shed my human form. A few seconds later, I was in full Luxen mode, casting the room in a white-red light. I reached out to her mentally. *Say something to me*.

She glanced around the room. "Uh, hi?"

I chuckled. Not aloud. Say something to me, but not out loud. Like what happened in the clearing. You spoke to me then.

Her eyes widened at that. It was something neither of us talked about it. Then again, we rarely had moments of talking. We were either arguing...or kissing. A few moments passed, and then I heard her voice in my thoughts, soft and sweet.

Your light is really pretty, but it's blinding me.

I gasped. There was no stopping that. *We can still hear each other*. I shifted back into my human form, uneasy. "So my light was blinding you, huh?"

"Yeah, it was." She fiddled with the chain around her neck. "Am I glowing now?"

It usually happened when we went into our true form, leaving a very faint trace behind, almost unnoticeable, but there was nothing around her. Oh man. "No."

"Why could I still hear you?" she asked. "You act like I shouldn't."

"You shouldn't, but we're still connected."

"Well, how do we get unconnected?"

"That's a good question." Lifting my arms, I stretched as I glanced around the room. My brows rose. "You have books everywhere, Kitten."

"That's really not important right now."

I stretched out a hand, wanting to distract her for a few moments. I could feel how fast her heart was racing. A book flew off the arm of the couch and into my hand. Turning it over, I quickly read the back. "His touch kills? Really, what is this stuff you're reading?"

She shot from the chair, snatching the book away and holding it close to her chest. "Shut up. I love this book."

"Uh-huh," I murmured.

"Okay, back to the important stuff. And stop touching my books." She placed it back where I'd found it. "What are we going to do?"

I watched her. "I'll figure out what is happening with you. Just give me some time."

She nodded, worrying her lower lip. "You do realize this whole thing is why you..."

I arched a brow, waiting for her to say what I already knew she was going to say.

"It's why you suddenly like me," she finished.

"I'm pretty sure I liked you before this, Kitten."

"Well, you had one hell of a way of showing it."

"True," I admitted. "And I've already said I'm sorry for the way I treated you." I squared my shoulders. "I always liked you. From the moment you first flipped me off."

"But you didn't start to want to spend time with me until after the first attack, when you healed me. Maybe we were already starting to, like...morph together or whatever."

I frowned. "What is it with you? It's like you need to convince yourself I can't possibly like you. Does doing that make it easier to tell yourself you don't have feelings for me?"

"You treated me like a redheaded stepchild for months. I'm sorry if I have a hard time believing that whatever you feel is real." She sat on the couch. "And it has nothing to do with what I feel."

My shoulders tensed as I thought back to that guy. "Do you like that guy you were with?"

"Blake? I don't know. He's nice."

"He was sitting with you today at lunch."

She arched a brow. "Because there was an open seat and it's a free world where people can pick where they want to sit."

"There were other seats open. He could've sat anywhere else in the cafeteria."

Kat didn't respond immediately. "He's in my bio class. Maybe he just felt comfortable with me, because we're both sort of new."

Oh, I did not like the sound of this. She was willing to accept that some strange dude was simply comfortable around her while she thought there were a million nefarious reasons as to why I was interested in her. What the hell? "He kept staring at you. And obviously he wanted to spend time with you outside of school."

"Maybe he likes me," she said, shrugging. "Lesa invited him to the party on Friday."

A muscle spasmed along my jaw. "I don't think you should be hanging around him until we know

what's up with you moving stuff." Part of that was actually a valid statement, but I could admit to myself I was totally using that as a perfect excuse to cut the douche bag out of the picture. "You doing that thing with the branch was only one instance. We can't have a repeat of that."

"What? I'm not supposed to date or hang out with anyone now?"

I smiled. "Anyone human, yes."

"Whatever." Kat stood, and a chunk of hair fell across her cheek. "This is a stupid conversation. I'm not dating anyone anyway, but if I were, I wouldn't stop just because you said so."

"You wouldn't?" I caught that damn piece of hair and tucked it back behind her ear. "We'll just have to see about that."

She stepped sideways, keeping distance between us. "There's nothing to see."

Challenge filled my entire being. "If you say so, Kitten."

Folding her arms across her chest, she faced me. "This isn't a game."

"I know, but if it were, I'd win." I moved around the room and then stopped. I watched her grab hold of her hair and start twisting it nervously. She was stressed. Understandable. I had done something to her, maybe irrevocably, like I had feared when she had gotten sick. For some reason, as I watched her, I thought about what I heard at lunch. My hands closed into fists. The last thing she needed to worry about was the shit Simon was spewing about her.

"By the way," I said. "I've heard what Simon has been saying."

Pink swept over her face. "Yeah, he's being a douche. I think it's his friends. He actually apologized to me, and then when his friends showed up, he told them I was trying to get with him."

My eyes narrowed. "That's not okay."

"It's no big deal," she said, lowering her gaze.

"Maybe not to you, but it is to me." I paused, my shoulders squaring. "I'll take care of it."

Kat plopped down on the couch, her back to me. "You always do that, don't you?"

"Do what?"

One shoulder rose. "Take care of things."

I drifted toward the couch quietly.

She peeked at me through her lashes. "You took care of things after...after Dawson. You took care of things with me—before and after I found out the truth. And now? You're going to do it again."

"I...I don't look at it that way."

"Of course you don't." There wasn't an ounce of rancor in her tone. Her brow wrinkled as she opened her hands and flipped them palms up. She stared at them. "It's just got to be a lot of responsibility."

My mouth was open and wordless.

Slowly, she lifted her gaze to mine as her fingers closed, pressing into her palm. "I just...I know you don't need this—whatever this is with me—and I'm—"

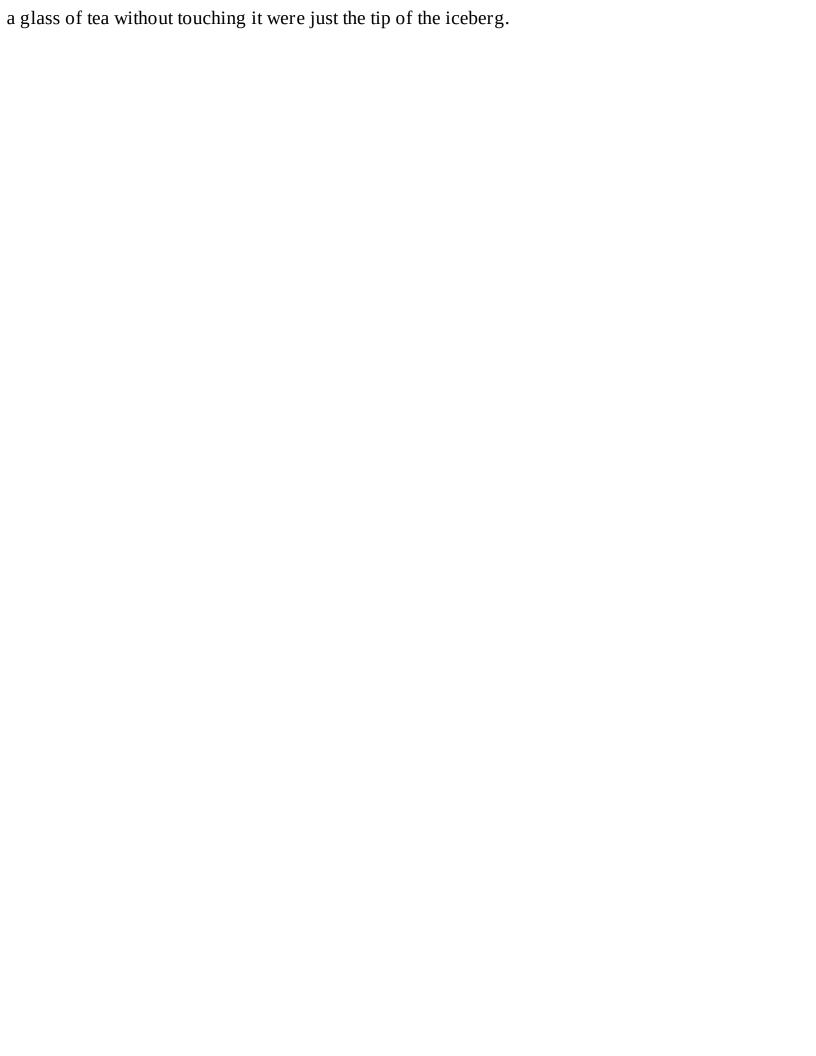
"Don't apologize," I bit out harshly. Her eyes widened. "You haven't done anything wrong, Kat. Nothing. You saved Dee's life. You saved *my* life, and in return, I've done...I don't even know what I've done to you."

Her head tilted to the side. "You didn't do it on purpose."

"Does my lack of intent matter?" I asked her, a hundred percent serious.

Thick lashes lowered, shielding her beautiful gray eyes. "I guess not, but...but I know you'll help me."

That was true. I wanted to help her—I *would* help her, but most importantly, I wanted Kat to trust me. Now, more than ever, she needed to, because I had a feeling that stopping the branch and moving



CHAPTER 9

Unable to sleep most of the night, I patrolled the county until early morning. I wasn't able to shut my mind down. I needed to figure out what was going on with Kat, but it wasn't like I could ask around without rousing suspicion or like I could Google it.

We were on our own with this.

I was restless during trig class, wholly aware of Kat. She didn't seem to be faring much better. Shifting a lot in her seat. Messing with her hair. About halfway through class, I realized that she was spending a lot of time staring at the back of Simon's head.

And the asshole was well aware of it, too.

Just below his cropped hair, his neck was beet red. Every so often, he'd glanced over his shoulder at Kat and then at me, which was not smart, because it reminded me that he was also a problem that needed to be dealt with—a much easier problem than the other ones we faced.

The muscles under the gray shirt Simon wore tensed as he looked over his shoulder at Kat once more before facing the front of the classroom. A second later, Simon's heavy textbook lifted off the desk and smacked Simon right in the face.

My lips parted as I swallowed a laugh as Kat jerked back in her seat. What did she just do? Simon jumped out of his seat and stared down at the book now resting on the floor like it was a venomous snake.

"Mr. Cutters, is there something you would like to share with the class?" our teacher asked in a tired, bored voice.

"W-what?" Simon stuttered. He looked around frantically, and then his eyes settled on the book. "No, I knocked my book off the desk. Sorry."

The teacher let out a loud sigh. "Well, then pick it up."

Scattered laughter followed Simon's jerky movement as he picked up the book and took his seat. I waited until the teacher turned back to the chalkboard before I poked Kat with the pen. She twisted around.

"What was that?" I whispered, struggling to keep a straight face. "Very bad kitty..."

A pretty flush cascaded over her cheeks as she bit down on her lip, drawing my attention and making me think of other very bad but fun things. Things that I really shouldn't be thinking about right now. Especially considering the fact that Kat just tapped into whatever ability she had brewing inside of her in a very public place. Granted, I'd done it myself, but I knew how to use my power. Kat didn't.

We were going to have to talk about that.

Kat's lips formed a sheepish grin. She turned back around, the edges of her hair teasing the top of her chair. Took no amount of imagination to remember how soft her hair felt between my fingers.

Like silk.

Sitting back in my chair, I swallowed a groan. Damn. This was going to be a long day.

I ended up catching up with Kat after school. That damn human boy had been her at ass at lunch. I waited for her at her locker, sort of surprised that she wasn't giving me crap about being there. Baby steps in the right direction?

Holding the door open for her, we stepped out into the chilled air. She started to swing her bag over her shoulder, but I reached between us and took the bag from her, carrying it.

Kat arched a brow at me. "Are you a gentleman today?"

"I am many surprising things."

"Uh-huh."

My lips quirked up. We hit the parking lot, and not surprisingly, she was in the back again. Walking side by side, I purposely slowed my stride. "Did that boy say anything today?"

"That boy?" Her nose did that wrinkle thing as she glanced up at me. "Oh, you mean Blake?"

"Whatever," I muttered, eyeing a group of guys huddled behind a pickup. Their camo baseball hats doing an awesome job at blending in. "Did he say anything about what happened at the diner last night?"

"No. Not really." She folded her arms around her waist as a strong gust of wind whipped through the cars. "I mean, I tried to feel him out about it, you know? Apologized for freaking out about the branch falling, and he didn't seem too interested in it. He thought..."

"Thought what?" We'd reached her car.

Kat shook her head as she unfolded her arms and reached out for her bag. "He didn't think anything about it." Taking the bag from me, she dug out her keys. "That's good, right?"

"Yeah, but I wish you hadn't brought it up."

She frowned as she opened the car door. "I was just trying to see if we had a problem."

"I get that." I watched her toss her bag in. "But it's best—"

"I know. Stay away from him. Blah." She climbed into the car and reached for the door. I caught it before she could shut it on me. A long-suffering sigh radiated from her. "I need to get going."

"Why? Meeting up with your new friend?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Actually, no. Dee is coming over. We're hanging out."

"Oh. Well then." I smiled broadly and she rolled her eyes. "Have fun."

"Uh-huh," she muttered. "Good-bye, Daemon."

Letting go of the car door, I stepped back and I didn't move until Kat backed out of the parking lot and drove off. The back right tire looked like it needed air. Hadn't I told her that already? Turning around, I scanned the parking lot, my gaze settling on the group of guys at the back of the pickup. A few of them broke apart, and I was able to see what was lying on the bed of the truck.

A dead doe.

My lip curled in distaste. Jesus. The rusty-looking marks along the bed showed that the kill must've been recent. Was it even hunting season yet? One of the guys started away from the truck, a big dude named Billy Crump. One of Simon's friends.

"Y'all going to Rudy's tonight?" he said, walking backward. "Me and Simon will kick your asses if

not."

Rudy's was an old pool hall down near Smoke Hole. It used to be a bar, but at some point, it lost its liquor license and was now a pretty shitty place that didn't have much more than pool tables and salmonella. That's where Simon would be tonight? Perfect.

I smiled as I strolled out to the middle of the parking lot, shoving my hands into the pockets of my jeans as Billy neared me.

Wariness seeped from him as he passed me, lifting his chin in greeting. "Hey, man."

I nodded, half tempted to clap him on the back. He just gave me the info I needed to take care of one of my problems.

Dee was gone by the time I got home, having stopped at the grocery store to pick up a few things. Night was creeping in, earlier and earlier each day. The light in Kat's front room was on, and I pictured my sister and her in there, nerding out about books.

My lips tipped up at the corners as I put the milk and eggs in the fridge, along with the five packs of bacon. They'd be gone by Sunday.

And it was Thursday.

There was a bunch of crap on the counter and in the pantry for the party tomorrow night. Somehow, and I'm assuming with a smile, Dee had procured a case of liquor. I shook my head as I walked out of the kitchen. I rounded the stairs and started to head up. There was a stack of paper lanterns in the guest room that Dee had ordered for the party that needed to be moved downstairs. Might as well—

I felt the presence of one of my own a second before there was a knock on the front door. Pivoting around, I moved to the door, half expecting to find one of the Thompsons or Matt.

It was neither.

Opening the door, I swallowed a ripe curse as I was eye to eye with an Elder. Luckily, it wasn't Ethan.

Lydia stood in front of me with barely a trace of a smile. She was around Ethan's age. Somewhere in her late forties, maybe early fifties. Then again, I wasn't sure how old Ethan was. Either way, she was beautiful, like all Luxen were, with dark skin and black hair that reached her waist. She had a son either my age or a year younger, but he stayed in the colony, like most of the ones our age, homeschooled and completely under the watchful "care" of the Elders.

I couldn't remember the last time Lydia had paid us a visit.

"May I come in?" she asked, her voice slightly accented. With her dark coloring, the luminous blue eyes were striking...and a bit unnerving. "Not like you can really say no."

I snorted and stepped aside. "Then why did you ask?"

"Because I like to be polite." She walked in, smoothing her hands along her denim jeans. "Is that not the human thing to do?"

Closing the door, I faced her. "And when have you ever been worried about doing the human thing?"

Lydia laughed softly. "More than you apparently believe. All of us, even if we reside within the colony, must blend in. It is the way."

Watching her with a wary gaze, I folded my arms. Out of all the Elders, I actually liked Lydia. When Dawson...when he died, she was one of the few Elders who appeared to care, but I wasn't in the mood for a whole ton of BS. I had stupid paper lanterns to move and a dumbass jock named Simon to visit. "Why are you here, Lydia?"

She walked into the living room and sat on the couch. Guessed she wasn't leaving anytime soon.

Hooking one knee over the other, she rested her joined hands in her lap. "You're of age, Daemon. It's time we talked about that."

Oh for the love of all the stars in the sky. I rolled my eyes. "That is not something I want to talk about."

"Gee, and here I thought you were bursting at the seams in excitement," she replied drily.

I smirked as I leaned against the wall. Thank God Dee wasn't here, because she'd also be on the receiving end of this conversation.

"Ethan worries that you aren't planning to mate," she continued, looking me dead on and having no problem getting all up in my business. "Especially since it doesn't appear that you plan to be with Ashlee Thompson."

Resisting the urge to bang my head, I forced a deep breath instead. "Ash and I are just going to be friends."

Lydia nodded. "There's nothing wrong with that. We have many females who are coming of age soon or—"

"Don't," I ordered softly. "I'm not having this conversation with you or any Elder. I have no plans to mate anytime in the near future, and yes, I get how important it is. We need babies and all that, but it's not on my calendar."

A single dark eyebrow rose, and a moment passed. "You realize if you go too long without mating, you face being cast out."

Lifting my hand, I scratched my cheek with my middle finger.

The Elder let out a genuine-sounding laugh. "You're lucky that I like you, Daemon."

That was probably true.

"Ethan wanted to come check in on you, especially after that fight you had with the Arum over Halloween, but I told him I would come in his place." She winked. "You owe me."

A grin tugged at my lips. "That I do."

Unhooking her knee, she scooted forward on the couch and stared up at me. "Okay. Let's drop the whole mating thing. How have you been, Daemon? I haven't seen you in a while, or your sister."

There was a part of me that wanted to end this conversation now, but I did like Lydia. Walking over to the chair near the couch, I sat down. "I'm doing...I'm doing good. So is Dee. We..." I inhaled deeply. "We miss Dawson."

"Of course." She smiled sadly as she reached over, patting my knee. "It doesn't get easier when you lose someone you love. You just get used to it."

Lydia would know. An Arum killed her husband a few years back. Lydia chattered for a while, and when she got up to leave, I decided to take a strategic risk. I trusted her, well, more than I trusted the rest of the Elders or those within the colony.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked.

Her eyes lit up with interest. "Ask away."

"I've been wondering about something," I started, searching my mind for a plausible excuse to ask this sort of question, and luckily stumbled across something kind of believable. "When those Arum were around, they kept going after some of the humans." Which wasn't really a lie. "We know that when they feed off humans, it doesn't do anything for them, but what if they went after a human we've been around?"

Her slender brows knit. "Do you mean if we've left a trace on the human? Would they then be able to feed off them?" When I nodded, she shook her head. "I wouldn't think so. I mean, even if we leave a trace behind on them, they don't have our abilities."

"True," I murmured, rubbing my fingers under my mouth. "I guess it's a good thing if a human was repeatedly exposed to a trace that it doesn't do anything to them."

Her gaze sharpened. "Yes, it is a good thing. If the humans became like us, then we wouldn't have the upper hand, now would we?"

I thought it was kind of odd thinking we actually had the upper hand when the DOD controlled everything we did, but whatever. "Well, we can't make humans like us, so there's nothing to worry about then. I guess those Arum were just...playing with their snacks."

Lydia stared at me a moment. "May I be frank with you, Daemon?"

Uh-oh. "Yeah."

She pressed her lips together in a flat line and then nodded, as if she was preparing herself. "I know you're not going to want to hear this, and I don't expect you to either confirm or deny it, but you do realize we were keeping a close eye on your brother."

I stilled. Didn't even breathe.

"He was quite close to that human girl he...he died with. Now you know, I have no problems with our kind being friends with humans. I am not nearly as strict as some of the others," she continued, expression open. "But many of the Elders suspected that your brother crossed the line with that girl."

I didn't ask what this had to do with what I was asking, because deep in my bones, I knew it had everything to do with it.

"There's a reason why we keep a certain distance between us and humans," Lydia went on. "Arum come looking for us and innocent humans are caught in the cross fire, but it's...it's more than that, Daemon." She exhaled softly. "And that's all you need to know."

My jaw flexed. More than that? As I met her gaze, I knew there was something she wasn't telling me, something probably along the lines of what was happening to Kat, but if I pushed it, she could get suspicious, and as much as I liked her, I knew she would go to the rest of the Elders if she thought I'd done something unforgivable, and I...

I would protect Kat if it came down to it.

Lydia left not too long after that, just before Dee returned home. It was close to nine when I left in my car, heading toward Smoke Hole, the conversation with Lydia playing over and over. What did I gain from it? Nothing much other than the fact that the Elders, or at least some of them, knew what could happen to a human. It didn't take a leap of logic to figure out that was what she was hinting at, but all of that brought me back to a different question, one that had nothing to do with what was happening with Kat.

Why had she brought up Dawson and Bethany?

Did the Elders know just how far their relationship had progressed? And did they somehow suspect that something major had gone down between Bethany and Dawson? Something like what had happened between Kat and me? Had Dawson healed Bethany? If so, was that what had drawn the Arum to them the night they'd gone to the movies? Or had the Arum just spotted Dawson?

All I had was more questions than answers, which was pretty typical.

I drove past Smoke Hole and pulled into the near-empty parking lot of Rudy's. Killing the engine, I leaned back in my seat and I waited.

Simon didn't disappoint.

An hour later, he strolled out of the pool hall, heading toward a truck jacked up on four oversize tires. He was hunched down in a heavy jacket, chin tucked in. I opened my car door and slipped out. Moving as quietly as a ghost, I sneaked up behind him.

"Hey, Simon."

He spun around, stumbling back a step. "Jesus," he grunted. "Where in the hell did you come from?"

I prowled forward, smiling when he backed up. "That doesn't matter. I need to talk to you, bud."

Under the bright floodlight from the pool hall, blood drained, inch by glorious freaking inch, from his face. "A-About what?"

"Oh, I think you know what we need to chat about."

His eyes widened. "I d-don't know."

"Kat." I said her name, and he stiffened. "I know what you've been saying about her, and boy, I thought you were smarter than that. What did I tell you last time?"

He opened his mouth, gaping like a belly-up fish. No words.

"I told you not to look in her direction, to not even speak of her, and then you go, telling people you hooked up with her? Got half the school believing that she would even stoop to your level?"

Simon's hands flew up. "I—"

Cocking back my arm, I planted my fist in his jaw, knocking him flat on his back. "You know what? I've got zero fucks to give when it comes to anything you've got to say." Bending down, I grabbed hold of his stupid coat and hauled his ass back up. Blood trickled off his split lip. "If you say one more thing about Kat, do you know what's going to happen?"

I pulled him in toward me, lifting him onto the tips of his toes. Fear filled his eyes, and the sudden stench of urine hit the air. I glanced down, seeing the wet spot spread along his leg. I smirked. "Yeah, I think you get the message."

Letting go, I kindly helped his face into the side of his truck, and when he hit the ground for a second time, I waved good-bye with my middle finger.

One problem down.

A shitload more to fix.

CHAPTER 10

It was weird that with everything happening with Kat, I spent several hours after school on Friday stringing up about a million paper lanterns. Moving the furniture around took Dee and me no time. Flick of the wrist, and the tables were lined up against the wall. She'd spent a small fortune on pumpkin and spice candles, and the house smelled like autumn threw up all over it.

Dee was buzzing around happily, excitement humming through her, and I really hoped for her sake that nothing crazy happened tonight. It wasn't like we couldn't control ourselves, but other than Kat and...and Bethany, we didn't have humans in our home. I really didn't want a huge bunch of humans in it now, and Lydia or another Elder was probably going to pay us yet another visit after this weekend, but Dee wanted this.

So I wanted it for her.

Adam and a couple others had started to arrive by the time I made it upstairs and took a quick shower. As I pulled on a pair of jeans I'd snagged out of the clothes basket, I could hear the hum of voices and laughter down below.

Tonight was going to be a long night.

Scrubbing a towel through my wet hair, I opened the bathroom door and stepped out. My bedroom was so not like how I'd left it. Mainly the big change was the fact that it wasn't empty.

Ash was leaning against my headboard, her legs stretched out in front of her, crossed at the ankles. And that was a whole lot of leg. Her dress was really just an oversize shirt. Not that I was complaining. It was a nice view.

But she didn't belong in my bedroom, on my bed.

Sighing, I tossed the towel over the back of my desk chair. "What are you doing in here, Ash?"

One shoulder rose as her bright blue gaze roamed over my bare chest and then lower. Not like she hadn't seen any of this before. "I wanted to see if you needed help."

My lips twitched as I walked over to my closet. "With what?"

"Anything you might need."

I raised a brow as I pulled an old screen T-shirt off the floor. Looked clean. "There's nothing I need." To clarify, nothing that I needed was in this room. "But thanks for the—"

As I turned around, Ash was off that bed and right in front of me. She snatched the shirt from my hand and tossed it over her head. I started to frown, but she planted both hands on my chest and pushed —pushed hard. My back hit the wall.

Ash was strong, damn strong, and if you ever forgot that, you'd probably end up with your ass kicked from here to Maryland.

Or manhandled.

Ha.

"I've missed you," she said, her gaze following the path of her hands, which were getting awful close to the button on my jeans. "Well, I've missed certain parts of you, and I was thinking since you're here and I'm here, we could make this party a bit more..." She bit down on her lower lip as she peered up at me through her lashes. "Interesting."

"Ash..." I grabbed her wrists, pulling her hands away from me. She resisted, but as strong as she was, I was stronger. Her eyes narrowed as her chin lifted. "As tantalizing as that offer is, and it really is..." I said, and that was truth. I was a male, and Ash was unbelievably hot, and I also knew exactly what this girl had to offer, and it was a lot. "But I'm going to have to pass."

She leaned in, her legs brushing mine. "Really?"

"Really." Gently, I guided her back a few feet and then sidestepped her. Bending down, I grabbed my shirt off the floor and tugged it on over my head.

Ash watched me for a moment and then laughed. "Well, shit, I just lost a bet."

Straightening the hem of my shirt, I frowned at her. "What bet?"

"Andrew is convinced that you have it bad for that girl," she said, and I could only assume "that girl" was code for "Kat." "And I told him that you're not that stupid."

"Oh really?" I folded my arms.

"So I told him that I could prove that you weren't caught up in that human girl."

My brows rose. "You made a bet with your brother about hooking up with me? That's kind of disturbing on about a hundred different levels."

Ash ignored that with a roll of her eyes. "Apparently I was wrong." She plopped down on the end of the bed. "He's right."

"And why do you think he's right?"

She looked down at herself and then pinned me with a befuddled look. "Seriously? You'll pass this up? You've got it bad."

I stared at her and then laughed. "Nice logic you have going there."

"You can laugh all you want, but it's messed up—and no, I'm not talking about the fact that you just passed *this* up." She crossed her legs and sighed. "What's going on with *her* is what's messed up."

I sighed. "Ash—"

"She's human, Daemon. You get that, right? And yeah, she knows what we are and she's cool about it. She saved your life and let's give her a damn gold medal, but that doesn't change that she's human," she went on, meeting my stare. "Do you think you have a future with her? That the Elders are going to just leave you alone? That the DOD is going to be okay with you making a future with a human? Do you think Kat's going to be happy living a lie her whole entire life, because that's what it's going to take to make this relationship work. That is, if both of you don't end up dead because of it."

To be honest, I hadn't gotten that far, to think about a future.

"Do you know what else that it doesn't change? She's downstairs right now with a human boy."

My gaze sharpened as I exhaled slowly. I didn't say anything, because all it would involve was an atrocity of curse words. Slipping my feet into a pair of old leather flip-flops, I started for the door.

"I'm not going to help you do this," she warned.

I opened the door, and the laughter from downstairs grew louder. "I don't need your help."

"Daemon—"

Looking over my shoulder at her, I smiled slightly. "But I appreciate that you care enough to offer, and I mean that." I held her gaze, hoping she got it. "I really do."

Ash rolled her eyes again.

Stepping out of my bedroom, I headed down the hall. Music and voices drifted up. At the top of the stairway, I felt the warm tingle across the back of my neck. Kat was here, and everything Ash had said about us, about a future between us, was totally true.

But it didn't change what I wanted.

It didn't change anything, even though it should.

I was as dumb as Dawson.

Taking the steps two at a time, I spotted Kat the moment the foyer came into view. She was at the door with the bronze-haired dork. He was smiling at her as he looked up. Our gazes locked. I smirked, and the smile slowly inched off his face.

Kat turned, and her gaze immediately found mine, and I immediately lost the ability to remember how to get my lungs to work. Holy shit, what was she wearing?

It was a black dress tight around the bust and then loose all the way down to her knees. She was wearing some kind of red sweater over the dress, buttoned up, but it did nothing to distract from the soft swells drawing my attention.

Holy shit, that dress...

I wanted to take it off with my teeth.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw someone approaching me, but they stopped for whatever reason. Maybe they sensed they shouldn't get between me and what I had my sights on. I brushed a strand of hair out of my eyes, and my lips formed a wolfish grin when someone mentioned exactly what I thought. That I looked like I was on the warpath.

I sort of was.

Skirting clusters of people I only vaguely recognized, I saw that the douche bag's hand was somewhere behind Kat. I stopped in front of them, telling myself not to break his arm. Kat wouldn't be happy about that. "Hey there..."

"I don't think we got the chance to introduce ourselves the other night at the diner. My name is Blake Saunders." He offered his free hand.

I glanced at Blake's hand and then turned my attention to Kat. "I know who you are."

She was all gray eyes. "This is Daemon Black."

Douche bag's smile faltered. "Yeah, I know who he is, too."

Laughing under my breath, I straightened to my full height, putting me a good head taller than the guy. "It's always nice to meet another fan."

He shook his head slightly and then turned to Kat. "Well, I need to get going."

She smiled tentatively. "All right. Thanks for...everything."

Everything? What the hell did that mean? Better yet, was he seriously leaning into her while I was standing here? Yep. He was. Boy had a death wish. I folded my arms across my chest as I watched him hug her stiffly.

Then Kat kissed his cheek.

I cleared my throat.

Douche bag pulled back, laughing softly. "I'll call you. Behave."

"Always," she said, letting go.

He grinned at me and then walked out the door, obviously not at all intimidated.

Fiddling with the necklace, Kat faced me with a scowl. "You know, you couldn't have been much more of a jerk if you tried."

I arched a brow. "Thought I told you not to hang out with him."

"Thought I explained that just because you say I can't doesn't mean I won't."

"You did?" My gaze followed the obsidian, right where it nestled in a very happy place. I lowered my head to hers. "You look really nice tonight, Kitten."

She took a moment to respond. "I think Dee has her hands full, but she did a great job decorating the house."

"Don't let her fool you into believing she did all of this herself. She recruited me from the moment I got home."

"Oh." Surprise flickered across her face. "You both did a great job."

I was trying and failing to keep my eyes above the neck. Holy shit, that dress answered the question on whether or not her blushes traveled south when she flushed. They did. "Where did you get this dress?"

"Your sister," she replied blandly.

Well hell. Frowning, I shuddered as the mental image of my sister wearing the dress formed.

"I don't even know what to say about that."

"Say about what, babe?"

I stiffened at the sound of Ash's voice. A second later, she had her arm around my waist. Instinct demanded that I remove it, but then again, did I not just witness Kat kissing the douche bag? It was on the cheek, but still. Lowering my lashes, I watched Kat as Ash fitted the front of her body against my side.

Brief, but it was there, a flicker of anger, a slight darkening in her eyes as she eyed Ash. Anger could only exist if there was jealousy, and if Kat was jealous...?

I smiled lazily.

"That's a cute dress. It's Dee's, right?" Ash asked. "I think she got it when we went shopping together, but it usually looks looser on her."

Oh dammit. I started to respond, but Kat snapped right to it, which I should've known. She didn't need me to defend her always. "I think," she said, "you forgot some jeans or the bottom part of your dress."

Ash smirked, but then turned back to me. "Babe, you rushed off so fast. I had to search the entire upstairs for you. Why don't we go back to your room and finish what we started?"

Oh dammit all to hell. I exhaled out of my nose as I stepped out of Ash's loose embrace. I glanced at Kat, and that anger...it was gone, and there was another all-too-quick shimmer of emotion before she raised her brows at me. Before I could say a word, she spun around, slipping between a couple who looked like they were seconds away from getting pregnant and two laughing girls.

"Kat," I called out.

She kept going, her back unnaturally stiff.

Cursing under my breath, I looked at Ash. "Really?"

Her smile was smug. "I told you I wasn't going to help you."

"That wasn't necessary, and you know it." I started after Kat and made it a few steps before I stopped. Twisting sideways, I grabbed the guy who was getting down to business with some chick on my couch. I yanked him up and spun him around. It was Donnie, a senior like me.

"What the—?" Donnie cut himself off the moment he realized who it was.

I shoved him back, sparing the girl a brief glance. "Not in here. Not ever. Got it?"

"Got it," he replied.

Letting Donnie go, I made it as far as the kitchen before Ash caught up with me. She darted in front of me. "Okay," she said. "Maybe that was going too far."

"You think?" I frowned as I caught a glimpse of my sister. She was with Carissa and Lesa, but it was

the way Adam was rubbing her arm that drew my attention.

Ash clasped her hands together in front of her. "But you did see what I saw, right? She kissed that guy—"

"On the cheek," I growled.

"Like that's a difference." She wiggled her brows. "And he's kind of hot."

"Ash—"

"Okay, he's really hot."

Lesa passed us, running her hand over her curly hair. "Who's hot? You?" She grinned unabashedly. "Yes. You are hot."

"Blake is also hot," Ash chimed in, and I tilted my head to the side, staring at her. "Isn't he, Carissa?"

Lesa frowned. "Yes, Blake is very hot, too. By the way," she gestured at her chest with her red Solo cup, "I'm Lesa."

Ash shrugged as she tugged on the hem of her dress. "Whatever."

The human girl stared at Ash. "Okay. It's not like we look alike. I'm white with an awesome touch of Hispanic, and Carissa is half black and half Asian. Kind of hard to get us confused."

Well, Lesa had a point, and this just got real awkward, and Ash stared at her, apparently oblivious. "Anyway," Lesa drew the word out. "Why are we talking about how good-looking Blake is? Not that I don't mind chatting about that."

"He was here with Kat." Ash's hand snapped out, and she plucked a fresh cup out of some random person's grip. She eyed the contents. "She kissed him."

"On the cheek," I repeated.

Lesa snickered. "I would totally be kissing him someplace else."

I looked at her.

"And you, too," she added quickly, and I frowned. She giggled. "Well, if I didn't have a boyfriend, that is."

"Uh, that's good to know." My heart started pounding as if I'd just run a mile. Concern bloomed in my gut. "Have you seen Kat?"

Lesa sipped her drink. "She went outside to get some fresh air. Didn't look too happy."

"Hmm," Ash murmured.

I was so going to duct tape her mouth shut. "Thanks," I said to Lesa and then shot Ash a look that warned her not to follow.

It was Lesa this time who stopped me at the back door. She placed her hand on my upper arm, and when I glanced down at her, sincerity was etched into her expression. "God, she's going to kill me for saying this," she said. "But Katy does like you. She really does. Just remember that."

The corner of my lips twitched. "I know."

Cool night air washed over me. The door swung shut, muting some of the sounds. Walking off the deck, I cut between the houses. It didn't look like she was at her place. Stopping near the porch, I scanned the endless stream of cars. It went all the way down to the empty house at the end of the street.

I glanced back at Kat's house. Good thing her mom was working tonight.

Would her mom also be working for her birthday—tomorrow? From what I could gather, her mom usually worked Saturday nights. The idea of Kat spending her birthday alone didn't sit well with me. But that wasn't the issue at hand. Where in the world could she have—?

The distant sound of glass shattering stopped me. My eyes narrowed. A couple of car doors slammed shut, but the sound was farther away. I walked past the cars and about halfway down the

driveway, the back of my neck starting to tingle.

Bingo.

Kat was near the empty house.

I cut over to the wooded area and then picked up speed, coming up around the back of the house. I slowed down as I spotted her walking back. Pushing a low-hanging branch aside, I stepped out of the woods. "What are you doing out here, Kat?"

Her shoulders were hunched. "I just blew up a bunch of windows."

"What?" I moved closer. "You're bleeding. What happened?" I paused. "Where are your shoes?"

She glanced down at her feet. "I took them off."

I shot to her side, seeing tiny pieces of glass clinging to the sweater. I began picking them off.

"Kat, what happened?"

Lifting her head, she sucked in a sharp breath. "I was walking and I ran into Simon—"

"Did he do this to you?" My hands stilled, and I swear to all the stars in the sky, someone was going to be dead by the end of the night.

"No. No! I ran into him, and he was upset about you." Her eyes met mine. "He said you beat him up?"

"Yeah, I did." And I had a feeling I was going to do it again.

"Daemon, you can't beat up guys because they talk bad about me."

"Actually, I can." Getting all the glass I could see, I lowered my hands to my sides. "He deserved it. I'm not going to lie. I did it because of what he was saying. It was bullshit. He knows what he did—what he tried to do—and to spin that around on you?" My hands curled into fists as my gaze flickered to the woods. "I'm not going to let some punk-ass human talk about you like that, especially *him* or his friends."

"Wow," she murmured. "I don't think I'm supposed to say thank you, because that seems wrong, but, um, thanks."

"Anyway, that's not important. What happened?"

She drew in several deep breaths, and then it came out in a rush. "I just needed fresh air, so I came out here and I started walking. I don't know. I was just angry and feeling...I just was so angry, and I'm frustrated, because I don't know what is going on with me." Her voice started to rise. "And the next thing I know, the window back there blew up, and I know it was me. I did that somehow, and Simon—oh my God, he was outside. I don't even really know what he was doing. He was really drunk, but he saw me do it. I freaked out and another window shattered. I didn't mean to do it on purpose. I really didn't, Daemon. I—"

Chest aching, I wrapped my arms around her and tugged her against my chest. She didn't resist, burrowing her face into me. I lowered my chin to the top of her head and held her tight. Her heart was pounding. So was mine, which explained why it had started doing that in the kitchen.

"I know you didn't do it on purpose, Kitten." I pressed my hand against her back, rubbing in a circle as my mind raced around yet another new problem. "Simon was drunk, so there's a good chance he won't even remember. And if he does, no one will believe him."

"You think?" she whispered.

"Yes." I pulled back, lowering my head so we were eye to eye. "People will think he's crazy. No one will believe him, okay? And if he starts to talk, I'll—"

"You'll do nothing." She tugged herself free, drawing in another heavy breath. "I think you've already scarred the boy for life."

"Obviously not," I muttered. "What were you thinking back there? You were upset. Why?"

Kat stared at me a moment and then spun around. She started walking back, through the woods.

And here we were, back to the silent treatment. I easily caught up with her. "Kat, talk to me."

I held a branch out of the way for her. "I can make it back home without your help, thank you very much."

"I would hope so," I said drily. "It is right there."

"Shouldn't you be making out with Ash right now anyway?"

I nearly stopped walking as understanding hit me. "That's what all of this is about?"

"No." She was walking faster. "It had nothing to do with you—or her."

"You're jealous." Oddly, happiness flooded me. "I'm so going to win this bet."

She stomped forward. "Me? Jealous? You've lost your mind. I wasn't the one trying to scare off Blake."

I caught a hold of Kat's arm, stopping her just as her porch came into sight. "Who cares about Ben?"

"Blake," she corrected.

"Whatever. I thought you didn't like me?"

Her hand curled around empty air. "You're right. I don't like you."

And the happiness was vanquished like chalk in a downpour. "You're lying—blushing cheeks and all."

Her mouth opened, and then it all just came out. "You were kissing me a few days ago and now you were having *fun* with Ash? Is this what you normally do? Jump from one girl to the next?"

"No." I dropped her arm, actually offended. "That's not what I do. I don't."

"Yeah, I hate to break it to you, but you are doing it." She drew back, her brows knitting, and then she shook her head "God, I am being such a whiny girl. Just forget I said anything. You can do whatever you want and I don't have any right—"

"Okay. You have no idea what was going on between Ash and me. We were only talking. She was messing with you, Kat."

"Whatever." She whirled around, walking again. "I'm not jealous. I don't care if you and Ash make alien babies together. I don't care. And honestly, if it weren't for this stupid connection, you wouldn't even enjoy kissing me. You probably already don't."

Unable to believe what I was hearing, I flew around her, stopping her. "Do you think I didn't enjoy kissing you? That I haven't thought about it every second since then? And I know you have. Just admit it."

Her chest rose sharply. "What is the point of this?"

"Have you?" I demanded, wanting—needing to hear her admit it.

"Oh, for crap's sake, yes, I have. I do!" she shouted. "Do you want me to write it down for you? Send you an email or a text? Will that make you feel better?"

I arched a brow, slightly mollified. "You don't need to be sarcastic."

"And you don't need to be here. Ash is waiting for you."

A grunt of exasperation left me. "Do you really think I'm going to go to her?"

"Uh, yeah, I do."

"Kat." Disappointed, I shook my head. She really thought that? After everything we'd been through, everything we'd shared, she'd honestly think I'd be interested in Ash?

"It doesn't matter." She tugged her fingers through her hair, pulling it back from her face. "Can we just forget this? Please?"

Lifting my hand, I smoothed a finger over my brow. The disappointment burned and sat in my



CHAPTER 11

Adam was on his second helping of stacked pancakes. His head was bowed over his plate, blond hair sticking up in every direction as he shoved the fluffy goodness into his mouth.

I sat across from him at the kitchen table, idly rubbing my palm along my jaw while I stared out the window. Prickly stubble grazed my hand. I needed to shave.

It had been a long night.

The last of the partygoers left around two in the morning, and then the great cleanup began. Dee, Adam, and I managed to straighten up most of the house, and then I'd tackled the kitchen this morning. It was a little past four in the afternoon, and Dee was back in bed. She'd probably sleep the entire day away.

Adam had stayed the night.

My brain was too fried to even deal with that, but he at least helped clean up.

"Did you even sleep last night?" Adam paused in his record-breaking pancake buffet.

I raised a shoulder. "A little."

"Looks like it."

Truth be told, I might've gotten two hours tops, and it really had nothing to do with cleaning the house. Had a lot to do with Kat. Not just our argument. If I'd lost sleep every time we argued, I'd never get any shut-eye. Granted, there was a huge part of me that was still hella disappointed and pissed over what she thought. I also felt...yeah, I felt bad, because I'd seen that flash of hurt in Kat's eyes when she thought I was hooking up with Ash. That didn't sit well with me, but that wasn't my main beef. Had a lot to do with her breaking those windows; not the reason behind it, but the fact that she had been able to do it in the first place.

We needed to accept that Kat was changing. The why behind it wasn't the most important part of what was going down. We needed to get her...her abilities under control before it was too late.

Today was her birthday.

And I knew she had gotten a new laptop because I'd received an email alert this morning signaling that she'd posted on her blog. Yeah, I'd signed up for alerts. Whatever.

When I'd dragged the tenth garbage bag outside, I'd seen an unfamiliar car in her driveway. It had belonged to that doctor—Will Michaels. The three of them—Will, Kat, and her mom—had left together.

Adam leaned back in the chair and stretched his arms over his head. Bones cracked. "So, I hear something went down with you last night?"

Raising an eyebrow, I dropped my hand to the table. "Is that so?"

He nodded. "Ash was pissed about you and Kat. She was bitching to me and Dee about it, like we were supposed to do something."

Ash needed a hobby. Stat.

"You know, she's just worried about you. I mean, Ash can be...well, she's my sister. She can be a bitch, but it comes from a good place."

"I know." I took a drink of my milk.

Adam's gaze dropped to his empty plate. "Can I be real with you for a sec?

"Sure..."

A brief grin appeared. "You know I'm not like Andrew or Ash. I don't care about what's going on with you and Kat." When I opened my mouth, he pinned me with a knowing look. "And I know something is going on. Dee and I talk, but even if we didn't, it's obvious to me. Anyway, I'm cool with it, whatever it is. I just wanted to let you know that."

Unsure of what to say, I stared at him. Words formed on the tip of my tongue, but I didn't give them voice. What I felt for Kat wasn't something I'd been entirely vocal about with the exception of what I'd said to Matthew, but I really hadn't said much. I wasn't surprised that Adam was cool with it. That was just the kind of...Luxen he was. Something occurred to me then.

"Thanks, man." I leaned forward, keeping my voice low. "I've got a question for you."

He smiled. "I'm all ears."

Adam had always been the most open of all the Luxen I'd known. Everyone knew that, including Dawson. My brother wouldn't have confided in me, but there was a chance he would've said something to Adam. Maybe even hinted at what had happened between him and Bethany when they went hiking the weekend he'd returned with torn, bloody clothing. "Did Dawson ever talk to you about Beth?"

Surprise flickered across his face. Obviously, he hadn't expected that question. "Not really. I mean, he was super quiet about Beth, but I did talk to him. Like the stuff I said to you. I'm cool with it. I did tell him that I was worried."

"You didn't tell me you are worried about Kat and me," I pointed out.

"Yeah, well, you're not Dawson."

That was the first time anyone said that and probably actually meant it as a compliment. "True," I murmured, and then smiled faintly. "But I think...I think I'm more like him than most realize."

"Why are you asking about Dawson?" He nudged his empty plate without touching it. "You never talk about him."

"Just because I don't talk about him doesn't mean I don't think about him." Standing, I motioned at the plates. They floated to the sink. "I don't know. I've just been thinking a lot about Dawson and Bethany." I stood in the center of the kitchen and decided to go there with Adam. I trusted him. "I think he did something to Bethany."

His brows rose. "Like what?"

I came back to the table and sat down. "They went hiking one weekend, and Dawson returned all jacked up—his clothes torn and bloody. He said nothing happened, but I knew he was lying. I think...I think Beth got hurt somehow, and..."

Understanding flared in his gaze. "You think he healed her?" When I nodded, he blinked.

"Shit. We're not supposed to—"

"I know we're not supposed to do it, but it doesn't mean it hasn't happened." Hello. For example: me. "I think that's what Dawson did, and I think...I think he changed her somehow." I had absolutely no proof supporting that statement other than the fact that I had changed Kat.

"Changed her how?" he asked.

I shook my head. Here's where it got tricky, because they...they'd died not too long after that trip,

and I hadn't been around her. "I don't know, but Lydia stopped by on Thursday, you know, checking in, and we were talking about shit in general, and she said something that got me thinking." I was so good at lying I was kind of amazed with myself. "She said that putting humans in danger wasn't the only reason why we weren't allowed to heal them."

His eyes widened. "And you're thinking it's because we change them somehow? And that the Elders know this?"

I nodded.

"Well, hell." He paused. "But even if that's the case, what does it have to do with Dawson? I mean, he and Bethany were killed by Arum."

That's what we were told.

Another set of potentially disastrous words I didn't speak out loud, but the moment I thought them, they rang true. We were told that Arum killed them. That the DOD found their bodies and...and disposed of them. What if that was a lie? My hand curled into a fist. What if the DOD got hold of them, because Dawson had done...had done the forbidden? And where was our friendly government watch group?

"The DOD hasn't checked in with you guys recently, right?" I asked.

"No."

I folded my arms, my gaze returning to the window. "And that's damn strange, isn't it?"

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, it is." There was a pause. "Where are you going with this, Daemon?"

I met his searching gaze. "We never saw their bodies, Adam."

"No...no, we didn't." Adam paled under the golden tone of his skin. "What are you saying?"

What I was saying was something that could get us all in a world of trouble. "I don't know what I'm saying," I said. "Don't talk to Dee about any of this, okay? It's just me thinking out loud, and I don't want her to worry. You feel me?"

Adam nodded slowly, his gaze suddenly fixed and distant. "Yeah, I feel you."

Showered and freshly shaved, I headed outside. Stars twinkled in the dark sky. Stepping off the porch, I looked next door. As expected, only Kat's car sat in the driveway. Her birthday, and she was spending the evening alone.

That sucked.

I knew what I needed to do. I didn't like how things ended between us last night, and I needed to apologize.

Within a heartbeat, I was in front of her door. Loud music thumped from inside. I knocked, but it became apparent that unless I knocked the door down, there was no way Kat was hearing me. Wrapping my hand around the knob, I discovered the door was unlocked. I hesitated, wondering if I should let myself in, but then I heard her—her *singing*.

I opened the door and stepped inside. The music was loud and became much clearer. It was an old song—"Hungry Like the Wolf." Closing the door behind me, I slowly grinned as her voice rose.

"A scent and a sound, I'm lost and I'm found. And I'm hungry like the wolf. Something on a line, it's discord and rhyme." Kat appeared in the hallway, just outside the laundry room, her back to me as she swung her arms around and above her head, but I was fascinated by the knee-high socks she was wearing. And the little shorts, but mostly the socks. They had…reindeer all over them. "—whatever,

whatever, la la la— Mouth is alive, all running inside, and I'm hungry like the—"

"It's actually, 'I howl and I whine. I'm after you,' and not blah or whatever."

Kat shrieked and whipped around. Her foot slipped and before I could even say hello, she landed on her butt. Her hand flew to her chest. "Holy crap. I think I'm having a heart attack."

"And I think you broke your butt." I could barely stop myself from laughing.

Sprawled across the hallway, she glared up at me. "What the hell? Do you just walk into people's houses?"

"And listen to girls absolutely destroy a song in a matter of seconds? Well, yes, I make a habit of it. Actually, I knocked several times, but I heard your...singing, and your door was unlocked." I shrugged. "So I just let myself in."

"I can see that." She stood, wincing. "Oh, man, maybe I did break my butt."

"I hope not. I'm kind of partial to your butt." I flashed a quick smile. "Your face is pretty red. You sure you didn't smack that on the way down?"

She groaned. "I hate you."

"Nah, I don't think you do." I glanced down. "Nice socks."

Rubbing her backside in a way that made me jealous of her hand, she sent me a hateful look. "Do you need something?"

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I leaned against the wall. "No, I don't need something."

"Then why did you break into my house?"

"I didn't break in. The door was unlocked, and I heard the music. I guessed you were the only one here. Why are you doing laundry and singing eighties songs on your birthday?"

Her eyes widened. "How...how do you know it's my birthday? I don't even think I told Dee."

I smiled at her. "The night you were attacked at the library and I went to the hospital with you? When you were giving them your personal information, I overheard you."

"Really." She stared at me. "And you remembered?"

"Yep. Anyway, why are you doing chores on your birthday?"

"I'm obviously that lame."

"That *is* pretty lame. Oh, listen!" I looked in the direction of the living room, where the music was coming from. "It's 'Eye of the Tiger.' Do you want to sing along to that? Maybe jog up the stairs and pump your fists in the air?"

"Daemon." She shuffled past me, went into the living room, and picked up the remote, turning the song down. "Seriously, what do you want?"

I followed her. "I came over to apologize."

"What? You're going to apologize again? I don't even know what to say. Wow."

I frowned. "I know it seems like a huge surprise to you that I do have feelings and therefore do feel bad at times for things that I may have...caused."

"Hold up. I have to record this. Let me grab my phone." She turned, scanning the coffee table.

"Kat, you're not helping. I'm being serious. This is...hard for me."

She rolled my eyes. "Okay. I'm sorry. Want to sit? I have cake. Cake should sweeten your disposition a little."

"Nothing can soften me. I'm as cold as ice."

"Hardy-har-har. It's made of ice cream and has the yummy crunchy middle part."

"Okay, that may work. The crunchy middle part is my favorite," I said.

"Okay," she said softly. "Then come on."

We went into the kitchen. Kat grabbed a hair tie off the counter and tugged her hair back. "How big

of a piece do you want?" She pulled the cake out of the freezer.

"How big of a piece are you willing to part with?"

"As big as you want." She grabbed a knife out of the drawer and placed it over the cake.

I looked over her shoulder. "Bigger."

She moved the knife to the side.

"Even bigger."

She moved it by a couple of inches.

"Perfect," I said.

Kat tried to cut the cake, but got an inch down. "I hate cutting these freaking things."

"Let me try." I reached around, and our hands brushed as I took the knife from her. Electricity shivered over my skin. "You need to run it under hot water. Then it cuts right through it."

Stepping aside, Kat let me take over. I ran the knife under the hot water and then chopped through the cake easily. "See? Perfect."

She grabbed two plates and placed them on the counter. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Milk is always good if you've got some."

Getting the milk, she poured two tall glasses, which surprised me, because usually she made me get everything. She grabbed the silverware and motioned toward the living room.

"You don't want to eat in here?" I asked.

"No. I don't like eating at the dinner table. It seems so formal."

Grabbing my plate and cup, I followed her out into the living room. She sat on one end of the couch and I on the other. As I shoved my fork into the cake, I spotted roses. I cleared my throat. "Nice roses. Brad?"

"Blake." She shrugged. "Yeah, they're nice, aren't they?"

"Whatever," I grumbled. "So why are you spending tonight by yourself? It's your birthday."

The corners of her lips turned down. "My mom had to work, and I just didn't feel like doing anything. It's not as bad as it sounds. I've spent many of them by myself."

"I guess you probably would have preferred I hadn't stopped by then, huh?" I stabbed the cake until I forced the ice cream away from the cookie part. I took a bite. "I really did come to apologize for last night."

She set the plate on the coffee table and tucked her legs under her. "Daemon—"

"Wait." I held up my fork. "Okay?"

Kat snapped her mouth shut.

My gaze flipped to my plate. "Nothing happened between Ash and me last night. She was just... messing with you. And I know that's hard to believe, but I'm sorry if it...hurt you." I drew in a deep breath. "Contrary to what you think about me, I don't jump from girl to girl. I do like you, so I wouldn't mess around with Ash. And I haven't. Ash and I haven't done anything for *months*, before you even came around. Things are complicated between Ash and me. We've known each other since we came here. Everyone expects us to be together. Especially the Elders, since we're 'coming of age.' Time to start making babies." I shuddered.

"Even Ash expects us to be together," I went on, stabbing the cake again. "And all of this? I know it's hurting her. I never wanted to do that." I paused, and having spoken that out loud, I knew it was true. Ash may act like it didn't bother her, but I knew it did. "I never wanted to hurt *you*, either. And I've done both of those things." I felt heat seep across my cheeks, but I continued, because all of this needed to be said. "I can't be with her the way she wants—the way she *deserves*. Anyway, I wanted to apologize for last night."

There wasn't a moment of hesitation.

"So do I," she said. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like I did. I guess the whole window thing freaked me out."

"What you did last night with the windows. Well, that was one hell of a display of power that you have no control of." I glanced at her. "I've been thinking about it. And I keep thinking of Dawson and Bethany. That evening they returned from hiking, and he was covered in blood. I think she may have gotten hurt."

"And he healed her?"

"Yep. I don't know more." It was easier saying it out loud now. "They...they died a couple of days later. I guess it's like two photons splitting, separate but the same. That explains how we can sense each other. I don't know. It's a theory."

"Do you think whatever is happening with me will stop?"

I ate the last of the cake and then placed my plate on the coffee table. "We may get lucky. What you're doing might fade over time, but you need to be careful. No pressure, but it's a threat to all of us. I'm not trying to be...cruel. It's the truth."

"No, I understand. I could expose you all. I've almost done it several times."

I leaned against the couch, tossing my arm along the back. "I'm checking around to see if anyone has heard of this happening. I have to be careful, though. Too many questions will give way to suspicion."

She fingered the necklace as I turned to the television and smiled. An eighties hair band played, screaming about losing love. "After seeing your dance skills earlier, you would have blended right in with the eighties."

"Can we not mention that again?" she muttered.

I grinned as I looked over at her. "You were this close to having 'Walk Like an Egyptian' down."

"You're a douche."

I laughed. "Did you know I had a purple Mohawk?"

"What?" She giggled as she cocked her head to the side. "When?"

"Yep, purple and black. It was before we moved here. We were living in New York. I guess I went through this phase. Pierced nose and all."

She busted out laughing, and I tossed a throw pillow at her. She placed it in her lap. "You were a skater boy, huh?"

"Something like that. Matthew was with us. He became our guardian of sorts. He had no idea what to do with me."

"But Matthew—he's not that much older."

"He's older than he looks. He's around thirty-eight."

"Wow. He's aging well."

I nodded. "He arrived at the same time we did, in the same area. I guess he thought he was responsible for us, being the oldest out of everyone."

"Where did you guys...?" She winced. "Where did you all land?"

Reaching over, I picked a piece of lint off her shirt. "We landed near Skaros."

"Skaros?" She wrinkled her nose. "Uh, is that even on Earth?"

"Yes. It's actually a small island near Greece. It's known for this rocky region where a castle once stood. I'd like to go back one day. It's kind of like our birthplace, I guess."

"How many of you landed there?"

"A couple dozen, or at least that's what Matthew has told us. I don't remember anything from the

beginning." My lips pursed. "We stayed in Greece until we were around five, and then we came to America. There were twenty or so of us, and as soon as we arrived, the DOD was there."

"How did all of that go?" she asked, her expression open and curious.

It was weird talking about this stuff. It was something none of us really went into, but I imagined that Dawson had done it with Beth. "Not very well, Kitten. We didn't know that humans were aware of us. All we did know was there were Arum around, but the DOD came as a huge surprise to us. Apparently they knew about us from the moment we got here. They rounded up hundreds who had arrived in America."

She clutched the pillow to her chest. "What did they do with you guys?"

"They kept us in a facility out in New Mexico."

"No shit." Her eyes went wide. "Is Area 51 the real deal? Wow. I thought the whole Area 51 thing had been around a while."

"My family and friends arrived fifteen years ago, but that doesn't mean the Luxen didn't come before that." I laughed at her expression. "Anyway, they kept us there for the first five years. They—the DOD—had been assimilating the Luxen for years. We learned a lot about humans during that time, and when we were...deemed ready to fully assimilate, they let us go. Usually with an older Luxen who could take care of us. Since Matthew had a relationship with us, we were placed with him."

Her brow wrinkled. "But you guys would've been only ten years old. Did you live with Matthew until recently?"

"Believe it or not, we mature differently than humans. At ten I could've gone to college. We develop a lot faster, our brains and whatnot. I'm actually smarter than I act." I grinned when she looked wholly unimpressed. "Matthew lived with us until we moved here. At fifteen, we were pretty much adults. The DOD set us up with a house and money."

"But what about people asking questions—looking for your parents?"

"There's always an older Luxen we can pass off for our parent, or we can morph into an older version. The morphing thing we try to avoid because of the trace."

Shaking her head, she settled back against the couch and appeared to be letting everything sink in. "Do you want me to leave?"

Her gaze lifted to mine. "No. You don't have to. I mean, I'm not doing anything, and if you have nothing to do, you can stay or whatever..."

I felt like I had just won a major battle. Slowly, I looked away, my gaze falling to the shiny red laptop sitting on the coffee table. "I see someone got something for her birthday."

"Yeah, Mom got it for me. I've been without since...well, since then."

I scratched my cheek. "Yeah, I didn't apologize for that, did I?"

"No," she sighed.

"That's never happened before, the whole blowing-stuff-up part," I admitted after a moment.

"Same here."

Staring at the TV, I relaxed a little. "It happened with Dawson, in a way. It was how Bethany found out." I paused, fighting a smile. "He was making out with her and lost control. Turned full Luxen while kissing her."

"Yikes. That had to be..."

"Awkward?"

"Yeah, awkward."

Silence fell between us, and my mind immediately went to what it had been like kissing Kat—touching her. Nothing in this world or beyond had been as...freaking amazing as that.

She tugged on the neckline of her sweater. "Dee said you guys had moved a lot. How many different places?"

Change of subject was a good idea. "We stayed in New York for a while, then we moved to South Dakota. And if you think nothing goes on here, you haven't lived in South Dakota. Then we moved to Colorado before coming here. I was always the one who provoked the change in scenery. It's like I was looking for something, but none of those places had it."

"I bet New York was your favorite place."

"Actually, it's not. It's here."

Kat laughed. "West Virginia?"

"It's not that bad. There are a lot of us here. More so than any other place. I have friends who I can be myself with—a whole community, really. That's important."

"I can understand that." She rested her chin on her pillow. "Do you think Dee is happy here? She makes it sound like she can't leave. Like, ever."

Shifting, I lifted my legs and stretched them out. "Dee wants to pave her own way in life, and I can't blame her for that. If you haven't noticed yet, there are more males than females. So the females are paired off very quickly and protected above all."

She made a face. "Paired off and mated? I understand it—you guys need to reproduce. But Dee can't be forced to do that. It's not fair. You should control your own lives."

I met her stare. "But we don't, Kitten."

"It's not right," she said passionately, as if she wanted to take up arms and defend our rights.

"It's not. Most Luxen don't push for anything different. Dawson did. He loved Bethany." I exhaled raggedly. "We were against it. And I thought he was stupid for falling for a human. No offense."

"None taken."

"It was hard for him. Our group was upset with him, but Dawson...he was the strong one." I smiled as I shook my head. Damn, that was so true, and I never gave him enough credit for that. "He didn't cave, and if the colony had discovered the truth, I don't think they would've changed him."

"Couldn't he have left with her, sneaked past the DOD? Maybe that's what happened?"

"Dawson loved it here. He was big on hiking and outdoors. He was into the whole rustic-living thing." I glanced at her. "He'd never leave, especially without telling Dee or me. I know both of them are dead." My smile spread a little. "You would've liked Dawson. Looked just like me but a much better guy. Not a douche bag, in other words."

"I'm sure I would've, but you're not bad."

I arched a brow.

"Okay, you're prone to moments of great dickdom, but you're not bad." She paused, squeezing the pillow tight. "Do you want to know what I honestly think?"

"Should I be worried?" I asked warily.

Kat laughed. "There's a really nice guy under the jerk. I've seen glimpses of him. So while I probably want to beat the crap out of you most of the time, I really don't think you're a bad guy. You have a lot of responsibility."

Well then...

I tilted my head back. "Well, I guess that's not too bad."

"Can I ask you a question and you tell me the truth?" she asked.

"Always."

She reached around her neck and pulled the piece of obsidian out. She held it in her hand. "The DOD is a bigger concern than the Arum, isn't it?"

A muscle tensed along my jaw. "Yes."

She ran a finger over the wire twisted at the top of the crystal. "What would they do if they knew I was moving things like you do?"

She'd spoken my earlier suspicions out loud.

"They'd probably do the same thing they'd do to us if they knew." I reached out, cupping the hand that held the obsidian. I laid my finger over hers, stopping her movements. "They'd lock you up...or worse. But I'm not going to let that happen."

"But how can you live like this? Like, just waiting for them to find out there's more to you guys?"

My fingers curled around hers. "It's all I've known—it's all any of us have known."

She blinked rapidly and whispered, "That's really kind of sad."

"It's our life." I paused, hating the sudden look of sadness in her gaze. "But don't worry about them. Nothing will happen to you."

Kat leaned in, stopping when our faces were only inches apart. "You're always protecting others, aren't you?"

I gently squeezed her hand and then leaned back, folding my arm under my head. "This hasn't been a very birthday-friendly conversation."

"It's okay. You want more milk or anything?"

"No, but I would like to know something."

She stretched out her legs and they ended up beside mine. "What?"

"How often do you run through the house singing?"

Kat moved to kick me, but I caught her toes, stopping her. "You can leave now," she said.

I grinned, eyeing the reindeer. "I seriously love these socks."

"Give me back my foot," she ordered.

"It's not so much the fact that they've got reindeer on them or that they go all the way up to your knees. But it's the fact they're like mittens on your feet."

She wiggled her toes. "I like them like that. And don't you dare knock them. I will kick you off this couch."

I raised a brow as I turned her foot over, inspecting them. "Sock mittens, huh? Never seen anything like it. Dee would love them."

She pulled at her foot, and I let go this time. "Whatever. I'm sure there're cornier things than my socks. Don't judge me. It's the only thing I like about the holidays."

"The only thing? I figured you're the type of person who wants the Christmas tree to go up on Thanksgiving."

"You celebrate Christmas?"

I shot her a bland look. "Yes. It's the human thing to do. Dee loves Christmas. Actually, I think she just loves the idea of presents."

She laughed. "I used to love the holidays. And yeah, I was real big on the Christmas tree when Dad was alive. We'd put it up while watching the parade on Thanksgiving."

"But?"

"But Mom is never home on the holidays now. And I know she won't be this year; since she's new at the hospital, she'll get the shaft." Kat shrugged, but I could tell it bothered her. A lot. "I'm always alone on the holidays, like some sort of old cat woman."

I could also tell that this conversation made her uncomfortable, made her sad. I changed the subject and picked one that would bring back some of the fire to her eyes. "So, this Bob guy..."

"His name is Blake, and don't start, Daemon."

"Fine." I grinned, because there it was—the darkening in her eyes. "He's not an issue anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I shrugged and changed the subject again. "I was kind of surprised when I was in your bedroom while you were sick."

Her brows lifted. "I'm not sure I want to know about what."

"You had a poster of Bob Dylan on the wall. I expected the Jonas Brothers or something."

"Are you serious? No. Not a fan of pop music. I'm a huge fan of Dave Matthews and older stuff, like Dylan."

That did surprise me, and that little tidbit kicked off a conversation about music and then movies. Of course, we ended up arguing, because seriously, we couldn't have a conversation without one, but she thought the second *Godfather* movie was better than the first, and that was a simply wretched thing to say.

Hours passed, and it felt like only minutes. We ended up stretched out on opposite sides of the couch, side by side, both of us growing sleepy at the same time. We argued. We laughed. We were *normal*. It—all of this—was nice. I couldn't remember the last time I was this relaxed.

I had no idea how much time had passed between the last time I blinked my eyes and reopened them. I knew it was really late, and there was a lull in the conversation, and I was drifting into that peaceful place between waking and sleeping. At some point, I opened my eyes. Not by much, just a thin slit really, and I found her watching me, her expression soft and...and downright perfect.

Kat moved suddenly, grabbing the large quilt off the back of the couch. She draped it over my legs. I waited for her to climb over me and leave, but she must've grabbed a second quilt and covered herself with it.

Another small victory.

"Thank you," I murmured, closing my eyes again.

There was a pause. "I thought you were asleep."

"Almost, but you're staring at me."

"I am not."

I pried one eye open. "You always blush when you lie."

"I do not."

"If you keep lying, I think I will have to leave," I threatened. "I don't feel like my virtue is safe."

"Your virtue?" She huffed. "Whatever."

"I know how you get." Grinning, I closed my eyes. In the background, the TV played more long-forgotten music. I knew I would need to get up soon, no matter what. If her mom came home and found me lying here, it wouldn't be pretty. I was close to dozing off.

"Did you find it?" she asked.

I moved my hand over my chest. "Find what, Kitten?"

"What you were searching for?"

My eyes opened and my gaze held hers. "Yeah, sometimes, I think I did."

CHAPTER 12

At the start of trig class on Monday, I couldn't help but mention those socks when I sat down behind Kat.

"Reindeer socks today?" I asked.

"No. Polka dots."

"Sock mittens?"

"Regular." Her lips twitched as if she was fighting a grin.

"I'm not sure how I feel about that." I tapped my pen on the edge of my desk, pretending to give this serious thought. "Regular socks just seem so boring after seeing the reindeer socks."

Lesa cleared her throat. "Reindeer socks?"

"She has these socks that have reindeer on them and are kind of like a mitten for the toes," I explained.

"Oh, I have a pair like that," Carissa said, grinning. "But mine have stripes on them. Love them in the winter."

Kat's look was all smugness.

"Am I the only person who is wondering how you saw her socks?" Lesa asked.

Carissa punched her on the arm.

"We live next door to each other," I reminded her. "I see lots of things."

Kat shook her head frantically. "No, he doesn't. He hardly sees anything."

"Blushing," I said, pointing at her cheeks with my pen.

"Shut up." There wasn't any heat to her words.

"Anyway, what are you doing tonight?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I have plans."

"What kind of...plans?"

"Just plans." She flipped back around in her seat.

Just plans? I had a feeling I wasn't going to be thrilled with those plans. For some reason, I was surprised, because I had a strong suspicion those plans involved the douche bag, and after Saturday night...

Why the hell did I think Saturday night changed anything?

Because we slept side by side until I got my ass out of there before her mom came home. Barely. I had to tap into some light-speed shit to get out of the house without being caught.

As I sat back, I saw that Simon wasn't in class today. Damn shame. I wanted to see how he acted around Kat to determine what kind of risk he posed, but I wasn't too surprised by his absence. He hadn't shown up for class on Friday, either. I still couldn't believe he had the balls or the amount of stupidity to show his face Friday night.

I frowned at the formula the teacher wrote on the chalkboard. I was pretty sure it was not correct. Chewing on the end of my pen, I glanced at Kat.

She was looking over her shoulder at me. Pink zoomed across her cheeks, and she hastily turned around, but it was too late. I'd caught her.

Around the cap of my pen, I smiled.

It was around five when my phone dinged. It was from Matthew.

We need to meet. All of us. Including Katy. It's about the DOD.

Kicking my feet off the coffee table, I sat up straight. I responded back only to him, but he wouldn't answer any of my questions. All he was saying was that he was coming over here. No more than two seconds later, Dee appeared in the living room, cell phone in hand. She opened her mouth.

"Where's Kat?" I asked.

She winced and then pivoted toward the door. "I'll go get her."

I beat her to the door, car keys in hand. "Where is she?"

Dee placed her hands on her hips, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"I can stand here and stare at you all night—it's not going to change anything," I told her, and then sighed. "Look, I pretty much guessed this morning that she was going out with him. It's not a big surprise. I'll go get her and you can stay here and make sure everyone stays cool. You're better at that than me."

She looked away, her jaw working. "She went to that restaurant that has Indian food—"

"Got it." I slipped out the front door. Considering there was only one place in the county that sold Indian food, I knew where to go.

I drove to the restaurant, finding a parking spot across the street. Stepping inside, I immediately felt the warmth along the base of my neck. There wasn't a wait at the door, and when the hostess approached me with a tired smile, I waved her off. "I'm meeting friends here. I know where they are."

She stepped aside, and seriously, the place was small enough that I didn't have to look hard. I passed candlelit tables, nearing a table obscured by a partition wall. I knew she was aware of me before she came into view. Her eyes tracked me right up to the table.

Douche Bag turned around, and his shoulders stiffened. He glanced at Kat. "Overprotective type...?"

"I don't...even know what to say," she mumbled helplessly.

"Hey guys." I slid into the seat next to Kat. The whole left side of my body was pressed against hers. "Am I interrupting?"

"Yes," she said, mouth agape.

"Oh, sorry." I wasn't sorry at all.

Douche Bag smiled as he sat back and folded his arms. "How are you doing, Daemon?"

"I'm doing great." I stretched, draping my arm along the back of the booth. "How about you, Brad?"

He laughed softly. "My name's Blake."

I tapped my fingers on the back of the booth, brushing her hair. "So what were you guys up to?"

"We were having dinner." Kat started to scoot forward, but I hooked my fingers around the back of

her turtleneck. My fingers brushed the back of her neck, and she gasped, stilling.

"And I think we were just about done," Blake said, his eyes fixed on me. "Weren't we, Katy?"

"Yeah, we just need our check." Under the table, Kat's hand landed on my thigh. I liked where this was going until she pinched—pinched hard.

I tugged on her turtleneck. "What were you planning to do after dinner? Was Biff taking you to a movie?"

Douche Bag's grin started to falter. "Blake. And that would be the plan."

"Hmm." I glanced at his glass of water and idly curled my finger.

His glass toppled over. Water sloshed over the table, spilling into his lap. The guy jumped up. "Shit."

My finger moved again.

His plate of half-eaten spicy noodles slid onto the front of Blake's sweater.

Kat's mouth dropped open.

"Jesus," Blake muttered, hands at his sides as he stared down at himself.

Grabbing napkins, Kat's glare promised death as she handed the napkins to Douche Bag. I smirked. "That was...really strange."

Face red, he glanced up from patting at his sweater and crotch. His eyes met mine, and for a second, something I saw in them sent my instinct flaring. Something about those eyes wasn't...normal.

Then again, I had just dropped a glass of water and a plate of noodles in his lap, so his murderous stare was kind of expected.

Quietly and with stiff, jerky movements, he brushed off the brown noodles. The waitress rushed to his side with several more napkins.

"Well, anyway, I'm actually here for a reason." I picked up Kat's glass and took a drink. "You're needed at home."

Douche Bag halted his movements. "Excuse me?"

"Did I speak too fast, Bart?"

"His *name* is *Blake*," she snapped. "And why am I needed at home? Right now, at this very moment?"

I met her eyes. "Something has come up and you need to check it out now."

She started to respond, and then she got what I wasn't saying. She stiffened and then turned to Douche Bag. "I'm *really*, really sorry about this."

His gaze darted between us as he picked up the check. "It's okay. Things happen."

"I'll make it up. I promise."

He smiled. "It's all right, Katy. I'll take you home."

"That won't be necessary." I smiled, but there was nothing warm about it. "I got this, Biff."

Kat looked like she wanted to smack me. "Blake. His name is Blake, Daemon."

"It's okay, Katy," he said, lips thin. "I'm a mess."

"Then it's solved." I stood and Kat scooted out.

Everybody was all kinds of happy as Douche Bag took care of the check and our awesome threesome headed outside. I waited, oh so patiently, when she stopped by his car.

"I am so, so sorry," she said.

I rolled my eyes.

"It's okay. You didn't knock the stuff on me." Douche Bag looked at me, and I raised my brows. "Although that was the craziest thing I've ever seen. But anyway, we'll make up for it when I get back from break, okay?"

"Okay." She started to give him a hug but halted.

Douche Bag laughed and then leaned in, kissing Kat, and it took everything in me not to pitch him into oncoming traffic. "I'll call you," he said.

Kat nodded as I walked to where I parked. Opening the door for her, I waited. "You ready?" I asked, and she stalked over to the car and climbed in, slamming the door. I frowned at her. "Hey. Don't take your anger out on Dolly."

"You named your car Dolly?"

"What's wrong with that?"

She rolled her eyes.

I jogged around the front of the car and slid in. The moment I closed the door, Kat hauled off and legit punched me in the arm. "You are such a jerk! I know you did the glass and plate thing. That was so wrong!"

I held up my hands, unable to hold my laughter back any longer. "What? It was funny. The look on Bo's face was priceless. And the kiss he gave you? What was that? I've seen dolphins give hotter kisses than that."

"His name is Blake!" She punched my leg this time. "And you know it! I can't believe you acted like that. And he doesn't kiss like a dolphin!"

I snorted. "From what I've seen, he does."

"You didn't see the last time we kissed."

My laughter ended with a quickness as I looked over at her. "You've kissed him before?"

"That's none of your business." Her cheeks flushed.

Oh man, a huge part of me wanted to point out that she yelled at me for assuming I was hooking up with Ash after kissing her when she, in fact, just admitted to doing what she accused me of. It took an act of God to make me not go there. "I don't like him."

"You don't even know him."

"I don't need to know him to see that there's something...*off* about him." The car roared to life. "I don't think you should be hanging out with him."

"Oh, this is rich, Daemon. Whatever."

I glanced over at her again, catching her shivering. "Are you cold? Where's your jacket?"

"I don't like jackets."

"Did they do something terrible and unforgivable to you, too?" I turned up the heat. Warm air blasted out of the vents.

"I find them...cumbersome." She sighed loudly. It was rather impressive. "What was so freaking imperative that you had to go stalker mode and find me?"

"I wasn't stalking you."

"Oh, you weren't? Did you use your alien GPS system to find me?"

"Well, yeah, sort of." I was so not about to tell her Dee had told me where she was.

"Argh! This is so wrong." For a second, I thought she was going to hit me again. "So what's the deal?"

I waited until I hit the highway. "Matthew has called a meeting of the minds, and you should be there. It has to do with the DOD. Something's happened."

"What?" she whispered. "What's happened?"

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I don't know, but I'm..."

"You're what?"

"We haven't heard from the DOD since before Halloween. That's not normal, especially with all the

energy we put out while fighting Baruck. Something's up and I...I don't think it's good, Kitten."

When the Thompsons arrived a few minutes after we got back to my house, Andrew looked at Kat sitting in the chair and rolled his eyes. "Anyone have a clue why she's here?"

Kat sighed. Andrew knew Matthew had texted Kat needed to be here. He was just trying to make her feel uncomfortable.

"She needs to be here." Matthew closed the door behind him and walked into the center of the room. Dee waved at him in between shoving fistfuls of popcorn into her mouth. "I want to keep this little get-together short."

"The DOD knows about her, right? We're all in trouble?" Ash asked, running her hand over purple tights.

Kat paled. "Do they, Mr. Garrison?"

"As far as I know, they don't know about you," he said. "The Elders called a meeting tonight because of the increase in DOD presence here. It appears something has caught the DOD's attention."

Adam stared at a buttery piece of popcorn. "Well, what did they see? No one's done anything wrong."

Dee set the bag of popcorn aside. "What's the deal?"

Matthew's gaze circled the room. "One of their satellites picked up the light show from Halloween weekend, and they've been out to the field, using some sort of machine that picks up on residual energy."

I scoffed. So now we knew they were aware of what went down, but that was nothing in comparison. "The only thing they're going to find is a burned patch of ground."

"They know we can manipulate light for self-defense, so from what I've gathered, that's not what caught their attention." Matthew looked at me, frowning. "It's the fact that the energy was so strong it disrupted a satellite's signal and they weren't able to snap any pictures of the event. Nothing like that has ever happened before."

I schooled my expression blank. "I guess I'm just that awesome."

Adam laughed under his breath. "You're so powerful you're disrupting signals now?"

"Disrupted only the signal?" Matthew barked a short laugh. "It destroyed the satellite—a satellite designed to track high-frequency light and energy. It zeroed in on Petersburg, and the event *destroyed* the satellite."

"Like I said, I'm that awesome." I smiled despite the tension creeping into my muscles.

"Wow," Andrew murmured. Respect gleamed in his eyes. "That's pretty awesome."

"As awesome as that is, the DOD is very curious. The Elders believe they will be here a while, monitoring things. That they've *been* here." Matthew paused and glanced at his wristwatch. "It's imperative that everyone is on their best behavior."

"What do the other Luxen have to say about this?" Dee asked.

"They aren't too concerned at this point. And they have no reason to be," Matthew said.

"Because it was Daemon who caused such a disruptive burst of energy and not them," Ash said, and then she gasped. "Does the DOD suspect we have more abilities?"

"I think they want to know how it's possible that he was able to do something like that." Matthew studied me. "The Elders told them there was a fight among our kind. No one implicated you, Daemon,

but they already know you're strong. You can be expecting a visit from them soon."

I shrugged, sort of welcoming their visit, because their being absent was more worrisome than their being all up in my shit.

"Katy, it's very important that you're careful when hanging around the Blacks," Matthew continued. "We don't want the DOD suspecting that you know anything you shouldn't."

"Speak for yourself," Andrew muttered.

I faced him. "Andrew, I'm going to knock the—"

"What?" Andrew exclaimed. "I'm just telling the truth. I don't have to like her because you're infatuated with the stupid human. None—"

Shooting across the room, I shifted into my true form as I snatched up and slammed Andrew into the wall. Pictures rattled. Plaster probably cracked, but I was so done with the shit he kept saying about Kat, so fucking over it.

"Daemon!" Kat shrieked.

Ash jumped out of her chair. "What are you doing?"

I thought I heard my sister say, "Here we go. Popcorn?"

And then from Adam, "Honestly, Andrew needs his ass kicked. The DOD's being here isn't Katy's fault. She has just as much to lose as we do."

Ash spun. "So you're taking her side now? A human's?"

"This isn't about sides," Kat argued.

Matthew shifted and placed his hand on my shoulder. When he spoke it wasn't out loud. *You need to let him go, Daemon. Now.*

He needs to stop talking shit.

Andrew wasn't saying a word now. I think he got the point.

Daemon, please. Fighting among ourselves isn't going to make this situation easier.

I pressed into Andrew. Knock this shit off with Kat. I'm being serious, man. I love you like a brother, I really do, but I'm not going to tolerate this. No more.

"None of this would be happening if you hadn't shown up here. You would've never gotten the original trace on you!" Ash shouted, drawing my attention. "The Arum would've never seen you, and this whole messed-up chain of events would've never happened!"

"Oh, shut up, Ash," Dee shot back. "Seriously. Katy risked her life to make sure the Arum didn't know where we lived."

"That's great and dandy," Ash snapped back. "But Daemon wouldn't have gone all Rambo on the Arum if his precious human weren't in danger every five seconds. This is her fault."

"I'm not his precious human!" she shouted, and Andrew flickered back into his human form. Matthew was still talking, but I wasn't listening to him anymore. "I'm just his...his friend," Kat said. "And that's what friends do. They protect each other. Well, it's what human friends do, at least."

"And it's what the Luxen do," Adam said. "Some just forget that."

Ash wasn't having it. "I'll wait outside."

In a few seconds, Andrew sidestepped me. I watched him closely. "Dude," he said. "That was just wrong. Knock me around all you want, but I'm not going to be okay with her."

"Andrew," Matthew warned.

"What?" Andrew threw up his hands. "Do you really think she can hold her own against the DOD if they question her? Because of how close she is to Dee and *you*, they *will* ask her questions. And you, Daemon, are you planning to do a repeat of your brother? Wanna die for her, too?"

My light flared brighter, and I was seconds from putting Andrew through a wall when I felt Kat's

hand wrap around my wrist. The touch in my true form jolted me. Calmed me.

"That was a low blow," Kat said, her voice shaking. "He doesn't even deserve your ass-kicking, Daemon."

"She's right," Adam said. He moved to stand next to me. "But if you want to put him out of commission for the next week after that comment, I'll help."

"Gee, thanks, brother." Andrew scowled.

Yeah, I wanted to knock him into next week, but what did that solve? Nothing. I shifted into my human form, looking down at where Kat's hand was still wrapped around my wrist. A charge passed between us, a crackling shock. She let go.

"This is the kind of display we cannot afford." Matthew ran his hand over his head. "I think that's enough for this evening. Both of you need to cool down and keep in mind that they are here. We need to be careful."

Everyone, including Dee, left the house. My sister wanted to make sure Adam didn't murder his brother. Understandable. Kat and I were left alone.

Thirsty and needing something to distract myself with, I walked to the kitchen. Kat followed, her voice soft. "I'm sorry about what Andrew said. That was wrong."

"It is what it is," I said, grabbing two cans of Coke. I handed her one.

"Still not right."

I searched her face intently for some sign of fear. "Are you worried about the DOD being here?"

There was a pause. "Yeah, I am."

"Don't be," I said, even though she should be.

"Easier said than done." She played with the tab on the can. "It's not me I'm worried about. They think you're responsible for what happened—the crazy energy thing. What if they think you're...a danger?"

How could I answer that? "It's not just me, Kitten. Even if I had done that, it's never been about me. It's about all the Luxen." I looked away, wetting my lips. "You know what Matthew believes?"

"No."

A cynical grin pulled at my lips. "He believes that one day, probably not in our generation, but someday, my kind and the Arum will nearly outnumber yours."

"Really? That's kind of..."

"Scary?"

She tucked her hair back. "I don't know if it's scary. I mean, the Arum thing is, but your kind—the Luxen—freaky powers aside...you're not very different from us."

"What about the fact that we're made of light?"

She smiled a little. "Well, besides that."

"It got me thinking," I said, going back to my point about what Matthew believed. "That if some of our kind believe this, how come the DOD isn't worried?"

"What happens if they think you are a threat? And don't beat around the bush about it."

Part of me didn't want to tell her this, but keeping her in the dark wasn't going to help her. "When I was at the compound before, there were Luxen who didn't assimilate. Mostly they didn't want to be kept under the thumb of the DOD. Others I guessed were viewed as a threat because they asked too many questions. Who really knows?"

She swallowed thickly. "What happened to them?"

Several moments passed before I answered. "They killed them."

CHAPTER 13

Horror filled Kat's gaze as she stared at me. I sensed the burst of energy a second before it rolled through the room. I twisted to the side as Kat dropped her unopened can of soda. It hit the floor as the kitchen chair flew out from underneath the table. I reached for the chair, but it changed course and slammed into Kat's leg.

Shooting forward, I caught Kat before she fell. "Whoa there, Kitten."

Kat pushed the hair out of her face as she lifted her head. She was favoring one leg, which wasn't surprising. That chair was trucking. "Holy crap..."

I eased a shoulder under her arm for support. "Are you okay?"

"I'm peachy." She wiggled free and placed weight on her leg. Her lips thinned, and then she bent over, rolling up her jeans. A thin stream of blood trickled down her leg. "Great, I'm a natural disaster."

"I might have to agree with that."

She shot me a dark look.

"Come on, get up on the table and let me look at that."

"I'm fine."

This wasn't something I was going to argue about. Moving fast, I caught her around the waist and carried her to the table, depositing her on it. When I pulled back, her mouth was hanging open.

"What...how did you do that?"

"Skill," I said, picking up her foot and placing it on a chair. My fingertips brushed over her skin as I rolled the leg of her pants above her knee. She jerked a little at the static charge that passed between my skin and hers. There was a nice little gash just below the knee. "Wow, you really are a disaster."

"Ugh, it's bleeding all over the place." She shuddered. "You're not going to heal me, are you?"

"Uh, no, because who knows what would happen then? You might turn into an alien."

"Ha. Ha."

I grabbed a clean towel and dampened it. Walking back to her, I carefully blotted up the blood. The weight of what Kat had just done settled heavily. She got emotional and stuff happened. This wasn't good. "What am I going to do with you, Kitten?"

"See? I didn't even want to move the chair, and it flew at me like a heat-seeking missile."

I shook my head. "When we were younger, things like this would happen all the time, before we could control the Source."

"The Source?"

"The energy in us—we call it the Source, because it links us back to our home planet, you know? Like the source of it all. At least, that's what our Elders say. Anyway, when we were kids and learning how to control our abilities, it was crazy. Dawson had this habit of moving furniture, like you. He'd

go to sit down and the chair would fly out from under him." I laughed as I remembered how many times he'd fallen on his ass. "But he was young."

"Great. So I'm operating at the level of a toddler?"

I lifted my eyes to hers. "Basically." I sat the towel aside. "Look, it's stopped bleeding already. Not that bad."

She glanced down at herself. "Thank you for cleaning it up."

"No problem. I don't think you'll need stitches." I ran my fingers over the cut, avoiding the angry red skin.

Kat jerked again, and when I looked up at her, her cheeks were flushed and lips slightly pursed. My hand stilled. "What are you thinking about?"

There was a pause, and then she blinked as her chest rose sharply. The flush increased. "Nothing."

I rose slowly, holding her gaze. Now was not the time for any of this, but she was here, and in this moment, nothing else mattered but that. Not her fledging ability or the DOD. Not the douche bag she'd been hanging out with. Not the fight between Andrew and me. It was just Kat.

Placing my hands on either side of her hips, I leaned over the chair and rested my forehead against hers. I inhaled deeply, and when I spoke, I barely recognized my own voice. "Do you know what I've been thinking about all day?"

"No."

I tilted my head and brushed my lips over the curve of her cheek. Her soft gasp grabbed hold of me. "Finding out if you look as good in striped socks as you do in reindeer ones."

Her cheeks rose against mine. "I do."

Drawing back, I smiled at her. "I knew it."

Kat's gaze held mine. Tension grew between us, in us. Her heart rate picked up, and it reflected in mine. It was like both of us were racing but not moving fast enough. I held back, waiting for her to look away, to push me away. She did neither, and I realized then she was also waiting.

Waiting for me.

A whitish tint filled my eyes as my control slipped. There wasn't even an inch of space between our mouths. I could already taste her. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

"I'm not doing anything."

I shifted my head just enough that our lips brushed once...and then twice. I waited for her to stop this. She didn't, and I wanted to shout with joy. I increased the pressure, and this kiss was different. I wasn't trying to prove something to her. This kiss wasn't out of anger. I was kissing her for the simple joy of doing so, and there was nothing as amazing as this.

Kat made this featherlight sound, a soft and breathy feminine moan, and I groaned in response. She undid me, completely, and she had no idea. Cupping her cheeks, I deepened the kiss. Her lips parted, letting me in. Our tongues met. Danced. Her hands curled around my wrists and then slid up my arms, leaving a storm of fire behind. I moved as close as I could with the chair between us, kissing her without coming up for air.

And Kat was kissing me back, her fingers digging through the material of my shirt, digging into my skin. What I was feeling, she was experiencing, and I—

The heavy oak chair trembled and then slid out from between us, as if one of us had pushed it away. The sudden void caught me off guard. I lurched forward, and Kat gave under my weight. With her tight grip, she brought me along with her, and then our bodies were pressed together.

My hips were between her legs and we were chest to chest, our bodies flush. Her legs curled up, drawing me in. My fingers splayed across her cheeks as she shoved her hands into my hair; her

fingers tugged. I slid one hand down, over the sweet swells, until I reached her rounded hip. I urged her closer, blown away by the red-hot feel of her under me.

Slowly, deliciously, the intensity of the kisses lessened, but not the power behind them. With one last lingering kiss, I lifted my head and stared down at her, drinking in the sight of her flushed face and damp, swollen lips.

"I didn't move that chair, Kitten."

"I know," she whispered.

"I'm assuming you didn't like where it was?"

"It was in your way." Her hands slipped down to my upper arms.

"I can see that." I smoothed a fingertip over the curve of her soft bottom lip, committing the satiny feel to memory. Then I took her hand and pulled her up so she was sitting, knowing that the moment the passion subsided in her, she was going to flip.

I didn't have to wait long.

Her eyes widened slightly. "We can't keep doing this. We—"

"We like each other." I let go of her hands and grasped the edges of the table on either side of her. "And before you say it, we were attracted to each other before I healed you. You can't say that's not true."

I leaned in, brushing my nose along her cheek, and she answered with a shudder. I pressed my lips against the spot under her ear. "We need to stop fighting what we both want. It's not going to be easy. It wasn't three months ago, and it won't be three months from now."

"Because of the rest of the Luxen?" Her head tipped back as I blazed a path of kisses down her throat. "They'll outcast you. Like—"

"I know." I slid a hand around the nape of her neck and pressed in so our bodies were sealed tight. "I've thought about the repercussions."

She lowered her head and opened her eyes. "And this has nothing to do with the connection or Blake?"

"No." I sighed. "Yes, some of it has to do with that human, but it's about us. About what we feel for each other."

She stared at me for several moments and then squirmed until she was able to dip under my arms. She flinched when she put weight on her injured leg and backed up. "Is this like a 'I didn't want you until someone else wanted you' type of thing?"

Struggling to keep a tight leash on my frustration, I leaned against the table. "That's not what this is."

"Then what is it, Daemon?" Tears built in her eyes, killing me. "Why now, when three months ago you couldn't stand to breathe the same air as me? It's the connection between us. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Dammit. Do you think I don't regret acting like such a douche to you? I've apologized." I pushed away from the table. "You don't get it. None of this is easy for me. And I know this is hard for you. You have a lot to deal with. But I have my sister and an entire race counting on me. I didn't want you to get close to me. I didn't want another person to care about, to worry about *losing*."

Kat drew back, obviously shocked, but I was on a roll now. "It wasn't right how I acted. I know that. But I can do better than that—better than Benny."

"Blake," she corrected. "I have a lot in common with *Blake*. He likes that I read a lot—"

"I do, too."

"And he also blogs."

I reached out and caught a piece of her hair and wrapped it around my finger. "I have nothing against the internet."

She knocked my hand away. "And he doesn't like me because of some stupid alien connection or because some other guy likes me."

"I don't either." I lowered my hand to my side. "You can't keep pretending. It's wrong. You'll break that boy's poor little human heart."

"No, I won't."

"You will, because you want me and I want you."

Shaking her head, she limped for the door. "You keep saying that..."

"What does that mean?" I demanded.

Kat briefly squeezed her eyes shut. "You say you want me, but that's not enough."

"I show you that I do, too."

"You do not."

"What was that?" I gestured at the table I would never look at the same again. "I think I showed you that I like you. I can do it again if you're not clear on what that was. And I brought you a smoothie and a cookie to school."

"You stuck the cookie in *your* mouth!" She threw her hands up in the air.

I smiled at that damn good memory. "The table..."

"Humping my leg like a dog in heat every time I'm around you doesn't prove you like me, Daemon."

I clamped my mouth shut before I laughed. "Actually, that's how I show people I like them."

"Oh. Fine. Whatever. None of this matters, Daemon."

"I'm not going anywhere, Kat. And I'm not giving up." Not on her—not on us. "Do you know why I met you that day in the library?"

"What?"

"The Friday you came back after being sick?" I ran a hand through my hair. "You were right. I picked the library because no one would see us together."

Her lips thinned as she looked away. "You know what, I've always wondered if your ego was so big you didn't want to eat crow."

"And as always, you jump to the wrong assumption." I waited until she looked at me before I continued. "I didn't want Ash or Andrew to start giving you a bunch of crap because of me like they did with Dawson and Beth. So if you think I'm embarrassed of you or not ready to make my intentions very public, then you better get that idea out of your head. Because if that's what it takes, then it's on."

And that's the second I realized that was what it was going to take.

"Daemon..."

I smiled at her then, a real smile that said so much. "I told you, Kitten. I like a challenge."

CHAPTER 14

On the way to school the next morning, I stopped at the florist shop—the only florist shop—a few blocks from school and picked up a single red rose. It was corny. Undeniably so, but if Kat seriously thought I wasn't willing to show people how serious I was about her, she had another think coming.

It was risky, possibly even stupid. It wasn't like I didn't know what the possible consequences could be, but if this was what it took to prove myself to Kat, then this was what I would do.

Walking into trig class a few moments before the bell rang, I hid the rose behind my notebook until I was in front of her.

Kat looked up, staring at the rose and then me blankly. I tapped a soft petal off the tip of her nose. "Good morning."

Dumbfounded, she stared at me.

"This is for you," I explained, knowing that the entire class was staring at us.

She took the green stem between her fingers and stared at it as I sat in my seat. "Oh holy baby Jesus," Lesa murmured, and I chuckled.

Kat placed the rose on the corner of her desk and then glanced over her shoulder at me. I peered up and met her questioning stare, and smiled. She faced the front of the classroom, and throughout class, I caught her several times staring at the rose.

Corny but worth it.

After class, Kat actually packed up her bag and turned to me, waiting for me to rise. Normally, she raced out of the classroom with Lesa and Carissa. She held the rose close to her chest. "Thank you for this," she said quietly, her gaze flickering to mine and then away. "It was very nice of you."

I raised a shoulder as I stepped into the aisle. "You like it?"

She nodded. "Of course."

We walked out of the classroom and she stopped, placing her hand on my arm. She tugged on my shirt, and I followed her over to the rarely used water fountain. "Did you hear about Simon?" she asked, glancing at the crowd of students.

"What?" I frowned. "What about him?"

Her worried gaze met mine. "He's missing."

"Missing? Since when?"

She shook her head. "I don't know the exact timing, but Lesa said since this past weekend..." She lowered her voice as she stepped closer. "I saw him Friday night. He disappeared sometime after that."

"That's...weird." I brushed the hair back from my face, considering it. "It could mean nothing, Kat. It's hunting season around here. Maybe he took off to go hunting."

"And forgot to tell his parents?" she questioned.

"Not everyone is responsible." Though it was hard to believe Simon would roam off without telling his parents, stranger things have been known to happen. I knew what Kat was getting at with this. Reaching between us, I wrapped my hand around hers, careful to not damage the rose, and squeezed gently. "It most likely has nothing to do with you."

She opened her mouth.

"I mean it, Kitten." My eyes searched hers. "Statistically, this has nothing to do with anything we've got going on. Okay?"

Looking away, she nodded. "Okay."

I let go of her hand, knowing that no matter what she said, she was afraid that Simon's disappearance had something to do with what happened Friday night with the windows. Truthfully? I wasn't so sure it didn't.

Coincidences nowadays weren't very likely.

I'd checked in with Matthew later that day to see if he'd heard anything about Simon. Being that he was on staff, I figured he might know more, but all he knew was what we did. Simon's parents had reported him missing the night before. He hadn't been seen in over seventy-two hours.

It wasn't long before the cops showed up. They'd questioned all the students, though Kat was paranoid about the fact that we were in the first wave of students questioned. I wasn't entirely surprised. It was common knowledge I wasn't a fan of Simon, but the police didn't appear too concerned about Simon's well-being. I could tell they thought he was a runaway.

I filed what was going on with Simon in the back of my mind, because there were other more pressing things to take care of. Like getting Kat's newfound abilities under control.

And wooing her through lattes, egg-and-bacon breakfast croissants, and glazed doughnuts. Kat seemed to approve of these tactics, because she didn't complain when I showed up at her house after school whenever she wasn't with Dee and hung out with her.

During that time, we watched movies. Or she blogged. We grabbed food from Smoke Hole or just ate snacks. I wanted her to relax before I started to work with her. I figured if she was in a good place, it would be easier. So that meant I kept my distance. For the most part. Douche Bag stayed away from her. I knew he texted and called, but there were no more dinner dates, and when I started eating lunch with her in the cafeteria, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

I had a plan for her on Saturday, though, a pretty damn good idea, I thought.

Leaning against the railing with my hands in my pocket, I waited for her out on her front porch. Thanksgiving was a handful of days away, and the air was chilly, so I was relieved to see her step outside with a hoodie on. It wasn't a jacket, but at least it was better than nothing.

She held the door open for me. I stepped inside, brushing past her. "You look nice today."

Kat glanced down at herself with a frown and then her hand flew to her hair, smoothing back a wild strand. "So...what's up?"

"I just wanted to see you," I replied, which was partly true, because I always liked seeing her.

"Oh."

I chuckled. "I thought we could take a walk. It's nice outside."

Glancing in the direction of her living room, she bit down on her lip, worrying it. I was probably interrupting her book gushing.

"I'll behave myself," I said. "I promise."

She laughed softly at that. "All right, let's go."

Grinning, I steered her outside and to my SUV. She stopped in front of it, casting me a long look before asking, "Exactly where are we going to take a walk?"

"Outdoors," I replied, opening the door for her.

"Well, I think I figured that part out."

"You ask a lot of questions, you know."

"I've been told I'm very inquisitive."

I leaned forward and whispered, "I think I figured that part out."

She made a face, but climbed into the car. I headed around the front and got in. Kat was quiet until I backed out of the driveway. "Have you heard anything about Simon?" she asked. "I haven't."

"I haven't, either."

The trees crowding the highway were an array of gold and red. Soon, the branches would be bare.

"Do you think an Arum had anything to do with his disappearance?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I haven't seen any, but we can't be too sure."

Kat was quiet as I drove, but as soon as I pulled the SUV off the road and parked it along the entrance to where all the field parties were held, she climbed out. "Why here?"

Dead leaves of various colors littered the ground, crunching under my steps as I walked over to her. "This place might hold a lot of residual energy from our fight and from Baruck's death." I stepped around a fallen limb. "Watch out, the branches are scattered everywhere."

"This might sound messed up, but I've wanted to come back here. I don't know why," she said. "Crazy, huh?"

"No. It makes sense to me."

"Is it the whole energy thing?"

"It's what's left over." I bent and pushed another fallen limb out of the way. "I want to see if I feel anything. If the DOD has been out here to check it out, it might be good to be in the know."

The rest of the trip was in silence, and I wondered what Kat was thinking by the time we reached the area. She toed at the dead leaves, brushing them aside. I squinted as the scarred ground came into view. Kat unearthed most of the burned patch, her hands shoved into the pocket of her hoodie. Thin slivers of light streamed through the branches, catching the red tint in her dark hair.

"The ground will never heal," I said. "I don't know why, but it took on his essence and nothing will grow from this spot." I took over, pushing back the leaves until the area was uncovered completely. Staring at what was virtually a grave site, I thought back to the first time I'd taken down an Arum. "Killing at first used to bother me. I didn't like it, taking a life. I still don't. A life is a life."

Kat swallowed. "It's something you have to do. You can't change it. It only wreaks havoc on you to dwell. It bothers me knowing that I've killed...two of them, but—"

"You aren't wrong for what you did. Never think that." My eyes met hers briefly, and then I cleared my throat. "I don't feel anything."

She was quiet for a moment. "Do you think the DOD found anything?"

"I don't know." I walked over to where she stood. "Depends on if they're using equipment I'm not familiar with."

Her chin tilted up. "And if they are, what does that mean? Is it something to be worried about?"

"I don't think so, not even if the levels of energy are higher." I smoothed back the strand of hair that had escaped her ponytail. "It doesn't really tell them anything. Have you been experiencing any outbursts recently?"

"No," she replied, pulling her hands free from her hoodie.

I really didn't believe her.

My hand lingered on her cheek for a few seconds, and then I caught her hand. Lifting her hand to my lips, I pressed a kiss against the center of her palm. I felt her shiver.

"Did you bring me out here just to get me completely alone?"

"That may have been a part of my master plan." That hadn't been a part of my plan. Not really. I wanted to see if she could use her abilities here, but I figured I could multitask. Lowering my head, I kissed her gently.

Kat kissed me back for like a nanosecond and then jerked back. "No kissing."

"I'm trying not to."

"Then try harder." She slipped her hand free and took a step back, shoving her hands back into the pocket of her hoodie. "I think we should head home."

Kissing her had been a bad move, because now her walls were up, and I wasn't going to get her to do anything. "Whatever you want." When she nodded, we started back. A few moments passed. "So I was thinking."

Her glance was wary. "About what?"

"We should do something. Together. Outside of your house and not just walking around." I stared straight ahead, bracing myself. "We should go out to dinner or maybe a movie."

"Are you asking me out?" she asked.

I laughed under my breath. "That's what it sounds like."

As the trees thinned out, large bales of hay came into view. "You don't want to take me out on a date," she said.

"Why do you keep telling me what I don't want?" I really wanted to know that.

"Because you can't," she reasoned. "You can't want any of this with me, not really. Maybe with Ash_"

"I don't want Ash." I stopped walking and looked at her. "If I wanted her, I'd be with her. But I'm not. She's not *who* I want."

"Neither am I. You can't honestly tell me that you'd risk every Luxen around here turning their backs on you for me."

I shook my head in disbelief. "And you have got to stop assuming you know what I want and what I would do."

She started walking again. "It's just the challenge and the connection, Daemon. Whatever you feel for me isn't real."

"That's ridiculous," I spat.

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I know." I appeared in front of Kat, eyes narrowed as I stared down at her. I thumped my hand off my chest, directly above my heart. "Because I know what I feel in here. And I'm not the type of person to run from anything, no matter how hard it is. I'd rather face-plant against a brick wall than live for the rest of my life wondering what could've been. And you know what? I didn't think you were the type to run, either. Maybe I was wrong."

Kat blinked as she pulled her hands out of her hoodie. "I don't run."

"You don't? Because that's what you're doing," I argued. "You pretend what you feel for me isn't real or doesn't exist. And I know damn well you don't feel anything for Bobby."

"Blake," she corrected, walking around me. I followed "I don't want to talk—"

I ground to a halt; my heart caught and then sped up in my chest, mirroring Kat's. Two Expeditions were parked on either side of my car, blocking me in. Without saying a word, I stepped in front of Kat.

The DOD was here.

CHAPTER 15

I recognized all of the DOD officers immediately. Officer Lane was the first to step forward, his wary gaze trained on me. "Hello, Mr. Black and Ms. Swartz," he said.

"Hey, Lane." I kept my voice calm. "I wasn't expecting you today."

"We got into town a little early and saw your car." Lane smiled.

Officer Vaughn squinted, as if trying to see through me. For once in her life, Kat was remaining quiet behind me. "What were you guys doing out here?"

"There was a party here last night, and we were looking for her cell phone." I threw a grin over my shoulder and prayed to whoever may be listening that she didn't have her cell on her and it didn't ring. "She lost it and we're still looking for it. So I can meet you guys later. Once we find the..."

The passenger door of one of the Expeditions opened and an icy blonde-haired woman stepped out. I swallowed a curse, recognizing the sharp features. "Underage drinking?" She smiled, but it was fake. It was wrong.

Every part of me tensed as I stared at Nancy Husher. Dealing with Lane and Vaughn was one thing, but this woman? She was trouble, and not the fun kind. I didn't see her often, and the fact that she was here did not bode well.

"We weren't drinking," Kat spoke up. "He knows better. His parents are like mine. They'd kill him." I kept my face blank as a sheet of paper.

"Well, I was hoping to catch up with you, Daemon, and we could get an early...dinner." Lane motioned toward his Expedition. "We only have a few hours. I hate to cut your cell phone search-and-rescue short."

Staring at Husher for a moment, I nodded. "It's okay. I can take her home and meet up with you guys."

"That won't be necessary," Husher said. "We can take her back, and you guys can catch up."

Oh, I did not like that. Not at all. A muscle thrummed along my jaw, and I was seconds away from telling Husher she could go screw herself, but Kat stepped forward with a bright smile. "That's cool with me," she said. "I just hope it's not going out of your way."

My right hand clenched and I wanted to shout at Kat. She didn't know Husher, didn't know what that woman was capable of. I didn't want Kat in the same zip code as Husher, let alone in a vehicle with her.

"It's not out of the way," Husher replied. "We love the roads back here. Fall colors and all. Ready?"

Kat walked toward the SUV, glancing back at me as Husher opened the back door of the Expedition. I forced my legs to move toward my car, but I didn't take my eyes off the vehicle. Not when Husher closed the door on Kat. Not when that woman smiled in my direction before climbing into the passenger seat. Not when Vaughn got behind the wheel. Not until the Expedition backed out of the

field and pulled out onto the road, disappearing from view.

There was nothing I could do.

Helplessness poured into me, followed by bitter frustration.

Lane stopped by his driver's door. "They'll take your friend home, Daemon."

I met his steady gaze and spoke the damn truth. "I don't trust a single one of you."

"That's a vice versa thing," he replied. "Always has been. You and I know that, but they will take your friend home."

His words didn't ease the tension building in me. "People know she left with me today," I said, which so wasn't true, but figured it couldn't hurt. "If she disappears, it's not going to look good for me."

Lane shook his head. "Like I said, that girl will go home."

"She better," I warned, and left it at that.

He opened his car door with a sigh. "I'm hungry. Let's go grab something to eat."

Getting food was the last thing I wanted, but Smoke Hole was closer to home than where we were, so we headed there in each of our cars. Even though it was a Saturday and the waiting area was crowded, I came to Smoke Hole enough that we were seated immediately

And the fact that the waitress was a Luxen and recognized who Lane was helped.

No one was seated near us in the back.

All I ordered was a glass of water, but Lane went all out, picking the meat loaf off the menu, like he always did when we met here. After the waitress rushed off to fulfill the orders, Lane leaned back in the seat, and when he spoke, he kept his voice low. "I'm not going to beat around the bush. What went down on Halloween night?"

I folded my arms across my chest and met his stare. "Why has it taken so long for you all to come around and ask me?"

"I just got my orders on Friday to talk to you," he replied.

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"I don't need to tell you more than that." He raised his hands. "I'm not trying to be a dick to you, but I just carry out my orders, and when they change, I know better than to question them. You should learn from that."

My lips twisted into a wry smirk. "Well, you know me, I'm not real good at learning things."

Lane laughed drily. "Now, I know that's not true." He paused when our drinks arrived. "What happened over Halloween?"

I took a healthy drink of my water before responding. "One of the guys from the colony got a little out of control. He was threatening my sister and... and my friends."

"Kind of odd to see you with a human friend," he cut in.

My finger trailed along the cool glass. "Well, it's kind of hard not to when she lives right next door. That's not my fault. You all let her and her mother move in. Anyway," I went on, feigning boredom with the conversation. I went along with what I knew the Elders had told the DOD according to Matthew. "He was out of control. We fought. It was pretty impressive."

"I'll say. Took out a satellite."

I grinned. "Cool."

Lane's stare was dry as his plate of food arrived. He cut into the meat loaf with an expression of bliss on his face. "What happened to the one who got out of control?"

Good question. I wasn't sure what the Elders had told them, but with that kind of display of power, someone died. The Elders would've known that. "No longer a problem."

He paused, a huge chunk of meat loaf dangling from his fork. "You know that's forbidden."

I took another drink. "And what would you have had me do? Let him expose us? Expose that the government is well aware of—"

"I get it," he interrupted, chewing thoughtfully. "Your colony reported the same thing. Officer Husher didn't seem to have a problem with it, just so you know. Talking with you today is just procedural."

A little bit of relief set in. "Why did Husher come along? This seems too pedestrian for her."

He snickered. "Officer Husher likes to do ride-alongs every once in a while. Today was just your lucky day."

Now it was my turn to snort. My dislike of Husher was no big secret. I glanced out the window. Night had begun to fall. I wished I could trust Lane. I liked him, but I knew that I was just a job to him. One he tolerated. I turned my attention back to him. He looked up, only a small piece of meat loaf remaining on his plate.

"What?" he asked.

I picked up my glass. "Nothing."

Lane finished off his meat loaf, leaving the mashed potatoes untouched, like always. He placed his fork on the plate and leaned back. "Off the record?"

Yeah, right. I waited.

"You're being smart, right?"

My fingers stilled on the glass. "About what?"

"The girl. Katy."

"You sound like a father, Lane." My tone was nonchalant, but that wasn't what I was feeling.

Lane's grin was small. "Sometimes I feel like that. I'm not asking what is going on with you two. You're both young and the differences don't matter in the...heat of the moment. She's a pretty girl. Be smart, Daemon."

I wasn't being smart when it came to Kat, and I had all but given up on that.

Pulling into the driveway, I parked my car and opened the door. There wasn't a light on at Kat's house, but as I neared my porch, I felt the warm tingle along the back of my neck. I almost hit my knees. She was here. She was okay. I climbed the steps.

The front door swung open, and Kat was a blur as she raced out. I barely had time to prepare myself. She threw herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and squeezing tight. My heart was racing, just like hers, and the greeting stunned me, so much so that I froze for a second.

Then I wrapped my arms around her waist, sealing her to me. I was aware of Dee stepping outside. "Whoa there, Kitten, what's going on?"

Face-planting in my chest, she didn't respond for a moment. "I thought the DOD carted you off to some lab to keep you in a cage."

"Cage?" I laughed a bit unsteadily. "No. No cages. They just wanted to talk. It took longer than I thought. Everything's okay."

Dee cleared her throat. "Ahem."

Kat stiffened in my embrace and seemed to realize what she was doing. She wiggled free, backing up a step. "I...I was just excited."

"Yeah, I'd say you were," Dee said.

I stared at Kat, my lips slowly curving up. "I kind of like this level of excitement. Makes me think of

"Daemon!" both of them shouted.

"What?" I stepped toward my sister, tousling her hair in the way I knew annoyed the crap out of her. "I was only suggesting—"

"We know what you were suggesting." Dee dodged my hand. "And I really want to keep my food down tonight." She smiled at Kat. "See. I told you. Daemon is fine."

Kat had obviously been very, very worried about me. Awesome. Right now, she looked pretty embarrassed. "They didn't suspect anything?"

I shook my head. "Nothing out of the norm, but they're always paranoid." I figured there was no point going into details right now. "Really, you don't need to worry. You're safe."

She stared at me and then shook her head, like I wasn't getting something. "All right, I need to go home."

"Kat..."

"No." She waved me off, starting down the steps. "I really need to go home. Blake called, and I need to call him back."

"Boris can wait," I said as Dee slipped back inside.

"Blake," she said, stopping on the sidewalk. A shaky hand rose and smoothed back the wayward strands around her face. "They asked me a lot of questions—especially the lady."

"Nancy Husher." I frowned as I went down the steps. "She's apparently a big deal within the DOD. They wanted to know what happened Homecoming weekend. I gave them the Daemon-edited version."

"Did they believe you?"

I nodded. "Hook, line, and sinker."

She shivered. "But it wasn't you, Daemon. It was me. Or it was all of us."

"I know, but they don't know that." I lowered my voice as I cupped her cool cheek in my hand. "They won't ever know that."

Her eyes closed as she turned her cheek into my hand. "It's not me I'm worried about. If they think you blew a satellite out of orbit, they could see you as a threat."

"Or they could just think I'm that awesome."

"It's not funny," she whispered.

"I know." I moved closer and, drawing in a deep breath, I drew her back into my arms. "Don't worry about me or Dee. We can handle the DOD. Trust me."

Kat placed her hands on my sides and stayed there for a handful of precious moments, and during that time, the world quieted a little. Then she slipped free. "I didn't tell that lady anything. And the damn phone rang as I was getting out of the car. She knew we were lying about why we were there."

Shit. Talk about bad timing with the phone. "They're not going to care about us lying over the phone. They probably think we were out there getting it on or something. You don't need to worry, Kat."

She lifted her eyes, meeting mine. "I'm glad you're okay."

I smiled. "I know."

CHAPTER 16

"All the kids were basically like X-Men in that book you told me to read. I still really liked it, though," Dee said, placing her hand over a cup of butter. "But if I could pick a superpower, it would be the ability to read minds."

Kat stared at her as my sister melted the cup of butter with her hands. Slowly, Kat looked over to where I was leaned against the counter. She raised her brows at me and then said, "Dee, you are basically already a mutant. I mean, you just melted butter with your hands."

"Can't read minds though, now can I?" Dee poured the butter over the chopped potatoes. "Or see through walls."

"Or control objects," I mused, and then grinned when they both looked at me. "Oh, wait, we can do that."

"It's not the same," Dee reasoned, waving her hand. The tray of potatoes lifted and slid into the open oven door. The door closed without her touching it.

Kat shook her head. "This is so weird."

Spinning around, Dee hopped up on the counter and crossed her ankles. "God, I wish we had more than the week off for Thanksgiving."

"I'm pretty sure we're getting more time off than most," Kat said, sitting in the kitchen chair. She had come over just before Dee decided she wanted to do a test run on Thanksgiving potatoes. "At my old high school, we only got a half day on Wednesday and Thursday and Friday off."

"I think we should get two weeks off." Dee shrugged. "It's only Tuesday, and I already feel like it's almost over."

I raised a brow as I pushed away from the counter. "Probably because you slept half of Monday and Tuesday away."

"Whatever," she said, grinning. "I'm preparing for the Wednesday grocery shopping trip from hell. Can't wait."

Kat's eyes widened. "You actually want to go out there the day before Thanksgiving?"

My sister, who was crazy, nodded. "I love it. People are insane, running around and grabbing stuff. I love the excitement."

"I bet you love Black Friday shopping, too."

"Uh, yes. I can move lightning-fast. I get those deals." Dee popped off the counter. "I'm gonna hop in the shower. You're not leaving soon, right?"

Kat glanced over at me. "You haven't showered yet? It's like five in the evening."

A sheepish look crossed her face. "I sort of slept in today, like Daemon said."

"I'll be here."

Dee shot me a look that warned behave as she darted out of the kitchen. I grabbed a Coke for Kat

and then joined her at the table.

"Thanks," she said, taking the can and popping the lid. She glanced up at me and then quickly turned her gaze to her red can. Kat had holed herself up in her house since Saturday night. She sat back, glancing at the kitchen door. "Sometimes the only logical explanation for why your sister enjoys the things she does is because she's an alien."

I laughed as I stretched out my legs. "I don't even think she's from my planet."

Kat smiled at that. "Are you going shopping with her?"

My brows flew up. "Hell no. I would not subject myself to that kind of torture. Adam's going with her."

"I bet he's happy about that." She took a sip and then reached up, brushing a loose strand of hair back from her face. "Nice of him to do that."

"Yeah." I toyed with the can. "Have you been displaying any mutant abilities?"

She stared at her can and shook her head. "Nope."

I eyed her closely, unsure if I believed her or not, but why would she lie? Knowing her, she probably didn't want me to worry. "Nothing at all."

"No." Those thick lashes lifted. "Has the DOD come around since Saturday?"

"That would be a no." I took a drink and then placed the can down. I leaned forward, resting an arm on the table. "So you're going to join us for Thanksgiving?"

Her lips curved up at the corners. "Dee's invited me, but I'm not sure yet."

"Why?"

"It's just...I don't know. I don't want to creep all up in your family time."

Extending my arm, I tapped my fingers on hers. She peered up at me through her lashes. "You know you're seriously welcome, right? It's not just Dee and me having dinner."

"I know," she said. "The Thompsons and Mr. Garrison are coming over, but they're your family. I'm not."

I met her stare. "You're just as important to us."

Her gaze rested on where my fingers touched her hand. "I'll think about it."

"Promise?"

She glanced up and grinned. "Of course."

I pulled my arm back. "So how's Beethoven been? Seen him lately?"

"Beethoven?" She laughed with a shake of her head. "You mean Blake."

"Whatever."

"You're such an ass," she said, smiling slightly. "How can you not remember his name?"

I smirked. "He's just not that memorable."

"Uh-huh."

"So? You've seen him?"

"No," she said. "He's visiting his family during Thanksgiving break."

"Maybe we'll get lucky and he'll stay there," I suggested.

Her eyes rolled. "You'd like that."

"Undoubtedly."

Kat cocked her head to the side. "There're the adverbs again."

"Oh, I have more for you. How about undeniably? Unequivocally?"

She eyed me over her can of soda. "Aren't you so proud of yourself."

"Unashamedly."

A giggle snuck out of her as she lowered her can. "That sums up you in one word."

"It's a good word." I watched her toy with the tab on her can. She peeked up at me, and when our eyes met this time, she didn't look away. A long, tense silence stretched out between us, and I thought about how relieved she'd been when I'd come home Saturday night.

Kat didn't get it when it came to the whole Thanksgiving thing. She didn't think she belonged or was a part of us. She had no idea that she was beginning to mean more to me than...

Well, than anyone else that was going to be here on Thanksgiving. And that was dangerous. Potentially stupid. Risky. Also exhilarating.

Thrilling.

I ignored the look Dee sent in my direction as I gathered up the last of the Christmas decorations that I figured she wouldn't murder me in my sleep for taking. She was smiling knowingly. Of course she was. And that was why I was pretending she didn't exist.

Making a quick pass into the kitchen, I grabbed the covered plates and then went back to the box by the door.

"Very sweet of you," Dee said.

"Shut it."

She giggled as I willed the door open and stepped outside. I used the Source to get the box. It floated behind me like a puppy. As I crossed the lawn and stepped onto the front porch, I knew I was taking a risk, because I never knew what version of Kat I was going to get these days, but I couldn't stand the idea of her spending Thanksgiving alone.

Like it or not, she would be continuing her traditions.

As I knocked on the door, I felt the familiar tingle along the back of my neck and grinned. A few seconds later the door opened.

Kat's lips parted, and hell, that made me want to kiss her. But I always wanted to kiss her, so that was no different from any other day.

"Hey." I lifted the stack of covered plates. "Happy Thanksgiving."

She blinked. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"You going to invite me in?" I wiggled the plates. "I come bearing gifts in the form of food."

For a moment, she didn't move, and then she stepped aside. I walked in, motioning at the box behind me. It landed inside the foyer with a jingle, and Kat just stood there, staring at me like I had walked into the house butt-ass-naked.

"I brought a little of everything." Off to the kitchen I went. "There's turkey, yams, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, some kind of apple crisp thing and pumpkin—Kitten? Are you coming?"

Silent, she followed me in as I got two candleholders and candles that looked like they've never been used. With a wave of my hand, the wicks caught fire. She was still quiet as I went about setting up dinner, and I wasn't sure what to make of it.

"And after dinner, I have another surprise for you," I warned her.

"You do?" she whispered.

I nodded. "But you've got to join me for dinner first."

She slowly made her way to the table and sat, clearing her throat. "Daemon, I...I don't know what to say, but thank you."

Uncomfortable with the thanks, I shrugged. "Thanks aren't necessary. You didn't want to come over, which I understand, but you shouldn't be alone."

Her gaze dropped, and I got hung up on staring at those freaking thick as hell lashes. Then she reached for the wineglass I'd filled, downing the drink in one gulp.

Holy hell.

"Lush," I murmured.

Her lovely lips tipped up at the corners. "Maybe—for today."

I nudged her with my knee under the table. "Dig in before it gets cold."

The food was divine.

Dee was a damn good cook, which I was suddenly thrilled about, because watching Kat dig into the food with such gusto and enjoyment really made my mind wander into places that had nothing to do with roasted turkey or buttered rolls, but had everything to do with...well, with Kat.

The second glass of wine flushed her cheeks, and things were cool while we cleaned up together after dinner. No. More than cool. Familiar. As if we'd done this every night, which was bizarre, because I was lucky to wash my own dishes at home, but this...yeah, this was good.

She followed me into the foyer, her eyes bright as I moved the large box into the living room. Kat sat on the couch, clasping her hands together as she watched me with a curious expression. Cute. She was so freaking cute. Had no idea.

Taking a deep breath, I opened up the box and pulled out the first green-needled branch. I poked her with it. "I think we have a Christmas tree to put up. I know it's not during the parade, but I think Charlie Brown's Thanksgiving special is on, and, well, that's not too bad."

Her lips parted again, but this time she didn't just stare at me. Her eyes suddenly took on a glossy sheen. Kat jumped from the couch and raced out of the room.

I stared at the entryway and then dropped the branch. Moving faster than she could track, I darted into the hallway, appearing in front of her, blocking the stairway. She skidded back and tried to turn, but I grasped her arms. "I didn't do this to make you cry, Kat."

"I know," she sniffled. "It's just..."

Fuck. This was not how I planned this going. I wanted her to be happy, to smile. I wanted her to see that even without her father, she could still have tradition.

"It's just what?" I cupped her cheeks, thumbing away the tears. "Kitten?"

Her shoulders rose and fell. "I don't think you know how much...something like this means to me." More tears tracked down her cheeks. "I haven't done this since—since Dad was alive. And I'm sorry to cry, because I'm not sad. I just didn't expect this."

Damn.

Those words hit me in the chest like I'd been sucker punched.

Maybe in the back of my head, I knew how much this could mean to her, but I wasn't prepared. Tugging her toward me, I wrapped my arms around her, and I closed my eyes as she face-planted on my chest. "It's okay. I get it. Good tears and all."

Kat didn't respond, but she held me back, and in that moment, I felt the change in her. Her muscles relaxed as if she'd been holding herself away this whole time. And I relished those moments, basked in them as if I were feeling the warmth of sunlight after a frigid winter.

Then she moved.

Reaching up, she clasped my cheeks and started to guide my head down. My heart freaking stopped when she kissed me. It was quick and over well before I wanted it to be, but it hit me hard. Man, dug right into me.

"Thank you," she said, her voice breathy. "I really mean it. Thank you."

It took every ounce of control not to bring that mouth back to mine, but somehow I managed. I smoothed away the last of her tears. "Don't let anyone know about my sweet side. I have a reputation to keep up."

Kat laughed. "All right, let's do this."

Putting up Christmas decorations with Kat was nothing like I'd ever experienced. She was animated, lovely as she touched every bulb and strand of lights. Sometimes she laughed. Sometimes she would look away quickly, thinking I didn't notice how her eyes would suddenly go unfocused and shiny. I didn't point it out, not wanting to overwhelm her, and she'd always recover quickly.

When she picked up a bright green bulb, she looked at me, looked at the bulb, and then smiled in a way that made me want to know what was going on in that head of hers. Once the tree was finished, I was tired, but the night was worth it. She stared at the end result with the biggest, most beautiful smile I'd ever seen.

"I love it," she declared.

The tree was lopsided, but if she loved it, then I was down with it. "Yeah, it's pretty good. Dee put up the tree this morning. She has to have everything the same color, but I think our tree looks better. It's like a disco ball."

Her smile got even bigger.

I bumped her shoulder with mine. "You know, I had fun doing this."

"I did, too."

I lowered my gaze. "It's late."

"I know." She paused, her expression tense. "You want to stay?"

Either I was hallucinating or she seriously just asked me that.

"I don't mean that," she added immediately.

"Not that I'd complain if you did." My gaze dropped. "Not at all."

She rolled her eyes, but her face was such a pretty shade of red, and my pulse...my pulse was out of control. Outwardly, I was calm, but my mind was racing a mile a minute.

"I'm going to get changed," she said.

"Need help?"

"Wow. You're so chivalrous, Daemon."

I smiled, unable to help myself. "Well, the experience would be mutually beneficial. I promise."

The flush deepened.

"Stay."

I stayed in place for a whole minute, if that. And I knew I should've stayed there, but I'd always had a problem with impulse control. Actually, I only had a problem with impulse control when it came to Kat.

Stealing quietly up the stairs, I went straight for her bedroom. I could hear her moving around in the bathroom as I drifted to the window. When she stepped out, she froze, and I immediately questioned the intelligence behind my decision to come up here, because I really liked how thin her shirt was.

And I really loved those freaking little shorts.

"I got bored."

She shook her head. "I wasn't even gone five minutes."

"I have a short attention span." My gaze dipped. "Nice shorts."

Her lips twitched into a grin. "What are you doing up here?"

Good question. Guess "I was a glutton for torture" wasn't the right answer. "You said I could stay." I glanced at the bed. "I didn't think you meant staying on the couch."

Uncertainty flickered across her face as her gaze followed mine. I didn't want that. I didn't want her to change her mind and kick me out. Not tonight.

Not ever.

Walking toward her slowly, I stopped in front of her. "I'm not going to bite."

"That's good."

"Unless you want me to."

"Nice," she muttered, stepping around me.

Since she hadn't told me to get my ass out of there, I decided it was a go. I kicked off my shoes and then tugged my shirt off, going for my jeans before she changed her mind.

"What—what are you doing?" she asked, stuttering.

I looked down at myself and then at her. "Getting ready for bed."

"But you're getting naked!"

I arched a brow. "I do have boxers on. What? Do you expect me to sleep in my jeans?"

"You did last time."

A laugh burst out of me. "Actually, I had pajama bottoms on."

Kat opened her mouth like she was about to say something and then changed her mind. Turning away from me, she walked over to a book on her desk. I watched her for a moment, and then I took it there. I climbed into the bed, folding my arms behind my head so that I didn't grab her the minute she decided to get her butt to the bed.

Finally, after about ten years, she turned around and whispered, "This was a bad idea."

"It was probably the smartest idea you've ever had."

Her hands moved along her hips, drawing my attention. "It's going to take a lot more than Thanksgiving dinner and a Christmas tree to get laid."

Sometimes I wondered what in the hell she thought of me. "Damn. There goes my whole plan."

Her eyes narrowed, and then she finally moved. Stomping—yes, stomping—over to the other side of the bed, she yanked the covers back and all but threw herself into the bed.

I grinned.

"Can you turn off the light?" she asked.

Without moving, I turned it off. Darkness enveloped us.

"That's a handy ability," she muttered.

"It is."

"Maybe one day I can be just as lazy as you and turn off lights without moving."

"That's something to aspire to."

"God, you're so modest," she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice.

"Modesty is for saints and losers. I'm neither."

"Wow, Daemon, just wow."

Rolling onto my side, facing her, I simply stared at her back for a moment. "I can't believe you haven't kicked me out yet."

"Same here," she murmured.

I shifted closer, stopping when my legs brushed against hers. The skin-on-skin contact was hard to ignore, but this needed to be said. "I really didn't mean to make you cry earlier."

She moved onto her back and stared up at me as I rose up on one elbow. "I know," she said. "The whole thing you did, it was sort of amazing."

"I just didn't like the idea of you being alone," I admitted quietly.

Kat sucked in a sharp breath, and her gaze met mine. I couldn't look away. Only she had that kind of power over me. How in the hell could she not see that?

I reached out, catching a strand of her hair and brushing it back. An electric charge traveled up my hand. Her gaze dropped to my mouth, and I knew—dammit, I knew she was feeling exactly what I was feeling.

"We should go to sleep," she said, voice lower, thicker.

"We should." I palmed her cheek.

She didn't look away as she lifted her hand, brushing her fingers over my lips. The touch sent a jolt of lust straight through me. I shifted my hand closer, giving her more room to play as I slid my hand down to her neck. Her heart sped up, beating in tandem with mine. I dipped my head, pressing a quick kiss atop her nose.

And then I kissed her.

I took my time. It was slow and deep. It burned right through me, and I wanted more, so much more. I wanted her. I wanted her in any and every way I could have her.

But she wasn't mine.

Reining it all in, calling on all the self-control I had, I lifted my head and shifted onto my back. I kept my arm around her. "Good night, Kitten."

She sighed loudly. "That's all?"

Damn. I laughed. "That's all...for now."

Her heart hadn't slowed. Neither had mine. After a couple of moments, she sighed again and then squirmed closer, quietly nudging me until I snaked my arm under her head, and rested her cheek there. I turned my head to her. Our eyes met. Her scent enveloped me, and even though I closed my eyes, I knew I wouldn't be sleeping for a long, long time.

And I also know that although she wasn't mine now, she would be one day.

CHAPTER 17

I was slow to wake up, and it had everything to do with the girl in my arms, curled against me. The warmth of Kat's body seeped into mine, and as I blinked my eyes open, I didn't want to leave this bed.

I knew I had to. Soon. Faint light from the window cut across the bed. Her mom would be home soon, and I seriously doubted she would be thrilled to find me in her daughter's bedroom despite the fact that nothing, other than a kiss, had gone down between us.

My chin dipped and I swallowed a groan.

Damn, I wanted more than a kiss right now. A lot more.

My hips were cradling her body. She was tucked into me, and man, if she woke up right now, things would get real awkward.

It didn't help that in her sleep, she had kicked off most of the covers, and the curve of her thighs looked incredibly soft. Her shirt had ridden up, and my forearm was resting against the bare skin of her stomach.

Seriously, it didn't take much to turn me on when it came to Kat. She could just look at me. Talk to me. Insult me. I was pretty much in a constant state of being turned on, but this was pure torture. To have her this close, to be holding her, and not do a damn thing about it.

I lifted my head slightly and stared down at her. Her lips were parted, and thick lashes fanned the rise of her cheeks. Her hair was half on me, half on the pillow. It was everywhere.

Kat had definitely wanted more last night, but I wasn't going there, not then and not now, until Douche Bag was completely out of the picture. I had a feeling he would be. He had to be. I saw it—everything—shift in Kat's eyes last night.

She'd seen only me, and there was no room for anyone else.

I needed to get up.

I didn't move for another five minutes, sort of caught up in staring at her, but the light slicing over the bed was growing stronger by the minute.

It was time for me to go.

Kissing her cheek, I gently slid my arm out from underneath her and rolled out of bed. Quietly pulling on my clothes, I moved soundlessly through her bedroom, noting the stacks of books everywhere. I grinned. Stopping at the door, I glanced back at her. She hadn't moved one inch. Closing the door, I left the bedroom and ghosted down the steps. I was out the front door and in mine just as I saw her mom's Prius come up the driveway.

I turned around.

Dee stood in the stairwell, her brows arched and arms crossed. "Well. Well. Well..."

"What?" I scratched my fingers through my hair and realized the strands were sticking up everywhere.

She blinked out and appeared at the bottom of the steps. "I don't have time to question you on why you're now just getting home from my *best friend's* house, because the Walmart in Cumberland is having a huge early bird sale and I need to get there, but you better believe I want answers."

I shot her a bland look. "There's nothing going on."

Dee snatched her purse and keys off the recliner. "Just like there's nothing happening when Adam spends the ni—"

"Oh, come on," I groaned. "I don't want to hear that."

"Whatever." She walked to the door, pointing at me. "You and I will be talking later."

I was going to be avoiding "later" like nobody's business.

Lucky for me, Dee was out most of the day and into the early evening. It was my turn to patrol, and I decided to get an early start before dinner. I could always grab something from Smoke Hole on my way back. Grabbing my baseball hat over the back of the sofa, I tugged it on and headed out.

Kat's car was gone when I stepped outside. Wondering if she met up with Carissa or Lesa, I cut across the driveways and moved among the bare trees. I knew Kat wasn't with Dee. If she wasn't with them, she— I cut my thoughts off. There was no way she would be with Douche Bag, not after last night.

Faint light clung to the thick limbs as I picked up my pace, staying in my human form as I scouted the area. From the wooded areas, we could move around the whole damn county virtually undetected, but it was hunting season, and the last thing I wanted was to be shot. Going full Luxen would noticeably draw attention, but wearing a dark thermal and jeans, I blended in as the waning sun gave way to night.

As I neared the outskirts of the county, a few steps from Pendleton, I skidded to a stop, kicking up dried, dead leaves and loose soil. Ice snaked down my spine. I whipped around, scanning the trees. I didn't see anything, but there was definitely an Arum nearby.

Shit.

I moved toward the west, farther away from home, and didn't pick up a damn thing. Backtracking, I picked up speed, coasting over the ground and uprooted trees, barely touching the exposed roots and boulders. Several miles later, I felt the oily thickness gliding over my skin. It was brief, gone before it could taint the air.

The Arum was a fast son of a bitch, staying several minutes ahead of me despite the fact that there was no way it sensed me, not with the looming Seneca Rocks.

My breath puffed out misty clouds in the cold air as I neared the highway. I traveled north a mile before I felt the Arum again.

Slowing down as the trees thinned, I tracked the Arum right up to the Smoke Hole diner. Holy shit, was it going for the meat loaf or something? The darkness of it, the thickness in the air, had heightened as I waited until bright headlights of oncoming traffic cleared. I crossed the road, hitting the parking lot at a sedate pace.

Through the lit windows of the diner, a dark shadow exploded within the building, blackening out the windows and rapidly disappearing. The presence of the Arum vanished.

"What the hell..." The back of my neck warmed and tingled. Kat was here?

The door to Smoke Hole flew open and out came Kat. She wasn't alone. Douche Bag was with her, his hand wrapped around hers. I stared at them, torn between focusing on the fact that an Arum had just been inside the diner and the fact that even after last night, she was with Blake today.

I couldn't believe either of those things.

Kat slowly lifted her head, her face pale as her eyes met mine. She pulled her hand free. "What...

what are you doing here?"

I was grinding my jaw so hard my molars were going to crack. "I was just about to ask you the same thing."

She glanced over at Douche Bag. "This isn't what—"

"Look, I don't know what's going on between you two or whatever." Douche Bag curved his hand around Kat's elbow. "But Katy and I need to talk—"

That did it.

Shooting forward, I had him pinned against the window of the diner, my face so close to his, the bill of my cap pressed into his forehead. "You touch her again and I will—"

"You'll what?" he shot back. "What are you going to do, Daemon?"

Kat grabbed my shoulder. "Daemon, come on. Let him go."

"You want to know what I'm going to do?" I asked, voice low. "You know where your head and ass are? Well, they're about to become well acquainted with each other."

Douche Bag smirked. "I'd like to see you try."

"You might want to rethink that." I laughed low. "Because you have no idea what I'm capable of, boy."

"See, that's the funny thing." He gripped my wrist. "I know exactly what you're capable of."

I tilted my head, hearing what he wasn't saying. This little punk. Knew it. From the moment I'd seen him all up on Kat, I knew there was something off about him.

"Boys," a man spoke. "You're gonna wanna break this up right now before someone calls the—"

Douche Bag raised his free hand, and the man froze.

Son of a bastard.

I was starting to shift. I tightened my grip until he gasped. "I don't care who or what you are, but you better give me a reason not to blast you into your next pathetic life real quickly."

"I know what you are," Blake choked out.

"That's not helping," I growled, letting more of my true form slip through, just enough for him to see exactly what *he* was dealing with. "Try again."

"I just killed an Arum, and even though you're an arrogant prick, we're not enemies." A choke cut off his next words, and Kat grabbed both of my shoulders. "I can help Katy," he wheezed. "Good enough for you?"

"What?" Kat demanded, dropping her hands.

"Yeah, see, you saying her name alone makes me want to kill you. So, no, not good enough for me," I told him.

His eyes darted to her. "Katy, I know what you are, what you will become capable of, and I can help you."

Oh man, this...this was something else. I leaned in to him, my eyes pure white and glowing. "Let me ask you a question. If I kill you, will these people unfreeze?"

His eyes widened.

I smiled.

Kat was beside me. "Let him go, Daemon. I need to know what he's talking about."

"Get back, Kat. I mean it; get the hell back."

"Stop it," she said, and then screamed, "Stop! Just freaking stop for a couple of minutes!"

I glanced at her, and Douche Bag took advantage of the distraction. He swiped his arm across mine, breaking my hold. He scrambled to the side, putting distance between us.

"Jesus." He rubbed his throat. "You have anger management problems. It's like a disease."

"There's a cure," I said. "And it's called kicking your ass."

He flipped me off. Boy had a death wish. I started forward, but Kat darted in front of me. She placed her hands on my chest. "Stop. You need to stop now."

My lips curled into a snarl. "He's a—"

"We don't know what he is," she cut in. "But he did kill an Arum. And he hasn't hurt me or anyone else, and he's had plenty of opportunity to do so."

I exhaled roughly. "Kat—"

"We need to hear him out, Daemon. *I* need to hear what he has to say. Besides, these people have been frozen, like, twice now. That can't be good for them."

"I don't care." I glared at the boy, wanting to turn his skin inside and out, and I think he saw that in my eyes, because he actually took a step back. "He'll talk. And then I'll decide whether or not he gets to see tomorrow."

Kat swallowed and then motioned at the man in a flannel shirt, the one who was frozen. "Can you, um, fix them?"

"Sure." He flicked his wrist.

"...police," Flannel Shirt Guy finished.

"Everything's fine. Thank you." Kat spun around. "My car—if you guys can get along in such an enclosed space?"

I stalked over to where her Camry was parked and slid into the passenger seat. Kat got behind the wheel, and Douche Bag made himself damn comfy in the backseat.

Kat turned the heat on and then looked back at him. "What are you?"

"The same thing I suspect you are," he said to her.

"And what do you think I am?"

I cracked my neck, keeping my mouth shut. Nothing I was going to say at the moment was going to move this conversation along.

"I didn't know at first," he answered. "There was something about you that drew me to you, but I didn't understand what it was."

"Proceed with caution when it comes to your next word choices," I growled.

Kat squirmed as she wrapped her hand around the obsidian necklace. "What do you mean by that?"

Douche Bag shifted forward in the backseat. "The first time I saw you, I knew you were different. Then when you stopped the branch and I saw your necklace, I knew. Only those who know to fear the shadows wear obsidian." Seconds ticked by in silence. "Then our date...yeah, that glass and plate didn't just fall into my lap on its own."

I snickered as my hand curled into a fist. "Good times."

"How much do you know?" she asked.

"There are two alien races on Earth: the Luxen and the Arum." He paused as I twisted in my seat. He swallowed. "You're capable of moving things without touching them and you can manipulate light. I'm sure you can do more. And you can also heal humans."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

There was a pause. "When I was thirteen, I was leaving soccer practice with a friend of mine—Chris Johnson. He was a normal kid like me, except he was super fast, never got sick, and I never saw his parents at any games. But who cares, right? I didn't until I was goofing around and stepped off the curb, right in front of a speeding cab. Chris healed me. Turns out he was an alien." His lips twisted into a wry grin. "I thought it was pretty cool. My best friend was an alien. Who gets to say that? What I didn't know and what he never told me was that he lit my ass up. Five days later, four men entered my

house.

"They wanted to know where *they* were," he continued, hands clenching into fists. "I didn't know what they meant. They killed my parents and my little sister right in front of me. And when I still couldn't help them, they beat me within an inch of my life."

"Oh my God," Kat whispered.

"Not sure he really exists," he said, letting out a dry laugh. "Anyway, it took me a while to figure out that when you're healed, you take on their abilities. Shit just started flying everywhere after I was sent to live with my uncle. When I realized that my friend had changed me, I researched as much as I could. Not that I needed to. The Arum found me again."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"The Arum in the diner, she couldn't sense me because of the beta quartz—yeah, I know about that, too. But if we were outside of the quartz range, we are just like your...*friend* to them. We're actually tastier."

Tastier? My fist rested on my knee.

"When I realized how much danger I was in, I started training physically and working on my abilities. I learned about their weakness through...others. I survived the best I could."

Instinct was firing off left and right. This guy happened to be healed by another Luxen, confirming what I suspected had happened to Kat, the whole changing her part, and he just coincidentally ended up here, in the middle of Bum Fuck, West Virginia? This wasn't the only place in the U.S. that was protected by beta quartz. This was bullshit.

"This is all great, the caring and sharing crap," I said. "But how did you end up here of all places?"

"When I learned about the beta quartz, I moved here with my uncle."

"Awful convenient," I murmured.

"Yeah, it is. The mountains. Very convenient for me," he replied.

"There are plenty of other places packed with beta quartz," I pointed out. "Why. Here?"

"Seemed like the least populated area," he reasoned. "I couldn't imagine there being that many Arum here."

"So everything was a lie?" Kat asked suddenly. "Santa Monica, the surfing?"

"No, not everything was a lie. I'm from Santa Monica and I still love surfing," he said. "I've lied as much as you have, Katy."

He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. He sank into the shadows inside the car. "You've been hurt, haven't you? And healed by one of them?"

I stiffened.

Douche Bag sighed again. "You're not going to tell me which one it was?"

"It's not your business," she said. "How did you know I was different?"

"You mean besides the obvious obsidian, the alien entourage, and the branch?" He laughed. "You're full of electricity. See?" He reached between the seats and placed his hand over Kat's. Static crackled, jolting us both.

My hand snaked out and grabbed his, throwing it back at him. "I do not like you."

"Feeling's mutual, bud." He looked at Kat. "It's the same whenever we touch an Arum or a Luxen, isn't it? You feel their skin hum?"

She was quiet for a moment. "How do you know about the DOD?"

"I met another human like us. She was under the DOD's thumb. Apparently she exposed her abilities and they swooped in. She told me everything about the DOD and what they really want, which isn't the Luxen or the Arum."

I turned back around, eyeing him. "What do you mean?"

"They want people like Katy. They don't give two shits about the aliens. They want us."

Kat gaped at him. "What?"

"You need to explain that a lot better," I ordered as static built in the tiny car.

He leaned forward. "Do you really think the DOD doesn't know what both the Arum and Luxen are capable of, that after studying your kind for decades and decades that they don't know what they're dealing with? And if you really believe not, then you're stupid or naive."

Kat jolted in the seat.

No way. There was no way. "If the DOD knew about our abilities, they wouldn't let us live free. They'd have us locked up in a heartbeat."

"Really? The DOD knows the Luxen are a peaceful race and they know the Arum aren't the same as your kind. Having the Luxen free takes care of the Arum alien problem. Besides, don't they get rid of any Luxen who causes a problem?" He jerked back as I started for him, but Kat grabbed ahold of my shirt. He lifted his hands. "Look, all I'm saying is there are bigger fish the DOD wants. And that's the humans the Luxen mutate. We're just as strong as you—even stronger in some cases. The only thing is, we tire out a lot quicker and it takes us longer to recharge, so to speak."

I settled back, my hands clenching and unclenching.

"The only reason why the DOD lets you believe that your big bad secret is hidden is because they know what you can do to humans," he explained. "And we're what they care about."

"No," she whispered. "Why would they care about us instead of them?"

"Gee, Katy, why would the government be interested in a bunch of humans who have more powers than the very creatures who created us? I don't know. Maybe because they'd have a superhuman army at their disposal or a group of people who can get rid of the aliens if need be?"

I swore under my breath, because as much as I hated it, what this boy was saying made sense. Made too much damn sense.

"But how...how are you stronger than the Luxen?" Kat asked.

"That's a good question." I stared into the backseat.

"In the diner, when I knew the guy was going to skip out on his meal? It's because I could pick up on bits of his thoughts. Not all of them, but enough to know what he was planning. I can hear almost any human—any one that's not mutated."

"Mutated?" Her voice rose.

"You're mutated. Tell me, have you been sick recently? Had a really high fever?"

Dammit.

"I can tell by your expression you have. Let me guess, you had a fever so bad that it felt like your entire body was on fire? Lasted a couple of days and then you felt fine—better than ever?" He turned to the window again, shaking his head. "And now you can move things without touching them? Probably have no control. The table shaking inside wasn't me. It was *you*. That's just the tip of the iceberg. Soon you'll be able to do a hell of a lot more, and if you don't get control of it, it's going to be really bad. This damn place is swarming with DOD, hidden in plain sight. And they're here looking for hybrids. Far as I know, the Luxen don't typically heal humans, but it happens." He glanced at me. "Obviously."

Kat tucked her hair back with shaky hands. "Then why are you here if it's such a risk now?"

"You," he said. "Honestly, I thought about not coming back. Moving on, but there's my uncle...and you. There're not many like us who haven't been caught by the DOD. You need to know what kind of danger you're in."

"But you don't even know me," she argued.

"And we don't know you," I added, eyes narrowed.

He shrugged. "I like you. Not you, Daemon." He smiled. "But Katy."

"I really, really do not like you at all."

Kat pressed a hand to her chest. "Blake..."

"That wasn't said to make you say you like me or not. I'm just stating the fact. I like you." He glanced at her. "And you don't know what you've stepped in. I can help you."

"Bullshit," I said. "If she needs help controlling her abilities, then I can do it."

"Can you? What you do is second nature to you. Not to Katy. I had to learn how to rein in my abilities. I can teach her. Stabilize her."

"Stabilize me?" Her laugh sounded a bit choked. "What's going to happen? I'm going to explode or something?"

"You can seriously end up hurting yourself or others," he explained. "I've heard things, Katy. Some mutated humans... Well, let's just say it doesn't end pretty."

"You don't need to scare her," I said.

"I'm not trying to. It's just the truth," he responded. "And if the DOD finds out about you, they're going to take you in. And if you can't control your abilities, they will put you down."

She gasped, facing the front of the car. I reached over, placing my hand on hers. She didn't look at me, and I wanted to punch the douche bag in the face.

"Katy, I know this is a lot. But you have to be prepared. You leave this town, the Arum are going to be on you. That is, if you can slide by the DOD."

"You're right. This is a lot." She looked up. "I thought you were normal. And you're not. You're telling me that I have the DOD gunning for me. That if I ever decide to leave this place, I'm going to be a Snack Pack for an Arum. And better yet, I may lose complete control of whatever powers I have and wipe out a family of four, then be *put down*! All I wanted to do today was eat some goddamn fries and *be normal*!"

I let out a low whistle, and Blake said, "You're never going to be normal, Katy. Never again."

"No shit," she snapped. Taking a deep breath, she seemed to pull it together. "What are we going to do?"

"We don't need his help," I said.

"But you do," he whispered. "I heard about the window thing with Simon."

She glanced at me, and I shook my head, willing her to be quiet, because how in the hell did he hear about that?

"What do you think will happen next time? Simon ran off, doing God knows what. You won't get so lucky again."

Tipping her head back against the seat, she closed her eyes. Her voice was small as she spoke. "How do you know so much about them?"

"The girl I was telling you about? She told me everything. I wanted to help her...to get away, but she wouldn't leave. The DOD had something or someone that meant a lot to her."

An odd chill radiated down my spine.

"Who was she?" she asked.

"Liz something," he said. "Don't know her last name."

"You know," I said, looking over the seat at him. "There's nothing stopping me from killing you. Right now."

"Yes, there is." He met my stare. "There's Katy, and the fact that I doubt you're a cold-blooded

killer."

Sometimes, like right now, I really wished I were a cold-blooded killer, because he wouldn't be a problem. "I don't trust you."

He held my gaze. "You don't have to. Only Katy does."

There was no way she could trust him. I looked at her, and I saw that she was actually considering it. Anger flooded me. I placed my hands on the dashboard to stop myself from choking the crap out of... whatever he was.

"When do we start?" Kat asked, and I closed my eyes.

"Tomorrow if you can," he said.

"My mom leaves for work after five."

"I'll be there," I said.

"Not necessary," he shot back.

"And I don't care. You aren't doing a damn thing with Katy without me being there." I faced him, lowering my hands to my knees. "I don't trust you. Just so we're clear."

"Whatever." He climbed out of the car, causing cold air to rush in.

"Blake," Kat called out.

He stopped with his hand on the door. "What?"

"How did you get away from the Arum when they attacked you?" she asked.

Looking away, he squinted at the dark sky. "That's not something I'm ready to talk about, Katy." He shut the door and jogged off toward his car.

Kat stared out the window, and both of us sat there for several moments without saying anything, and then I opened the car door. I stepped out, shutting the door behind me. There were too many things I wanted to say to her right now, and none of them were good. I needed a few moments to myself, to calm my ass down, and maybe by the time she got home, I could have a decent conversation with her.

Leaving her, I crossed the road and slipped into the woods. I beat her to the house by a good twenty minutes. I came down her porch steps as she slowly approached them.

Kat shook her head slowly. "Daemon..."

"I don't trust him. I don't trust a damn thing about him, Kat." I took off my hat and scrubbed my fingers through my hair, and then slammed the cap back down. "He comes out of nowhere and knows *everything*. Every instinct is telling me he can't be trusted. He could be anyone, working for any organization. We don't know anything about him."

"I know." Weariness clung to her. "But at least this way we can keep an eye on him. Right?"

I gave a short, dry laugh. "There are other ways of dealing with him."

"What?" Her voice rose and was carried away by the wind. "Daemon, you can't be thinking..."

"I don't even know what I'm thinking." I took a step back, obviously not calmed down enough to have this convo. "And dammit, my head is so not in the right place at this moment." I paused, my jaw working. "Why were you with him in the first place?"

"We were grabbing something to eat and I was—"

"You were what?" God, this wasn't important, not after everything, but I couldn't stop myself. After last night, after waking up with her in my arms, she went to grab dinner with him? A date? Damn.

"You went to Bryon after..."

She shook her head again, her hair flying around her pale face. "Daemon—"

"You know, I'm not really surprised." The curve of my lips was bitter. "We kissed. Twice. You spent the night using me as your own body pillow...and liking it. I'm sure that had you freaking out the

moment I left. You ran straight to Boris, because he really doesn't make you feel anything. And feeling something for me scares the hell out of you."

Her mouth snapped close. "I did not run straight to *Blake*. He texted me about getting something to eat, and it wasn't even a date, Daemon. I went to tell him—"

"Then what was it, Kitten?" I stepped forward, peering down at her. "He obviously likes you. You've kissed him before. He's willing to risk his own safety to *train* you."

"It's not what you think. If you'd let me explain..."

"You don't know what I think," I snapped.

"Daemon—"

"You know, you're unbelievable." Anger grabbed a hold of me, sinking its razor-sharp claws in. "The night of your party, when you thought I was messing around with Ash? You were so pissed that you went outside and blew up windows, exposing yourself."

She flinched.

"And now you're doing—what? Messing around with him in between kissing me?"

Her lower lip trembled. "I'm not messing around with him, Daemon! We're just friends. That's all." Skepticism drew my lips into a tight line. "I'm not stupid, Kat."

"I didn't say that you were!" she yelled, her hands forming little fists. "You're not giving me a chance to explain anything. As usual, you're acting like a freaking know-it-all and you keep cutting me off!"

"And as usual, you're a bigger problem than I could've ever imagined." The moment those words came out of my mouth, I knew I'd gone too far.

She staggered a step back, her voice cracking as she spoke. "I'm not your problem. Not anymore." "Kat—"

"No. I was never your problem in the first place." Anger mingled with the hurt in her voice. "And I'm sure as hell not your problem now."

"Hell. This"—I waved my hand around us, losing control—"isn't even important right now. Just forget it."

I couldn't win with her. No matter what I did, what I said, and I needed to walk away before I really said something I couldn't take back.

Before she said something I couldn't let go of.

CHAPTER 18

I didn't go home, not for a very long time. I stayed out, patrolling the county into the early-morning hours. If there was one Arum, there were three more. Even though I didn't feel the presence of one, they wouldn't be far behind.

When I came home, it was a little after four in the morning, and my human skin wasn't too thrilled with spending hours in the near freezing temps. Faint light flickered from the living room, punctuated by a low murmur. Pulling off my cap, I walked into the living room.

Dee was curled up against the arm of the couch, out cold. Beside her, a sleepy Adam rubbed at his eyes. I didn't say anything as I made my way into the kitchen. Flipping on the light above the stove, I tossed my cap onto the table and walked to the fridge.

I pulled out a tub full of turkey and then grabbed a soda. My stomach rumbled as I peeled the lid off. Bypassing the BS of a fork, I started rooting around the bits of meat with my fingers.

"You're getting in late," Adam stated from the doorway. He walked over to the counter, scratching his jaw as he yawned. "Is everything okay?"

Everything was absolute fubar right now. I shoved a handful of turkey meat into my mouth while I debated what I could tell Adam. The shit with Douche Bag? I wasn't comfortable telling Adam or any of them about that. I didn't want to draw them into something that could blow up in our faces.

Something that would most likely blow up in our faces.

I shoved in another mouthful of turkey. Lying to my friends, to my family, didn't sit well on me. But this wasn't the first and only lie. They didn't know about me healing Kat. They didn't know she was changing—*mutating*. So many lies.

Adam watched me, waiting.

Popping the tab on the soda, I swallowed a large gulp. "There was an Arum tonight."

All the sleepiness vanished from Adam's expression. He was tense, alert. "What happened?"

"The Arum is no longer a problem," I said, picking up another strip of turkey.

"But if there's one then there's...."

"There's three more somewhere close." I sat the tub of turkey aside. "I know. So just be aware. I'll let Matthew know, so he can notify the Elders."

Adam scrubbed his fingers through his messy hair. "Damn, man, will there ever be a day when we don't have to worry about the Arum?"

"Yeah." My appetite was gone. "When we're dead."

By the time Saturday evening rolled around, some of the anger had burned off. Not all of it, but enough that I was confident I could be around Douche Bag without murdering him. Sort of confident. I did not agree with his training Kat, not at all, but that didn't mean I wasn't going to be there to supervise it.

My distrust of him grew by the second.

At five, I walked over. Kat's mom was already gone. I knocked on the front door, and a few seconds later, what sounded like a herd of wolverines rushed the door. Stepping back, I frowned.

The door flew open to reveal Kat. She appeared somewhat out of breath and her eyes were a bit swollen and red. "Hey," she said.

I arched a brow. "It sounded like you were going to come straight through the door."

She flushed. "I, uh, was...looking for my drink."

"Looking for your drink?"

"I lost it."

Looking over her shoulder, I spotted the drink on the table just inside the foyer. I smiled slightly. "It's right there, on the table."

Kat turned around. "Oh. Well, thank you."

I stepped aside, brushing past her. Stopping a few feet in, I shoved my hands in my pockets to stop myself from touching her, because as she pointed out in the past, I did have boundary problems. Leaning against the wall, I watched her...watch me. Blood was creeping into her cheeks.

"Kitten..."

"Daemon...?"

My gaze moved over her face, lingering on the swollen eyes. "You look tired."

She crept closer. "I didn't sleep well last night."

"Thinking about me?"

There wasn't a moment of hesitation. "Yes."

Surprise flickered through me. Did she just admit that? Were pigs flying outside? "Well, I was preparing this whole speech about how you need to stop denying that I consume your every waking thought and haunt your dreams. Now I'm not sure what to say."

Kat leaned against the wall, right in front of me. "You, speechless? That's one for the record books."

I lowered my head and whispered, "I didn't sleep well last night, either."

She moved closer, her arm brushing mine. I stiffened. "Last night—"

"I wanted to apologize," I said, and I knew I needed to for what I said about her being a problem. "I'm sorry—"

Someone cleared his throat.

My gaze snapped up. So caught up in Kat, I hadn't heard him walk through the open door. Douche Bag was here.

"Am I interrupting?" he asked.

"Yes, Bart, you are always interrupting," I responded.

"Sorry it took me so long to get over here," he said, ignoring me as Kat faced him.

"Too bad it didn't take longer." I stretched idly "And too bad you didn't get lost or—"

"Eaten by wild boars or killed in a horrific ten-car pileup. I get it." he interrupted and then walked past us. "You don't need to be here, Daemon. No one is forcing you."

I pivoted on my heel, following him. "There's no other place I'd rather be."

Kat shuffled into the living room. "So, um, how are we going to do this?"

"What we need to do first is figure out what you can already do," he said.

She tucked her hair back, obviously not entirely comfortable with both of us staring at her. "Uh, I'm not sure there's much I can do."

His lips pursed as I sat on the couch. "Well, you stopped the branch. And the time with the windows. That's two things."

"But I didn't do them on purpose." Kat glanced at me. "What I mean is, it wasn't a conscious effort, you know."

"Oh." His brows lowered. "Well, that's disappointing."

My gaze slid to him. "What a great motivator you are."

He ignored me. Again. "So these have been random outbursts of power?" When Kat nodded, he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Maybe it will just fade?" she said, sounding hopeful.

"It would've already done that by now. See, one of four things happens after a mutation, from what I could learn." He started moving around the living room, giving Kat a wide berth. "A human can be healed, and then it fades after a few weeks, even months. Or a human can be mutated and it sticks, and they develop the same abilities as a Luxen—or more. Then there are the ones who kind of...self-destruct. But you're out of that stage."

"And?"

"Well, and then there are humans who are mutated beyond what would be expected, I guess."

"What does that mean?" I asked, my fingers tapping along the arm of the couch.

He folded his arms and rocked back. "Like in the freakish-mutant-looks department and in the head, and it's different for everyone."

"Am I going to turn into a mutant?" she squeaked.

He laughed. "I don't think so."

My finger stilled. "And how do you really know all of this, Flake?"

"Blake," he corrected. "Like I said, I've known others like Katy who have been sucked into the DOD."

"Uh-huh." I smirked. This boy had bullshit tattooed on his forehead.

He shook his head. "Anyway, back to the important stuff. We need to see if you can control it. If not..."

Not liking where that statement was heading, I came off the couch and I moved fast, just to remind Douche Bag of what I was. I was in his face in under a second. "Or what, Hank? What if she can't?"

"Daemon." Kat sighed. "First off, his name is *Blake*. B-L-A-K-E. And really, can we do this without any macho-man moments? Because if not, this is going to take forever."

I spun around, pinning her with a dark look.

"The best thing to start with is to see if you can move anything on command." He paused. "And I guess we can go from there."

"Move what?" Kat asked.

He looked around the room. "How about a book?"

Which book? There were like a million piled up around the room, and obviously Kat was having a hard time settling on one, because Douche Bag had to tell her to focus. She twisted sideways, focusing her attention on the couch. I had no idea if she was staring at the pillows, the book, the remote, or the magazine.

Nothing happened.

And after three hours, the only thing Kat managed to do was make the coffee table tremble, and I

might've almost fallen asleep.

"I'm hungry. I'm tired. And I'm done," Kat announced at some point, and then ended the statement by knocking my foot off the coffee table.

Douche Bag lifted his brows. "Okay. We can pick up tomorrow. No biggie."

She glared at him.

That made me smile.

Stretching my arms, I yawned. "Wow, Brad, you are such a great trainer. I'm amazed."

"Shut up," she said, and then ushered Douche Bag out the front door. I got on my feet and walked into the hallway. They were outside talking. I listened, because I didn't trust him, and I was nosy.

"What you're doing by helping me is pretty amazing. I just wanted to say that," I heard Kat say.

Oh, forget this. I couldn't listen to this shit. I lifted my hand and extended my middle finger. No one saw me, but it made me feel better.

Walking into the kitchen, I grabbed the mayo, lunch meat, and bread. I was almost finished when Kat walked in. "What are you doing?" she asked.

I waved my knife. "You said you were hungry."

She inched closer. "You...didn't have to make me anything, but thank you."

"I was also hungry." I plopped mayo on the bread, spreading it out evenly. A few seconds later, I had two ham and cheese sandwiches. I handed one to her. "Eat."

Kat stared at me, and I smiled before I took a huge bite of mine. I kept my mouth shut while Kat ate. When she was finished, she cleaned up, and then moved to wash her hands. I followed, stopping to stand behind her. I placed my hands on either side of her hips, my fingers curling over the counter.

"So, you had a very interesting conversation with Butler on the porch."

She shivered. "His name is Blake and were you eavesdropping, Daemon?"

"I was keeping an eye on things." I tilted my head just an inch, brushing my nose along her neck. I inhaled her peachy scent. "So, his helping you is amazing?"

"He's putting himself at risk, Daemon. Whether you like him or not, you have to give him props for that."

"I don't have to give him anything other than the ass-kicking he deserves." I rested my chin on her shoulder. "I don't want you doing this."

"Daemon—"

"And it has nothing to do with my raging dislike of the boy." I moved my hands to her hips. "Or the fact that—"

"That you're jealous?" she said, turning her cheek and bringing her lips daringly close to mine.

"Me? Jealous of him? No. What I was going to say was, 'or the fact that he has a stupid name.' Blake? It rhymes with flake. Come on." I straightened, tugging her back against me. She didn't pull away. Instead she leaned into me, and I wondered if her eyes were open or closed. "Kitten, I don't trust him. Everything about him is too convenient."

She wiggled free and faced me. "I don't want to talk about Blake."

I arched a brow. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Last night."

I stared at her a moment and then backed off. Turning, I walked over to the kitchen table. What was there to say about last night? I needed to apologize for saying she was a problem, but other than that? I wasn't sure. I rubbed my neck. What a mess.

"Actually," she continued, "I wanted to finish the conversation we were having before Blake came over."

"Which is about last night."

"Yeah," she said slowly, dragging out the word.

I scratched the stubble on my chin, unsure of where to go with any of this—this stuff between us. "I don't even know what I was going to say to you.

"Look, last night I was mad. I was also a little caught off guard with...with everything." I closed my eyes briefly. "Anyway, that's not important. This thing with Bart is. Part of me just wants to snatch him up and get rid of him. It would be easy. I'm being serious, Kitten. He's not just a danger to you, but if he's playing us, he's a danger to Dee. So I want her kept as far away from this as possible."

"Of course," she murmured.

I folded my arms. "And going along with everything will keep tabs on him. So you were right last night about that."

She nodded slowly, and I waited for her to say whatever it looked like she wanted to say, but she remained quiet. I sighed. "I don't like this, but..." I paused. "But I'll ask you one more time to not do this with him. Trust that I can find something out that can help you—help us."

Her eyes met mine, and I knew in that moment, she wasn't going to stop this with him. For some reason, she trusted *Blake*. That cut deep. That reminded me of where we were with each other, which was nowhere. Sadness crawled into her gaze, along with a measure of regret, and it mirrored what I was feeling inside.

Because after it was all said and done, Kat really didn't trust me.

CHAPTER 19

Things changed after that Saturday night.

I wasn't sure if it was a conscious decision or just the way things became between us. There was a gap, one that had to be there for me to keep any sort of clear mind when it came to *Blake*. Though, sometimes, it was almost like it had been before...before everything. We would bicker, and Kat would fight a smile. She would brush against me, and I would feel it in every cell. I would touch her hand or fix her hair, and it would take everything in me to let go.

And there were days when Kat tried, she really did, to cross that gulf between us, but I couldn't, not when it was so apparent that she didn't trust me.

There was nothing without trust.

So things changed. We didn't really talk at school. I left her alone in trig class and at lunch. I saw her in the evenings, and this separation between us was chipping away at a hidden part of me, but I had to draw a line somewhere.

Training sucked up most of our time after school. Not even Dee realized that I was with Kat and him, and I knew what everyone thought at school about Kat. That she was now dating him and everything outside of her "boyfriend" ceased to exist. Keeping shut about that was a struggle as the days turned into weeks.

And as the time passed, Kat...she didn't look like she was doing too good. Dark smudges appeared under her eyes. She was pale and drawn, always tired-looking. As if she was sleeping as well as me, which meant she wasn't sleeping for shit.

I sensed an Arum only once since the Friday after Thanksgiving, and I spent nearly every night patrolling. Once, a week ago, when I was near the outskirts of Grant County, I felt the oily, suffocating presence and then it was gone. Nothing since. Not even when Adam or Andrew patrolled.

I had Matthew check out *Blake's* records, telling him that I just had a strange feeling about the new kid. Everything Douche Bag had told Kat about where he was from was true. The only thing missing was his uncle's name, but Matthew explained that wasn't out of the ordinary.

Maybe what I felt for Kat was blinding me when it came to this kid, coloring my perspective. I didn't know, but I couldn't shake the fact that his appearance, his offer of help, was just too easy.

Working with Kat wasn't accomplishing much. From what she claimed, she hadn't had any recent unexpected outbursts, and she also wasn't progressing very far. Douche Bag sucked at training. He talked. A lot. But what he'd said during one of the trainings actually made sense.

"Technically, whenever we use our abilities, we are sending a piece of ourselves," he'd explained. "Like if I want to pick something up, a part of me is doing that as an extension of me. It's why using our powers weakens us." He paused, laughing when he saw Kat's expression. "You have no idea what I'm talking about."

With a bit of my help, Kat had finally been able to move items on purpose. She floated the books on and off the coffee table, and her eyes had lit up like someone just dumped a truckload of books in her lap.

That night had been one of the last nights I trained with her. The DOD checked in the following day, soaking up most of the afternoon. The visit hadn't been anything out of the ordinary. Then Lydia had paid a visit the next day.

On the third night, after school, I hadn't gone back. Not until tonight. Earlier today, in class, I'd noticed that her hand was bandaged. When I asked what had happened, she had avoided answering. Unease had sprouted, and grown throughout the day.

A horrible thought lingered in the back of my head. Had her training had something to do with her injury? I knocked, and within a heartbeat, the door flew open.

"Hey," Kat gasped as she stared up at me. She looked more tired than the last time I saw her. "Are you helping tonight?"

My gaze dropped to her bandaged fingers. "Yeah. Where's Bilbo?"

"Blake," she corrected. "He's in the living room."

I shut the door behind me. "About your hand..."

"I burned it on the stove last night." She shrugged, staring at the tips of my black boots.

"That...is..."

She sighed. "Lame?"

I didn't know if I should believe her or be relieved. "Yeah, really lame, Kat. Maybe you should stay away from the stove for a little while?" I sidled past her and walked into the living room.

Douche Bag actually waved at me. "Nice of you to join us again."

Grinning, I sat down next to him and spread my arm along the back of the couch, crowding him.

"I know you've missed me. It's all right, I'm here."

"Yeah," he said, sounding real genuine.

Training got started, and I stayed quiet, watching Kat move stuff around. She was getting damn good at it. I was proud of her.

"Moving stuff is just a parlor trick, really," Douche Bag said after Kat stacked about twenty books without touching them.

"Wow." I cocked my head to the side. "You're just now figuring that out?"

He stared at Kat, keeping his arms pinned to his chest. "The good news is you can do it on command now, but that doesn't mean you have control. I hope it does, but we really don't know."

Geez, he was a really positive polly over there.

"I have an idea. You're going to need to completely trust me. If I ask you to do something, you can't fire back with a thousand questions." He paused while my eyes narrowed. "We need to see something amazing."

"I'm doing my best," she said, her shoulders tensing.

"Your best isn't good enough." He exhaled loudly. "Okay. Stay here."

She glanced at me as he disappeared into the foyer. "I have no idea what he's up to."

I arched a brow. "I'm guessing it's going to be something I don't like."

There was an odd clank of silverware and then Douche Bag returned to the doorway, one hand behind his back. "You ready?"

"Sure," she replied.

The kid smiled and then cocked his arm back. I saw the light reflecting off metal a second before he threw it—threw the knife straight at Kat.

Kat threw up her hand, a look of horror etched into her face. The knife stopped in midair. Frozen inches from her chest, pointy end facing toward her. It just stayed there, suspended.

My mouth dropped open as I blinked slowly.

He clapped. "I knew it!"

"What the hell, Blake?" Kat screeched as the knife fell to the floor.

He did not just throw a butcher knife at Kat's chest.

I came out of my frozen stupor in a rage, what he had just done finally cracking through my skull. I was like a rocket of anger. Flipping into my true form, I slammed Blake into the wall, my whitish-red light nearly swallowing him.

I was going to kill him, right here and right now. This dumbass fucker was going to die. I lifted him until he was halfway up the wall.

"Whoa! Whoa!" he yelled, arms flailing in the light. "You need to check yourself. Katy wasn't in any danger."

That's it. I'm going to kill him. That was my only warning to Kat. He didn't hear me, but he knew death was coming. Windows began to shake and walls trembled. The flat-screen on the TV stand rattled. Puffs of plaster filled the air. My light flared, swallowing him whole.

"Daemon!" Kat shrieked. "Stop!"

Air heated and charged around me. Her terror-filled scream cycled over and over. She would hate me if I killed him—absolutely hate me. That I could almost deal with, but she would also be scared of me, and that...yeah, that I couldn't handle.

With Herculean effort, I dropped his rat ass. Unfortunately, he landed on his feet and not his head. Kat darted in between us. "Okay. You two need to freaking stop."

He ran his hands down his shirt, straightening. "I'm not doing anything."

"You did throw a freaking knife at me," she shot back.

I will break him in two.

Hearing my voice, Kat looked at me. "Stop."

Fury hummed through me. He could've killed her, just like that, and I had sat there like a freaking idiot and let it happen. No more. I was done with this. She was done with this.

Still in my true form, I reached out and brushed my fingers along her cheek. Her skin was soft as silk and so damn fragile. Dropping my hand, I shifted into my human form. Only my eyes remained white and sharp like the damn knife he'd thrown at her.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

"She wasn't in any danger!" he shouted. "If I thought for a second she couldn't do it, I wouldn't have thrown it at her!"

I sidestepped Kat, my hand curling into a fist. "But there was no way you would've known she could do it! Not a hundred percent!"

He turned pleading eyes on Kat. "I swear you were never in any danger, Katy. If I thought you couldn't stop it, I wouldn't have done it."

I cursed again, but Kat blocked me. I stared down at her. "Who does that?"

"Actually, Kiefer Sutherland did. In the original Buffy movie," he explained. "It was on TV a few nights ago. He threw one at Buffy, and she caught it."

"That was Donald Sutherland—the dad," I corrected. What an ass.

He shrugged. "Same difference."

"I'm not Buffy!" Kat yelled.

A slow grin pulled at his lips. "You are definitely cuter than Buffy."

I growled low in my throat. "You got a death wish? Because you're really pushing it tonight, buddy. I'm dead serious. Really pushing it. I can hold you up against that wall until you run out of juice. Can you hold me off forever? No? I didn't think so."

His jaw jutted out. "Okay. I'm sorry. But if she hadn't been able to catch it, I would've stopped it. Just like you would've. No harm. No foul."

A whirlwind of rage was building inside me as Kat drew in a deep breath. "I think that's enough for tonight."

"But-"

"Blake, I really think you should leave," she said. "Okay? I think you need to go."

He stared at her for a moment and then nodded. "All right." With a quick look in my direction, he started toward the door and stopped. "But you did great, Katy. I don't think you realize how awesome that was."

The fury rolled off me, rattling the floors. Douche Bag got the hell out of the house at that point. Part of me was disappointed. I was kind of hoping he'd be stupid enough to try something with me. At least then I could claim self-defense.

Silence fell in his wake until I finally spoke. "No more. Absolutely no more." My voice was low as Kat faced me. "He could have killed you, Kat. I'm not okay with that. I won't be okay with that."

"Daemon, he wasn't trying to kill me."

Disbelief flooded me. "Are you insane?"

"No." She bent and picked up the wickedly sharp knife.

"I don't want you doing any more training with him. I don't even want you near him. That boy's got a few screws loose. I'm going to give him back-alley plastic surgery. I can't—"

"Daemon," she whispered.

"—believe he did that." It hit me again, just how close she came to taking a knife wound to the chest. Stepping forward, I wrapped my arms around her and hauled her against me. I held her tight. "Jesus, Kat, he could have hurt you." I lifted my hand, wrapping it around the back of my head. Good God, she could've died tonight, and I might not have been here to help her. I would've been out, chasing down a damn Arum.

Or sulking around my house like a loser.

A tremor rocked me. "Look, you've obviously got some control. I can help you work on it." I rested my chin against the top of her head. "This can't happen again."

"Daemon." Her voice was muffled.

"What?" I pulled back, lowering my chin.

"I froze it."

My brows slammed together. "Huh?"

"I *froze* the knife." She shimmied free, waving the knife around. "I didn't just stop it, but I froze it. The thing was just hovering in air."

Then it struck me. She was right. She didn't stop it. She froze it, and that was one of the most difficult talents for even a fully grown Luxen to master. "Holy..."

She laughed. "God, that's pretty huge, isn't it?"

I nodded. "It is. That's...that's a big deal."

Excitement flushed her pretty face. "We can't stop training."

No. No way. "Kat—"

"We can't! Look, throwing a knife at me isn't cool. And God knows, I'm not exactly thrilled that he did it, but it worked. It really worked. We're getting somewhere—"

"What part of 'He could've killed you' don't you understand?" I backed away before I shook some common sense into her. "I don't want you training with him. Not when he's putting your life in danger."

"He's not putting my life in danger." She shook her head. "We can't stop. I'll be able to control it and use the Source, just like you and Dee can. I can help you—"

"Help me with what?" I stared at her, then laughed harshly. "Help me to fight Arum?"

Crossing her arms over her chest, she tapped the edge of the knife on her arm as her eyes narrowed on me. "Yeah, what if I wanted to?"

I laughed again. "Kitten, you're not helping me fight Arum."

"Why not? If I can control the Source and help, why not? I could fight."

"I think the reasons are pretty huge," I yelled, losing some of my patience. "First off, you're a human."

"Not really."

"Granted, you're a mutated human, but a human who's a hell of a lot weaker and more vulnerable than a Luxen."

She exhaled slowly. "You don't know how weak or vulnerable I'll be fully trained."

"Whatever. Secondly, you have no business going up against the Arum. That will never happen."

"Daemon—"

"It won't if I'm still alive. Do you understand that? You will never go after an Arum. I don't care if you can stop the world from spinning."

Her cheeks flushed with anger. "You don't own me, Daemon."

"It's not about ownership, you little nut."

"Nut?" She glared at me. "I wouldn't call me names when I have a knife in my hand."

I almost laughed again. "Thirdly, there is something off about Blake. You can't tell me you don't see or sense that."

"Oh, don't—"

"You know nothing about him—nothing deeper than that he likes to surf and blog. Big deal."

"These aren't good enough reasons," she fired back

"Because I don't want you in danger—how about that? Is that damn good enough for you?" I shouted.

Kat jumped, her eyes widening slightly.

Hands on my hips, I looked away. I counted to ten. Still pissed, I counted to twenty. Didn't work.

"Daemon," she said, her voice softer. "You can't stop me just to protect me."

My head swung back to her. "I need to protect you."

"Daemon, I'm flattered—I am, but your job is not to protect me. I'm not Dee. I'm not another one of your responsibilities."

"Damn right you're not Dee! But you are my responsibility. I got you into this mess. And I will not be dragging you further into it!"

"I'm not stopping," she said, shoulders squaring.

Shocked, all I could do was stare at her for a moment. Didn't she get it? Freezing knives would never prepare for her going toe to toe with an Arum. "Does it even matter that I don't want you in that kind of danger? That I won't facilitate something as idiotic as you gearing up to go against the Arum?"

She flinched. "Wanting to help you and your kind is idiotic?"

My jaw tightened. "Yeah, it is."

"Daemon," she whispered. "I get that you care—"

"You don't get it. That's the problem!" I stopped, pulling it all back in, sucking the air right out of the room with it. "I won't be a part of this. I mean it, Katy. You choose this, then...whatever." I hated saying it, but it was true. I would not usher her down this path. "I won't have this hanging over my head like I do every freaking day with Dawson. I won't make another mistake and condone this."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Daemon—"

"What will it be, Katy?" I looked at her dead on. "Tell me now."

"I don't know what to tell you."

I jerked back, as if she had actually hit me. That would've been better than this, because she had made her choice. She'd chosen to put herself in danger. She'd chosen to ask me to be okay with it. She had chosen this. Every part of me hardened.

"That was the wrong thing to say. I'm done."

Anger simmered inside, a constant companion since the night Kat nearly took a knife to the chest. The bitter edge of the fury had faded, only because I put some space between the incident and us. Knowing that she was still training with the psychotic asshole and not being there drove me crazy.

But I couldn't—I wouldn't—be a part of that.

It was bad enough knowing that I had stood by and virtually watched everything with Dawson happen and had done nothing to stop it. Then again, I was traveling down that same path at the speed of a racing bullet, wasn't I?

As mad as I was with Kat, what I felt for her hadn't lessened. A part of me wished it had, because it would make dealing with this a hell of a lot easier if I didn't care, but I did.

I hated seeing how worn down she looked in class. I hated how upset my sister was, because Kat wasn't spending any time with her. Dee asked nearly every night about Kat, as if she expected me to hold all the answers. Screwed-up thing was that I did, but what could I tell her? All I could do was reassure Dee that she hadn't done anything to upset Kat. I hated that training had become everything to her. What was she trying to prove? That she was strong? That she could stand side by side with me?

Just thinking about it pissed me off and made me want to blow shit up.

A little over a week after the last training session, my phone dinged. Setting my laptop aside, I lifted my hand. The phone slid over my dresser and flew straight to my palm. As my fingers closed around it I wondered if Kat was able to do this now. Control movement so precisely. A lot could happen in a week. I flipped the phone over, seeing the text. My eyes widened slightly. It was from Kat.

Can u come over?

I stared at the message for a good minute and then tossed the phone on the bed. Leaning back, I scrubbed my hands down my face. I lowered my arms, flipping my gaze to the ceiling. I tracked the weblike crack in the plaster. Another text came through.

This is important!!!

Ten minutes passed before a third text dinged on my phone. I was half tempted to pick it up and throw it out he window, but I glanced down and saw the message.

Its abt Dawson.

I was off the bed in a nanosecond. Rushing down the stairs, I flew outside and went next door

without a second thought. There wasn't a single part of me that thought Kat would bring up Dawson without there being a real damn good reason for it.

Kat answered the door. "Daemon..." She trailed off, her gaze dropping south of my face.

It was below thirty, but I barely felt the chill hitting my bare chest or seeping through the flannel pajama bottoms. I stepped inside. "What about Dawson?"

She shut the door, and I couldn't tell if it was my heart racing or hers, but it was pounding in my chest. As she turned around, she was still staring at me, her cheeks slightly flushed.

"Kat."

"Sorry." She walked toward the living room, pressing her arms to her sides so she didn't brush against me. I got there first, struggling to keep my cool. She took a deep breath and then said, "I saw Bethany today."

CHAPTER 20

My head jerked to the side as I stared at her. "What?"

"Dawson's girl—"

"I know what you said." Dragging my hands through my hair, I couldn't believe what she had just said. "How can you be sure it was her, Kat? You've never seen her."

"I've seen her missing persons flyer. It's a face I can't forget." She sat down, rubbing her hands over her knees. "It was her."

"Holy shit..." I sat beside her on the couch, dropping my hands between my legs. I couldn't process this. "Where did you see her?"

"At the post office after school," she said.

"And you waited until now to tell me?" I laughed under my breath. "Because you were training with Bilbo Baggins and you had to wait until he left to talk to me?"

Her mouth opened and then she nodded. She squeezed her knees. "I'm sorry, but I'm telling you now."

I nodded as my gaze swung around the room, landing on the Christmas tree I'd help put together. God, that seemed like forever ago. "Man, I don't...I don't even know what to say. Beth's alive?"

She cleared her throat. "Daemon, I saw her with Brian Vaughn. She's with the DOD. They'd pulled over on the side of the road and the car door had opened. That's how I saw them. He was closing the door and he looked angry."

Slowly, I looked at her, and our gazes locked. Time stretched out as the shocking news gave way to understanding. My entire world shattered in an instant and then rapidly rebuilt itself. I'd been 99 percent sure that something had happened with Bethany, and Dawson had healed her. Knowing how that changed Kat and if what Blake had said was true about the DOD searching for humans like Kat, then it took no leap of logic to figure out that what had happened to Dawson and Bethany was because of the DOD and not the Arum.

Somehow, the DOD figured out that Dawson had done the forbidden. How? I didn't know. But at that moment, it didn't matter, because they had come into my house and they had—they had fucking lied to Dee and me. They had ripped the world out from underneath our feet and it had been a lie.

Maybe all of it had been a lie.

Because if Bethany was still alive, and with the DOD, then Dawson...he could be alive.

I shot to my feet, switching into my true form unintentionally. Rage pounded like the beat of a steel drum. Bulbs on the Christmas tree rattled as a wind picked up inside the room.

I spoke to Kat, each word punctuated with fury. *She was with the DOD? The DOD is responsible for this?*

"I don't know, Daemon, but that's not the worst part of this. How would the DOD know what

happened between Dawson and Bethany unless...?"

Unless someone told them? My light pulsed, and a blast of heat filled the room. But Dawson didn't even tell me he'd healed her or that anything happened. How would anyone know? Unless someone had seen them other than me, suspected what happened, and betrayed us...

She nodded as she stared at me with wide eyes. "That's what I've been thinking. It had to be someone who knew, and that probably really limits the pool of suspects."

Meaning it was someone that I knew, that I trusted. Someone Dawson had trusted. Heat poured off me. I'd never felt such anger before. It was a living, breathing entity in the room. I need to know who betrayed us. Then I'll make them wish they'd never landed on this planet.

Kat stood, pushing the sleeves of her sweater up her arms. Daemon?

Surprised to hear her voice in my head, because it was something she didn't seem to enjoy doing, I focused on her. *I hear you*.

There was a pause. I know you're hell-bent on revenge, but most importantly, what if Dawson is still alive?

I drifted closer to her. Then I don't know if I should be happy or sad. He'd be alive, but where? The DOD has him, and if that's the case, what kind of life has he had? For two years? A ball of bitter emotion formed in my throat. What have they been doing to him?

I'm sorry, Daemon. I'm really sorry. But if he's alive, then he's alive. Kat reached out, placing her hand through the light, finding my chest and touching it. My light pulsed erratically, then calmed. My body hummed at the contact. *That's got to mean something, right?* she said.

Yes, yes it does. Stepping back, I willed myself into my human form. "I need to find out if my brother is alive—and if he's not..." I looked away, my jaw working. "I need to know how and why he died. It's obvious why they would want Beth, but my brother?"

Kat sat down, wiping a palm over her forehead. Her wrist turned, revealing a deep purplish bruise circling the skin. "I don't know—" She gasped when I grasped her hand. "What are you doing?"

I turned her hand over, my brows furrowing. "What is this?"

"Huh?" She glanced down. "It's nothing. I banged my arm into the counter earlier."

Icicles formed in my chest as I lifted my gaze to hers. Standing above her, I found it once more hard to hold on to my human form. Too many emotions were tearing me up, but this bruise looked like a handprint. Like if someone grabbed her wrist too hard. Thoughts of Bethany and even Dawson took a second seat. Was someone hurting her? If so, I was pretty sure I knew who—*Blake*. "Are you sure that's what happened, because I swear if it's not, you tell me and *that problem* will be solved."

Her laugh was shaky, but she rolled her eyes. "Yes, Daemon, that's all that happened. Geez."

Watching her intently, I had a choice to make. I either believed her or I killed *Blake* without any real proof. Though I didn't feel like I needed much proof to take his ass out. Kat smiled at me, and I exhaled roughly. She wouldn't lie about this, because that bruise was nothing like a knife being thrown at her. Training shouldn't leave bruises, and I couldn't imagine her protecting him.

I sat on the couch again, refocusing on Beth and Dawson. A tiny spark of hope fired up deep in my chest, but I was afraid—damn terrified of grasping hold of it. If I did and Dawson wasn't alive, it would be like losing him all over again.

"Don't tell Dee about this, okay?" I said. "Not until we get some leads or something. I don't want her knowing anything until we know for sure."

"How are you going to get leads?" she asked.

"You said you saw Bethany with Vaughn, right?"

She nodded.

"Well, I happen to know where he lives. And he probably knows where Beth is and what happened to Dawson."

"How do you know where he lives?"

The moment he was assigned to us, I made sure I knew where the SOB lived. "I have my ways."

Kat blanched. "Wait. Oh no, you can't go after him. That's insane and dangerous!"

I arched a brow. "As if you care what happens to me, Kitten."

Her mouth dropped open. "I do care, jerk-face! Promise me you won't do anything stupid."

Did she really care? Who knew? "I won't make promises I know I'll break."

"Argh! You're so freaking frustrating. I didn't tell you so you'd go off and do something stupid."

"I'm not going to do anything stupid. And even if what I plan is risky and insane, it's a well-thought-out level of stupidity."

She rolled my eyes. "That's reassuring. Anyway, how do you know where he lives?"

"Since we're surrounded by people who potentially want to do my family harm, I tend to keep tabs on them like they keep tabs on me." I leaned back, stretched my arms until my back bowed. When I caught her staring at me, I resisted pointing it out to her. "He's been staying at a rental in Moorefield, but I'm not sure which one it is."

She shifted on the couch, yawning. "What are you going to do? Stake out his block?" "Yes."

"What? Do you have a James Bond fetish?"

"Possibly," I replied. "I just need a car not easily recognizable. Does your mom work tomorrow?"

Her brows rose. "No, she's off in the evening and will probably be sleeping, but—"

"Her car would be perfect." I shifted closer to her. "Even if Vaughn has seen her car, he won't suspect it belongs to her."

"I'm not letting you take my mom's car."

"Why not?" I smiled at her. "I'm a good driver."

"That's not the point." She leaned back against the arm of the couch. "I can't just let you take her car without me."

I frowned. "You're not getting involved in this."

Her body stiffened. "You want my mom's car, then you get me along with it. It's a two-for-one special."

Dipping my chin, I peered up at her. "Get you? Now that sounds way more interesting of a deal."

Her cheeks flushed. "As in a partnership, Daemon."

"Hmm..." Rising, I walked away from the couch, stopping in the doorway. "Be ready after school tomorrow. Ditch Bartholomew by any means necessary. And do not speak a word of this to him. You and I will be playing spy alone."

The moment darkness fell the following evening, I headed outside and waited by Kat's mom's car. I didn't have much of a plan for the night. Sort of playing it by ear, but if I saw Vaughn, I was going to have a little chat with him. There was going to be no way to stop myself from doing that.

A little after five thirty, Kat came out, quietly closing the door behind her. I reached for the keys.

"Nope. My mom's car means I'm driving."

I shot her a dark look, but didn't want to waste time arguing. I walked around the car and got in on

the passenger side. Immediately, I realized this was not going to be a comfortable ride. This car was built for members of the Lollipop Guild.

Kat looked over at me as she hit the ignition button and laughed.

Legs cramped, I scowled at her even though it was good, really good, to hear her laugh again. As she turned the car around, she flipped the radio to the rock station, and just to be annoying, I flipped it to the station that played nonstop Elvis. Moorefield wasn't a long drive, but with the way she looked right now, you'd think it was going to take hours.

Kat's chin jutted out, and I hid my grin by looking out the window. "So how did you drop Butter-face?"

"I told him I have plans with my mom. It's not like I spend every waking minute with Blake."

I snorted.

"What?" There was a pause and then she said, "What? You know what I'm doing with him. It's not like we're hanging out and watching movies."

"Do I really know what you're doing with him?" I asked softly, staring at the blur of trees as we hit the highway.

"Yes."

Jaw tightening, I angled my body toward her, which wasn't much given the limited space.

"You know, your whole life doesn't have to involve training with Bradley. You can take time off."

"You could also join us. I liked it...when you helped out, when you were there," she admitted.

I'd liked helping her, too, up until the moment Douche Bag could've killed her. "You know my stance on that, but you need to stop avoiding Dee. She misses you. And that's just messed up."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" I blinked. "What for? For being a crappy friend?"

"I'm not trying to be a *crappy* friend, Daemon." Anger flooded her voice. "You know what I'm doing. *You're* the one who told me to keep her out of this. Just tell Dee I'm sorry, okay?"

"No."

"Can we not talk?"

"And that would also be a no," I said, but other than giving her directions to the subdivision where Vaughn lived, I didn't say anything else. Not until she parked the car halfway between the six houses I narrowed it down to. "How has your training been going?"

"If you got over yourself, you'd know."

I smirked. "Are you still able to freeze things? Move objects around?" When she nodded, I eyed her closely. "Have you had any unexpected outbursts of power?"

"No."

"Then why are you still training? The whole purpose was for you to get control. You have."

She groaned. "That's not the only reason, Daemon. And you know it."

"Obviously I don't," I retorted, pushing back against the seat. Jesus, my legs were going numb.

"God, I love how you're all up in my personal business but don't want to be involved in it."

"I like talking about your personal business. It's usually entertaining and always good for a laugh." "Well, I don't," she snapped.

I sighed as I shifted in the seat to no use. "This car sucks."

"It was your idea. I, on the other hand, think the car is a perfect size. But that might be because I'm not the size of a mountain."

I snickered. "You're the size of a little, itty-bitty doll."

"If you say a vacant doll, I will hurt you." She wound the necklace chain around her fingers. "Got

that?"

"Yes, ma'am." I watched her stare forward. A few seconds passed before she yawned. Even though there wasn't much light from the nearby streetlamps making its way into the car, I could see the weariness in every line of her face. I'd seen it every day for a week, getting worse and worse.

I sighed. "You're worn down. Dee's worried. She won't stop bugging me to check on you and see what's wrong, since you won't hang out with her anymore."

"Oh, so we're back to you doing things to make your sister happy? Are you getting bonus points for asking?"

"No." I reached out, gently catching her chin and turning her gaze to mine. "I'm worried. I'm worried for a thousand different reasons and I hate this—I hate feeling like I can't do anything about it. That history is on repeat and even though I can see it as clear as day, I can't stop it."

Her chest rose with a soft inhale as her gaze searched mine. Lifting her hand, she wrapped her fingers around my wrist, inhaling sharply when static jumped from my skin to hers. She said nothing, like always, but in that moment, as she stared at me with an acute sense of desperation, I realized she wasn't just being quiet. There were words she wanted to speak. They were in her eyes and the tense lines of her beautiful face. They hung in the air between us, constantly unspoken.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"About what?"

"About everything—about not hanging out with Dee and being a terrible friend to Lesa and Carissa." She pulled my hand away as she returned to staring out the windshield, blinking several times. "And I'm sorry about not being able to stop training. I get why you don't want me to. I really do. I understand that you don't want me in danger and that you don't trust Blake. Most of all, I do know you fear that I'm going to end up like Bethany and Dawson—whatever really did happen to them—and you want to protect me from that. I understand. And it...it kills me knowing that it hurts you, but you've got to understand why I need to be able to control and use my abilities."

"Kat—"

"Let me finish, okay?" She glanced at me, and when I nodded, she went on. "This isn't just about you and what you want. Or what you're afraid of. This is about me—my future and my life. Granted, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life when it came to college, but now I face a future where if I step out of the range of the beta quartz, I'm going to be hunted. Like you. My *mom* will be in danger if an Arum sees me and follows me home. And then there's this whole DOD mess."

Her hand squeezed the obsidian. "I have to be able to defend myself and the people I care about. Because I can't expect you to always be there to protect me. It's not right or fair to either of us. That's why I'm training with Blake. Not to piss you off. Not to get with him. I'm doing it so that I can stand beside you, as your equal, and not be someone you need to protect. And I'm doing this for myself, so that I don't have to rely on anyone to save me."

I sat back, closing my eyes. All the terrible things I'd said to her when I first met her, about her being weak and not being good enough, smacked me right in my face. I had caused this need to grow and fester in her.

"I know," I said after a few minutes, realizing that I probably knew this whole time, but I'd been too stuck up my own ass to accept it. "I know why you want to do this. And I respect that. I do, but it's hard to stand back and let this happen."

"You don't know what's going to happen, Daemon."

Rubbing my jaw, I stared out the windshield. Tiny flakes of snow drifted down, melting the moment they hit the hood. "It's hard. That's all I can say about this. I'll respect what you want to do, but it's

hard."

A long stretch of silence passed, and then Kat moved on. "Anyway, what are we going to do if we see Vaughn?"

"Haven't thought that far ahead yet."

"Wow. This was a good plan." She paused. "I really doubt Bethany is in one of these houses. That would just be too dangerous."

"I agree, but why did they have her out in public like that? Where anyone could see her?"

She shook her head. "I got the distinct impression that Vaughn wasn't too happy. Maybe she escaped."

I looked at her. "That would make sense. But Vaughn, well, he's always been a punk."

"You know him?"

"Not extremely well, but he started working with Lane a few months before Dawson 'disappeared." The last word was hard to say and wrap my head around. "Lane had been our handler for God knows how long, and then Vaughn showed up with him. He was there when they told us about Dawson and Bethany." Bitter memories clogged my throat. "Lane seemed genuinely upset. Like Dawson wasn't just a *thing* that had died, but a person. Maybe he grew attached to Dawson over the years. See..." I cleared my throat. "Dawson had that kind of effect on people. Even when he was being a smart-ass, you couldn't help but like him. Anyway, Vaughn couldn't have cared less."

Kat reached over the small space between us and squeezed my arm. I looked at her, and after a moment, I placed my hand over hers. Something infinite flared between us—stronger than physical, much deeper. I pulled back, watching the snow fall in larger flakes. "You know what I've been thinking?"

"What?" she asked after a moment.

I leaned back against the seat to keep my legs from cramping. "If the DOD knows what we can do, then none of us are really safe. Not that we've ever been safe, but this changes everything." I looked over at her. "I don't think I said thank you."

"For what?"

"For telling me about Bethany." I smiled slightly.

"You needed to know. I would—wait. We've got one."

Two headlights turned onto the street. It was at least the fifth car to hit the road, but this was an SUV. I squinted. "It's an Expedition."

The black Expedition slowed down and pulled into the driveway of a single-story home two houses in. The driver's door opened and Vaughn stepped out, frowning as he lifted his gaze to the sky. My hands balled into fists. Another car door closed and a figure moved into the light.

"Dammit," I said, recognizing the woman. "Nancy's with him."

"Well, you weren't really planning on talking to him, were you?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I kind of was."

"That's insane. What were you going to do? Bust up in his house and demand answers?" When I nodded, she gaped. "Then what next?"

"Another thing I hadn't fully worked out yet."

"Geez," she muttered. "You suck at this whole spy thing."

I chuckled. "Well, we can't do anything tonight. If one of them went missing it probably wouldn't be such a huge deal, but two of them would raise too many questions."

They disappeared into the house. A light turned on inside, and then someone I guessed was Nancy passed in front of the window. The curtains were drawn closed.

"Huh," Kat said. "Private bunch, aren't they?"

"Maybe they're getting some bow-chicka-pow-wow."

She looked at me. "Ew."

"She's definitely not my type." My gaze dropped to her lips. "But now I totally have that on my mind."

"You're a dog," she said, a bit breathlessly.

"If you pet me, I'll—"

"Don't even finish that sentence." Her lips twitched. "And knock the innocent look off your face. I so know—"

Kat yelped, jerking in her seat. Her head hit the roof of the car.

"What?" I demanded.

"An Arum," she gasped, digging the piece of obsidian out from under her sweater. "An Arum is nearby! You don't have any obsidian on you?"

Tense, I scanned the road. I didn't feel a single thing. Weird. "No. I left it in my car."

She stared at me. "Seriously? You left the one thing that kills your enemy in your *car*?"

"It's not like I need it to kill them. Stay here." I started to open the door, but she grabbed my arm. "What?"

"You can't get out of the car. We're right in front of their house! They'll see you," she reasoned, and dammit, I hated logic. "Are we still close enough to the Rocks?"

"Yes," I growled. "They protect us for about fifty miles in every direction."

"Then just sit still."

Sitting still was not something I was a fan of, but I managed as a shadow moved up the street, darker than the night. I slowly shook my head. How did I not feel it? The Arum glided to the curb and drifted over the thin layer of snow. Its path became obvious. The Arum was going for Vaughn's house.

"What the hell?" I placed my hands on the dashboard.

The Arum took form, dressed in a black jacket. His pale blond hair moved slightly as he walked up to the front door and pressed his finger on the doorbell. Vaughn answered the door and grimaced. His mouth moved, and I picked up a name, and then he stepped to the side, letting the Arum enter his house.

"Holy monkey balls," she said. "That did not just happen."

I sat back. Fury rose swiftly. "That did. And I think we've discovered how the DOD knows what we're capable of."

"The DOD and the Arum are working together? Sweet alien baby... Why?"

"Vaughn said a name—Residon. Read his lips."

"What do we do now?"

"What I want to do is blow up their house, but that would draw too much attention."

She pursed her lips. "No doubt."

There was one person I thought we could talk to, that we could trust, because at this point, we had to talk to someone else about this. What we saw went beyond Kat and me. "We need to go see Matthew," I said. "Now."

CHAPTER 21

Bringing anyone into the fold was risky and could open up a whole new set of problems, but discovering that the Arum were working with the DOD wasn't something I could keep to myself. That wasn't smart. We were going to have to take this risk and see it through.

Matthew lived farther out than we should've attempted to reach in this car. By the time the vehicle crawled up his driveway, I was wondering if we were going to make it back in the Prius.

We climbed out and immediately Kat slipped in the snow. I grabbed her arm. "You fall and break something, I'm going to be irritated."

"Sorry, not all of us can be as awesome—"

She squealed as I lifted her up in my arms. I darted up the driveway, shielding her face against the wind and snow. Once we were in front of Matthew's door, I placed her on her feet. Kat stumbled to the side. "Could you give me a warning next time?"

I grinned as I knocked on the door. "And miss that look on your face? Never."

"You're insufferable," she muttered.

Matthew opened the door, his gaze swinging from me to where Kat stood shivering, because of course, it was snowing and she didn't have a jacket on. "This is...unexpected," he said.

"We need to talk," I said.

He eyed Kat for a moment and then led us into his living room. Matthew lived in a legit log cabin home. It looked like it had when he first moved here. Like no one lived there. Kat sat close to the fire, obviously needing to thaw out.

"What's going on?" Matthew picked up a glass of wine. "I'm assuming it's something I don't want to know, considering she's with you."

Kat looked entirely unimpressed with the statement.

I sat beside her. "I guess we should start from the beginning, and you're probably going to want to sit."

"Oh, this is starting out good." He swirled the liquid inside the glass.

Oh, he had no idea. "Katy saw Bethany yesterday with Vaughn."

Matthew's brows shot up, and then he took a long drink of his wine. "That's not what I was expecting you to say. Katy, are you sure that's who you saw?"

She nodded. "It was her, Mr. Garrison."

"Matthew, call me Matthew." He took a step back, shaking his head as he cleared his throat. "I really don't know what to say."

"It gets worse," she said, rubbing her hands together.

"I know where one of the DOD officers lives," I chimed in. "And we went there tonight."

"What?" Matthew lowered his glass. "Are you insane?"

I shrugged. "While we were watching his house, Nancy Husher showed up and guess who else did?"

"Santa?" he said drily.

Kat laughed out loud.

I ignored that. "An Arum showed up and they let him in. Even greeted him by name—Residon."

Looking away, Matthew downed the entire drink. He set the glass on the mantel above the fireplace. "This isn't good, Daemon. I know you want to rush up there and find out how Bethany is still alive, but you can't. This is too dangerous."

"Do you understand what this means?" I rose, stepping forward. "The DOD has Bethany. Vaughn was one of the officers who came and told us that they were both dead. So they lied about her. And that means they could've lied about Dawson."

"Why would they have Dawson? They told us he was dead. Obviously Bethany isn't, but that doesn't mean he's alive. So get that out of your head, Daemon."

Anger flashed through me. "If it was one of your siblings, would you 'get that out of your head'?"

"All my siblings are dead." Matthew stalked across the room, stopping in front of us. "You guys are all I have left, and I will not stand by and humor false hope that will get you killed or worse!"

I sat down, taking a deep breath. "You're family to us, too. And Dawson also considered you family, Matthew."

Pain flashed in Matthew's ultrabright eyes, and then he looked away. "I know." Turning, he walked over to his recliner and sat down heavily, shaking his head. "Honestly, it would be best if he weren't alive, and you know that. I can't even imagine..."

"But if he is, we need to do something about it." I paused. "And if he's truly dead, then..."

"You don't understand, Daemon. The DOD would have no interest in Bethany unless...unless Dawson healed her."

I stilled as I stared at Matthew, and I could feel Kat doing the same. I didn't want him to know about Kat and me. Not yet. "What are you saying, Matthew?"

He rubbed his brow, wincing. "The Elders...they don't talk about why we're not allowed to heal humans, and they have good reason. It's forbidden, not only because of the risk of exposure on our end, but because of what it does to a human. They know. So do I."

"What?" I glanced at Kat, relieved that she knew to stay quiet. "Do you know what happens?"

He nodded. "It alters the human, splicing his or her DNA with ours. There has to be a true *want* for it to work, though. The human takes on our abilities, but it doesn't always stick. Sometimes it fades. Sometimes the human dies from it or the change backfires. But if successful, it forms a connection between the two."

A true want? What the hell did that mean?

"The connection between a human and a Luxen after a massive healing is unbreakable at a cellular level," he continued. "It marries the two together. One cannot survive if the other perishes."

Kat's sharp inhale echoed in my head as I shot to my feet. *Blake* had not said that when he talked about Kat being changed. He never mentioned that the Luxen and the human were bonded on an unbreakable level. But that meant...

Oh my God.

I barely got the words out. "Then if Bethany is alive..."

"Then Dawson would have to be alive," Matthew finished, sounding weary. "If he had in fact healed her."

Flipping my gaze to the fire, that tiny spark of hope grew stronger. Dawson had to have healed

Bethany. I knew it, deep in my core, and that meant that my brother was alive. He was alive, somewhere out there; he was *alive*.

"But you just said he couldn't be alive," Kat spoke up, and I looked at Matthew.

"That was my weakest attempt to persuade this one from getting himself killed," he said.

It was like taking a punch to the chest. Raw emotion poured into me. "Did you...did you know this the entire time?" My form began to flicker. "Did you?"

Matthew shook his head. "No. No! I believed both of them to be dead, but if he did heal her—did change her—and she's alive, then he has to be alive. That's a big if—an if based on whether or not Katy really did recognize someone she's never met."

I slowly sat down, feeling so much I didn't feel anything. "My brother's alive. He's...he's alive."

"What do you think they're doing to him?" Kat asked.

"I don't know." Matthew stood. "Whatever it is, it can't be..."

It wasn't good.

"The DOD knows, Matthew. They know what we can do," I said finally. "They've probably known since the beginning."

His lashes swept up, and he met my stare. "I've never truly believed they didn't, to be honest. The only reason I never voiced my belief is because I didn't want any of you to worry."

"And the Elders—do they know this, too?" I asked, thinking of Lydia.

"The Elders are just grateful to have a place to live in peace and be basically separated from the human race. Stick-their-heads-in-the-sand kind of thing, Daemon. If anything, they probably choose to not believe our secrets aren't safe." He glanced at his empty glass on the fireplace. "It's...easier for them."

"That sounds incredibly stupid," Kat said.

Matthew smiled wryly in response. "Dear girl, you do not know what it is like to be a guest, do you? Imagine living with the knowledge that your home and everything could be whipped out from under you at any moment. But you have to lead people, keep them calm and happy—safe. The worst thing would be to voice the darkest of your concerns to the masses." He paused, eyeing that glass again. "Tell me, what would humans do if they knew aliens lived among them?"

Her cheeks flushed. "Uh, they'd probably riot and go nuts."

"Exactly," he murmured. "Our kinds are not that different."

She squirmed next to me. "What about the Arum thing?"

"I don't know." Matthew refilled his glass. "I can't even fathom a reason why the DOD would be working with them—what they could even gain. The Arum absorb our powers, but never healing—nothing of that magnitude. They have a different heat signature than we do, so with the right tools, the DOD would know they weren't dealing with us, but to walk up to an Arum or a Luxen on the street, there would be no way to tell us apart."

"Wait." She tucked her hair back, glancing at me. "What if the DOD captured an Arum, believing it to be a Luxen, and you guys were studied, too, right? Forced to assimilate into the human world? I don't know what assimilation entails, but I'm sure it was some kind of observation, so wouldn't they have noticed eventually, especially with the heat-signature thing?"

Matthew walked over to the liquor cabinet in the corner, going for something harder. "When we were being assimilated, they never saw our abilities. So if we work off the theory that they've known for some time, they studied our abilities on Luxen who could never tell us that the DOD is aware of what we can do."

"You're saying that those Luxen would be..."

"Dead," he said, tossing back a mouthful of clear liquor. "I'm not sure how much Daemon has told you, but there were Luxen who didn't assimilate. They were put down...like feral animals. No stretch of the imagination to believe that they used some Luxen to study their abilities, to learn about us, and then got rid of them."

I was quiet, but I was listening, and I suddenly thought about Blake. What if the DOD was sending some of the Luxen—or ones like Kat—out to spy on others? Maybe that was paranoid. Maybe not.

"But that doesn't explain why the Arum would work with the DOD," Kat argued.

"It doesn't." Matthew moved to the fireplace. He propped his elbow on the mantel. "I am afraid to theorize over what that could mean."

"Part of me doesn't even care about that right now," I said, feeling tired. "Someone betrayed Dawson. Someone had to tell the DOD."

"It could be anyone," Matthew said wearily. "Dawson didn't try to hide his relationship with Bethany. And if anyone was watching them closely, they could've suspected something happened. We all watched them when they first got together. I'm sure some of us didn't stop."

Who in the hell could it have been?

We left Matthew's house shortly after that, and she handed the keys to me without fighting when I asked for them. Snow was coming down heavier, and I needed...well, I needed something like driving to focus on. I turned to open the car door, but Kat walked back to me. Before I knew what she was doing, she wrapped her arms around me and squeezed tight.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "We'll figure out something. We'll get him back."

We'll get him back.

After a moment of hesitation, I folded my arms around Kat and held her close. "I know," I said, full of steely determination. "I'll get him back if it's the last thing I do."

Over the next couple of days, we staked out Vaughn's house after Kat finished her evening training with Blake. We didn't see anything out of the ordinary. No visiting Arum or Nancy. Each evening, we returned home, and my frustration grew.

My brother was out there, somewhere, and nothing I was doing seemed to be getting me any closer to finding him. When I wasn't with Kat, I was staking out Vaughn's home on my own. I began to realize that the man was barely there, and I wondered if he had another home. Though the times I managed to follow Vaughn on foot, he didn't go anyplace else.

Thoughts of my brother and who could've possibly reported what he'd done to the DOD consumed me. It would have to have been someone who saw either Dawson or Bethany immediately after whatever happened or someone Dawson trusted enough to tell.

Dawson didn't trust anyone in the colony, not even Lydia, with that kind of information. The only person he could've talked to would've been Dee, but there's no way she would've kept that quiet all this time. I already knew he hadn't confided in Adam. So that left two options. Someone saw them.

Or it was someone Bethany knew.

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense that the person who had notified the DOD was connected to Bethany and not Dawson. My brother would've been so damn careful to keep what he'd done a secret, and maybe Bethany hadn't realized the seriousness of what had happened, trusted the wrong person.

But that theory had its flaws, too, because who did Bethany know that would've even had the inclination or the know-how to contact the DOD? It's not like you could call 1-800-ALIENS or something.

Looking into Bethany was a start, though.

Since Kat wasn't home early Thursday evening, I scoped out Vaughn's place on my own. As usual, nothing happened. I headed back to the house, spying Kat's car in the driveway, but I knew she wasn't there. She was out somewhere with Douche Bag, and to stop from wanting to blow up something, I reminded myself of why she was with him in the first place.

Because of my mouth.

Guilt churned in the pit of my gut as I headed to my bedroom. Once inside, I grabbed my laptop and refocused on Bethany.

I had no idea what I could find on the internet, but it was a start. I typed in her full name, and Google pulled up several articles. My chest hollowed as I started scanning through them. At first, they discussed her as if she were a missing child, and then the later articles hinted that she was presumed dead. Her family had moved away from Petersburg about a year ago, something I personally found strange. If I hadn't been told that Dawson was dead and only that he was missing, I would probably stay here forever, hoping that he'd someday return.

Unless her family had reason to believe that she was dead.

Or they just couldn't live in an area that served as a constant reminder. I could understand that.

I stared at a picture of Bethany on a news website. Pretty girl. Dark hair. Bright smile.

There was nothing on the internet, barely even a mention of Dawson, which I'm sure the DOD had something to do with. The lack of anything mentioning him was as if he'd been erased from history. Made sense. After all, we lived here, but when things went south, we ceased to exist.

Bethany hadn't been at school long enough to get really close to anyone, so there wasn't a friend I could check with. Dead end there. Closing the laptop, I stood and stretched, growing restless. What else...?

Beth's house.

Lowering my arms, I smiled wryly. There was one place I could check out. Bethany's old house. I didn't even know if anyone had moved into it or if I'd find anything, but shit, it was better than pacing in my bedroom, which was surely coming next.

It was better than doing nothing.

I passed Dee's bedroom on the way out. The door was halfway open. I stopped and peered inside. She was already asleep. What an exciting way to spend a Thursday evening. It wasn't even seven. I knew the house wasn't empty. I could hear Adam moving around downstairs.

I was almost at the door when Adam appeared, coming from the kitchen. The light from the Christmas tree flickered. He glanced at me and then the direction of the door. "You leaving?"

My brows rose. "You staying?"

"Actually, no. Dee's asleep, and I was just cleaning up after the dinner she made." He looked up the stairwell, smiling faintly. "I was just heading out. Where are you going?"

First inclination was to say nowhere, but as I stared at Adam, I made a split decision. "I'm going to go check out Bethany's house."

Adam blinked. "Come again?"

"Come outside, okay?" He followed me out onto the porch. My boots crunched over the layer of snow covering the porch, blown in by the wind. "Before I say anything else, I need to know you're not going to repeat a single thing to anyone, including Dee."

"You're starting to worry me," he replied, crossing his arms over his PHS sweatshirt. "This is the second time you're asking me not to talk to Dee."

"I know, and if you don't want to keep her in the dark, then the convo between us ends here. Nothing personal," I told him. "But I don't want her knowing any of this. Not yet."

Adam eyed me for a long moment and then exhaled roughly. "Okay. I swear. I won't say anything, but this better be good."

Oh, he had no idea. "Kat saw Bethany at the post office."

His mouth opened and then snapped shut. A moment passed, and he tried again. "What?"

I glanced at the closed door. "She saw her at the post office, and she's positive it was Bethany. Kat's seen her picture."

He shook his head slowly as he unfolded his arms. "I don't even know what to say."

"Well, that's not all." I kept my voice low as I went on. "You know how I wondered if something had gone down between Dawson and Bethany—if he'd healed her, right?" When he nodded, I continued. "I think he did—no, I'm...I'm positive he did." Once that was out, the rest was easy. "Dawson healed her and it changed her on a cellular level. It linked them together, bonding them."

"Bonding them together?" Adam thrust his hand through his hair. "That sounds crazy. You know that, right? It sounds—"

"Matthew confirmed that it was possible."

His eyes widened.

"Yeah." I smiled, but it was without humor. "Matthew confirmed that we can heal a human to the point that it changes their DNA. They take on some of our abilities and it links us together. That means if Bethany is alive, then so is Dawson."

"Holy..." Adam stepped back. "Dawson is alive?"

That spark of hope had turned into a seedling, and damn if it wasn't growing. "I think so, Adam. I really think so." I moved to the porch steps, stirring the snow. "Kat saw Bethany with Vaughn. If the DOD has her—"

"Then they have Dawson." Adam cursed under his breath as he thrust his fingers through his hair again. "I don't know if I should be happy or scared as hell, because if they have him and Bethany..."

"I know," I said quietly, staring out over the still yard. "Someone had to have betrayed them. Dawson didn't tell any of us. I think it might have been someone Bethany knew. So that's why I want to check out her house. I don't even know if anyone lives there now or—"

"No one lives there," Adam said, coming to stand next to me. "We drive past it every so often on the way to school. No one has moved in since her family left."

That was good news. Still didn't mean we'd find anything, but it was worth trying.

"And you haven't told Dee?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't want to get her hopes up if I'm just chasing a ghost, you know? It would kill her."

"It will kill you."

I didn't respond.

Adam stepped off the porch. "I'm not going to say anything. Not until we have concrete proof, because you're right, she doesn't need to go through losing him all over again." He paused, his eyes meeting mine. "But neither do you, Daemon. You shouldn't have to experience this again."

We traveled the several miles to Beth's old house by foot, which only took us a handful of minutes. We stayed in our human forms so we didn't freak out the locals. My face stung from the snowy wind as the renovated farmhouse came into view, perched atop a hill.

Snow crunched under our boots as we walked up the sidewalk and hit the front porch. I eyed the front door. It wasn't just locked, but also had one of those Realtor locks on it. A closed and locked door wasn't going to deter me. I placed my hand on the center of the door, prepared to blast it into next week.

"Hold on." Adam stepped back. "We really don't want to make it that obvious that we're here."

We didn't?

With a quick grin, Adam backed off the porch and disappeared around the side of the house. A few moments later, I heard the *click* of the front door and then it opened. I arched a brow as Adam held the door open.

"Figured if we had to break something, we shouldn't make it so obvious," Adam said as I stepped past him, into the dark and cold house. "Plus the back door didn't have one of those weird locks on it. Easily broken."

"Smart," I murmured, scanning the bare walls as I walked farther into the house.

Adam pulled out his cell phone. A few seconds later, the screen lit up with harsh white light, casting a glow along the floors and walls. We passed what looked like a living room. A couch draped in a light-colored canvas was the only thing remaining in the room. The kitchen was odd, though. A table sat in the corner of the room, covered in a thick layer of dust.

"Is this normal?" Adam asked, gesturing at the counters. Kitchen appliances were still in their designated spaces. A toaster sat next to a coffeemaker, and both had obviously been sitting untouched since the Williamses moved away. "Do people just leave stuff behind?"

I raised a shoulder. "Who knows? Maybe they didn't need it."

"Or they were in a hurry," Adam supplied.

In a hurry for what? To get away from all reminders of their missing, presumed dead daughter? Or something else? God. We would probably never know.

From the kitchen, we headed upstairs. Our footsteps echoed in the otherwise silent house. We found Bethany's room pretty easily. From what I remembered, she liked to paint, and there was a nice-sized room with an easel by a dirtied window. There were papers on a small desk, mostly assignments from school. An odd pang hit me in the chest when I saw the neat stack of books in a corner. It reminded me of Kat.

This could be her.

One day, someone could be walking through her room, looking for evidence of what happened to her. Shit. That hit me hard, a fist to the lungs and stomach. Made me want to turn around, find Kat, and keep her...keep her safe somewhere, and that had nothing to do with us being connected. And the punch of panic was far too strong for someone who was just physically attracted to another person.

But I already knew that what I was feeling for Kat dug in far deeper than lust.

Adam opened a closet door, revealing that it hadn't been packed up. Clothing hung from hangers. Jeans were stacked on a shelf. Shoes scattered the inside. "You know," he said, stepping aside as he looked over his shoulder at me, "I think this is kind of weird."

"Same here." I had no idea if her parents had owned this house or rented it. Either way, it didn't seem normal that this much stuff was left behind.

I riffled through the papers, finding nothing of interest. The same with her closet. What was I really expecting? A list of people Bethany might've confided in? Like life was that easy.

Adam roamed out of the room, and a few moments later he returned, his expression unreadable. "I think I found something interesting."

Following him down the hall, we entered a smaller bedroom. Like the rest of the house, personal items were scattered about, along with dusty furniture. Adam walked over to an open closet and picked up what looked like a shoe box off the floor. He sat it on the stripped-down bed. "If I remember correctly, Beth lived here with her parents and a younger brother. Her dad worked in Virginia somewhere."

I nodded, knowing this.

"And I'm pretty sure neither of her parents was a doctor. I remember Dawson telling me once what they did, but hell if I can remember exactly now, but I know neither of them was a doctor." He gestured at the box. "Which is why I find it strange there's a shoe box with a stethoscope and a blank prescription pad from the hospital."

Walking over to the box, I picked up the pad. With the light from Adam's phone, I saw that was indeed a prescription pad from the local hospital. "These cannot be easy to get ahold of nowadays, not if you don't actually work at the hospital."

"Exactly." Adam moved the phone back to the box, shining the light on the stethoscope. He picked it up, running his thumb along the metal part. "Something was either scratched into the metal or engraved, but you can't make it out."

I caught it when he tossed it over, and he was right, the markings were ilegible. I dropped it back in the box, frowning. When I walked to the closet, I saw a couple of plain white men's shirts lying on the floor.

"No one in her family was a doctor or worked at the hospital?" I asked.

"Not that I know of. I mean, at least not her immediate family, but it looks like someone else lived here with them." Adam sighed. "The thing is, none of this could mean a damn thing."

Bending at the knees, I nodded again. "I know." I swept the shirts aside, feeling something under them. "Hey, bring the light over here."

A second later, white light shone down on what was under the forgotten shirts. My brows lifted. Several unused bundles of gauze sat atop a bedpan, and I spotted a cane in the corner of the closet. A walker was folded up, resting against the back wall. Next to the bedpan was a pack of unused plastic cups with lids and an unopened six-pack of Ensure.

"Someone was either very old or very sick," Adam commented.

"Yeah," I murmured, standing up as unease crawled its way down my spine. "Someone who was either sick or old who might've worked at the hospital."

"Uh-huh."

Something about this struck me as wrong. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. What we found might not mean anything and as we scoped out the rest of the house, we didn't find anything else. Later that night, as I lay in bed, staring at the cracks in the plaster, I still couldn't shake the discomfort of knowing I'd stumbled across something without knowing what had tripped me.

CHAPTER 22

Kat was late to trig class Friday morning before Christmas break, entering the classroom a few moments before the bell rung. Immediately, I knew something was wrong with her. She walked stiffly, as if she couldn't fully extend her legs. I straightened as she made her way to the desk in front of me and watched her sit down very slowly. Concern pinged through me.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She turned halfway, her face a shade paler than normal. "Yeah. Just slept wrong."

Tension poured into me. Slept wrong? Fallen recently? And burned her hand on a stove? "Did you sleep on the floor or something?"

She laughed drily and started to turn back around. "Feels like it."

My fingers dug into the edges of the desk. "Kat..."

"What?" she whispered, her gaze not meeting mine.

I stared at her for a moment and then sat back, folding my arms. "Never mind," I said, even though I wanted to ask her how training was last night, but I sensed I wasn't going to get anything else out of her. "You still on for tonight?"

Biting her lip, she nodded and turned back around. Throughout class and the rest of the day, whenever I saw her, she moved stiffly. Dee noticed it after lunch, catching me in the hallway. My sister was worried about Kat, and Kat wasn't telling her anything. Nothing new there, but the horrible suspicion that there was more to her recent injuries overshadowed the unease from last night.

Would Kat lie about someone hurting her?

The mere thought nearly caused me to lose control of my human form while in history class, because there was only one person who would be in the position to hurt her. *Blake*. In between classes, I'd kept an eye out for the little punk-ass, but he was nowhere to be found. Probably a good thing, because even without proof he was hurting Kat, I still wanted to rip his throat out. Just because.

After school, when I didn't see *him* show up at Kat's house around the time he normally did, I decided to head over there earlier than we had planned. The opportunity to talk to her—hell, who was I kidding? I wasn't passing up the opportunity to just spend time with her.

I darted up the steps, raising my hand to knock when the door opened. I frowned. "I'm really beginning to dislike the fact that you know when I'm coming."

"I thought you loved it. It enables you to be such a great stalker." She stepped aside.

"I've already told you. I don't *stalk* you." I followed her into the living room, eyeing how she walked. She seemed looser, as if the steps weren't as pained. "I use it to keep an eye on you."

"There's a difference?" She sat on the couch, looking slightly disheveled in her loose sweats and thermal...with...little strawberries on it. What was it with her and fruit?

Cute.

I sat right next to her, so close our thighs touched. "There is a difference."

"Sometimes your logic scares me." She smoothed her hands over her pants. "So what are you doing over here so early?"

"Bill didn't come by tonight?" I leaned back against the cushions.

She tucked her hair back behind her ear. "No. He had something to do with family."

Family? I had suspected the asshole was hatched from an egg. My gaze roamed over her face and then slid to the laptop. The video app was open, and beside the laptop was a stack of books. "What are you doing? Making another one of those videos?"

"I was planning to. I haven't done one in a while, but then you showed up. Plan ruined."

I grinned. "You can still film one. I promise I'll behave."

"Yeah, not going to happen."

There was a lot we needed to talk about. What I'd found at Bethany's house last night and if it meant anything. All the shit with Blake and how she kept ending up hurt. We could scope out Vaughn's house early, but there was something so normal about her wanting to film a video for her blog. And she had very few normal moments lately.

And giving her this moment seemed more important than anything else.

"Why not?" I raised my hand, and the book on the top of the pile flew to my hand. I glanced at it. There was a guy on the cover with curly blond hair and ice-blue eyes. I got an idea. "Hey, I have an idea. I could pretend to be him."

"What?" She frowned as I flipped the book over, showing her the cover. "Wait. You don't mean—"

Glancing back at the image, I focused and then let my human form slip. It was harder to mirror the image since all I had was a photo, but I'd spent hours doing it when I was a kid, teaching Dawson. A few seconds later, a lock of blond hair fell across my eyes. *I smiled slightly*. "Hello there..."

"Oh my God." Kat lifted her hand and poked my golden cheek. She laughed. "You can't do that. People would freak."

"But it would definitely get a lot of attention." I winked. "It would be fun."

"But this cover model"—she took the book from me and waved it around—"is a real person somewhere. He'd probably be curious how he ended up in my In My Mailbox video."

I pouted. "You do have a point." Letting go of the mirror image, I returned to my normal form. "But don't let that stop you. Go ahead and film. I'll be like your assistant."

She stared at me. "I don't know about this."

"I'll be completely quiet. I'll just hold books for you."

"I don't think you have the ability to be completely quiet. Ever."

"I promise." My grin spread.

Several moments passed, and then she nodded. Facing the screen of the laptop, she adjusted the placement so I was included. She hit record and took a deep breath. "Hi, this is Katy from Katy's Krazy Book Obsession. Sorry for such a long absence. School and"—she glanced at me—"stuff have gotten in the way, but anyway, I have a guest. This is—"

"Daemon Black," I said. "I'm the guy she lies awake at night and fantasizes about."

Her cheeks flushed as she elbowed me. "And that is so not the truth. He's my neighbor—"

"And the guy she's completely obsessed with."

"He's very egotistical and likes to hear his voice, but he's promised to stay quiet. Right?"

I nodded as I smiled at the camera. "I think reading is sexy."

Kat's brows inched up her forehead. "Do you now?"

"Oh, yes, and you know what else I think is sexy?" I leaned forward so my entire face filled the

picture. I lifted my chin in her direction. "Bloggers like this. Hot."

She smacked my arm and whispered, "Get back."

I sat back and I was totally quiet for a very, very long time. Like a good assistant, I handed her the books, but sometimes I had to say something. Like the guy on one of the other covers looked constipated. And seriously, did she have enough angel books? But one book did look interesting. I held it up, ignoring her muffled, disgruntled sigh, and said, "This reaper dude sounds like my kind of guy. He gets to kill people for a living."

Kat snatched it out of my hand, grinning. She spoke about the book for a few moments and then, "And that's it for today. Thanks for watching!"

I leaned in. "Don't forget. There are cooler things out there than fallen angels and dead guys. Just saying." I winked.

Smiling like I hadn't seen her do in a while, she pushed me aside and clicked off the record button. "You like seeing yourself being recorded."

More like I liked seeing her smiling. I shrugged. "That was fun. When do you do another?"

"Next week if I get more books."

"More books." My eyes widened. "You have, like, ten books you just said you haven't read."

"Doesn't mean I won't get more books." Her lips curved up again as I gaped at her. "I haven't been able to read a lot lately, but I will, and then I won't be out of anything new to read."

"You haven't had time because of *him* and that's ridiculous." I looked away, jaw working. "Reading is something you love. So is blogging, and you've completely dumped those things."

"I have not!"

"You're such a little liar," I shot back as I leaned against the couch once more. "I've checked out your blog. You've done five posts in the last month."

Her mouth dropped open. "You've been stalking my blog, too?"

"Like I said before, I'm not stalking. I'm just keeping an eye on you."

"And like I said before, your reasoning is faulty. You know what I've been doing. It pretty much soaks up my time—"

"What the hell?" I exploded. Kat had bent forward to close the laptop, causing the back of her thermal to ride up, exposing several inches of skin—purple and blue skin. Bruised and angrylooking. Horrified, I grabbed hold of the thermal and tugged it up, revealing a huge bruise.

"Hey." She twisted around, knocking my hands away. "What are you doing? Hands off, mofo."

I looked up, meeting her wide stare. Rage bubbled like lava tinted with desperation. My hands curled into fists. "Tell me why your back looks like you fell out of a two-story window."

Kat's face paled as she stood. Without saying anything, she walked out of the living room. I was right behind her, barely able to hold on to my human form as we walked into the kitchen. She grabbed a Coke out of the fridge. "I...I fell in training with Blake. It's not a big deal, though." Facing me, she toyed with the top of the can. "I told you I slept wrong because I figured you'd make fun of me."

I searched her face for a hint that said she was lying. She looked uncomfortable, embarrassed even, but she appeared genuine. My hands loosened. "Yeah, I would've made fun of you...a little bit, but Jesus, Kat, you sure you didn't break something?"

"I'm fine," she assured me.

Following her around the table, I took a few seconds to make sure my voice was level. "You've been hurting yourself a lot lately."

"Not really."

"You're not clumsy, Kitten. So how does this keep happening?" I slowly approached Kat, not

wanting her to dart away from me.

"I tripped in the woods the night I first found out about you," she reminded me.

"Nice try." I shook my head. "You were running full-out in the middle of pitch-black woods. Even I'd..." I winked. "Well, maybe not me, but *normal* people would trip then. I'm just too awesome."

"Well..." Her nose wrinkled.

My gaze briefly dropped. "It looks like it hurts."

"It does a little."

"Then let me fix it." I reached for her.

"Wait." She backed up. "Should you be doing that?"

"Healing you can't hurt. Not at this point." I tried again, but she knocked my hand away. Frustration spiked. "I'm just trying to help!"

She backed up against the wall. "I don't need you to help me."

The muscle in my jaw started working. Kat always had to be so damn stubborn, even when she was obviously in pain, and I hated seeing her like this. I loathed the idea of her hurt. I couldn't deal with it, so the moment she started to relax, I moved wicked fast. Within two heartbeats, I had my arms around her hips, careful to not touch her back, and I lifted her up, carrying her to the couch. I sat down, holding her in my lap.

Kat gawked at me as her hair settled around her face. "That's not fair!"

"I wouldn't have had to do it if you would just stop being so freaking stubborn and let me help you." I slipped my hand under the back of her thermal, flattening my palm against her lower back. She jerked slightly. "I can make you feel better," I told her. "It's ridiculous that you won't let me."

"We have stuff to do, people to stalk, Daemon. Just let me up." She wiggled, but I held her still.

"No." I focused and felt heat flare from my palm. My lips tipped up when I heard her soft inhale. Her eyes met mine and then flickered away. Her mouth opened, and I knew she was preparing for another argument. "I can't be around you when I know you're in pain, okay?"

Her eyes widened slightly. Uncomfortable, I focused on the spot above the TV. A moment passed and she asked, "Does it really bother you, me hurting?"

"I don't feel it, if that's what you're asking." I paused, exhaling softly as I met her questioning gaze again. "Just knowing you're hurt is enough for it to bother me."

She lowered her eyes and stopped squirming, the fight leaving her. Healing her didn't take as much concentration as it had that night we'd fought Baruck. It was natural, requiring almost no thought, and that was a good thing, because Kat placed her head on my shoulder, and that was incredibly distracting.

It felt like forever since I'd held her. Thanksgiving night was the last time. Too long ago. She snuggled in, resting one hand against my lower stomach. I closed my eyes, soaking up the feel of her. At some point I knew she was healed, but I didn't want to bother her. She was completely relaxed in my loose embrace, where she belonged.

Yeah, exactly where she belonged.

I lowered my chin and tilted my head to the side. Her thick lashes fanned the top of her cheeks. With her slow heart rate, I knew she was close to sleep. It wasn't late at all, but those shadows under her eyes were still there. She was exhausted. Folding my other arm under her knees, I stood.

Kat stirred. "What are you doing?"

"Taking you to bed."

"I can walk."

"I can get you there faster." And I did. Leaving the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree, I raced her

upstairs and into her bedroom. "See?"

She looked a little windblown as I neared her bed. Without touching them, I lifted the covers back and then placed her down. I tugged the comforter up to her hips, lingering as I stared down at her. "Do you feel better?"

"Yeah," she whispered, her gaze fixed on mine.

The center of my chest throbbed in an unfamiliar way. There was so much between us that sometimes it felt like we would never be on the same page, but there were moments—moments like this—that there were no obstacles. It was just her and me, and the world outside didn't exist.

My throat worked. "Can I...? Can I just hold you? That's all...that's all I want."

Her lips parted, but there were no words. She nodded.

Relief cracked me straight down the center as if some internal fault line had been ruptured. My heart started pounding, and I knew she could feel it as I kicked off my shoes and then walked around to the other side. I slid into bed beside her and extended an arm. Kat rolled onto her side without hesitation, curling against the side of my body. She rested her cheek on my chest.

"I kind of like being your body pillow." My hand trembled slightly as I placed it on her hip. "Even if you drool on me."

"I do not drool." Her hand came to rest above my heart. "What about tailing Vaughn?"

"That can wait until tomorrow." I tilted my chin to the side, brushing my lips against her forehead. My arm around her tightened as I held her close. "Get some rest, Kitten. I'll be gone before morning."

That was the plan. I would hold her until she fell asleep, and then I would leave. After all, it wasn't even eight o'clock, and I could still scope out Vaughn without Kat. I just wanted a few...quiet moments with her, but Kat drifted off fast, and the seconds in between opening and closing my eyes rapidly increased. Being with her like this had a lulling, comforting effect, and before I knew it, I fell into the deepest sleep.

I was having the most wonderful dream. Ever. Kat was in bed with me, her body warm and soft. My mind was full of vague, almost distant images and sounds. I felt her hand slip free from mine, and she shifted beside me. I rolled into her, my arm around her waist keeping her close as I buried my face in the side of her neck. Inhaling deeply, I caught the scent of peaches. I was half awake, present enough to know this wasn't a dream. She was lying in bed next to me. Perfect. I pressed my lips to her neck.

Kat pushed me. Hard.

I blinked my eyes open. "Mmm, what's your problem?"

She looked at me, and then her gaze moved to the doorway. I followed and immediately woke right up. Her mom stood in the opening, a robe cinched tight at her narrow waist. Beside her was Dr. Michaels.

Oh shit.

I removed my arm from Kat's waist. "Oh, wow, awkward." Clearing my throat, I spoke louder.

"Good morning, Ms. Swartz."

Kat's mom smiled tightly while her look screamed *are you serious*, but I was really at a loss for what else to say. "Good morning, Daemon. I think it's time for you to go home."

Yep. I was going to have to agree with that.

Glancing down at a red-faced Kat, I was relieved to see that only a faint shadow lingered under her

eyes. I grinned apologetically at her, and then I left the bed as fast as humanly possibly, which was really slow for me.

I grabbed my shoes off the floor and turned sideways as I walked out the door. Her mom didn't even spare one glance in my direction. Dr. Michaels stepped aside, and as I made my way past him, he clapped his hand on my shoulder in an age-old attaboy way.

Weird.

But when I stepped out in the frigid morning temperatures, all I could think about was the look on Kat's face. I tipped my chin back and I laughed loudly, laughed harder than I had since...since Dawson.

CHAPTER 23

Over the next couple of days, I laid off dragging Kat into the whole stalking-Vaughn business. With Christmas, it didn't seem right. Plus, I'd learned from Dee that *Blake* was spending all of Christmas break with his family. That meant that Kat should be able to actually get some rest, and that also meant that I needed to crawl out of her ass for a few days.

Dee had managed to coax Kat out of her house over break and take her to the movies. Adam and surprisingly, Ash, had gone with them. That concerned me a little, considering that Ash and Kat usually escalated to DEFCON one whenever they were around each other, and I wanted to go with them. I'd even stood out on the porch and watched Adam, Dee, and Kat leave, but I remained behind. Kat needed the time with Dee. Needed the normalcy she'd been lacking...well, since she moved here.

So I checked out Vaughn's house, leaving the car behind even though my skin felt frozen by the night's end. Nancy showed up soon after Vaughn arrived, and did so every night, but it wasn't until Sunday night that my stalking finally proved fruitful. I'd followed him from his house to an industrial park just outside of Petersburg. He'd disappeared in there for several hours, and the place was well guarded from the outside by two officers.

I knew they were hiding something or someone in there.

When Vaughn finally left, the officers remained outside. It took everything in me not to bust right up in there now, but I was smart about it. I checked out the place over the next couple of days and by Christmas night I was confident that the guards were on a schedule. There was a gap in time, no more than thirty minutes, when they were gone from the outside premises, usually around twelve thirty in the morning, and the guards appeared active only once Vaughn arrived.

Inside was a different story, one I didn't know and wouldn't know until I got in there.

Deciding to make my move to get into the building the day after Christmas, I waited until it was close to eleven before I slipped out of the house. Dee was over at Adam's, so I didn't have to worry about her wondering what I was doing. I checked out Vaughn's house first and saw that he was home. Another Expedition was in the driveway, most likely belonging to Nancy. Perfect. I was halfway to the industrial park before I stopped.

I thought of Kat.

Dammit.

Turning back, I raced through the woods in the opposite direction, slowing only when I returned to my house. I stopped by my SUV and stared at Kat's house. Taking her with me was risky, freaking dangerous as hell.

But finding this warehouse wouldn't have been possible without Kat telling me about seeing Bethany. Cutting her out of this seemed wrong. Involving her didn't feel any better.

I pulled the baseball cap off my head and thrust my fingers through my hair as I stared at her house.

She wanted to be involved—wanted to stand side by side with me, facing whatever came our way. Truth was, I hadn't really let her.

And Blake had.

Wasn't that why he was training her instead of me? He had enough...faith in her. Didn't I?

I slammed the cap back down on my head. It didn't have anything to do with faith. I didn't want Kat to be in danger, and because of that, there was a wedge between us. One that had evaporated the night I fell asleep in her bed, but it was there. I needed to trust that Kat could…handle herself. If I didn't, there would be no chance for us.

And there had to be a chance.

"Shit," I muttered, casting a dark look at the night sky.

Mind made up, I stalked over to her house and up onto the porch. I knocked on the door and then stepped back, shoving my hands in my pockets so I didn't punch myself in my face. If anything happened to Kat because of me—well, anything more—I wouldn't be able to live with it.

The door opened, and Kat poked her head out. Expectation filled her gray eyes as she looked me over. Not annoyance or anger. She was happy to see me. My lips tipped up in a crooked grin. "You busy?"

She shook her head.

"Wanna go for a ride?"

There wasn't even a pause. "Sure. Let me grab something warmer to put on." Kat disappeared, returning wearing boots and a hoodie. She joined me outside, closing the door behind her. "Are we going to check on Vaughn?"

"Not really. There's something I've discovered." I led her to my car and waited until we both were in. "But first, did you have a good Christmas? I was going to stop over, but I saw your mom was home."

"It was good. Will spent the day with us. That was weird." Her nose wrinkled. "What about you?"

"It was okay. Dee nearly burned the house down trying to make a turkey. Other than that, not very entertaining." I pulled out of the driveway. "So, how much trouble were you in after Saturday?"

"I got a lecture about not making my mom a grandmother."

I laughed.

She sighed. "Now I have rules to follow, but nothing serious."

"Sorry about that." I grinned as I slid her a sideways look. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"It's okay. So where are we going? What have you found out?"

"Vaughn came home Sunday night for about ten minutes. I followed him to just outside of Petersburg to this warehouse in an industrial park that hasn't been used in years. He stayed there for a few hours and then left, but there were two officers who remained." I slowed down as a deer dashed across the highway. "They're keeping something there."

"You think they're keeping Bethany...or Dawson?"

I glanced at her, lips pressed into a tight line. God, I hoped I wasn't making a huge mistake. "I don't know, but I need to get in there and someone needs to keep an eye on the outside while I go."

She nodded. The excitement that poured off her was palpable. "What if the guards are still keeping watch?"

"They weren't doing anything until Vaughn showed up. He's home right now. With Nancy." My lip curled. "I think those two really have something going on."

"Did you know my mom's boyfriend is Bethany's uncle?"

"No." I frowned as I focused on the road. Immediately my mind went to the shoe box full of

prescription pads in Bethany's old house. Was that the connection? "I didn't really try to get to know her," I said after a few moments. "Hell, I didn't really try to get to know any human girl."

"So you've never...dated a human girl before?"

"Dated? No." The question knocked me off guard. I glanced over at her, deciding how to answer the question. "Hung out with? Yes."

Kat looked away quickly, and she didn't respond.

I let out a low breath and forged on. "Anyway, I didn't know they were related."

A moment passed. "Do you think that's weird? I mean, he's related to Bethany, who's sort of like me now, and he's messing around with my mom. We know that someone had to have betrayed Dawson and Bethany."

I considered it. Even if he was the man the prescription pads belonged to, what did it mean other than him living there? That is, if he lived there and those pads weren't for someone else. But then there was a stethoscope. Some doctors owned their own stethoscopes, but even if Will saw Bethany injured, how would he have known to put two and two together? How would he know about us, the Luxen, and what we could do?

Again, there were more questions than answers, but some damn interesting new questions were raised. I was going to have to look into Will.

"It's weird, but how would he know what had happened?" I asked that question a lot. "He would've needed to have some inside knowledge of the whole healing process to know what to look for."

"Maybe he's an implant."

I looked at her sharply, but didn't say anything. Anger thinned her lips, and I knew if I told her what I'd found in Bethany's house and the possible link to the man her mom was dating, she'd probably cut him the first chance she got.

Wrong or right, her confronting Will without any concrete evidence was the last thing we needed. After a few moments, I cleared my throat. "I've been thinking about what Matthew told us—the whole marrying DNA thing."

She tensed as she stared straight ahead. "Yeah...?"

"I talked to him later and I asked him about the connection, if it could make someone feel anything. He said no. But I already knew that. Thought you should know."

Kat nodded. "What about the whole you die, I die thing?"

"What about it?" I kept my eyes on the road. "There isn't anything we can do about that other than not get ourselves killed."

"There's more to it than that," she said. "We're really joined together, you know. Like, forever..." "I know," I said quietly.

Neither of us really spoke after that, because what else could be said? We were joined together. Forever. And knowing that didn't send me screaming off into the night.

We arrived at the abandoned industrial park near midnight. We did a drive-by to make sure there were no cars around. There were three buildings nestled together near a field covered in white. One was a squat, one-story brick building and one in the middle was several stories high, and that was the one I wanted in. I pulled behind one of the buildings, parking the SUV between two large sheds with the front facing the only entrance.

Killing the engine, I turned to her. "I need to get in that building." I gestured at the tall one. "But you need to stay in the car while I do this. I need eyes on the road and I don't know what's waiting in there."

"What if someone is in there? I want to go with you."

Bringing her here was one thing, but I drew the line. "I can take care of myself. You need to stay in here, where it's safe."

"But—"

"No, Kat, stay here. Text me if anyone comes in." I reached for the door. "Please."

She stared at me a moment and then nodded curtly. I hesitated, wanting to kiss her before I got out of the SUV, but figured I better not push my luck. Quietly closing the door behind me, I darted around the side of the building, past the padlocked, windowless steel bay doors, keeping an eye out for security cameras, and found none. I reached another door, the entrance I'd seen Vaughn head in and out of. This door would be way easier to manipulate than the others. Placing my hands on the door near the lock, I willed the internal gears to turn. The *click* was like learning a whole new season of *Paranormal Hunters* was starting sooner than expected.

As I opened the door, I noticed something reddish-black, glossy and smooth, embedded in the center of the threshold. Having no idea what that was, I closed the door behind me. I quickly scanned the first floor as I kept the brim of the cap low. I moved fast, so if I showed up on any security cameras, I would be nothing but a blur.

I passed empty offices, following the scent of recently smoked cigarettes that hung thick in the air. I moved farther in, finding an office where metal folding chairs were spaced out. Full ashtrays sat on one of the metal tables, next to used coffee cups. There was nothing else. No paperwork or computers, not even a printer or a landline phone.

Weird.

Darting out of the office, I raced down a wide hall faintly lit by dull yellow light. A set of double doors was at the end, and when I pushed on them, they opened easily. I stepped into a large room and my heart nearly stopped in my chest.

"Holy shit," I murmured, feeling my cell vibrate in my pocket.

Cages. There were *cages* in this room.

There were about ten of them. All of the cages were empty. For a moment, I was frozen as I stared at them. Anger and horror swirled inside me. They kept people in those cages. They could've kept Bethany or my brother in one of these cages. Energy stirred inside me, and I wanted to let it go, blowing this building off the face of Earth.

I finally moved to the cages and saw the chains. *Chains*. The same strange material I'd seen over the door encased the chains. In here, it looked like some reddish-black stone I'd never seen before. The cage in the middle looked recently used. A red rusty substance covered the cuffs. Blood. It took me a moment to realize it was blood, probably from someone pulling against the metal. The shackles were also covered with the same reddish-black material. In another cage, liquid had dried in the middle. It wasn't blood—human at least. It looked sort of transparent. Luxen blood.

Stepping back, I lifted my gaze. At the end of the room there was a door marked Stairs. God only knew what I'd find on the second floor. Maybe cages that *weren't* empty. Purpose filled me. I prowled toward the door, stopping short when I remembered my phone had vibrated.

I reached into my pocketed and pulled it out. It was a text from Kat. One word. *Company*. I spun around. "Shit."

Not going upstairs pissed me off, but if the officers or Vaughn had shown up, Kat was at risk. Whatever was up there had to wait. I raced through the building, and when I neared the entrance, my heart rate jumped erratically. Kat. It was due to Kat. Something was wrong. Her heart was beating way too fast.

At the door, I heard an unfamiliar voice. "Christ. You're right. She's one of them."

"Told you," another responded. "What's in this barrel will do far worse. So you better think carefully before you answer the next question. Who are you?"

I made a split decision. Holding the image of Vaughn in my mind, I mirrored his appearance. It wasn't perfect. If anyone knew him well or got too close, they'd see that I didn't look exactly like him. Stepping outside, my jaw locked down as I saw Kat on her knees, a man holding her arm with one hand and pointing a gun at her forehead with the other. Rage as potent as the Source exploded inside me. My hands curled into fists as I willed my voice to answer.

"What's going on out here?" I demanded.

The one with the gun stepped aside, and he was still holding her arm. I did not like that, either. "We found her sneaking around back here. She's one of them."

I frowned as I moved closer, not liking the grimace of pain tightening Kat's face or the panic crowding her gaze as she stared up at me. "Good job. I'll take this one."

"Are you sure?" asked the other officer, a shorter one.

Nodding, I reached down and grasped her arm, hauling her to her feet. "I've had my eye on this one for a while."

"The cages should be prepped," the one with the gun said, letting go of my other arm reluctantly. "It took a while for it to work on her. You might want to double it up."

My jaw ached.

"Since we caught this one, shouldn't we get a reward?" the shorter one asked.

"Reward?" I repeated, voice low.

The one with the gun laughed, and I felt Kat shudder. "Yeah, like with the other one. That was one hell of a reward. Husher won't know any different as long as we don't mess her up."

Like the other one? As long as they didn't mess her up?

I didn't even stop to think.

The rage inside me turned deadly. These people...these horrible human beings did not deserve to live. I pushed Kat aside as I lifted my hand. Lightning crackled around my arm, flaring red-white as it surrounded my body.

"Dammit!" The one with the gun yelled, "It's a trick!"

Too late.

The pulsing white light struck that bastard first, sending him several feet in the air. The light arched, smacking into the shorter officer. He flew into the side of the building with enough impact that it left a dent. Clothing smoked. Skin burned.

A moment passed, and the Source pulled back into me. Both men, sprawled a few feet from each other, shuddered once and then turned to ash.

"Oh my God," Kat whispered.

A cold breeze whipped down the building, stirring the piles of ashes, picking the flecks up and spreading them along the snow-covered ground. Within seconds, nothing remained of them.

I returned to my human form and faced Kat. She was crouched on the ground, eyes wide. I reached down and took her hand, gently pulling her to her feet. "We need to get of here."

Before we could head back home, I needed to destroy the evidence. I had driven the officers' car to the woods and then fried it. Eventually, questions would be asked about them, but with no car and no...no bodies, it would be hard to link back to us.

Once we were in Kat's house, she made herself a cup of hot chocolate, and we sat on the couch, legs crossed, facing each other. I was keeping my head empty at the moment, not letting myself really think about what I'd done back there. Not allowing myself to ask if...if killing them had been necessary, if there hadn't been another way.

Kat's hands tightened around her steaming cup. "Daemon...are you okay?"

I nodded slowly. "Yeah."

She took a sip. "What was inside the building?"

Rubbing the back of my neck, I briefly closed my eyes. "There wasn't anything in the first couple of rooms. Just empty office space, but it's obvious the place is used a lot. There were empty coffee cups, filled ashtrays everywhere. The farther I got in, there were...cages. About ten of them; one looked like it was used recently."

She blanched. "Do you really think they were keeping people in there?"

"Luxen? Yes. And maybe others like you." I dropped my hands onto my legs. "One of the cages had dried blood in it. All of them had chains and manacles encased in this dark red stone I've never seen before."

"I saw something outside the building, above the doors. It was shiny, looked black to me because it was dark." Leaning to the side, she placed the cup on the coffee table "And he put something against my cheek, and God, that hurt like hell. I wonder if it was the same thing you saw."

Anger flashed through me, turning the corners of my lips down. "How are you feeling now?"

"Perfectly fine," she said. "Did you see anything else?"

"I didn't have time to go upstairs, but I had this feeling that something...something was up there." I stood, clasping my hands behind my neck. "I need to get back in there."

"Daemon, it's too dangerous. People are going to realize that the officers are missing. You can't go back there."

I whirled, facing her. "My brother could be in there, or something that will tell me where he is. I can't just walk away because it's too dangerous."

"I understand that." She rose, clenching her hands at the sides. "But what good are you to Dawson—or to Dee—if you get caught?"

I stared at her for several long moments. "I have to do something."

"I know, but it needs to be more thought-out than any of your plans have been so far," she pointed out. "Because you could've been captured tonight."

"I'm not worried about myself, Kat."

"Then that's a problem!"

My eyes narrowed, and the worse possible thing came out of my mouth. "I wouldn't have involved you in this if I knew you were going to wimp out."

"Wimp out?" For a moment, I thought her head was going to spin. "*I'm* the one who involved *you*. I saw Bethany."

"And I agreed to let you come with me the first time." I ran my hand through my hair. "If you'd stayed in that car, I could've had time to check the floors above."

Her mouth dropped open. "You would've been caught inside. I got out of the car because you didn't respond to my text! If I'd stayed in there, we'd both be in those cages."

Heat hit my cheekbones. What the hell was I saying? None of this was her fault, and she was right, but that didn't change what I'd done back at that warehouse and I couldn't just walk away from this. We'd discovered the first real link to Bethany and Dawson, and the lives I took... "Okay. Both of us

are aggravated right now. We should just let it drop for tonight. Get some rest. Whatever."

Kat stared at me a moment and then crossed her arms. "Fine."

Grabbing my cap from the coffee table, I slipped it on. I started for the door, but my feet turned into cement. I couldn't walk forward. The anger festering in me caused my shoulders to shudder. When I spoke, my voice was nothing more than a whisper. "I've never killed a human before."

I felt Kat place her hand on my arm. "It's okay."

Okay? Ending a life was never okay. Killing Arum was one thing, something I'd grown used to over the years. Wasn't easy doing it or dealing with it, but a human? No. My jaw clenched. Deep down, I knew those two men were horrible people and if they had captured Kat, they would hurt her in ways that disgusted and enraged me. The fact that they had done it before, in my opinion, had been enough reason to snuff them out.

But it wasn't okay.

It wouldn't be okay. Not for a very long time.

CHAPTER 24

Kat would be proud. Over the next couple of days, I didn't bum-rush the warehouse. I could be a huge, impulsive asshole, but I wasn't stupid. Once the anger and the adrenaline faded, I knew I had to stay away for a bit. Freaking killed me to, but with the two officers on guard now missing, more eyes than normal would be on the place.

And the officers had definitely been reported as missing, according to the headline on the *Charleston Gazette*.

Two Department of Defense Officers Missing After Last Seen Near Petersburg.

Officer Robert McConnell and Officer James Richardson were their names—the names of two men I'd mowed down without hesitation. That was something I still hadn't allowed myself to really focus on. Guilt accomplished nothing.

So instead of razing the warehouse to the ground and getting myself caged in the process, I focused my attention on William Michaels, a potential link. The only way it would make sense was if Will was what Blake had called an implant. Major coincidence though, if he was.

Stranger shit had happened.

A quick search of the good doctor revealed that he'd once been diagnosed with leukemia, and while that sucked, all it confirmed was what we found in Bethany's house. Maybe he was writing himself prescriptions to deal with the pain or the treatment. Couldn't blame the guy for that. The walker and cane also made sense, along with the Ensure. I wondered if she or her mom knew, considering how her father had died. Nothing shady could be found on the internet, so I ended up tailing him. Other than going to the hospital or out with Kat's mom, he kept a low profile and a residence in a new subdivision with large, overpriced homes.

He'd been at Kat's house earlier, and when he'd left, I followed him on foot back to his house. Then I patrolled until it was close to midnight. Not going to the warehouse was making me stir-crazy. Tomorrow, I was going to check it out. See what the activity was around it. I couldn't wait any longer.

Snow was starting to come down heavier, and since I hadn't sensed any nearby Arum, I headed back. I got home a little after midnight, I saw that Kat's car was gone. What the hell? It had been there when I'd left. Where would she...?

It suddenly hit me.

Would Kat have gone to stake out Vaughn's house alone? Where else would she be? Dee was inside with Adam. Blake the Douche Bag was still off visiting family, hopefully never to return. There was nowhere else she could've gone. Fear punched a fist-sized hole in my gut.

Instead of staying on foot, I fished the car keys out of my pocket and walked my ass over to the SUV. I climbed in, cursing up a storm. Halfway to Vaughn's house, I saw Kat driving along as the

snow started to fall in sheets. Yanking on the wheel, the SUV's tires squealed as I spun it around, rushing up behind her.

I followed her back to the house and the moment she parked the car, I was out of mine and opening up the driver's door on hers. "Where in the hell were you coming back from?"

She climbed out of the car. "Where were you going?"

Glaring down at her, I resisted the urge to shake her. "I have a feeling it was the same place you were coming back from, but I'm telling myself that you can't be that stupid."

Her eyes narrowed as she stomped past me and walked up the porch steps. "Well, since that's where you were going, I guess that means you're stupid, too."

"You seriously went there, didn't you?" Even though I'd suspected it, I couldn't really believe it. "Please tell me that's not where you were. That you were just out for a midnight drive."

She shot me a bland look over her shoulder as we walked inside. Heat immediately melted the dusting of snow that had gathered in her dark hair. "I went to Vaughn's," she said.

I stared at her for several moments. "You're insane."

Tugging off her wet sweatshirt, she shot me a dark look as a rush of tiny bumps spread across her bare arms. "So are you," she said, straightening her tank top.

"I can take care of myself, Kitten."

"And I can, too." She tugged her hair back. "I'm not helpless, Daemon."

All the terrible things that could've happened to her rolled through my mind in vibrant, horrifying clarity. I shuddered and then snapped forward, clasping her chilled cheeks in my hands. "I know you aren't helpless, but there are things I would do that you won't. Things I know you could never live with, but I can. What would you have done if someone saw you? What would *I* have done if you were captured or..."

I couldn't finish those words, and I saw the flash of understanding in her steely gray eyes. I could kill—I had killed. I never, ever wanted her to be in the situation where she would have to make that choice.

Without breaking eye contact, she placed her cool hands on my cheeks. My skin hummed in response. My eyes widened as she leaned in. My lungs stopped working. The gray softened before she closed her eyes, and then she brushed her lips over mine, shocking me straight to my core.

"Kitten," I said, voice rough with emotion.

Her hands slid into my hair as she kissed me. It was soft. Hesitant. So damn tender, and it felt like forever since I waited for this moment—for her to make the move. And it was forever. A first. This was all Kat, and there was nothing sweeter. She pulled back, her fingers still sifting through my hair.

"Kitten," I repeated. "You don't get to do that and then stop. That's not how it works. Not when you're mine." I backed up until I hit the wall. Sliding down, I pulled her onto my lap, her knees on either side of my hips. "And you're mine."

She dropped her hands to my shoulders as I brought her mouth to mine. The kiss was slow at first, and I dragged it out for all it was worth, savoring the taste of her. Kat was the one to take it to the next level, moving her tongue along the seam of my mouth. She was the one who deepened it.

I groaned low in my throat and my arms tightened around her, drawing her in so there was no space between our chests. Her hands were on the move, slipping over my shoulders, up the back of my neck. I cradled the back of her head, drawing soft gasps out of her. Lust and something far deeper slammed into me. I threw what I felt into that kiss, and she shuddered against me.

Kat slowly broke the kiss, breathing heavily as she rose onto her knees. "Wait. Wait. Important stuff."

I grabbed her hips, pulling her down against me. I knew my eyes were glowing. The whole room was tinted in white. "This is important."

Most important damn thing ever.

"I know." Her back arched as I glided my fingers under the hem of her tank top, brushing the tips of my fingers along her smooth skin. "But this is really important. I found something in Vaughn's house."

My hands stilled. "You went inside Vaughn's house?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I went into his house."

"Are you a career criminal?" I asked, and she shook her head. "I'm curious how you got into his house, Kitten."

She bit down on her lip. "I unlocked the door."

"With what...?"

"The same way you would."

My eye was starting to twitch. "You shouldn't be doing things like that."

Kat started to wiggle around, and I stopped her, because seriously, she was in my lap and that movement was so not helping anything at the moment. "I found stuff. And I also met someone." She started to get up, but I folded my arms around her. "Are you going to let me go?"

I smiled tightly. "Nope."

She sighed and folded her hands in the space between us. "They've been watching us, Daemon. From the moment I moved here."

What in the actual hell?

"But that's not all. Bethany showed up."

"What?" I rose swiftly, settling her on her feet. My head was everywhere. The bitter tang of fear for her still lingered, not completely overshadowed by her kiss, and now this? Needing space, I backed up. "Did she talk to you about Dawson?"

"Ah, see, she's not...well, she didn't respond well to his name."

"Explain."

"She kind of went alien ninja on my butt." Grabbing a rubber band out of her pocket, she twisted her hair up in a messy knot. "She threw me against the wall."

My brows shot up in interest. Well then...

She rolled her eyes. "Not in that way, you perv. She's like a souped-up freakin' mutant. She even did the whole glowworm thing, too."

Lifting my fingers, I rubbed my chin. "Did she tell you anything useful?"

"She demanded to know why I was there, and then she said I shouldn't be there. That I needed to leave here and take my chances outside the protection of the beta quartz. I asked her why she was in his house, and all she said was that she kept escaping him. I'm guessing Vaughn? She said they were coming, but she didn't make a lot of sense, Daemon. I think she's cracked. And she flipped out when I mentioned Dawson. She didn't give me much of a chance to push the questioning. She removed me from the house."

"Dammit." I turned sideways, hands clenching. "Besides getting a hold of one of the DOD officers, she was my last hope to find out where Dawson could be."

"I did find something else." She dug into her pocket, pulling out the scrap of paper. "I found this."

I took what appeared to be a money transfer slip. The amount was freaking astronomical. An address was scribbled on it, along with the letters *DB*.

"Do you think *DB* stands for Dawson Black?" she asked.

"It could." I clenched the paper tight. "Can I use your laptop? I want to see where this address goes."

"Sure." She quickly grabbed the laptop and clicked out of some website and then handed it over to me.

Sitting beside her, I quickly typed the address in Google maps and the directions popped right up, along with satellite images. It was an office building in Moorefield. I grabbed a nearby notebook. Turning past English notes, I found a blank page.

She watched me write the directions down. "Are you going?"

"I want to, right now, but I need to scope out the place first. Tomorrow I'll check it out, then go back later." I shoved the piece of paper into my pocket and then faced her. Our eyes met. "Thank you, Kat."

"I kind of owed you something, right?" She rubbed her arms, chasing away a visible shiver. "You've saved my butt a lot."

"And what a lovely butt it is, but you risked too much by doing this." I reached behind her, tugging the quilt off. I draped it over her shoulders, holding the edges close as I searched her face. "Why did you do this?"

She lowered her eyes. "I just was thinking about everything, and I wanted to see what was in there."

"It was crazy dangerous, Kitten. You can't do anything like that again. Promise me."

"Okay."

I caught the edge of her chin, tilting her face up to mine. "Promise me."

Kat sighed. "I won't. Okay. I promise. But you've got to promise me the same thing. I know you can't drop this. I understand that, but you have to be careful, and you can't sneak off without me, either."

"This shouldn't involve you."

"But it does," she insisted. "And I'm not a fragile human, Daemon. We're in this together."

"Together?" A slow smile crept over my lips. "Okay."

Her answering smile was tentative. Hopeful. "So, that means I go when you check out the address."

I nodded. "Tell me how you know they've been watching us?"

Kat drew in a deep breath. "There were photos. Lots of photos, Daemon. From the time I moved in here and up until a few days ago."

"Jesus." I scrubbed my hand down my face.

"The night I got sick and went into the lake? They had a photo of that. They've been watching this entire time. They...they have to know something happened to me and you were involved."

I reached over to her, folding my hand over her knee. I squeezed gently. "Lets not jump to that conclusion yet, Kitten. They've always been up in my business. The pictures aren't that surprising. That's what the DOD does. They monitor and chronicle us. If they've known that I've healed you or told you about us, you...we..."

"Wouldn't still be here?"

I nodded again.

Kat looked a little better. "What do you think Bethany meant by 'They are coming'?" she asked.

Leaning against the couch, I tossed my arm along the back. "I don't know."

"I guess it might not mean anything. I mean, she was kind of whacked out."

Staring straight ahead, I let that process. If Bethany wasn't right, what did that mean for Dawson? "I can't help but wonder what my brother is like right now. Is he like that? Whacked out? I don't think I could...deal with that."

It hurt to admit that, to speak it out loud.

Kat inched forward, halting when I looked at her again. A second passed, and then she wiggled her way over so that she was pressed against the side of me. I inhaled sharply when she rested her head against my shoulder.

"Even if he is...whacked out," she said. "You can deal with it. You can deal with anything. I don't doubt that at all."

"You don't?"

"No."

Lifting my arm, I curled it over her shoulders and then lowered my chin to the top of her head.

"What are we going to do, Kitten?"

"I don't know."

"I have a few ideas."

"I'm sure you do," she replied, and I heard the smile in her voice.

"Wanna hear about them? Although I'm much better at the show part rather than the tell."

"Somehow, I believe you."

"If you didn't, I could always give you a teaser." I paused, enjoying the moment of lightness. "You bookish people love teasers, don't you?"

She laughed. "You've been doing your research on my blog."

"Maybe," I replied, gathering her close. "Like I said, I've got to keep an eye on you, Kitten."

CHAPTER 25

We checked out the address found on the bank transfer the next day, on New Year's Eve. The whole plaza was packed with cars. I pulled the baseball cap low and then climbed out. It had stopped snowing and the parking lot had been plowed, but a thin layer of ice and snow remained.

The number on the address turned out to be a lawyer's office, based on the plaque outside. Above the entrance and the large windows were the same damn reddish-black stones Kat and I had seen at the warehouse. Jackpot. Opening the glass door, I walked inside the lobby. Keeping my chin down, I bypassed the elevator and went for the stairwell. I passed the windows, seeing little white boxes tacked along the top of them. My gaze flipped to the ceiling, and I saw a glass-breaking sensor. The building was obviously wired for security.

On the third floor, I found the office at the end of the hall. Unlike the rest of the offices on the floor, this one had the stone above the door and over the small window. I could see that there were people inside the waiting room. On the door a sign had been taped. Closed For New Year's Day.

Perfect.

I hurried back to where I parked the SUV. Getting in, I tossed Kat a quick grin and pulled out of the parking lot. "It appears to be a lawyer's office. Has at least two floors above the main one. They're closed for New Year's and obviously on Sunday. Bad news is they are outfitted with an alarm system."

"Crap. Know a way around that?"

"Fry their systems. If I do it quickly enough, I shouldn't trigger an alarm. But that's not all. Above the entrances and windows is that same damn blackish-red gemstone." I smiled. "This is good, though. Whatever those stones are, they have to mean something."

"What if it's guarded?" she asked.

I didn't answer, because I think she already knew the answer. The office looked legit, but it was obviously connected to everything going on. I had to get in there.

Kat let out a low breath. "When are you going back?"

Tomorrow was the plan, but right now, I wasn't sure if I wanted to drag Kat into it, especially after what happened at the industrial park. If things went south, I didn't want her in danger, and I also didn't want her to see what I'd...what I'd have to do if the situation turned sour.

"So are you going to Ash's party?" I asked, changing the subject. I knew Dee had invited her to the party tonight.

"I don't know." She fiddled with the button on her sweater. "I can't imagine her wanting me there, but back to—"

"I want you there."

She glanced at me, her cheeks flushing pink.

"Kitten?"

"Okay. I'll go."

My lips tipped up at the corners.

"Dee said she'd drive me over," she added, dropping her hand to her lap.

I winked. "I'm taking you home."

Kat opened her mouth, and then a strangled laugh came out. "Is that so?"

"Yep." I hit the highway, but didn't pick up speed. The roads were congested. "We need to talk."

Her fingers went back to messing with the button. "About what?"

I smirked as I shot her a quick glance. "You know. What happened last night between us isn't something I'm going to forget. It changes everything."

"Changes everything?" Her eyes widened.

"Don't pretend like last night didn't happen."

Kat let go of her button. "I'm not pretending like nothing happened last night. I...I don't want to."

I wanted to pull the car over and show her just how thrilled I was to hear that. "Good, because if that wasn't the case, then you probably shouldn't have kissed me."

"You kissed me," she argued.

I arched a brow. "You kissed me first."

"I..." Kat threw up her hands. "You're right. I did kiss you first."

"Glad we're on the same page," I replied drily.

There was a moment, and then Kat laughed huskily. "We...we're on the same page."

Reaching over, I found her hand and threaded my fingers through hers. I squeezed, and she responded with the same. A lot was unspoken between us and everything was up in the air, but there would be time later.

We would have tonight.

After dropping Kat off, I took a quick shower and then headed over to the Thompsons'. I took my car since I'd need it to take Kat home later.

The Thompsons' house was much larger, closer to Matthew's and deep in the woods, a lot more secluded. I found Dee helping Ash cut up orange slices in the kitchen. There was already a huge bowl on the gray granite counter. "What's up with the oranges?" I asked. I wasn't sure why Ash put so much effort into the party since she didn't invite anyone from school, but who was I to judge?

Dee glanced over her shoulder. "For the punch."

"That's a lot of punch then." I eyed the bowl.

"I like my punch," Ash replied, cleaving an orange in two with a quick swipe as she smiled sweetly at me. "Want to help? You can hold the oranges for me."

Okay.

"Yeah. I'll pass on that." Pursing my lips, I wheeled around and walked into the sunken living room. The guys were there, sitting side by side on a sectional, their fingers flying over their controllers. On the wide screen was one of the *Call of Duty* games.

I dropped down on the couch and stretched out my legs. "You guys seem real busy."

Adam smiled without looking over at me. "Whoever loses has to run out to the grocery store and get—"

"Wieners and crescent rolls!" Dee shouted from the kitchen.

Adam grimaced. "That."

"Those things are the best," Andrew added, his eyes narrowed in concentration. "I can eat an entire—dammit!"

I glanced at the screen as Adam tossed the controller to the couch. Popping to his feet, he raised his arms. "Oh yeah, see you later, ass."

Andrew cursed under his breath. "This is bullshit."

I laughed.

Rising to his feet, he flipped off his brother and then turned to me. "Is it true?"

Arching a brow, I stared back at him. "Is what true?"

"Katy is coming over?"

My smile was tight and about a thousand miles in the opposite direction of friendly. "You got a problem with that?"

As he walked past, he gave me a wide berth. "Do you want an honest answer?"

"Not really," I replied, tilting my head back as I watched him. "Mainly because I don't care."

Andrew looked like he wanted to say more, but wisely kept his mouth shut as he dug his car keys out of his pocket and headed into the kitchen.

"One of these days, he'll be okay with it." Adam flipped off the TV. "Want to step outside?" "Sure."

I followed Adam out on the deck as I heard Andrew make his way out the front door, slamming it behind him. "He's really going to need to readjust that attitude before Kat gets here. I don't want her to feel like she's not welcome."

"Do you believe she thinks she's welcome?" he asked as he lifted himself up on the railing.

Folding my arms, I leaned against the side of the house. "No. She knows Ash and Andrew would rather see her propelled into a different galaxy than be at their house."

He flashed a quick grin. "So why would she come?"

"Because Dee asked her." I paused. "And because I asked her."

Adam eyed me for a moment. "Cool. So, any more news? About Bethany or Dawson." His bright gaze flickered to the sliding doors. "I haven't said a word to Dee, but I've got to tell you, that isn't easy."

"I know, and I appreciate you keeping it quiet," I told him, tipping my head back. Thick clouds were rolling in. It was going to snow again. There wasn't much I felt like I could tell him. Since I'd taken out two DOD officers, the less Adam knew the better. Plausible deniability. "We haven't found much, but I'm hoping that'll—"

"You're lying," he cut in, brows raised.

A reluctant grin pulled at my lips. "If I was, I have good reasons."

"I'd hope."

The sliding glass door opened and Dee stuck her head out. "I'm heading over to get Katy."

"I'll go with you." Adam jumped off the railing.

"What if I wanted to go?" I asked.

Dee rolled her eyes. "I would like some alone time with her. Well, no-Daemon time, actually. I haven't had a lot of that."

Which was why I wasn't pushing it. "Whatever. Don't take forever."

She made a face at me as she stepped aside, letting Adam through. "I'll take however long I like."

"Hey, Ash, I'll be back," Adam yelled at his sister. "Make sure Andrew's pulled his head out of his ass by then."

"Not my problem!" she shouted back, still in the kitchen I assumed.

As Adam walked through the house, he folded his arm along Dee's shoulders. I smiled as I flipped my gaze back to the sky. Adam...yeah, he was good for Dee. He was good all around. So were Andrew and Ash, but they were a little sharp around the edges.

Sharp like broken glass.

Even though it wasn't particularly warm outside, I stayed out on the deck. It was quiet here. Not that it wasn't peaceful at home. It was different here. So much stuff was running through my head that it was damn near close to an hour before I headed inside. Andrew still wasn't back, and I could hear Ash humming from the kitchen.

I waved my hand. The remote flew off the arm of the couch. I flipped the TV on and leaned over the back of couch. Seemed weird as hell to be doing this—partying on New Year's Eve when I could be hours away—

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Pulling it out, I saw that it was Dee. I answered. "What's up?"

"Something is going on with Kat," she said in a rush. "She's inside the house, but she won't let us in or come out."

Dread curled along the base of my spine. "What?"

"She said these...these terrible things to me, Daemon. Things she would never say." Emotion clouded Dee's voice. "Something is wrong."

"Shit. Okay. I'll be right over, but I want you and Adam to stay away from the house until I get there. Okay?" When Dee didn't answer, my fingers tightened on the phone. "Did you hear me, Dee? I don't want you going near that house. Drive down the road and stay there until I get there. Promise me."

There was a pause. "I promise."

Dee hung up, and I...I didn't believe her for one second.

CHAPTER 26

I took off on foot, running faster through the woods than I ever have before. I was nothing more than a blur, my feet not even touching the ground.

Fury and panic ripped into my skin, shredding muscle and tissue. I pushed it away, shoved it down, and shut it off as I raced across Petersburg.

Snow had started to fall as I burst through the trees, hitting the snow-covered access road leading to our houses. I saw Dee's car, but she and Adam were nowhere near. Dammit. I knew they hadn't listened. The thick, oily presence of the Arum was the first thing I noticed, and as I cleared the small hill, I saw two cars in front of Kat's house.

Blake's truck.

An Expedition.

Intense white light radiated from Kat's living room, shining through the window. Energy shifted inside me, pulling me forward. In an instant I knew it was from Kat. How she was pulling the Source from me, I had no idea, but I *felt* it. The tugging motion didn't weaken me nor was it unpleasant, but the fact that she was doing it sent me flying forward. I didn't slow as I raced up the porch steps and threw open the front door, coming face-to-face with fleeing Arum.

In their true form, they appeared as if they were made of smoke and oil, their black tendrils crawling up the walls and smacking into the ceiling.

"Leaving so soon?" I said. "I'm offended."

I shifted immediately, drawing on the Source. I took out the closest Arum with a blast, followed by the other. It spun up in the air, shattering like the ceramic bowl Ash had dropped. Inky fragments floated to the ceiling and faded into thin wisps.

What I saw in the living room enraged me.

Dee was on the floor. Her chest was rising and falling in shallow breaths. Lying beside her was Adam and he... Adam was gone. His nearly translucent form was still and no blood pumped through the network of silvery veins.

Adam was dead.

Raw pain lanced me, nearly taking my knees out from under me. Adam was a brother to me, and it was like losing Dawson all over again. The hurt twisted into a red-hot, deadly fury as I lifted my head.

I saw another Arum between Kat and me, and Kat...holy shit, she was in the air, her long strands of hair floating around her head. She was glowing a bright white tinged in red, like me. Her light pulsed, and mine flared in response as she drew the Arum closer to her.

We were two sides of the same coin.

Beyond the glow surrounding her, I saw the bruises on her, on her cheeks. I saw the dried blood around her mouth, under her nose. And I knew then that what I'd always suspected about that bastard

had been true. He *had* been the one hurting her.

Tell me what happened, I asked, not speaking out loud.

The light around her throbbed brightly. It was Blake. He was working for the DOD the entire time, with his uncle. It's Vaughn. Blake was sent here because they have the one who mutated him. Chris. They've been using him as leverage over Blake... She struck out at the Arum, pushing him back toward me. Vaughn was going to make some kind of exchange that Blake didn't know about. Vaughn was going to let the Arum—Residon—take Adam's—take his body and Dee. I couldn't let that happen.

I'd heard enough.

Kat turned her head toward where Vaughn was trying to work the window open. When that didn't work, he grabbed the floor lamp. Kat stopped him with a wave of her hand, whipping the lamp out of his hands.

The bastard Blake rushed past me and the Arum darted, shifting up toward the ceiling. Spinning around, I took off after both of them. Three forms streaked up the driveway—Andrew, Ash, and Matthew. I wanted to stop them. They didn't need to see Adam like that, but there was no time. The Arum and Blake were getting away.

The Arum raced down the driveway. I hit him with a blast of the Source, stronger and more concentrated than the blow inside. All it took was one hit. The Arum spun into the air and then froze. A heartbeat passed, and then the Arum imploded, dark ash mixing with the falling snow.

Whirling around, I scanned for Blake. I saw him standing near Kat's car, but then Vaughn launched out from behind it, stumbling to his knees. On his feet, he ran for the Expedition, ducking behind it with a gun in his hand.

Oh no, he was going nowhere.

I threw out my arm, flipping the Expedition in the air. It landed on its roof. Metal crunched and gave way. Glass exploded.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Blake start to run. I crossed the distance in an under a second. His eyes widened when he saw me. He opened his mouth, but I caught him around the throat, cutting off whatever it was he was going to say.

I flipped him over, slamming him down on the hood of Kat's car. I shifted into my human form. "You have no idea how painful I'm going to make this for you. Every bruise you gave Kat, I'm going to return to you tenfold." I lifted him off my hood. The boy's feet dangled in the air. "And I'm going to seriously enjoy this."

"Daemon!" Kat shouted, running off the porch.

A gun went off. Once. Twice. A third time.

My head whipped toward the sound, and I smiled. The bullets stopped inches from my face, hovering as if they were suspended. My gaze flickered to Vaughn's. "You really shouldn't have done that."

Comprehension flooded Vaughn's pale face. "No—no!"

The bullets flipped over and returned to the sender with an alarming speed. They hit Vaughn in the chest. He crumpled to the ground. Red splashed across the snow.

Blake tore free, knocking into the side of the bumper. He staggered a step and then gained his footing. He took off, and Kat was right behind him. Both were moving incredibly fast, tapping into their borrowed abilities.

I chased after them, picking up speed as Blake spun around, sending a blast of light behind him. It struck Kat in the chest, knocking her back a few steps. I clenched my jaw when another hit her in the shoulder and then her leg. She hit the ground on her hands and knees, and I roared my rage.

"I'm sorry..." he said, shaking. "Katy, I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice."

Switching back to my true form, I moved to her right as she picked herself up. *What do you want to do with him?*

He...he killed Adam. She swayed unsteadily as the wind whipped her hair around her. "He killed him. And hurt Dee."

I nearly lost it then. Energy rose inside, violent and destructive. Taking a step toward him, I shifted back.

"So many have died tonight," Kat whispered.

Blake's gaze darted toward her. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry. I never wanted any of this happen. I only wanted to protect Chris."

My hands closed into fists. At that moment, I didn't give two shits about this Chris, but there had been so much death tonight. Adam. The Arum. Vaughn. Now I'd killed three humans, and I wanted to add a fourth to that terrible list. So badly, but taking out Blake meant I would be taking out the Luxen too, and this Chris was obviously very much alive. That would be five deaths on my hands. Blake deserved it, but I...

I wasn't going to be the only person looking for him. So would the DOD. If I let him go, he would find his death at the hands of someone else.

Blake drew in a ragged breath, wiping at the blood under his nose. "I'm—"

"Shut up," I growled. "Go. Go now before I don't give you a choice."

Shock splashed across Blake's face. "You're letting me go?"

I glanced at Kat, but she lowered her head, silent. I was done. So was Kat.

"Go and never, ever come back here," I ordered. "If I ever see you again, I will kill you."

Blake was still for a moment, and then he pivoted around, taking off. I watched him go for a long moment, and then I turned to Kat. She staggered to the side, and her knees went out. I caught her before she hit the ground and switched into my Luxen form.

Instinct took hold, and as I held her close, I folded one hand along the back of her head and I healed her. God, I was so angry, but I took away the bruises and the pain. I wished I could take everything else away—all her lies, the guilt she would now face, the pain that would cut deeper than any physical wound, because this…all of this could've been prevented if she had just listed to me.

Squeezing my eyes shut, my arm around her waist tightened. I pinned her to my chest as I swallowed the knot in my throat. Pressure built in my chest as I lowered my cheek to the top of her head. I sat back, my ass planted in the snow. My throat seized off.

Daemon?

My fingers curled in her hair. *I told you we couldn't trust him*.

Kat trembled. I'm sorry. I thought...I thought if I learned how to fight, I could keep you safe, all of you safe.

I lifted my head as I returned to my human form. Staring down at her in disbelief, my entire body shook with the force of the anger rolling through me.

"Daemon, I—"

"Don't apologize. Just don't apologize." I lifted her out of my lap and sat her on the ground. Climbing to my feet, I drew in a short, rough breath. "Did you know he was working with the DOD this entire time?"

"No." She shot to her feet and swayed. I caught her elbow, holding her until she stopped moving. Once she was steady, I let go. I had to. Tears streamed down her pale face. "I didn't know until a few nights ago. And even then I wasn't sure."

A few nights ago?

"Dammit," I spat, forcing myself to take a step back from her. "Was that the night you went to Vaughn's on your own?"

"Yes, but I wasn't sure." She lifted bloodied hands and stopped short from thrusting them through her hair. "I should've told you then, but I didn't know for sure, and I didn't want to add anything for you to worry about." Her voice cracked. "I didn't know."

I looked away, jaw clenching. "Adam is dead. My sister almost lost her life."

She sucked air. "I'm so—"

"Don't! Don't you dare apologize!" I yelled, eyes glowing through the darkness. "Adam's death will *destroy* my sister. I told you we couldn't trust Blake, that if you wanted to learn how to fight, I would've shown you! But you didn't listen. And you've brought the DOD into your life, Kat! Who knows what they know now?"

"I didn't tell him anything!" Her voice broke again. "I never told him you healed me."

My eyes narrowed. "Do you think he didn't guess?"

She winced and whispered, "I'm sorry."

I flinched, because sorry...sorry changed nothing. "And those times you were covered in bruises? That was him, wasn't it? He was hurting you during training, wasn't he? And never once did you think there may be something wrong with him? Goddammit, Kat! You've lied to me. You didn't trust me!"

"I do trust—"

"Bullshit!" I shot forward, in her face. "Don't say you trust me when it's apparent you never did!" Kat said nothing, because there wasn't anything to say. I was right.

A burst of energy left me, slamming into an oak tree. It cracked with a loud snapping sound and then folded into a tree beside it. Kat jumped, gasping for air.

"All of this could've been prevented. Why couldn't you trust me?" My voice cracked, and a fresh wave of tears coursed down her cheeks. I started forward, but stopped. Our eyes met. "I would've kept you safe."

Pain flared in her eyes. She lifted her hand, reaching for me, but I stepped back. I turned and I left her there, in the barren coldness that had invaded my chest.

CHAPTER 27

Dee was awake when I returned to the house. She was on her knees, her cheek pressed to Adam's still chest. Her entire body shook with the force of her sobs. Seeing her so broken killed me.

I walked over to her and knelt down, placing my hands on her shoulders. She didn't seem aware of me. Ash was in Andrew's arms on the other side of Adam. Matthew stood above them, and I could barely look at him.

It was Adam my gaze settled on and stayed there for a while. Adam hadn't deserved this. God, none of us deserved this. Not even Kat.

"Come on." My voice was gruff as I tugged Dee away from Adam. Her blotchy red face crumpled a second before she wrapped her arms around my neck. "Shh," I whispered as I picked her up. "It's going to be okay. It's going to be all right."

Her tears were already soaking my shirt.

I looked at Matthew. "I'm going to take her next door, and then I'll take care of everything outside."

He nodded without looking at me. "I'll...I'll take care of this."

"Can you stay with Dee first?" I didn't want her alone.

Dragging his gaze from Adam, he looked dazed. "Yes." Matthew followed me next door. I kept Dee's face pinned to my chest so she didn't see Vaughn's body. Warm air rushed at us as I walked into my house. I gently placed Dee on the couch. She immediately rolled onto her side, away from me.

I pressed my forehead to her cheek, my hands shaking. "I'm sorry, Dee. I'm so damn sorry."

Dee cried louder.

Matthew sat by her legs, his head hanging. "God..."

Pushing away from the couch, I knocked the hair off my forehead and pivoted around. Energy rippled through me. I wanted to destroy something, but shit, there was already a mess outside.

"Where is he?" Matthew asked, his voice hoarse. "Blake?"

"Gone," I answered after a moment. "He's gone. He won't be back."

"You let him go?" Surprise filled his tone.

I closed my eyes. "We'll talk when I get back, okay?"

None of this needed to be said in front of Dee.

I walked back outside. Ash was standing near the body of Vaughn. She didn't look up as I went to her side. "Andrew is taking Adam back...back to the house." Her voice was shaky, fragile. "I...don't know what to do."

"I'm sorry," I said again, the words nowhere near adequate.

"I thought it would be you." Her teary gaze met mine. "I thought *she* would get *you* killed, but it was my brother."

Despite what I knew and what I didn't know yet, I defended Kat. "She didn't want this to happen. If

anything..." I sighed, weary as my gaze fell to Vaughn. "If anything, she was trying to avoid this."

"But it did happen, didn't—" Her voice broke off.

The next thing I knew, white light swallowed Vaughn's body. The Source was coming from Ash. I didn't stop her. Nothing but ash remained where Vaughn once lay. "I want to kill them all," she gritted out. "All of them."

Ash brushed past me, and I turned halfway, watching her head into my house. I knew what she was feeling. I'd gone through it before, and there would be nothing that I could say that would make it okay.

I took care of Vaughn's Expedition and Blake's truck, moving them both farther down the road before I tapped into the Source and lit them up. I fed the fire that engulfed them, the flames turning white. After several minutes, there was nothing left of them, not even a burned-out shell.

Exhausted and raw, I returned to the house. Ash was sitting on the couch with Dee's head in her lap. I went straight to my sister, picked her up, and held her in my lap. Her sobs had quieted, but every so often, she trembled.

"I'm going to go next door," Matthew announced. He'd been standing near the window. "She's going to need help."

I closed my eyes against the fresh wave of anger and damn near crushing disappointment. Ash didn't say anything. None of us did. All I could think about as the three of us sat there was how lucky I was right then. Because no matter how pissed off I was at Kat, she was alive, and it had nothing to do with the life-and-death connection between us.

I had no idea how much time passed before Matthew returned. Then it was the four of us. At some point, I passed out while holding my sister, and I knew Ash slept, but I didn't think Matthew did. In the morning, Andrew returned. When Dee woke, she didn't want to stay here, and I didn't really want to let her go with Ash and Andrew, but she wanted to be with them. I couldn't refuse her. I watched the three of them leave and then turned to where Matthew sat on the arm of the couch.

He rested his hands on his knees. "I helped Katy clean up."

Feeling as if I were a hundred years old, I sat in the recliner. I opened my mouth, but I couldn't find anything to say.

"She thinks all of this is her fault," he continued when I said nothing. "I...I don't know all the details, Daemon, but I think...I think she was trying to prevent this."

I scrubbed my hand over my face. "I know. I know that, Matthew."

He drew in a stuttered breath. "She's hurting."

Closing my eyes, my hand formed a fist against my forehead. Everybody was hurting. All of us. But I knew Kat's was a different kind of pain.

"She told me that you two let Blake go," Matthew said. "And she told me that he claimed the DOD was forcing him to work for them. That they had one of ours, the one who...who changed him, in their custody."

"That's what he claims," I said tiredly, lifting my head. "I don't know if any of it is true, but a Luxen had to have...changed him. Killing him would've..."

"Killed the Luxen."

I nodded. "That wasn't the only reason, Matthew. I was just...I was done. Killing a human, even him...I was just done."

A few moments passed while Matthew stared at the blank TV screen. "He won't get far if what he claims is true. The DOD will be after him."

"They'll be after all of us."

Matthew shook his head. "It sounded like Vaughn went rogue. From what I gathered from Katy, he was taking her somewhere, and it had nothing to do with the DOD. Blake might've been sent here by Husher or other DOD members, but with him on the run, maybe they don't know about Katy. From what he told her, Vaughn wasn't telling Husher anything Blake was reporting back to him. Something else was or is going on."

"I guess we'll find out." I sighed. "Is it messed up that I'm not even worried about that right now?" I laughed, because that sounded crazy. It was crazy. "It feels like no matter what we do, everything is already set in motion. Nothing...nothing will change it."

"Do you really believe that?"

I shrugged. I wasn't sure what I believed anymore.

Matthew was quiet for several moments. "You...changed Katy, didn't you? That was why you were asking all those questions?"

Nodding, I didn't see any point at the moment to mention Dawson or Bethany, which was a huge freaking wake-up call, because Kat hadn't been the only one lying.

So had I.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

Leaning back against the cushion, I eyed Matthew. "Halloween night. She was hurt, and so was Dee. I'd been knocked down and I...I tried to heal her so she could get away from Baruck, but something happened. She pulled the Source from both Dee and me, and she killed Baruck."

His eyes widened slightly. "That wasn't the first time you healed her."

I shook my head. "After the attack at the library, I did and...and once more, a minor injury. I wasn't thinking when I did it. But after she killed Baruck, she was hurt. She was..." My voice trailed off, and I cleared my throat. "She was dying, Matt. I couldn't let that happen."

He stared at me. "You love her."

My mouth opened, and for a moment I couldn't speak. Then I did in a voice I barely recognized. "I do. I love her."

"Of course." His smile was sort of sad. "You wouldn't have been able to change her if you didn't."

Some of the pressure squeezing the hell out of my chest lessened. I loved Kat. I was in love with her, and I was damn lucky she was alive. Despite all the craziness, the arguing and fighting, the lies and the miscommunication, I was in love with her. Was that such a shock? Not really. Truth be told, I fell for her the first time she mouthed off at me. I just hadn't fully admitted it to myself.

"I know you're upset with her right now, but it's obvious that what you feel for her isn't some fleeting emotion. You love her," Matthew said quietly as he rose. "You need to talk to her, because right now, you both...you both need each other. More than ever."

I didn't say anything as he walked toward the front door. "I'm going to go check on Andrew and Ash." He reached for the handle and stopped. "Happy New Year, Daemon."

I'd slept what felt like an eternity before waking Sunday evening. After I took a shower where it felt like I scrubbed off years of emotional crap, I headed downstairs. I didn't stop. I walked outside and went next door. I didn't feel her in the house, but I had a feeling I knew where she'd gone.

Snow continued to fall as I walked down the road. The fluffy white stuff covered the scorched marks from where I burned the two vehicles. It was almost like I could pretend none of that happened

yesterday.

A warm tingle spread across my neck. I stepped out of the woods and into the snow-covered clearing. She was standing at the edge of the frozen lake. Jesus, she was barely dressed to be out here. Granted, she was definitely something more than human, but would wearing a jacket every once in a while kill her? The moon reflected off the ice, casting silvery light across the still surface. I stopped directly behind her and for a moment just...just reveled in the fact that she was still standing, that the one person outside of my family who meant the world to me was still here. Matthew had been right. We needed each other, especially in this moment, more than ever before.

Kat turned around. Red-rimmed eyes met mine.

"I knew you'd be here." I cast my gaze to the frozen lake, my jaw working. "It's where I come when I need to think."

She drew in a shallow breath. "How's Dee?"

"She'll survive," I said, even though I wished she wouldn't have to survive this. "We need to talk. Are you busy right now? Not sure if I'm interrupting. Staring at the lake can take a lot of concentration."

Her brows knit. "I'm not busy."

I met her stare. "Then come back with me?"

Anxious energy rolled off her, but she nodded. We walked back to my house in silence. I led her into the kitchen. "Hungry? I haven't eaten all day."

She watched me cautiously. "Yeah, a little."

I went to the fridge and grabbed some lunch meat while Kat sat at the table. I made two ham and cheese sandwiches, doubling up on the mayonaise for hers. We ate and cleaned up in silence.

Kat stood. "Daemon, I—"

"Not yet." I dried my hands and then walked out of the kitchen, knowing Kat was behind me. I started up the steps.

"Why are we going upstairs?"

I glanced over my shoulder, my hand on the mahogany-colored rail. "Why not?"

"I don't know. It's just seems..."

It might be weird, but I didn't know if Dee was going to return tonight, and I didn't want her walking in on what Kat and I needed to talk about. We could've gone to her house, but that was the last place I wanted to be right now.

"Where's Dee?" she asked as we walked past her bedroom.

"She's with Ash and Andrew. I think being with them is helping her..." I opened the door and stepped aside, letting her walk in.

Her nervous energy increased, along with her heart rate. "Your room?"

I closed the door. "Yep. The best spot in the whole house."

Kat folded her hands together as she checked out my room. She'd never been in here before, so she was taking everything in—the posters, the TV and desk. The bed. I waved my hand, turning the bedside lamp on.

She turned to the desk, staring at my Mac. "Nice computer."

"It is." I kicked off my boots.

"Daemon—" She stopped when I sat on the bed. Her fingers drifted over the lid of the Mac. "I am so sorry about everything. I shouldn't have trusted him—I should've listened to you. I didn't want anyone to get hurt."

"Adam didn't get hurt. He died, Kat."

She faced me, her voice thick. "I... If I could go back, I'd change everything."

I shook my head as my gaze dropped to my open hands. I curled them into fists. "I know we don't always get along, and I know the whole connection thing freaked you out, but you knew you could always trust me. The moment you suspected Blake was with the DOD, you should've come to me." Helplessness filled me. "I could've prevented this."

"I *do* trust you. With my life," she said, inching closer. "But once I thought he could possibly be involved with them, I didn't want you involved. Blake knew and suspected too much already."

"I should've done more. When he threw that damn knife at you, I should've stepped in then and not backed down, but I was just so damn angry."

Her chest rose sharply, and papers on my desk stirred. "I was trying to protect you."

I lifted my gaze. I knew she wanted that, but could that have been the sole reason behind her not coming to me about Blake? She was trying to protect *me*. "You wanted to keep me safe?"

"Yes." She swallowed. "Not that it turned out that way in the end, but when I found out Blake and Vaughn were related, all I could think was that he played me—I let myself be played. And he knew how close we were. They'd do to you what they did to Dawson. There is no way I could have lived with that."

Closing my eyes, I turned my head. "When did you know definitely that Blake was working with the DOD?"

"On New Year's Eve. Blake showed up while I was sleeping, and I saw Simon's watch in his car. He says Simon's still alive, that the DOD took him, but there...there was blood on his watch."

I cursed. "While you were sleeping? Did he do this often?"

She shook her head. "Not that I know of."

Not that she knew of. Shit. I should've killed him...for a multitude of reasons.

"You should've never been worried about me getting hurt." I stood, running both hands through my hair. "You know I can take care of myself. You know I can handle my own."

"I know, but I wasn't going to knowingly put you at risk. You mean too much to me."

My head swung toward her. That was probably the first time I'd ever heard her actually say that. "And what does that mean, exactly?"

"I..." Her lower lip trembled. "It doesn't matter now."

"The hell it doesn't!" I yelled. "You nearly destroyed my family, Kat. You almost got both of us killed, and none of this is over. Who knows how much time any of us have before the DOD comes? I let that dickhead go. He's still out there, and as terrible as this sounds, I hope he gets what's coming to him before he can report back to anyone. Fuck! You lied to me! Are you telling me all of this is because I mean something to you?"

Pink swept across her cheeks. "Daemon..."

"Answer me!"

"Fine!" She threw her hands up in the air. "Yes, you mean something to me. What you did for me on Thanksgiving—that made me..." Her voice cracked. "That made me *happy*. You made me *happy*. And I still care about you. Okay? You mean something to me—something I can't really even put into words because everything seems too lame in comparison. I've always wanted you, even when I hated you. I want you even though you drive me freaking insane. And I know I screwed everything up. Not just for you and me, but for Dee."

I stared at her.

Her next breath caught on a sob as tears filled her eyes. "And I never felt this way with anyone else. Like I'm falling every time I'm around you, like I can't catch my breath, and I feel *alive*—not just

standing around and letting my life walk past me. There's been nothing like that with anyone else."

The entire world was crashing down on us. That son of a bitch Blake—I should've killed him the moment I first saw him. I should've killed him now. Kat had *lied* to me. Adam was dead. Dee was destroyed. The DOD would be knocking on our doors any damn second, I still had no idea where Dawson was, and the only thing I could think about—cared about—was what Kat was telling me. That she had never felt this way about anyone before. That she couldn't catch her breath and that she felt alive.

And she was talking about how she felt about *me*.

"But none of this matters," she continued, "because I know you really hate me now. I understand that. I just wish I could go back and change everything! I—"

I moved too fast for her to track and clasped her cheeks. "I never hated you."

She blinked, and God, I couldn't stand it if she cried. "But—"

"I don't hate you now, Kat." My gaze locked with her watery one. "I'm mad at you—at myself. I'm so angry, I can taste it. I want to find Blake and rearrange parts of his body. But do you know what I thought about all day yesterday? All night? The one single thought I couldn't escape, no matter how pissed off I am at you?"

"No," she whispered.

My chest constricted. "That I'm lucky, because the person I can't get out of my head, the person who means more to me than I can stand, is still alive. She's still there. And that's you."

A tear trailed down her cheek. "What...what does that mean?"

"I really don't know." I chased after the tear with my thumb. "I don't know what tomorrow is going to bring, what a year from now is going to be like. Hell, we may end up killing each other over something stupid next week. It's a possibility. But all I do know is what I feel for you isn't going anywhere."

She started to cry harder, and it made me weak in the knees. I bent my head, kissing the tears away until that wasn't enough and I *needed* a taste of her. I kissed her, growling at the way her lips felt against mine.

But Kat pulled back. "How can you still want me?"

I pressed my forehead against hers. "Oh, I still want to strangle you. But I'm insane. You're crazy. Maybe that's why. We just make crazy together."

"That makes no sense."

"It kind of does, to me at least." I kissed her again. I had to. "It might have to do with the fact that you finally admitted you're deeply and irrevocably in love with me."

She let out a weak, shaky laugh. "I so did not admit that."

"Not in so many words, but we both know it's true. And I'm okay with it."

"You are?" She closed those beautiful heather-gray eyes, and all I could think was how grateful I was she was still breathing.

Man, I was turning into a pansy.

But I didn't care. Not when it came to her.

"It's the same for you?" she asked.

My answer was to bring our mouths together again...and again. The touch was like tapping into the Source, sending lightning straight to the soul. The kiss deepened until there was no me, no her. It was just us, and it wasn't enough—could never be enough.

I was moving without realizing it, and the next thing I knew we were on the bed and she was right where I wanted her—in my lap. And then she was beside me on the bed, and my heart was doing crazy

crap in my chest. Such a human thing, but it was happening.

Kat breathed heavily. "This doesn't change anything I've done. All of this is still my fault."

Placing my hand on her stomach, I moved so close I was practically attached to her. And I wanted to be in so many different ways. "It's not all your fault. It's all of ours. And we're in this together. We'll face whatever is waiting for us together."

"Us?"

I nodded, working on the buttons of her sweater. Some of them were buttoned incorrectly, and I laughed. Only Kat could have trouble putting clothes on correctly and somehow make it sexy. "If there is anything, there is *us*."

Kat lifted her shoulders and helped me get her out of the damn thing. Good. She was on board with where this was heading. "And what does 'us' really mean?"

"You and me." I moved down, tugging off her boots. "No one else."

Her cheeks flushed as she pulled off her socks and lay back down. Jesus, she still had on way too many clothes. "I...I kind of like the sound of that."

"Kind of?" Bull. Shit. I slipped my hand down her stomach, to the hem of her shirt and underneath. I bit down on the inside of my cheek. The minor burn of pain did nothing. I loved the way her skin felt like satin. "Kind of isn't good enough."

"Okay. I do like that."

"So do I." I lowered my head, kissing her slowly. "I bet you love that."

Her lips curved into a smile against mine. "I do."

There was that damn constriction again, like I'd been punched in the chest, but in a good way. How you could be punched in the chest in a good way was beyond me, but damn, I sort of loved that feeling.

"Tell me everything," I asked in the tiny space between our mouths.

The tips of her fingers slipped over my cheek, and she seemed to know what I'd meant without having to say the exact words. "I didn't burn my fingers on the stove. Blake...he was teaching me how to control fire—how to create it."

Jesus. "The bruises?"

"From him during training," she whispered as her lashes lowered. "I didn't think he was doing it on purpose. Not until our last training session before Christmas. I'd been too tired to train, so he suggested we grab something to eat. It didn't feel right from the beginning, because we went out of the range of the beta quartz."

I might've stopped breathing.

"Dinner was strained, and then he got a text message. Looking back now, I wonder how much of this was set up." She laughed without any humor. "On the way home, I felt an Arum. He pulled along the side of the road, made me get out...and fight it."

"What?" I seethed.

She didn't look up. "I had to fight the Arum, and I did. I killed...I killed it," she continued, her voice low. "It wasn't easy."

It took several moments before I trusted myself to speak. "That's how you were covered with all those bruises along your back?"

"Yeah. I didn't tell you the truth, because I knew...I knew you'd go after him, and I wasn't worried for him. I was worried for you, because at that point I knew something was wrong with him. I knew something was off, just like you'd been saying the whole time." Kat shuddered, and I pressed my lips to her forehead. "That's when I began to really suspect he wasn't what he seemed to be. I didn't want

you to go after him in case he was working with the DOD or something." Her voice shook. "I should've listened to you, Daemon. I should've—"

"Shh," I said, kissing her still-damp cheeks, and then I found her lips. I kissed her softly, changing the reason she trembled in my arms. "I was jealous," I admitted.

"What?" Her lips brushed mine.

I slipped my thigh between hers. "I was...jealous of how much time you were spending with him. I wasn't thinking clearly when he first came into the picture. I thought I was going to lose you before... before I had you."

"No," she whispered, cupping my cheek. Her hand shook. "It was never like that with him. Maybe... maybe in the beginning I wanted it to be, because I was so confused about how I felt about you, but when he kissed me, I didn't feel anything. Nothing. It wasn't anything like when you kiss me." Her hand slipped into my hair. "We only kissed that one time. He tried...he tried once more, but I stopped him."

Tension poured into my muscles. "And did he stop?"

"Yes. I swear. He stopped."

The relief was sweet, and I brought our mouths together once more. In between the kisses that unraveled me and then pieced me back together, I spoke things I never told anyone. How crazy I had felt after hearing Dawson was dead, and the hope I felt learning he had to be alive. I told her how badly I wished my parents were here and how sometimes I hated being the one who had to take care of things.

Everything I felt was in every touch, and even what I didn't say was in the way my fingers brushed over the fragile bones of her rib cage. And with every breathy, soft moan that escaped her lips, I was snared in her web a little more.

My hands shook as they moved up, and I hoped she didn't notice. I was blown away, shattered by what she allowed me to do. Pieces of our clothing disappeared. My shirt. Hers. Kat's hand drifted down my stomach, and I clenched my jaw so hard I was sure I was going to be paying a visit to a dentist soon.

When her fingers found the button on my jeans, I was completely lost to her, but in a way I never, ever expected.

"You have no idea how badly I want this," I told her, bringing the tips of my fingers down her chest and over her stomach. So beautiful. "I think I've actually dreamed about it. Crazy, huh?"

She ran the pads of her fingers down my cheek. I turned into the touch, pressing a kiss against the palm of her hand, and then I found her mouth again. This kiss was different, more intense, and Kat—aw, God—Kat came alive. Hips rocking together, our bodies fitted so tightly there was a good chance I would slip into my true form and knock out the power in the entire state.

Our explorations grew. Her hands were everywhere, and I urged her with words and touches to go further. Her leg curled around my hips—sweet baby Jesus—I was nearly undone.

With my name on her lips and with barely anything separating us, I felt the last of my control slipping. Whitish-red light radiated off me, bathing Kat in the warm glow. There was nowhere that my hands didn't explore, and the way her body arched into the slightest touch, I was awed and consumed. Kissing her and drawing her deep inside me, I never wanted this to end. She was perfect to me. She was *mine*, and I wanted her more than I wanted anything in my life.

But I stopped.

Everything that had happened flipped through my head like a photo album I wanted to burn. Both our emotions were all over the place. There had been death, discovery, and so much more. And we

were rushing headfirst into not turning back.

I didn't want our first time to be like this—to be because of what happened.

My God, I was a mushy pansy-ass, but I stopped.

Kat stared up at me, running her hands over my stomach and making it really hard to slam on the brakes. "What?" she asked.

"You...you're not going to believe me." Hell, I didn't believe it. In a couple of seconds, I was really going to regret this. "But I want to do this right."

She started to smile. "I doubt you could do this wrong."

Ha. "Yeah, I'm not talking about *that*. That I will do perfectly, but I want to..." Break out the subscription to the Hallmark Channel and the Lifetime Movie Network. "I want us to have what normal couples have."

Kat looked like she was going to cry again. I'd probably be crying soon, but for a totally different reason.

I cupped her cheek, exhaling roughly. "And the last thing I want to do is stop, but I want to take you out—go on a date or something." I sounded like an idiot. "I don't want what we're about to do to be overshadowed by everything else."

I think I might have blushed. Damn me.

Calling on every ounce of self-control I had, I did the unthinkable and lifted off her, easing down on my side. I wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her close. I brushed my lips across her temple. "Okay?"

Kat tipped her head back, meeting my stare. Her throat worked on her next words. "I think I might love you."

Air punched out of my lungs. I held her tight, and I knew right then I would burn down the whole universe for her if I had to. I would do anything to keep her safe. Kill. Heal. Die. Anything. Because she was my everything.

And I wanted to tell her so, but I didn't want to tempt the universe. Bad things happened to the people I loved.

I kissed her cheek. "Told you."

Kat stared at me.

I chuckled, and although it didn't seem possible, I moved closer. "My bet—I won. I told you that you'd tell me you loved me on New Year's Day."

Looping her arms around my neck, she shook my head. "No. You lost."

I frowned. "How do you figure?"

"Look at the time." She tipped her chin toward the clock on the wall. "It's past midnight. It's January second. You lost."

For several moments I stared at the clock, wishing it into a black hole, but then my gaze found hers and I smiled—really smiled. "No. I didn't lose. I still won."

CHAPTER 28

It was six in the morning, and I sat on Kat's bed, listening to the shower running in the bathroom and mentally listing all the reasons why it wasn't a good idea to join her.

I couldn't come up with one.

But I managed to keep my ass planted on the bed while she got ready for school. We'd spent the entire night together, talking and sleeping in each other's arms. Despite everything, it had been the best night in a long time. In forever. That didn't mean I wasn't thinking about my sister or Adam. That didn't mean everything was perfect. The moment I let my thoughts wander, they didn't go to a good place.

I'd checked in with Dee before I headed over to Kat's house. She wasn't awake, but I'd talked to Andrew. It hadn't been an easy call. Not when we talked about how we were going to explain Adam's death. Publicly for the humans, it would be a car accident. To the nearby Luxen colony and the DOD, if the latter didn't already know the truth, it would be an Arum attack.

The next couple of days—weeks—were going to be rough.

Kat stepped out of the steamy bathroom, wrapped in a fluffy towel with a robe over the top. She didn't look surprised to see me even though I hadn't told her I was sneaking over. Obviously she felt me the moment I got into the house.

She walked over to where I sat. "What are you doing?"

I patted the spot beside me, and she sat on her knees, facing me. "We need to stick close together over the next couple of weeks. I wouldn't be surprised if the DOD shows. We're safer together."

"Is that the only reason?"

A lazy grin pulled at my lips as I reached over, tugging lightly on the belt of her robe. "Not the only reason. Probably the smartest, but definitely not the most pressing."

Kat smiled slightly as she shook her head. Circling an arm around her waist, I tugged her into my lap. I kissed her forehead. "What are you thinking?"

She tucked her face into my neck. "A lot of things. Do...do you think it's wrong to be happy right now?"

My arms tightened as I frowned down at her. "Well, I wouldn't send out a mass text message or anything." I paused, getting what she meant. "And I'm not entirely happy. I don't think I've really come to terms with everything. Adam was..." I trailed off, throat working.

"I liked him," she whispered. "I don't expect Dee to ever forgive me, but I want to see her. I need to make sure she's okay."

"She'll forgive you. She needs time." I kissed her temple. "Dee knew you tried to warn her off. She called me when you told her to leave, and I told her and Adam to stay out of there, but they parked the car down the street and came back. They made that choice, and I know she'd do it again."

Her voice hoarsened. "There are so many things I wouldn't do again."

"I know." I placed two fingers under her chin, tipping her head back so our eyes met. "We can't focus on that now. It's not going to do any good."

She stretched up, kissing my lips. "I want to see Dee after school."

"What are you doing for lunch?"

"Other than eating? Nothing."

"Good. We're skipping."

"Going to see Dee, right?"

I grinned at her. "Yeah, but first, there are things I want to do, and we don't have nearly enough time for that now."

She arched a brow. "Are you going to try to squeeze in dinner and a movie then?"

"Kitten, your mind is a terrible and dirty place. I was thinking we could go for a stroll or something."

"Tease," she murmured and started to stand, but I held her there.

My eyes locked on hers. "Say it."

"Say what?"

"Tell me what you told me earlier."

I felt her heart speed up in her chest and she leaned in, brushing her nose across mine, and said, "I love you."

Slipping my hand behind her head, I pulled her in for a kiss that made me really want to bring her down to the bed and forget all about school and everything else. "That's all I ever need to hear."

"Those three words?" she asked.

"Always those three words."

Sitting in class was the last place I wanted to be on a normal day, but it was nearly killing me to be here. I wanted to be home with Dee. There wasn't much I could do for her. Words were never good for grief, but I hated that I couldn't be there for her. I also wanted to be with Kat. She was in the same building as me, but it wasn't the same. I wanted her close by and not just because, well, I wanted her near me. I figured if the DOD were going to make a move, they'd do so fast, and I wanted to keep an eye on her.

I had no idea what the shape was that the teacher drew on the chalkboard. The only thing I really saw was how amazing Kat had looked in my bed—how amazing she had felt and tasted. I could still feel her without even trying. It was insane. Mind-blowing.

Stretching my legs out, I still couldn't believe I'd stopped.

Do it the right way? Man, I was going to need a training bra soon.

But stopping had felt right. We'd gone through a lot of crap and emotions. Honestly, I didn't want our first time to be marred by grief and leftover anger. Might not have felt like those things would've clouded our first time, and maybe they wouldn't have, but I hadn't wanted to risk it.

When class finally ended, I made it out into the hallway and pulled my cell out of my pocket. I frowned as I stepped around a cluster of classmates. There was a missed text from Kat that had come in around forty minutes ago. Annoyed that I missed it, I clicked on the text.

Mom N accident. Going 2 hospital.

I came to a complete stop, stomach sinking. God, what else was going to happen?

Where did her Mom work last night? I racked my brain for an answer. Winchester. Roads were still slick in many areas and covered in snow in others. Stepping out of the hallway traffic, I quickly called Kat.

It rang and rang. No answer.

Leaving a short message, I fought the urge to rush out of the school and find Kat. The problem was I didn't know what hospital she would've gone to. It could be anywhere between here and Winchester. I'd have to wait until she got back to me.

Patience was a virtue I didn't believe in.

Before I headed into my next class, I checked in on Dee. She was as expected. Not good. Sitting through history class was a test in true control. When lunch arrived and I still hadn't heard from Kat after trying her again and sending a text, I couldn't stay at the school any longer.

On the way out, I tried her once more. Still no answer, and a sense of unease built in my gut like pools of acid. Cell service was spotty anywhere in town and the whole way into Virginia, but she would've made it to Winchester by now and Kat...she would've returned my calls, especially after everything that had gone down. Her going radio silent was not normal.

I stopped over at the Thompsons' house before going home. Sorrow clung to the walls like mold. Spending time with them, I found myself at a loss when it came to what I could say or do. A rare moment in my life, but death was a void that even I couldn't fully understand. Here one moment and gone the next. Death was that quick. There'd be a private funeral within the community. Adam's body would be cremated, as was the tradition, and then there'd be nothing.

There was already nothing but memories.

Heavy with those thoughts, I headed to our empty house, where I paced back and forth like a lunatic. Several hours had passed, and with no word from Kat, I started to feel desperate. What if her mom had passed away and she was too distraught to call? What if she had gotten into an accident on the way to the hospital? Her car was still in the driveway next door, so that meant Mr. Michaels most likely picked her up.

Immediately I thought about the link between Will and Bethany. He was her uncle—her sick uncle, but the DOD had no doubt been watching Bethany and Dawson like they'd been watching Kat and me. No one needed to turn them over. The DOD had probably seen everything that had gone down.

Just like they had with Kat and me.

I was halfway to where I left my phone on the coffee table, about to start calling every hospital I could think of, when it rang. There was a dip in my stomach as I shot through the room, picking it up.

"Kat?" I answered.

There was a stretch of silence and then, "No. This isn't Kat."

Concern exploded. "Mr. Michaels? Where's Kat? Is she okay? What—?"

"She's not...really okay, Daemon."

I reached out, planting my hand on the wall, legs suddenly weak. That off-kilter sensation was the same thing I felt before the officers had told me about Dawson. I knew Kat had to be alive, but...

"Daemon?"

I took a deep breath. "What happened to her?"

"Nothing irreversible at this point."

Wait. What? I pushed off the wall, my whole world centering on what Mr. Michaels was saying. "What do you mean by that, Will?"

There was a pause. "Kat is okay. Sort of. Well, she's definitely not having a lot of fun right now."

Fury rose like a heat wave. My fingers curled around the cell, grinding the plastic and metal. I didn't know why he'd done something to Kat. I didn't care. All I knew was that I would kill him for this. "You son—"

"Now, let's not waste time. You can fix this, Daemon. Are you listening? You don't want to miss this."

"Oh, I'm listening. I'm also taking notes."

Mr. Michaels laughed drily. "Come to the warehouse. You know exactly which one—and Daemon? I'd hurry if I were you."

The bastard hung up before I could respond. For a second, I stood there staring at the phone. Shit. Shit. Shit. My skin tingled, and I felt myself lose control of my human form. Tossing the phone aside, I shot toward the door and was halfway down the driveway before I spun back around, heading for the SUV. I didn't know what was going on with Kat or if she was hurt and how badly. I would need to take the car, which would slow me down.

I broke about ten different speed laws as I raced out of town, toward the warehouse where those two officers had cornered Kat. I called Matthew, who was with Dee and the Thompsons, telling him what happened. They wanted to help, but I told them to go to our house and stay there, just in case...well, just in case shit went real bad.

My mind was blank during the drive. I couldn't let myself think about anything. I had to keep my cool. I couldn't let my head go down that road—the one where she was hurt—because after Blake and Adam, I wasn't sure how I'd deal.

I'd probably lose my shit and expose my entire race.

The sky was a deep blue and cloudless as I pulled into the back of the warehouse. Parking Dolly, I flew out of the car and around the building. The first door I came to was unlocked, which had me on high alert.

Dim lighting in the ceiling cast yellow light over a metal desk and chairs. The stale smell of cigarettes lingered, but there was nothing else. From memory, I darted to the right and up the stairs. There was no time to prepare myself, to really even think about what might be waiting for me. I hit the second-floor landing and pushed the double doors open. The door slammed off cement walls.

What I saw almost brought me to my knees.

Disregarding where Will stood, my eyes locked on Kat. She was in a cage—a *fucking* cage. Like some kind of rabid animal, chained up. So many emotions rushed me I almost lost complete hold of my human form. Rage and desperation warred with just a flicker of relief. There was Kat. She was in one piece—

Kat made the slightest movement toward me, and her body spasmed. Her mouth dropped open in a silent scream.

Cold fear whipped through me as I shot forward and gripped the bars. Sharp red-hot pain lanced my palms, and I jerked back. "What is this?" I glanced down at my palms and then at where the metal circled her wrists. I was going to be sick, for the first time in my life.

"Onyx mixed with ruby and hematite," Will answered. "A nice combination that doesn't sit well with the Luxen or hybrids."

I looked at Will. "I will kill you."

"No, I don't think you will." Will moved a few steps back, though. "Onyx covers every entrance to this building, so I know you can't pull in any power or use the light. I also have the keys to that cage and those handcuffs. And only I can touch any part of that."

"Maybe not now, but I will," I growled low in my throat. "You can believe that."

That was a promise I would keep.

"And you can believe that I'll be ready for that day." Will arched an eyebrow at Kat. "She's been in there for a while. I think you understand what that means. Shall we move this along?"

Turning away from him, I approached the other side of the pen and knelt. Kat turned her head toward me. Pressure clamped down on my chest. Dear God, seeing her like this ripped me into shreds. "I'm going to get you out of there, Kitten. I swear to you."

"As sweet as your declaration is, the only way you'll get her out of there is to do as I say, and we only have"—he checked his Rolex—"about thirty minutes before the next round of officers arrives, and while I have every intention of letting you both go, they won't."

I lifted my head, seconds from planting my fist in his face. "What do you want?"

"I want you to mutate me."

I stared at Will, wondering if he'd lost his damn mind. I laughed. "Are you insane?"

Will's eyes narrowed. "I don't need to explain everything to you. She knows. She can fill you in. I want you to change me." He reached over the cage, wrapping his fingers around the bundle of chains. "I want to become what she is."

"I can't just twitch my nose and make it happen."

"I know how it works." He sneered. "I have to be wounded. You have to heal me, and the rest I can take care of."

I shook my head. "What is the rest?"

Once again, Will looked at Kat and smiled. "Katy can fill you in on that."

"You'll fill me in right now," I snarled, losing whatever control I had.

"Or not." Will yanked on the chains, and Kat buckled.

Her scream was just a whimper, but it cut through me like a rusted knife. I shot up. "Stop it. Let the chains go."

"But you haven't even heard what I'm offering." He yanked on the chains.

Kat's back bowed completely off the dirty floor of the pen. Her lashes swept down and her face took on a fine sheen of sweat.

Horror roared through me like a tempest. I moved to the front of the cage, hands closing into useless fists. "Let the chains go. Please."

Will released the chains, and she slumped against the pen. "This is my deal. Mutate me, and I'll give you the key to the cage, but I'm not stupid, Daemon."

"You're not?" I snickered.

The older man's lip twitched. "I need to make sure you don't come after me as soon as I leave here, which I know you will once she's removed from that cage."

"Am I that predictable? I may have to change up my game."

Will let out an exasperated breath. "When I leave here, you will not follow me. We have less than twenty minutes to do this, and then you'll have only thirty minutes, give or take a few, to go to the address I've given to Katy."

I glanced at Kat. "Is this a scavenger hunt? I do so love them."

"Possibly." Will slowly approached me, pulling out a gun. "You'll have a choice to make after you let her out of the cage. You can come after me or you can get the one thing you've always wanted."

"What? A tattoo of your face on my ass?"

Will's cheeks flushed with anger. "Your brother."

My heart stopped and every muscle in my body clenched up as I took a step back. "What?"

"I've paid a lot of money to get him in a position where he could've 'escaped.' Besides, I doubt

they'll really be searching for him." Will smiled. "He's proven to be quite useless. But you—you, on the other hand, are stronger. You'll succeed where he's failed time and time again."

"Failed...at what?" Kat croaked.

My head swung toward her, my eyes narrowing. Her voice...it sounded raw and painful. For that alone I wanted to wipe the floor with Will's entrails.

"They've been forcing him to mutate humans," he explained. "It hasn't been working. He's not as strong as you, Daemon. You are different."

I drew in a breath. Will was offering something I couldn't turn down—my brother, my blood. There was still a huge part of me that just wanted to rip into him. "I'd prefer to hunt you down and break every bone in your body for what you've done. Rip your flesh off your body slowly and then feed it to you for hurting Kat. But my brother means more than vengeance."

Will paled. "I was hoping that would be your decision."

I'm sure he was. Murder was in my eyes. "You know, you have to be hurt for this to work."

Will nodded, aiming the gun at his leg. "I know."

Hell, I was disappointed. Shooting him would make me feel a smidgen better. "I was so hoping I was going to get to inflict the damage."

"Yeah, I don't think so."

I could only watch as Will closed his eyes and shot himself in the leg. It was the craziest thing I'd seen. He didn't even groan as the bullet tore through his flesh. I stepped forward, wrapping my hands around Will's arm, tipping my chin down to hide my satisfied smile. Will thought he had all of this figured out.

He was so wrong I would love to be there to witness it.

I healed Will, and in that second for the wound to seal up, I sent him an extra special message that only he could hear. You think this will be the last of me? You're wrong. I will haunt every step you take for hurting her. That's a check my foot is going to cash in your ass.

Will jerked back. His eyes held mine for a moment, and I recognized the fear in his gaze. I smiled.

Unnerved, he lurched to the cage and unlatched the cage door. He slipped the manacles off her wrists. "I suggest you don't tell your mother about this. After all, it would kill her." He smiled, and I wanted to punch it off his face. "Behave, Katy."

Then Will was out of the cage and gone.

"Daemon..."

"I'm here." Carefully entering the cage, I helped her out. "I've got you, Kitten. It's over."

I knew we were on a timeline, but I cradled her against my chest, smoothing my hands along her damp cheeks. Healing warmth radiated from my touch, seeping into her. I moved back from the cage, holding her so close I was sure I was never going to let her go again.

She gently brushed my hands away once she was standing on her own. Her voice was throaty and low when she spoke. "I'm all right."

An almost inhuman sound came from me and I clutched her cheeks, bringing her mouth to mine. The kiss tasted of desperation and relief. When I pulled away, she was gasping for air.

"What did you do?" she asked.

I pressed my forehead against hers. Our lips brushed as I spoke. "For the mutation to work, both parties have to be willing, Kitten. Remember what Matthew said? I wasn't entirely into it, if you get my drift. And not to mention, he needed to be dying or close to it. The mutation probably won't work. At least not to the extent he thinks."

She laughed, the sound rasping. "Evil genius."

"You betcha," I replied, my gaze roaming over her as I threaded my fingers through hers. "You sure you're okay? Your voice..."

"Yeah," she whispered. "I'll be okay."

I kissed her again, pouring everything I felt for her into it. I wanted to erase the harsh memory of her time here. I wanted to shield her from ever experiencing something like this again. My hands dropped to her waist and I held her against me, letting her feel just how badly I wanted her, so there was no doubt that she was it for me. She was mine.

I was hers. A truth that would never change.

I sighed against her mouth. "Now let's go get my brother."

Kat's sweater and shoes had disappeared, so I tugged the heavy wool sweater I was wearing off and over her head. The cold wouldn't affect me as much. I picked her up and raced out of the warehouse since her feet were completely unprotected. Hybrid—mutated, whatever—she was still more human than me.

I used the Source to open the passenger door and then gently placed her in the seat. I grabbed the seat belt.

"I can do it," she mumbled.

I was unable to move as I watched her hands tremble as she fumbled with the seat belt. Jesus, what had happened in there to her? I wanted to ask her, but there wasn't time. I backed off, moving wicked fast around the front. In a second, I was behind the steering wheel. "Ready?"

She leaned back against the seat, her shoulders slumped and eyes barely open. Weariness invaded her expression. "You could leave me. You'd be faster...without me."

My brows shot up as I eased the SUV around the Dumpsters. "I'm not leaving you."

"I'll be fine. I can stay in the car and...you can just do your zippy speed stuff."

I shook my head. "Not going to happen. We have time."

"But—"

"Not going to happen, Kat." I gunned it out of the parking lot. "I'm not leaving you alone. Not for a freaking second, okay? We have time." I brushed the hair off my forehead with one hand, my jaw clenching tightly. "When I got your message about your mom and when you didn't respond back to me, I thought maybe you were already at the hospital in Winchester, so I called and when they told me your mom hadn't been admitted..." I shook my head as I flew down the road. "I thought the worst—I thought they'd gotten you. And I was ready to tear this whole damn town apart. And then I got the call from Will...so, yeah, I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"I'm okay," she whispered.

I glanced at her sideways. Kat didn't look okay. Not even a little. She didn't sound okay. We sped onto the highway heading east. "Are you really okay, though?" I asked, my hands tightening on the steering wheel.

She nodded instead of speaking.

"Onyx," I grunted out. "It's been years since I saw it."

"Did you know it would do that?" Her voice was raspy as if...as if she'd spent all day screaming, and that was mostly likely what had happened.

"Back when we were being assimilated, I'd seen it used on those who were causing problems, but I was young. I should've recognized it, though, when I first saw it. I just never saw it in that capacity—on bars and chains. And I didn't know it would affect you the same way."

"It..." She trailed off, and I focused on the road.

I had to focus, because I really wanted to lose my shit. I remembered how painful it looked for those it was used on during assimilation. Onyx was said to be one of the most painful things we could be exposed to, worse than even an Arum feeding. Those Luxen had screamed like their skin was being hacked away from their muscle and bone with a butter knife.

Knowing that Kat had suffered that for hours filled me with helpless rage. My ass had been sitting in class while she was being tortured. Freaking tortured.

"Kat?"

She sat up in the seat. "Blake and I aren't very different."

"What?" I looked at her sharply. "You're nothing like that son—"

"No. I am." She twisted toward me. "He did everything to protect Chris. He betrayed people. He lied. He killed. And I get that now. Doesn't make anything he did okay, but I get that now. I...I would do *anything* to protect you."

I stared at her for long as I could without driving off the road, and then I looked back at the road. I knew what she was saying. She would kill to protect me. She would do anything to keep me safe. The same as Blake, but no...it wasn't the same.

Reaching over, I threaded my fingers through hers and brought our joined hands to my thigh.

"You're still nothing like him, because in the end, you wouldn't hurt someone who was innocent. You'd make the right call."

She didn't respond to that. Several moments passed. "About Will? What...what do you think will happen with him?"

I growled. "God, I do want to hunt him down, but here's the deal. Worst-case scenario, he's pissed when the mutation fades, and he comes back after us. If so, I'll take care of him."

Her brows arched. "And you think there was no way the mutation stuck?"

"Not if Matthew is right. I mean, I wanted to do it to get you out of there, but it wasn't this true and deep want. He nicked an artery, but he wasn't dying." I sent her a look. "I know what you're thinking. That if it did, we're connected to him."

"Yeah," she replied.

"There's nothing we can do about that now but wait and see."

"Thank you." She cleared her throat, but it did nothing to make her voice sound stronger. "Thank you for getting me out of there."

I squeezed her hand. We were near Street of Hopes, the address provided. "Are you okay?"

She smiled weakly. "Yeah, I'm okay. Don't worry about me right now. Everything..."

"Everything is about to change." Shit. I couldn't even wrap my head around what was about to happen. My brother. God, he was alive and we were about to be reunited. I pulled along the back of the plaza, hitting the brakes. Pulling my hand free, I killed the engine and took a deep breath as I glanced at the clock in the dashboard. We had five minutes.

Kat unclicked the seat belt. "Let's do this."

I blinked. "You don't have to come in with me. I know...you're tired."

A steely look of determination filled her heather-gray eyes as she opened the door and stepped out of the SUV, standing in the damn cold parking lot with her bare feet. I was beside her in a second, taking her hand. She didn't need to do this. She could stay in the SUV where it was warm and she could rest, but she was doing this for me.

"Thank you," I said.

Kat smiled, and then we started into the building, and I couldn't help but notice the onyx embedded

in the bricks. The door was unlocked, and once inside, the alarm system shone green.

Hell, how many people did Will Michaels have to pay off to make this happen? How did he get that kind of money?

The lobby looked like any office building lobby. Half-circle desk, fake plants, and cheap tile floors. There was a door leading to a stairwell that had been conveniently left open. Kat squeezed my hand, and I felt sort of nauseous as I stared at the door.

Squaring my shoulders, we went for it, climbing the steps as fast as we could. At the top landing, there was a closed door. Above it, there was more onyx. I let go of her hand and wrapped my fingers around the handle, a slight tremor running up my arm.

I pushed open the door.

The room was dark, lit only by the moonlight streaming in through one window. There were a couple of folding chairs propped against the wall, a TV in the corner, and a large kennel-like cage in the middle of the room, outfitted with the same kind of manacles that had hung from Kat's.

I stepped into the room slowly, my hands falling to my sides. Heat rolled off my body as I stared at the cage.

The empty cage.

Opening my mouth, I shook my head wordlessly as all the hope and excitement swan-dived out of an airplane.

"Daemon," Kat croaked.

I stalked toward the cage, stood there a moment, and then knelt, pressing my forehead against my hand. A shudder racked my body. Had Dawson ever been here? Was it all a fucking lie? I didn't know. All that mattered was my brother was still...missing.

Kat's hand landed on my back, and my muscles tensed. "He...he lied to me," I said, voice ragged. "He lied to us."

Pain ripped into me, tearing up old wounds that had never healed. This was never going to be over. That's how it felt. I was going to go on for the rest of my life chasing a ghost.

Kneeling beside me, Kat pressed against my back. Her arms wrapped around my waist. I placed my hands on her arms and closed my eyes, letting her presence warm me. If she hadn't been here...

I rose swiftly, catching Kat off guard. She started to fall backward, but I spun around, catching her before she hit the floor. My name was a rough rasp when she spoke. "Sorry," I said. "We...we need to get out of here."

She nodded, stepping back. "I...I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault. You had nothing to do with this. He tricked us. He lied."

Taking her hand, I led her back to the car. On the way back to the house, I could feel Kat staring at me. I wanted to say something to reassure her. God knows she could use it, too, at this moment, but my jaw was locked shut. All I could focus on was getting us both back to the houses.

Then Kat reached between us, placing her hand on my arm. I glanced at her briefly but said nothing. I don't think she would ever know how much that meant to me. Her hand stayed there even though she was close to dozing off.

I pulled into my driveway, letting the SUV idle for a moment as I saw Matthew's car behind Dee's. Kat blinked several times. "Did you call them, tell them what happened to...me?"

"They wanted to help find you, but I had them stay here in case..." No point in finishing that part of the sentence, but the next needed to be said as I turned off the engine. "If the mutation doesn't hold, I will find Will and I'm going to kill him."

Kat didn't look all that surprised by the statement as I leaned over the center console and kissed her.

Her heart immediately sped up, and I smiled against her mouth, loving how she responded to the softest of touches.

Pulling away, I glanced over at my house. Seeing Dee right now was going to be hard. A part of me had hoped bringing Dawson home would elevate some of her pain. I shuddered. "I can't…I can't face Dee right now."

"But won't she worry?"

"I'll text her as soon as you're settled."

"Okay. You can stay with me."

A wry grin tugged at my lips. "I'll get out before your mom comes home. Swear."

Kat smiled at that. I got out of the SUV and jogged around to her side. Opening her door, I reached in for her. "What are you doing?" she asked.

I arched a brow. "You haven't had shoes on this entire time, so no more walking."

She opened her mouth as if she wanted to argue, but snapped it closed. I grinned as she scooted to the edge of the seat.

The front door to my house swung open, slamming against the clapboard like a gunshot. I spun around, my hands forming into fists as I expected the DOD to come rushing out.

But it was Dee.

Strands of dark curly hair streamed behind her. Tears glistened from her eyes and coursed down her cheeks. My heart started to sink even further, but she...she was laughing and she was smiling.

What the hell? Was Dee medicated? Not that there was anything wrong with that, but I had a feeling pills wouldn't work on us. Maybe pot?

Kat slipped out of the car behind me, and I started to turn around to stop her. She was not going to walk barefoot on snow, but the door opened again behind Dee, and...

Holy shit.

I stumbled as the tall and thin form appeared behind Dee. The form drifted forward, standing shoulder to shoulder with my sister—*our* sister. It was him on the porch, a thinner, more disheveled replica of me. Dark hair, longer than the last time I saw him, curled against the sharp, high cheekbones. His eyes were green, but duller…haunted. But it was him. It was my brother.

"Dawson," I croaked out.

The house was quiet except for the low hum of conversation coming from the TV in the living room. Wind howled outside, battering the sides of the house as snow fell in thick sheets.

From the front window, I watched the wind whip the snow across the driveways. I wasn't sure how long I'd been standing here. Definitely more than a few minutes. Possibly an hour. Tension crept into my neck.

I wasn't alone.

Looking over my shoulder, I watched my brother enter the living room. His movements were stiff, as if he weren't used to walking much. He probably wasn't. I'd seen those cages, and I knew there was a good chance, a high probability, that he'd been kept in one of those. Knowing that, watching him ate away at me. He was still so gaunt, and in the past week the shadows under his eyes had darkened.

Dawson wasn't sleeping more than a few hours here and there.

He also wasn't talking. Not really. Not to me at least. He spoke more to Dee, but nothing like it was before.

My brother was a ghost of his former self.

So much anger churned in my gut. What they'd done to him had changed him, and the anger hadn't faded. Not even when I went back to the warehouse Will had taken Kat to, where Dawson was probably held at some point, and I stripped the damn place bare of onyx. Doing so had filled me with satisfaction, but it hadn't dampened the anger.

Pushing away from the window, I followed him into the kitchen. He knew I was there, but he didn't acknowledge my existence. My hands curled helplessly at my sides.

Dawson stood in the middle of the kitchen, his head cocked to the side as he stared at the fridge.

"Hey, man, you hungry?" I asked.

He didn't respond.

The helplessness doubled until it was a pound of lead in my stomach. "We have Lucky Charms," I offered, knowing he'd liked to eat the marshmallows out of the damn cereal. "I can grab you a bowl."

Pivoting around, Dawson walked out of the kitchen without saying a word.

"Or not," I muttered. Taking a deep breath, I followed him once more. This time he was at the window I'd been at.

Dee was sitting on the stairs, the set of her face weary. It was almost two in the morning. Our eyes met, and I shook my head tiredly at the question in her gaze.

Was he talking?

Dawson's shoulders rose with a heavy breath. The hum from the TV continued as the three of us stood in sad silence until he turned and headed up the stairs, passing Dee without a word. I heard his bedroom door close.

Maybe he would sleep now

Dee lowered her head, pressing her face into her hands. I walked over to her and sat on the step below her. "This is progress," I said, almost wanting to laugh. "At least he was out of his bedroom and not in the woods."

"What was he doing?" Her voice was muffled by her hands.

I glanced up at the stairs. "I don't know. He went into the kitchen and I thought he was going to eat something, but he didn't."

"He ate some turkey yesterday, nothing more than a handful." She lifted her head, letting her hands fall limp between her knees. "With him barely sleeping, I have no idea how he's up and walking around."

"He's strong." The words sounded hollow. "He'll...he'll get better."

Dee turned exhausted green eyes to mine. "I know."

My smile was faint.

Hers was nonexistent as she whispered, "What did they do to him in there, Daemon? What did they do?"

There was no answer, none that I felt comfortable giving Dee, even though she knew everything now. Matthew had filled her in on what was going on with Blake—what he was, and what I had done to change Kat. Then I'd told her the rest, all that I knew about the DOD, and what had really happened on Halloween night. I told her about what Will Michaels had done to Kat and what he'd wanted from me. Dee had been shocked. Obviously. Because that was some legit insanity right there.

With everything in the open, Dee had been angry, but the relief of having Dawson back, having him alive, had left little room for the anger. For now.

Dee was hurt by the fact that I'd kept her in the dark, and she was devastated by the lies that Kat had told. I knew that it would take some time for her to fully get over it, but my sister was like...freaking sunshine at her core. She wouldn't hold a grudge. Not even if it was a reasonable one.

As I sat beside Dee, both of us quiet in the stairwell, I thought about Adam. Hell. That hit me in the gut. And then I thought about Kat and the wrecked sound of her voice, the marks around her wrists and ankles that hadn't completely faded yet. That slammed into my chest.

Following Dawson around had left little time for Kat. I knew she was a hundred percent understanding of that, but it still sucked not to see her. Being around her...well, it was peace in the midst of a violent storm.

A storm that had us all in a holding pattern, waiting for the DOD to spring on us.

Dee and I returned to bed, and I fell asleep around four and woke up no more than two hours later, wide awake and my heart pumping faster than normal. I stared at the ceiling for a moment, confused, and then I launched out the bed.

Kat.

OPAL

Book 3 of the Lux series, as told from Daemon's point of view.

Shoeless and shirtless, I raced downstairs and out of the house, into the heavily falling white stuff. Snowed in at Winchester, Kat's mom wasn't home, but as I slipped inside, I immediately sensed another presence in the house.

Dawson.

What in the holy hell? He was here? I wasn't exactly surprised as I climbed the steps. I mean, yeah, him here with Kat at six in the morning was freaking weird, but Dawson...he was freaking weird right now.

I walked to Kat's bedroom. The door was open. Dawson was standing by the window overlooking the front yard, and Kat was in bed looking...hell, looking like I needed to be in there with her.

God, I missed her.

Her gaze roamed over my face and then dipped south before returning north. Her cheeks were slightly flushed.

"Are we having a slumber party?" I asked. "And I'm not invited?"

Dawson shuffled past me and out of the room. A few seconds later, the front door closed. I sighed. "Okay. That's been my life for the last couple of days."

Sympathy poured into Kat's expression. "I'm sorry."

Hearing the raspy quality in those two words made me want to punch something as I walked over to the bed. "Do I even want to know why my brother was in your bedroom?"

"He couldn't sleep." Kat paused as I bent down and tugged the covers. Kat grabbed the sheet, but when I tugged again, she let go. "He said it was bothering you guys," she added.

I slipped under the covers, easing onto my side so I was facing her. "He's not bothering us."

A look of doubt crossed her beautiful face, and then she shifted onto her side. "I know." Her soft gaze was on the move again, and I wished she'd get those hands involved. "He said I remind him of Beth."

What in the hell yet again? I frowned.

"Not in the way you're thinking." Kat rolled her eyes.

"Honestly, as much as I love my brother, I'm not sure how I feel about him hanging out in your bedroom." I reached over and brushed a few strands of her hair back behind her ear. She shivered at the slight touch, and I smiled. "I feel like I need to mark my territory."

"Shut up."

"Oh, I love it when you get all bossy pants. It's sexy."

"You're incorrigible," she said, grinning.

I inched closer, pressing my thigh against hers. "I'm glad your mom is snowed in elsewhere."

She arched a brow. "Why?"

I raised a shoulder. "I doubt she'd be cool with this right now."

"Oh, she wouldn't."

Shifting until there was barely an inch separating us, I let the peachy-vanilla scent that was all her surround me. "Has your mom said anything about Will?"

Unease crept across her expression, tipping the corners of her lips down. "Just what she said last week, that he was going out of town for a couple weeks on some kind of conference and visiting family, which we both know is a lie."

Freaking manipulative asshole. "He obviously planned ahead so no one would question his absence."

Her lashes lowered. "Do you think he'll come back?"

I ran my knuckles down her silky soft cheek. "He'd be crazy." But Will Michaels was already proven to be crazy.

Kat opened her eyes. "About Dawson..."

Pressure clamped and settled on my chest as I drew the back of my hand down her throat. "I don't know what to do."

Her breath caught.

My hand drifted over her shoulder, then down her arm, under the covers. "He won't talk to me, and he barely talks to Dee. Most of the time, he's locked up in his bedroom or out wandering the woods. I follow him, and he knows, but he..."

"He needs time, right?" She kissed the tip of my nose. "He's been through a lot, Daemon."

I smoothed my hand to her hip. "I know. Anyway..." Lying in bed with Kat, I didn't want to focus on anything but her. Not now. We had a few precious moments when it was just her and me, and nothing else. I shifted toward Kat, rolling her onto her back. My hands were braced on either side of her head, holding my weight off her as I hovered above. "I've been remiss in my duties."

Kat's stormy gray eyes softened.

"I haven't spent a lot of time with you." I kissed her right temple and then her left. "But that doesn't mean I haven't been thinking about you."

Her hands settled on my upper arms. "I know you've been occupied."

I traced a path with my lips over the arch of her brow. "Do you?"

She nodded.

Moving my weight to my right arm, I lifted my other hand and cupped her chin, tilting her head back. Our eyes met. "How are you dealing?"

"I'm dealing," she said. "You don't need to worry about me."

I swept my thumb under her full bottom lip. "Your voice..."

She cleared her throat with a wince. "It's getting much better."

It really wasn't getting better. I moved my thumb to her jaw and chased the stubborn line. "Not enough, but it's growing on me."

Kat smiled, catching my heart. "It is?"

I nodded and then kissed her sweetly, a soft taste of what I wanted. "It's kind of sexy." Then again, I found everything about her sexy. I kissed her again, this time deeper. The tip of my tongue teased the seam of her lush mouth. "The whole raspy thing, but I wish—"

"Don't." She clasped my cheeks. "I'm okay. And we have enough things to worry about than my vocal cords. In the big scheme of things, that's nowhere near the top of the list."

I arched a brow.

Kat giggled and then sobered. "I have missed you."

"I know. You can't live without me."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Just admit it."

"There you go. That ego of yours getting in the way," she teased.

I kissed just below her jaw. "Of what?"

"The perfect package."

I snorted. "Let me tell you, I have the perfect—"

"Don't be gross." She shivered, though, and I chuckled, having a feeling she really wanted to know about my "perfect package," and I had no problem going there with her.

I slid my hand off her hip to her thigh. Hooking her leg around my hip, I loved the soft catch in her breath. "You have such a dirty mind," I teased her. "I was going to say I'm perfect in all the ways that count."

Laughing, she looped her arms around my neck. "Sure you were. Completely innocent, you are."

"Oh, I've never claimed to be *that* nice." Lowering my hips to hers, I swallowed a rough groan as she inhaled sharply. "I'm more—"

"Naughty?" Kat pressed her face into my neck, her chest rising against mine. "Yeah, I know, but you're nice under the naughty. That's why I love you."

I love you.

No way would I ever grow tired of hearing those three words. They made me shudder. Made me want to gather her up and keep her safe. Made me want to be a better...being for her. Rolling onto my side, I folded my arm around her waist and held her tight to me.

She wiggled, lifting her head. Her concerned gaze met mine. "Daemon?"

"It's okay." My voice was thick with unspoken emotion. I kissed her forehead. What I should be doing was figuring out where Dawson had roamed off to. If he'd gone out into the woods or back to the house, but that's not want I wanted to do. I wanted this with Kat. "I'm okay. It's...early still. No school or mom coming home, yelling your full name. Just for a little while we can pretend that crazy doesn't wait for us. We can sleep in, like normal teenagers."

"I like the sound of that."

"Me, too."

"Me three," she murmured, snuggling against me until the front of her body was plastered to mine, and I really liked that. I could feel our hearts beating in perfect tandem.

Sleeping like this would be heaven. I drew my hand down her spine and her back bowed slightly, pushing her body into mine, and I really, really liked that. Maybe sleeping was the wrong idea. Maybe we could—

The window across from her bed blew open as a large body, mixed with snow, crashed onto the floor, sending piles of snow and shards of glass into the air.

Kat's startled scream echoed in my ears as I shot off the bed, switching into my Luxen form. My light chased away the lingering darkness in the room as I stepped around her bed.

Holy crap.

Kat scrambled to the edge of the bed and peered down, "Holy crap."

A body—a man dressed all in white—was on the floor, obviously dead. Like so dead.

The dead man had to be with the DOD. Otherwise I wouldn't have any clue as to why someone would be dressed so they'd blend in with the snow.

Hell.

Blood pooled under the man's head, an injury that happened either before he'd come through the window or during it. The charred spot in the center of the man's still chest suggested that he didn't simply fall out of the sky and then through the window.

Freaking hell.

Kat's heart pounded like a steel drum. "Daemon...?"

She was seeing this, and she should never see this. Spinning around, I slipped back into my human form. I folded my arm around her waist, pulling her away from the edge of the bed.

"He's an officer," she stuttered, smacking at my arms to get free. "He's with the—"

Her words were cut off as Dawson appeared in the bedroom doorway. His eyes glowed white, sharp and brilliant. "He was sneaking around outside," he said. "By the tree line."

My arm loosened around Kat's waist as I stared at my brother. I was shocked on two fronts. He'd done this? And this was the most I'd heard him say since he was returned to us. "You...you did this?" I asked.

Dawson glanced at the body. "He was watching the house—taking pictures." Lifting his hand, he held up what looked like a melted camera. "I stopped him."

Holy hell balls, what did I say to that?

Letting Kat go, I turned back to the body. I knelt and pulled down the insulated white down jacket. The stench of burned flesh wafted into the air, forcing Kat to scramble off the bed. I looked over my shoulder, seeing her press her balled fist against her mouth.

I turned back to the man. A hole had been burned through his chest. Normally the Source would incinerate a human, not do this. "Your aim is off, brother." I let go of the jacket. Tension poured into my muscles. "The window?"

"I've been out of practice," Dawson replied.

Out of practice? That was like saying sometimes thunder was loud. No shit.

"My mom's gonna kill me," Kat mumbled. "She's really going to kill me."

Pushing to my feet, I turned to my brother. For the first time, I didn't really recognize him. Unease festered in my gut like gangrene. Dawson hadn't just stopped the man. He'd killed him, and there wasn't a flicker of remorse on his impassive expression. He actually...he reminded me of myself, and that wasn't Dawson.

Dawson didn't kill.

Deep in the woods, I stood next to Matthew as we both watched the intense white light fade. The snow was melted, revealing the scorched ground where we'd dropped the body of the DOD officer. Nothing but wet clumps of ash remained.

I exhaled slowly, lifting my gaze to the snow-tipped branches. "Dawson isn't...he isn't the same, Matt."

The older Luxen was quiet for a moment. "Did you really expect him to be? The DOD had him for far too long for there not to be long-lasting effects." He lifted his hand, shoving his fingers through his light brown hair. "But this? Dawson would never have…"

"Killed." I stepped back from the spot, watching the wind toss the ashes into the blowing snow. "The DOD was watching us—still could be watching us, and now he's killed one of them."

"You've killed three of them," Matthew pointed out.

"True." And it sucked to have ended their lives. It still got to me, but if I had to do it all over again, I would. I looked over at Matthew. "There is no way they do not know that Dawson is free and with us. Even if they have no use of him anymore, how could they be okay with that? There is no way they don't realize that we know they've been capturing Luxen who've mutated humans. Why are they not banging down our doors and coming for us? It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't." He turned sideways, facing me. "We have to be careful from this point on. More than ever before."

"They don't have the upper hand anymore," I said, squinting as the wind picked up again, pelting snow. "We know what they're up to. We have that."

"We do."

We headed back to Kat's house. Everyone was there—Dee along with Andrew and Ash. Their being inside her house had to be hard. When I walked in, both of them were staring at the spot where Adam had fallen.

Dawson was by the window, where the Christmas tree used to be, staring out of it. He shoved his hands into his pockets and pressed his forehead against the glass. Lost. He looked lost, and hell, it killed me that there was nothing I could do to change that. Dee was perched on the arm of the couch, her watchful gaze never leaving Dawson.

We took care of the broken window upstairs. Matthew had brought the necessary items with him—a tarp, a hammer, and nails. It wasn't the best replacement, but it was the only option at the moment.

Back downstairs, I went to where Kat sat. She scooted closer to me, nestling into my side as I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. She shivered even though she hadn't been out in the cold. Reaching over with my other hand, I tugged on the strings of her hoodie. "It's been taken care of."

"Thank you," she whispered, resting her head against my shoulder.

My gaze slid to Dawson. "Did anyone find a vehicle?"

"There was an Expedition near the access road," Andrew said. "I torched it."

Matthew sat on the edge of the recliner, looking like he needed something hard to drink. "That's good, but it's not good."

"No shit," Ash snapped. I looked at her, really looked at her. Her hair was greasy and hung limp around her pale face. She was in sweats, and I had never seen Ash look anything short of perfect. Or in anything other than short skirts or skintight jeans. "That's *another* dead DOD officer. How many does that make it? Two?"

Apparently she hadn't heard about the other two.

Ash tucked her hair back behind her ear. "They're going to wonder where they are, you know? People don't disappear."

"People disappear all the time," Dawson said quietly, without turning around, his words sucking the oxygen from the air, because he was right.

Ash's bright sapphire eyes slid to him. Her mouth opened, but she clamped her lips shut and then shook her head slowly.

"What about the camera?" Matthew asked.

Kat leaned forward, picking up the melted camera. "If there were pictures, they're gone now."

Dawson turned around. "He was watching this house."

"We know," I said, shifting forward so I was in line with Kat.

He tilted his head to the side. "Does it matter what was on the camera? They were watching you —her. All of us."

Kat shuddered.

"But next time, we need to kind of...oh, I don't know, talk first and then throw people through windows later." I crossed my arms. "Can we try that?"

"And we can just let killers go?" Dee said, voice shaking as her eyes flashed with fury. "Because that's apparently what should happen. I mean, that officer could've killed one of us, and you would have just let him go."

"Dee," I said, standing and stepping toward her. "I know—"

"Don't 'I know, Dee' me." Her lower lip trembled. "You let Blake go." Her gaze shot to Kat. "Both of you let Blake go."

I shook my head as I unfolded my arms. "Dee, there was enough killing that night. Enough death."

Dee flinched. Without speaking, she wrapped her arms around her waist. It was Ash who spoke, and what she said surprised the hell out of me. "Adam wouldn't have wanted that. More deaths. He was such a pacifist."

"Too bad we can't ask him how he really feels about it, isn't it?" Dee's spine stiffened. "He's dead."

"Not only did you guys let Blake go, you lied to us. From her?" Andrew gestured at Kat. "I don't expect loyalty. But you? Daemon, you kept everything from us, and Adam died."

Kat stood. "Adam's death isn't Daemon's fault. Don't put that on him."

I stilled. "Kat—"

"Then whose is it?" Dee demanded. "Yours?"

She sucked in a sharp breath, but met my sister's gaze. "Yeah, it is."

Shit

Matthew jumped in. "All right, guys, that's enough. Fighting and casting blame isn't helping anyone."

"It makes us feel better," Ash muttered, closing her eyes.

Kat lowered her chin as she sat back down, this time on the edge of the coffee table. She blinked rapidly as she folded her hands over her knees, squeezing so tightly that her knuckles bleached white.

"Right now, we need to get along," Matthew went on. "All of us."

No one spoke, and I thought the likelihood of everyone getting along was somewhere between not going to happen and hell no.

Then Dawson spoke. "I'm going after Beth."

All of us turned to him, everyone struck silent, and then voices rose. Only Kat remained quiet as she stared at him. I spoke up, moving toward him. "Absolutely not, Dawson—no way."

"It's too dangerous." Dee was standing, too, her hands clasped together as if she were pleading with him. "You'll get captured, and I won't survive that. Not again."

Dawson's lips tipped up a little at the corners. "I have to get her back. Sorry."

"He's insane," Ash whispered, her eyes wide with disbelief. "Freaking insane."

My brother shrugged as Matthew leaned forward. "Dawson, I know, we all know, that Beth means a lot to you, but there's no way you can get her. Not until we know what we're dealing with."

Raw anger flashed in Dawson's eyes, turning them forest green, and it was the first show of emotion I'd seen from him, and it was hot, powerful anger. "I know what I'm dealing with. And I know what they are doing to her."

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. Prowling forward, I stopped in front of my brother, prepared to keep him standing there forever if need be. "I cannot allow you to do that. I know you don't want to hear that, but no way."

Dawson didn't back down. "You don't have a say over it. You never did."

"I'm not trying to control you, Dawson. It's never been about that, but you just got back from hell. We just got *you* back."

"I'm still in hell," he replied, his eyes meeting mine. There. I almost saw a part of my brother in his stare, the one who left to go to the movies and never returned. "And if you get in my way, I will drag you down with me."

And that small fragment of Dawson was gone.

"Dawson..."

A wind blew through the living room, fluffing the curtains and flipping the pages of all of the books and magazines in the room. Kat was suddenly standing next to me, her small hand on my arm.

"All right," she said. "The alien testosterone right now is a little too much, and I really don't want to have an alien brawl in my house on top of the broken window and the dead body that came through it. But if you two don't knock it off, I'll kick both of your asses."

I looked at her, my brows raised, and I wasn't the only one staring at her.

"What?" Her cheeks flushed pink.

A wry smiled tugged at the corners of my lips. "Simmer down, Kitten, before I have to get you a ball of yarn to play with."

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't start with me, jerk-face."

I smirked and then focused on my brother. My chest lurched. There was another emotion playing across his mouth. Amusement. He watched Kat with a look of amusement, and damn... A knot formed in the back of my throat.

Dawson's gaze moved from her to me, and his expression went blank, eyes shuttered. He was as impenetrable as thick glacial ice. He turned and stalked out of the room. The door slammed shut behind him.

And I knew in that moment that Dawson hadn't just changed. He'd become...he'd become me, and like me, he would do anything to get Bethany back.

He would risk all of us.

Dawson was currently upstairs, sequestered in his bedroom by his own doing. At least he wasn't out roaming around in the cold, so that was good news, right?

Hell. You knew shit was bad when that was considered good news.

Appetite slaughtered, I pushed the rest of my turkey sandwich and the plate away from me.

Dee had barely touched her sandwich, and I knew without even going upstairs and checking that the food for Dawson was still where I'd left it, sitting on the desk in his bedroom.

Sitting back from the table, Dee lifted her gaze to mine. "Kat...she tried to talk to me when I left her house earlier."

My gut fisted.

"I'm not ready to go there with her," she continued as she picked at the edge of her sandwich. "I don't know if I'll ever be ready to do it."

"You will be."

Dee shook her head slowly. "I don't know, Daemon."

I sat forward, resting my elbows on the table. "You've forgiven me, haven't you?"

Anger tightened the lines around her mouth, and I thought that might not have been a wise statement. "I haven't really forgiven you. Let's be clear about that. You lied to me, and you let Blake go."

So not touching the whole Blake issue right now. "But you're talking to me."

"You're my brother. I have to talk to you." Her eyes rolled as she crossed her arms. "And you didn't kill Adam."

"Neither did Kat."

Her lips thinned. "If she had been—"

"Kat never wanted that to happen, and you know that, Dee. You think she doesn't feel guilty about what happened?" Bitter anger turned the turkey sour. "You think it's not eating away at her? She didn't tell you the truth because she didn't want you to be involved, and she tried to get you two to leave her house. Both of you made that choice to go in there, and you know if Adam was here today, he would do the same thing again." I paused as Dee looked away. "And so would you."

Pushing away from the chair, I stood and grabbed our plates. "Right now, we all need to be unified. We need to stick together, because we have no idea what is going to happen next, but we know something is."

I dumped the leftovers in the trash and then stalked out of the room, stopping just outside the doorway. "I'll be back later."

In other words, don't leave. Keep an eye on Dawson.

Heading outside in the frosty, snow-scented air, because I needed to patrol, my senses sharpened when I felt the warm tingle along the back of my neck. I looked next door and stopped moving. Maybe even stopped breathing a little.

There was a snowman in front of Kat's house, a lopsided snowman with no arms or face that hadn't been there when I'd left earlier. Beside it, Kat sat in the snow, her back to my house.

A small smile pulled at my lips as the anger eased away. Mindful of the huge icicles hanging off the roof of the porch, I walked down the steps and over to her, my footfalls cushioned by the thick layers of snow. Kat appeared unaware of me, which was pretty amazing considering the bond between us.

"Kitten, what are you doing?"

She jumped a little and then twisted around. "I was making a snowman."

I glanced at it. "I see. It's missing some stuff."

"Yeah," she said morosely.

The small smile faded. "That doesn't tell me why you're sitting in the snow. Your jeans have to be soaked." I thought about that for a moment, and then I grinned. "Wait. That means I'd probably get a

better look at your butt then."

Kat laughed.

Loving the sound of it, I dropped down into the snow beside her, crossing my legs. A few moments of silence passed between us and then I leaned over, knocking my shoulder against hers. "What are you really doing out here?"

"What's going on with Dawson? Has he run off yet?"

Her avoiding my questions was as subtle as a dump truck at six in the morning, but I let it go. For now. "Not yet, because I followed him around today like a babysitter. I'm thinking about putting a bell on him."

She laughed softly. "I doubt he'll appreciate that."

"I don't care." A little bit of anger seeped into my tone. "Running off after Beth isn't going to end well. We all know that."

"Daemon, do you..."

I waited. "What?"

"Why haven't they come after Dawson? They have to know he's here. It would be the first place he'd come back to if he had escaped. And they've obviously been watching." She gestured back at my house. "Why haven't they come for him? For us?"

I stared at the lopsided, incomplete snowman. "I don't know. Well, I have my suspicions."

"What are they?"

"You really want to hear them?

Kat nodded.

"I think they were aware of Will's plans, knew he was going to arrange for Dawson to be released." I paused, giving voice to my thoughts. "And they let it happen."

She drew in a shallow breath as she picked up a handful of snow. "That's what I think."

I looked over at her. "But the big question is why."

"It can't be good." She let the snow sift through her gloved fingers. "It's a trap. Has to be."

"We'll be ready," I said, because there couldn't be any other option. "Don't worry, Kat."

"I'm not worried," she replied, and we both knew that wasn't true. "We need to stay ahead of them somehow."

"True." I stretched out my legs, ignoring the cold, wet bite of snow. "You know how we stay under the humans' radar?"

"By pissing them off and alienating yourselves?" She gave me a cheeky grin.

"Ha. Ha. No. We pretend. We constantly pretend like we're not different, that nothing's happening." "I'm not following."

I lay down in the snow. "If we pretend like we've gotten away with Dawson being released, that we don't think anything's suspicious or that we know they're aware of our abilities, then it may buy us time to figure out what they're doing."

She watched me throw my arms out with a tiny grin. "You think they'll slip up then?"

"Don't know. I wouldn't put money on it, but it kind of gives us the edge. It's the best we have right now."

Our eyes met, and I grinned as I started sliding my arms through the snow, along with my legs. Kat's laugh was choked off.

"You should try it," I coaxed, closing my eyes. "It gives you perspective."

There was a pause, and then I felt her lie down beside me. "So I Googled Daedalus."

"Yeah?" I continued making the sexiest snow angel known to man. "What did you find out?"

"Well, there was no 'Welcome to Daedalus: Secret Government Organization' website to be found." "No shit?"

She smacked me with her hand. "Did you know Daedalus is tied to Greek mythology? He was the guy who created the labyrinth the Minotaur lived in and he was the father of Icarus. You know, the kid who flew too close to the sun on wings—wings fashioned by Daedalus."

"Huh."

"See, the legend says that when Icarus got too happy from flying, it was a form of passive punishment by the gods, and they caused him to lose his wings, which made him fall from the sky and drown, because, you know, that's how the Greek gods rolled. They didn't like that Daedalus had created something that gave mortals godlike abilities like flying."

"I can basically fly," I told her, and then grinned when she snorted. "What? I'm so fast that my feet don't even touch the ground."

"And your arrogance is so vast, it brings me to my next point," she retorted, and I smirked. "See, Daedalus created things that bettered man. He did so at all costs, just like the government—just like Daedalus we know today. They named themselves after a Greek myth about a man who could give others godlike abilities. Just like this Daedalus. You know they did that on purpose."

"It wouldn't surprise me—the ego behind that."

"You'd know," she said.

"Hardy har-har."

Kat grinned as she made another swipe of her arms and legs. "How is this giving me perspective by the way?"

I chuckled. "Wait for a couple more seconds." When I stopped, I reached over and grasped her hand, pulling her up when I stood. I brushed the snow off her back and my hands lingered a bit on her rear, because of reasons.

Once I was finished, we stared down at our snow angels. Hers was tiny compared to mine, and interestingly top heavy. Kat folded her arms around her waist. "Waiting for the epiphany to happen."

"There isn't one." I curled my arm around her shoulder and leaned down, pressing a kiss against her cool cheek. "But it was fun, wasn't it? Now..." I steered her back to the snowman. "Let's finish with your snowman. It can't be incomplete. Not with me here."

Matthew had gotten a glass repairman out to Kat's house the moment the plows made it to our road. The bedroom window was repaired mere minutes before her mom came home from Winchester on Friday.

Since she hadn't seen her daughter in days, I slipped out the back door and gave them time to themselves. Her mom's timing worked out, because keeping track of Dawson and making sure he didn't get himself captured was pretty damn time-consuming.

Dawson had left the house on foot Friday morning, and of course, I followed him. Using the woods to travel into town, he tried to lose me a couple of times. He roamed the town and the county for hours.

Hours.

He had a purpose, though. Patrolling. Except he wasn't searching for Arum. Oh no, he was looking for signs of Beth. Maybe even the DOD. He got close to the office he'd been kept at, but backed off. I had a feeling if I hadn't been right behind him, he would have raided the place.

The sun was setting behind Seneca when Dawson finally stopped moving for longer than a minute. We were deep in the forest a few miles from the colony. A fallen tree separated us, just a couple of feet, but it felt like there were miles between us, a damn continent.

Dawson's posture was stiff. "I'm not going to stop looking for her."

Shock clenched my chest. Yesterday had been the first time he'd really spoken to me. I wasn't expecting him to actually talk. Hell, it robbed me of my ability to put syllables together.

"If it were Katy, you'd do the same thing. I know you would." Dawson tipped his head back and his shaggy hair brushed the collar of his sweater. "And yet you expect me to just forget about Beth and do what? Move on?"

I shook my head. "I don't expect you to forget about her."

"Could've fooled me." Slowly, he faced me with a haunted look on his gaunt face. Several moments passed. "Katy was in a cage, wasn't she?"

My hands curled into fists. "Yes."

"For a few hours, basically. Yet, her voice...it's changed, and you know why."

I did. I would never forget why she sounded raspy or why her voice cracked. The damage had been done from her screaming out in pain. My jaw locked down so hard I swore my teeth would crack.

"I wasn't..." He swallowed. "Weeks. Maybe even months. That's how long I was kept in a cage with onyx wrapped around my wrists and ankles."

"Jesus," I gritted out, wanting to rip every DOD officer apart.

The pupils of Dawson's eyes glowed white. "They did the same to Beth. To others. They could be doing that to her now."

The thought of it made me sick. "I'm not asking you to forget about her or what they could be doing to her. I'm asking you to be smart about it."

"Would you be smart about it if it were Katy?" he volleyed back.

Anger flashed hot in me. "Stop bringing her into this, Dawson. I get what you're saying loud and clear without it."

He laughed drily.

I tamped down on the wrath building. "What...what did they do to you in there, Dawson?"

His eyes met mine. "What didn't they do?"

Dawson wasn't saying anything else after he dropped that horrifying bomb. What didn't they do? A steady stream of horrid images kept me company on the way back to the house.

Once inside, Dawson didn't speak to Dee or Andrew. He went straight to his bedroom. Dee was immediately at my side, worrying her lower lip. "What did he do today?"

"Nothing really," I answered, walking into the kitchen. "Just out looking for Bethany. He didn't try anything." "Yet" hung in the air between us. The slim black cell phone sat on the counter, next to the plate I'd used this morning. Picking it up, I tapped on the screen. There was a missed text from Kat. Slipping it into my pocket, I pivoted around. "Can you make sure he eats something tonight?"

Dee nodded. "I can try."

I passed a silent Andrew on the way out. The little Prius was in the driveway, behind Kat's Camry. Her mom was still home. That didn't deter me as I zipped up the porch steps and knocked.

A second later, the door flew open and Kat flung herself at me in a blur of arms and legs. Stumbling back a step as I caught her, I laughed deeply at her exuberant greeting. She clung to me, arms tight around my shoulders.

"Kitten," I murmured. "You know how much I like it when you say hi this way."

Her head was buried in the space between my neck and shoulder, and when she responded, I couldn't make out a damn thing she said.

I lifted her clear off her feet. "You've been worried, haven't you?"

"Mm-hmm." Kat jerked back and wriggled free. She smacked my chest hard.

"Ouch!" I grinned as I rubbed my chest. "What's that for?"

She folded her arms, keeping her voice low as she spoke. "Have you heard of a cell phone?"

I arched my brow. "Why, yes, it's this small thing that has all these cool apps on it—"

"Then why didn't you have it on you today?" she interrupted.

Lowering my head to hers, my lips brushed her cheek as I spoke. "Going in and out of my true form all day kind of kills the electronics."

A moment passed. "You should've checked in, though. I thought..."

"You thought what?"

Drawing back, she gave me a look. I knew why she was concerned, and I hated that she'd spent even a minute worrying about me. Clasping her cheeks, I kissed her softly. "Kitten, nothing's going to happen to me. I'm the last person you need to worry about."

Her eyes closed. "See, that's possibly the stupidest thing you've ever said."

"For real?" I kissed the corner of her lips. "I say a lot of stupid things."

"I know. So that's saying something." Her hands slid to my chest. "I'm not trying to act like one of

those obsessive girlfriends, but things...things are different with us."

She had a point. A very good one. "You're right."

Her eyes widened. "Come again?"

"You're right. I should've checked in at some point. I'm sorry."

Shock splashed over her pretty face. Jaw dropped over and everything. Damn, she was adorable.

"You're speechless." I chuckled. "I like that. And I also like you all feisty. Want to hit me again?"

She laughed. "You're a—"

The door opened behind her and her mom appeared, clearing her throat. "I don't know what it is with you two and porches, but come in, it's freezing out there."

Kat flushed fire-engine red, so I let her go and made my way into the house. "Did you get a new haircut, Ms. Swartz?"

Her mom lightly touched her hair. "I did. About a week ago."

"Looks great," I said, smiling as Kat frowned. "Shows off those wonderful earrings."

Kat's mom flushed, just like her daughter. "Thank you."

I continued to chat up her mom while Kat rolled her eyes about a million and three times before grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the steps. "Okay, well, this has been nice..."

Ms. Swartz folded her arms. "Katy, what did I tell you about the bedroom?"

Dipping my chin to hide my smile, I watched her face burn even brighter. "Mom..." She tugged on my arm again.

Her mom raised her brows.

Kat sighed. "Mom, it's not like we're going to have sex with you home."

"Well, honey, it's good to know that you only have sex when I'm not home."

I coughed as I fought a smile. "We can stay—" The look Kat sent me warned that I'd probably never have sex with her, ever, if I continued. I wisely kept quiet.

"Mo-om."

"Keep the door open," her mom warned.

Kat beamed brightly. "Thanks!" Then she all but dragged me up the stairs. Pushing me inside the bedroom, she shook her head at me. "You're terrible."

"And you're naughty." I backed up, grinning. "Thought she said leave the door open."

"It is." She gestured behind her. "It's cracked. That's open."

"Technicalities," I said, sitting down on the bed. I curled my fingers at her. "Come on...come closer."

She didn't budge. "I didn't get you up here to indulge in wild monkey lust."

"Crap." I dropped my hand to my lap.

Her eyes gleamed with amusement as she moved closer to the bed. "We need to talk. Will's been talking to my mom."

My eyes narrowed. "Details."

She sat beside me, tucking her legs against her chest. "He said he's at a conference and would be home in a week or so. He also told Mom that we were seeing each other. The fact that he even brought us up..." She trailed off, rubbing her temples. "He can't come back. If the mutation didn't hold, he knows you'd kill him. And if it did..."

"He has the upper hand," I admitted.

She threw herself onto her back. "God, this is a mess—a freaking mess of epic proportions. If he comes back, I can't let him near my mom. I have to tell her the truth."

Leaning against the headboard, my head raced to process this problem. "I don't want you to tell

her."

She frowned as she tilted her head to the side, meeting my stare. "I need to tell her. She's in danger."

"She's in danger if you tell her." I folded my arms. "I understand why you want to and your need, but if she knows the truth, she's in danger."

"But keeping her in the dark is worse, Daemon." Rising to her knees, she faced me. "Will is a psycho. What if he comes back and picks up where he left off? I can't let that happen."

I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling long and hard. "We need to find out if Will actually has intentions of coming back first."

Irritation darkened her eyes. "And how do you propose we do that?"

"That I haven't figured out, but I will."

She stared at me a moment and then nodded. How I was going to figure out if Will was coming back was a mystery, but right now, he didn't feel like the worst of our problems.

"What were you doing all day?" she asked. "Chasing Dawson?"

I nodded.

"What was he doing?"

"He was just roaming around. I know he was trying to get back to that office building, and if I hadn't followed him, he would've. The only reason I feel safe leaving him alone right now is because Dee has him cornered." I paused, looking away. My shoulders tensed as his words replayed over and over. "Dawson...he's going to get himself captured again."

Since Dee was keeping an eye on Dawson Saturday evening, I wanted to do something with Kat. Well, I wanted to do a lot of things with her.

A lot.

But I wanted to take her out, do dinner and then a movie. Something normal, and God knows, she needed something normal right now. All of us did. And what I'd told her while we made snow angels had been true. We had to forge forward like nothing had happened. Easier said than done, but if we had to act normal, then I was going to take advantage of it.

Going out on a real date, the dinner and movies variety, wasn't something I'd ever done before, not even with Ash. We'd always seemed to skip that step, but with Kat, I didn't want to bypass a single stage.

But then I saw her Sunday evening and not rushing through all those steps became real hard.

Kat was...damn, she was beautiful with her hair down, falling over her shoulders in soft, dark waves. The red turtleneck and dark jeans clung to all the areas I wanted to get to know personally. Like real intimately.

After chatting up her mom, I led Kat outside. Held her hand and everything, even stopped and opened the car door for her. I was the epitome of a gentleman...on the outside. In my head, the things I was thinking about were definitely not gentlemanly.

Warm air blasted out of the vents when I cranked up the heat in the SUV. I grinned at her. "Okay. There are some rules about our date."

Her brows rose. "There are?"

"Yep." I backed out, careful around the patches of black ice. "Rule number one is we don't talk about anything DOD-related."

"Okay."

I glanced at her sideways and saw that she was fighting a major smile. "Rule number two is that we don't talk about Dawson or Will. And number three, we focus on my awesomeness."

Kat lost the battle. Her smile was huge. "I think I can deal with these rules."

"You better, because there is punishment for breaking the rules."

"And what kind of punishment would that be?"

Pulling out onto the main road, I chuckled. "Probably the sort of punishment you'd enjoy."

I reached for the radio at the same time Kat did and our fingers brushed. Static raced over my hand, jumping to hers. Kat jerked back with a soft gasp. Her eyes were bright, and it was suddenly so damn hot in the SUV, and it had nothing to do with the heat coming out of the vents.

I'd picked out an Italian restaurant and had stopped by earlier. The manager had been rather ecstatic when it came to helping me out with dinner. She most definitely developed a crush.

Kat eyed the red-and-white checkered tablecloths as we were led to a small table in the back. She blinked once and then twice when she saw the bare table lit with small candles and two wineglasses filled with water.

Kat sat across from me. "Did you...?"

I propped my elbows on the table and leaned forward. Light from the candles flickered across her face. "Did I do what?"

"Arrange this?" She waved at the candles.

I shrugged. "Maybe..."

Smiling, she tucked her hair back. "Thank you. It's very..."

"Awesome?"

She laughed. "Romantic—it's very romantic. And awesome, too."

"As long as you think it is awesome, then it was worth it." I glanced up as the manager arrived at our table. "Hi there..."

Rhonda, who probably didn't normally take orders, smiled at me and then took our orders. Once she dashed off, Kat grinned at me and said, "I think we're going to get extra meatballs."

I laughed. "Hey, I'm good for some things."

"You're good for a lot of things."

Her blush that immediately followed her words stopped me from pointing out all the things I was good at. Instead, I asked her about the book I'd seen in her room, one with a shirtless dude who looked like he could chest-press a truck.

"It's a historical romance," she explained. "About pirates."

I arched a brow. "Pirates."

She grinned as a ginormous pile of breadsticks was placed in the center. "Pirates were all the rage back in the day." She plucked up a breadstick. "You'd look good on a book cover."

"I don't wear leather pants." I bit into the garlic-and-butter heaven.

"Still. You have the look."

I rolled my eyes. "You just like me for my body. Admit it."

"Well, yeah..."

"I feel like man-candy."

She busted out laughing, and that one laugh was worth a million bucks. Finishing off the breadstick, I wiped the specks of garlic off with the linen napkin. "What are you going to do about college?"

Kat blinked and then sat back, eyeing the candle. "I don't know. I mean, it's not really possible unless I go to one near a buttload of beta—"

"You just broke a rule," I reminded her.

She wrinkled her nose. "What about you? What are you doing for college?"

I shrugged. "Haven't decided yet."

"You're running out of time," she pointed out.

"Actually, we've both run out of time, unless we do a late acceptance."

"Okay. Rule-breaking aside, how is it possible? Do online classes?" she asked, and I shrugged again. "Unless you know of a college that has...a suitable environment?"

Our meals arrived, pressing pause on the conversation for a moment. Rhonda basically grated an entire block of cheese on my plate before turning to Kat's.

"So, do you?" she asked when Rhonda left.

Knife and fork in hand, I cut into the lasagna. "The Flatirons."

"The what-a-what?"

"The Flatirons is a mountain just outside of Boulder, Colorado." I continued knifing away until the lasagna was in bite-size pieces. "They are full of quartzite. Not as well-known as some places or as visible, but they are there, under feet of sediment."

"Okay." She twisted her spaghetti noodles around her fork. "What does that have to do with anything?"

I peered up at her. "University of Colorado is about two miles from the Flatirons."

"Oh." She chewed slowly. "Is...is that where you want to go to school?"

"Colorado isn't a bad place. I think you'd like it."

Kat swallowed and then smiled faintly as she placed her fork down beside her plate. The sudden look on her face was distant, as if she were a million miles away as she stared at her plate.

Picking up a breadstick, I tapped the tip of her nose with it. Sprinkles of garlic puffed into the air. "What were you just thinking about?"

She brushed off the rest of the crumbs and smiled. "I...I think Colorado sounds nice."

Yeah, I didn't believe her. She was thinking about something that had stolen the light from her eyes. The possibilities of what it could've been were limitless. Stabbing a piece of lasagna, I changed the subject.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay with the movie I picked? I don't want you to be scared," I teased.

She pinned me with an arched look. "It's going to take a lot more than a haunted box to scare me."

My lips twitched. Haunted box. Ha. "Then again, if you do get scared, then you'd have to get super close to me."

Kat rolled her eyes.

"I like the sound of that."

"I bet you do," she replied drily, but her eyes were a light gray again and she was eating once more. She cleared her throat, but her voice was still a bit raspy when she spoke again. "This movie sounds right up your alley. You're obsessed with ghost-related stuff."

My eyes met hers. "That's not what I'm obsessed with."

Her lips parted. "Then what is?"

I glanced down at her mouth. How inappropriate would it be if I just knocked the table out of my way and kissed her? Pretty inappropriate. "I think you know."

Pink splashed across her cheeks, and then she all but shoved the last of her noodles into her mouth. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

Sipping on my glass, I sat back. "I think they exist."

Her eyes widened. "Really? Huh. I thought you just watched those ghost shows for entertainment."

"Well, I do. I like the one where the guy yells, 'Dude! Bro!' every five seconds." I smiled when she laughed. "But in all seriousness, it can't be impossible. Too many people have witnessed things that can't be explained."

"Like too many people witnessing aliens and UFOs." She grinned.

"Exactly." I set the glass down. "Except the UFOs are total bunk. Government's responsible for all unidentified flying objects."

Her mouth dropped open.

Our check arrived shortly, and I took care of that. We walked side by side through the restaurant. Near the door there was a group from school. They stared at us like I was in my true form.

Flurries fell from the sky, leaving a fine dusting along the pavement as we walked to the passenger side of the SUV. I went to open the door for Kat, but she stopped and tipped her head back. Curious, I

watched her.

She closed her eyes and then the tip of her tongue sneaked out. My mouth dried and a pleasant, heady tension invaded me. She caught the snowflake on the tip of her tongue.

Hell.

Opening her eyes, she leveled her chin. Our gazes met. "What?" she whispered.

"I was thinking about a movie."

"Okay. And?"

"But you've broken the rules, Kitten. Several times. You're owed some punishment."

Her heart kicked up, and so did mine. "I am a rule breaker."

My lips tilted up on one corner. "You are."

Kat flushed, and then I moved as fast as a cobra striking. I was in front of her, my hands against her cheeks and tilting her head back, before she could take another breath. I brushed my lips over hers, swallowing a groan at the sweet contact. I swept my lips against hers again, and her mouth opened. The kiss deepened, and she tasted like paradise.

My hands coasted down to her hips, and I pulled her against me, hip to hip. Her soft gasp echoed through me. I backed her up, pressing her against the side of the SUV. The rest of the world fell apart around us, and maybe I shouldn't have been kissing her like this in public, not when anyone could see us, but I didn't care.

Kat did that to me.

And she was kissing me back just as feverishly. Her hands were on my chest, her palms burning through my sweater. I didn't want anything between us, but that wasn't going to happen right now. She slipped her hands up and around my neck as she moved her hips against mine.

Damn. I lifted my mouth from hers, forcing myself to breath. "Movie?" I kissed her again. "And then what, Kitten?"

She knew what came after a movie even if she didn't speak it, and I think she was a little beyond the whole talking part as my fingers drifted under the hem of her turtleneck. She jerked and moaned softly as my hands smoothed over the bare sides of her waist. Her side was so smooth, silky and soft. I could spend forever just touching her.

Kat dropped her hands to my hips, and surprised the hell out of me when she tugged me against her, lining us up in a way that made it hard to keep a semblance of control. Raw sensation pounded throughout me. I growled against her swollen lips. The tips of my fingers brushed against lace. We were so not making it to—

My cell phone went off in my back pocket. I wanted to ignore it, but considering everything that was going on, that wouldn't be wise. I pulled back, knowing my eyes were glowing. "One second."

I kissed her as I dragged my phone out my pocket and kept my other hand where it was, under her sweater, and so damn close. She shifted against me, pressing her face into my chest as I answered the phone. "This better be really important—"

"Dawson made a run for it," Dee shrieked into the phone. "He's gone."

My stomach clenched as Dee's words settled in and I could feel my pupils dilating. "Okay," I said into the phone. "Don't worry, Dee. I'll take care of it. I promise."

Kat's face had paled as I slipped my phone back into my pocket. "What?" she asked.

Every muscle had locked up in my body. "It's Dawson. He made a run for it." Dammit. "I'm sorry."

"No. I completely understand." She brushed the flakes of snow out of her hair. "What can I do?"

"I need to go." I grabbed the keys out of my pocket and placed them in her palm. I then handed over my cell. "And I mean I need to go really fast. Go home and stay there. Keep that in the car. I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Daemon, I can help you. I can go—"

"Please." I grasped her face once more and kissed her hard. "Go home."

Trusting that she'd listen to me, I let go and then I moved faster than anyone could track. I had a feeling I knew where Dawson was heading. Dammit. He waited until I was out with Kat to make a run for the office building where he'd last been kept.

I darted across the highway, narrowly missing getting taken out by a truck. I hit the heavily wooded area and slipped into my true form so I could move even faster.

We had maybe two hours together, Kat and I, before the real world intruded and I had to chase down my brother. Fury was like red-hot lava pumping through my veins. It wasn't so much that the date had been ruined that infuriated me. It was the fact that I had to leave Kat in a parking lot alone. It was because I had to chase down my brother and stop him from ending up in the DOD's clutches once more. It was because I knew this wasn't going to be the last time.

Several miles out from the office building, I caught sight of Dawson. He was in his human form when he skidded to a stop, facing me. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "You're supposed to be with Katy."

Half tempted to pick him up and throw him through a tree, I struggled to keep a tight leash on my fury as I shifted back. "Yeah. I was with Kat, up until the moment Dee called me and told me you made a run for it." Dawson's hands curled into fists. "You didn't need to leave her. You shouldn't have left her. Not with—"

"Don't," I warned, lifting my hand. "Don't you dare think I don't know how dangerous it is for her to be out there when I'm chasing your ass around."

"Then why are you here?" he fired back, his eyes turning luminous. Off in the distance, thunder cracked in response to the violent energy he was throwing off.

I stepped toward him. "You really going to ask that question? Seriously? Did they knock a few brain cells out when the DOD had you?"

"I'm going to knock a few out of your head."

Fighting my brother was the last thing I wanted. No. It was actually the first thing I wanted right now. I lifted my arms. "Try it."

Dawson didn't need any further coaxing. Shifting into his Luxen form, his light tinged in blue, he lunged at me. I changed as I caught him. He *was* out of practice, because he wasn't able to break my hold as I lifted him up and threw him back several feet. He landed in a nimble crouch and slammed his hand down in the snow.

A wall of snow flew into the air, coming at me with speed of a racing train. I spun out to the side, but wasn't fast enough. The heavy snow came down on me, burying me several feet.

Son of a bitch.

A burst of energy left me, throwing snow up in the air in a shower of light. I sprang out, furious as icicles fell from the elm trees. Jesus, those things could've impaled someone. Dawson was on the run again, racing over the fallen trees and mounds of snow.

I took off after him, easily catching up to him. He tried to turn to the left, but I caught him around the shoulders, taking him to the ground. Dawson bucked, nearly tossing me over his shoulders, but I wasn't letting go.

Just stop, I told him. Just freaking stop.

A shout of rage bounced around my skull. He rolled, and I almost lost my hold. I dug in, kicking up snow as I wrapped my arms around his neck. Standing, I forced him onto his feet. *Don't do this*, I told him. *Don't put us through losing you all over again*.

You need to let me go. He gripped my arms as I felt a warm tingle along the base of my neck, but before I could investigate that, he broke my hold, managing to shove me back a foot.

Oh, I was so done with this.

I shot forward, wrapping my arms around his waist, and then I launched both of us into the air. I brought him back down into the snow, slamming him through the layers. Icicles and clumps of snow rained down all around us. Whitish-blue light pulsed out from Dawson, slamming into the trees around us.

Jesus, Dawson grunted. That wasn't necessary.

I held him down, hands on his shoulders. It was necessary.

Dawson tried to roll me, but we both froze as a voice spoke loud and clear. "You have got to be kidding me."

Kat.

Well, that explained the warm and fuzzy feeling along the back of my neck.

We both shifted into our human forms as we looked over to where Kat stood.

"I thought I told you to go home and stay there," I said, voice thin with warning.

"And the last time I checked, you don't get to tell me to go home and stay." She took a step toward us. "Look, I was worried. I thought I'd come and help."

My lips pulled back in a sneer. "And how would've you helped?"

"I think I did. I got you two idiots to stop fighting."

I stared at her in a way that promised we'd be talking about this later.

Dawson pushed at me. "Let me up, brother."

I looked down at him. "I don't know. You're probably going to run and make me chase you again." "You can't stop me," he said, voice apathetic.

Muscles in my arms and back flexed as I held him down. "I can and I will. I'm not letting you do this to yourself. She—"

"She's what? Not worth it?"

"She wouldn't want you to do this," I seethed. "If the situation were flipped, you wouldn't want her doing this."

Dawson reared up and got to his feet. "If they had Katy—"

"Don't go there." My hands curled into fists.

He went there. "If they had her, you'd be doing the same thing. Don't lie."

I opened my mouth, but he was right. I wouldn't lie. I already knew this. I glanced to where Kat stood, her arms wrapped around her waist, shielding her from the cold wind whipping through the trees. If they had her, nothing, and I mean nothing, would stop me from going after her. I stepped back, thrusting both hands through my hair.

Kat inched closer. "We can't stop you. You're right."

Dawson jerked toward her. "Then let me go."

"But we can't do that, either." She glanced at me before she continued. "Dee and your brother have spent the last year believing you were dead. That killed them. You have no idea."

"You have no idea what I went through," he said, and then looked away from her. "Okay, maybe you do a little. What was done to you is being done a thousand times over to Beth. I can't just forget about her even though I love my brother and sister."

I inhaled sharply. It was the first time Dawson had even acknowledged that he gave two shits about us since we had him back.

"And they know that," Kat rushed on. "I know that. No one expects you to forget about Beth, but running off and getting yourself captured isn't helping anyone."

"What are the alternatives?" Dawson asked.

Kat drew in a deep breath as she glanced at me again. I stiffened, having a feeling I wasn't going to like what was about to come out of her mouth.

"Let us help you."

"What?" I demanded.

She ignored me, like always, it seemed. "You know bum-rushing the DOD isn't going to work. We need to find out where Beth is, if they are even keeping her here, and we need a plan to get to her. A really thought-out plan with low fail potential."

Both of us stared at her. I had no idea what Dawson was thinking, but I wanted to throttle Kat...in the gentlest way possible. How could she offer to help him when we had no idea where to even begin looking for Beth? Because I doubted she was being kept where Dawson had been. The DOD couldn't be that stupid. But most importantly, I didn't want her anywhere near the DOD or this issue with Dawson. No way.

Dawson turned away from Kat, his back straight as he stared up at the trees. "I can't stand the idea of them having her. It hurts to breathe just thinking about it."

"I know," she whispered.

My brother nodded. "Okay."

A muscle began to tick along my jaw, and it took a huge amount of self-control to keep my mouth shut.

Kat had no problem talking. "But you have to promise to give us time. You can't get impatient and run off. You have to swear."

A shudder rolled through Dawson as he faced her. His arms dropped to his sides. "I swear. Help me and I swear."

"It's a deal."

I closed my eyes for a brief second, partially relieved that Dawson was backing down and partially

infuriated by Kat involving herself in this. Her fingers were like ice cubes when I took the keys from her. The walk to the SUV was strained and silent. We piled into my car, Dawson in the back. The fight had gone out of him, and he was resting his head against the backseat of the SUV, eyes closed.

Kat watched me as I pulled off the shoulder of the road, then she peered over the back of her seat. "Hey, Dawson...?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to go back to school?"

My hands tightened on the steering wheel.

"I mean, I'm sure you can," she continued, nibbling on her finger. "You could tell people you ran away. It happens."

"People think he's dead," I pointed out, my voice harsh.

"I'm sure some runaways all across the nation are believed to be dead and aren't," she reasoned.

"What do I tell them about Beth?" he asked after a moment.

"That's a good question." Challenge dripped from my voice.

Kat paused from gnawing on her finger. "That you both ran away, and you decided to come home. She didn't."

Leaning forward, Dawson rested his chin in the palms of his hands. "Better than sitting around thinking about everything."

"He'd have to get registered for classes," I said, and as much as I hated to admit it, her idea was a good one. If Dawson was in school, I wouldn't have to worry about him running off while Dee and I were there. He would be contained at least eight hours a day. "I'll talk to Matthew. See what we can do to get it taken care of."

Proud of herself, Kat settled back in her seat with a smile.

Dee was waiting on the front porch when I pulled into the driveway, Andrew standing sentry beside her. Dawson was out first, heading toward Dee. They spoke and then embraced. That was another first since he'd arrived.

Turning off the car, I looked over at Kat. "I thought I told you to go home."

Her smile faded as she looked over at me. "I had to help."

Turning my gaze to the windshield, I dropped my hands to my lap. "What would you have done if it wasn't Dawson you came upon, but me fighting the DOD or whatever the hell the other group is?"

"Daedalus," she said. "And if it were them, I would've still helped."

"Yeah, and that's what I have a problem with." I got out of the SUV and walked around to the front. Leaning against the bumper, I waited for her.

A handful of seconds later, she joined me. "I know you're upset because you worry about me," she said. "But I'm not going to be the girl who sits at home and waits for the hero to wipe out the villains."

"This isn't a book," I snapped.

"Well, duh—"

"No. You don't get it." I turned to her, furious at her and frightened for her. "This isn't a paranormal fantasy or whatever the hell it is you read. There is no set plot or clear idea of where any of this is going. The enemies aren't obvious. There are no guaranteed happy endings and you—" I lowered my head so we were eye level. "You are not a superhero, no matter what the hell you can do."

Her gray eyes turned stormy. "I know this isn't a book, Daemon. I'm not stupid."

"You're not?" I laughed without humor. "Because being smart isn't rushing off after me."

"The same could be said about you!" Anger rose in her voice, matching mine. "You run off after

Dawson without knowing what you're getting into."

"No shit. But I can control the Source without trying. I know what I'm capable of. You don't."

"I know what I'm capable of," she threw back.

"Really? If I'd been surrounded by human officers, would you have been able to take them down. Live with yourself after that?"

Her lips parted as blood drained out of her cheeks. Her voice came out as a whisper. "I'm prepared to do that."

God, I didn't want to hear that. I took a step back, shaking my head. "Dammit, Kat, I don't want you to experience that." Raw emotion slammed into my chest. "Killing isn't hard. It's what comes afterward—the guilt. I don't want you to deal with that. Don't you understand that? I don't want you to have this kind of life."

"But I already have this kind of life. All the hoping, wishing, and good intentions in the world aren't going to change that."

That just pissed me off more, because I never, *never* wanted her to experience any of that. "That issue aside, what you promised Dawson was freaking unbelievable."

"What?" Her arms dropped to her sides.

"Help him find Beth? How in the hell are we supposed to do that?"

She shifted from one foot to the next. "I don't know, but we'll figure something out."

"Oh, that's good, Kat. We don't know how to find her but we'll help. Awesome plan."

Heat flooded her cheeks again. "You're such a hypocrite! You told me yesterday we'd find out what Will was up to, but you have no idea how. The same thing with Daedalus!"

I opened my mouth, but shit, she had me.

"And you couldn't lie to Dawson when he asked what you'd do if they had me. You're not the only one who gets to make brash and stupid decisions."

"That's not the point."

She cocked a brow. "Lame argument."

I shot forward. "You had no right to make those kinds of promises to *my* brother. He's not *your* family."

Kat flinched as she took a step back, and a part of me regretted my words, but she had made a promise we had no idea how to keep to my more-than-slightly-unstable brother.

"Dawson is my problem, because he's your problem." Her voice shook as she continued. "We're in this together."

My eyes met hers. "Not on everything, Kat. Sorry. That's just the way it is."

She drew back again, blinking rapidly. "If we're not together on everything, then how can we really be together?" Her voice cracked. "Because I don't see how that's possible."

My eyes widened. Shit. "Kat—"

She shook her head and then backed away from me. Pivoting around, she walked over to her house, her movements stiff. I wanted to go after her. I wanted to stop her. I didn't want tonight to end like this. But I didn't.

After I met with Matthew Sunday morning, he said he could work something out with the officials that would allow Dawson to return to school. It wasn't going to be easy, and not just the technicalities of Dawson reentering school. It was going to be a lot for him to deal with.

"It's a good idea," Matthew had said.

Yeah, it had been a good idea, but it was going to be a freak show when it happened, just like it had been after he and Bethany had disappeared and after Adam had died.

The only thing different this time was that we could prepare for it. Since Dawson wasn't able to make his grand reappearance until sometime midweek, we were going to be able to lay the groundwork as soon as we returned to school Monday. Dawson's return wouldn't be kept secret there.

It was Sunday afternoon and Dee was upstairs with Dawson, attempting to convince him to let her cut his hair. I was pacing the length of the living room, my thoughts on the house next door. On the person next door.

Some of the anger had faded from last night, enabling me to see that I kind of made a mess out of explaining why I was so furious with her. As impossible as it was, I wanted her far away from all of this.

Scrubbing my hands down my face, I muttered a curse under my breath. How could I keep her away from any of this? She was a part of this, like the damn center of it all.

I dropped my arms to my sides. Staring at the wall, I wanted to slam my fists into the plaster. Damn, sometimes not caring about anyone was so much freaking easier. Feeling for a person, wanting them safe at all costs, was probably one of the scariest stunts I'd ever pulled.

I started for the kitchen when I sensed a nearby Luxen. A moment later, there was a knock on the door. Glancing out the window, I saw that it wasn't Adam or Matthew, not even Ash.

Lydia stood at the door.

Not surprised that someone from the colony finally showed up, I went to the door and opened it. "I know why you're here and no, you can't see him."

She smiled tightly. "Well, good afternoon to you, Daemon."

I folded my arms, quiet.

With a sigh, she folded her hands together. The insulated white vest she wore reminded me of the officer Dawson had tossed through the window. "So, it is true? The rumors?"

When I didn't answer again, Lydia lifted her chin. A flicker of light raced through her veins, a stark contrast against her ebony skin. "You can either answer my questions or answer Ethan's. Is that what you want?"

I wanted that like I wanted a meteorite to land on my head. "What rumors did you hear?"

"You're not going to let me in?" When I smiled at her, she looked like she was seconds from

throwing me through a wall. The skin around her eye twitched. "Rumor is that Dawson was with the DOD this entire time."

Having no idea what information I could trust Lydia with, I leaned against the doorframe. "Is that so?"

Lydia nodded. "He was being re-assimilated."

I kept my expression blank. Re-assimilated? That was one way of looking at this screwed-up situation, but it was better than the truth. I doubted the colony would be thrilled to hear that Dawson had escaped, if that was what truly had happened.

Stepping out on the porch, I let the door close quietly behind me. "We didn't know until they released him last week. We thought he was dead."

"I know. I remember how you and Dee were afterward," she said, her shoulders relaxing. "Why did they have him?"

"I don't know." I was such a damn good liar. "We haven't really talked to the DOD, and Dawson hasn't really gone into it."

Lydia glanced behind me, at the closed door. "None of us have ever heard of the DOD releasing a Luxen who possibly needed to be re-assimilated."

I met her steady gaze. "There's always a first."

"I suppose," she replied, and a moment passed. "He won't be a problem, right? You'll make sure of that, won't you? We don't want the DOD snooping around, Daemon."

The point of her visitation was finally laid out between us. The colony, the Elders, cared only about how Dawson's presence affected them, and if he would drive unwanted attention toward them.

Question was, what was the colony hiding?

Kat still wasn't exactly happy with me come Monday morning. She wanted an apology for Saturday night. I wanted one, too, and I also wanted to lock her in a room outfitted with obsidian, and maybe a shitload of assault rifles.

The rifles might not be a good idea. She would probably shoot me.

I figured we'd talk later, and later came at lunch when she rushed up to me while I was standing with Billy Crump, telling him the story of how Dawson had run away from home, but now he was back, and blah, blah bullshit.

Kat drew up short as she glanced at the milk I held in one hand and the slice of pizza in the other. "Ew," she muttered, shaking her head.

Pizza and milk was an awesome combo.

"We need to talk," she said.

I took a bite of my pizza while Kat eyed Billy like she wanted to take him down. The human boy must've sensed it, because he lifted his hands as he backed away. "Okay, well, I'll talk to you later, Daemon."

I nodded without taking my eyes off her. "What's up, Kitten? Come to apologize?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Uh, no I'm not here to apologize. You owe me an apology."

"How do you see that?" I took a drink.

Steam was seconds from pouring out of her ears. "Well, for starters, I'm not an ass. You are."

I chuckled. "That's a good start."

"And I got Dawson to heel." She smiled victoriously while I was feeling the exact opposite of that. "And—wait. This isn't even important. God, you always do this."

"Do what?" My gaze slid back to her, and even though she was pissed at me and I was angry at her, she was so freaking hot when she was mad. Her cheeks got all flushed, her eyes deepened to a stormy gray, and I wanted to lay her out on one of those tables.

"Distract me with the inane," she said. "And in case you don't know what that means: silly—you always distract me with something silly."

I finished off my pizza. "I know what 'inane' means."

"Shocker," she retorted.

A slow smile inched across my lips. "I must be really distracting you, because you still haven't told me what you need to talk to me about."

Kat might hit me. "I saw—"

Tommy Cruz, football player and friend of the most likely dead Simon, knocked into Kat. No accident. Hell no. I straightened, pushing off the wall.

"Oh, sorry," Tommy snickered. "Didn't notice—"

Moving fast, I grabbed a fistful of Tommy's shirt and pushed him back against the wall, lining him up with the stupid-ass mascot painted on the wall. Tommy's eyes bugged. I waited for him to piss himself as he gasped out, "Jesus."

I lifted the milk carton with my other hand, getting it nice and close with his face. "See this milk carton? Do you want to see your face on the back of it? No? Didn't think so. Touch her again and it'll be there."

"Boys!" Coach Vincent's voice rang out. "Break it up! Both of you! Break it up."

Silence descended in the crowded cafeteria.

Tommy's wide gaze darted around, as if he really thought someone was going to intervene. Wasn't going to be his coach. Oh no, Coach was rocking the Luxen highway. I smiled at him as I slowly released my grip on his shirt, stepped back, and then dumped the milk carton over his head.

Kat slapped her hand over her mouth as sticky white liquid ran down Tommy's face. Laughter rose from behind me as I patted a clean spot on his chest. "Glad we've reached an understanding." Tossing the empty carton in the trash, I turned to the coach. "Sorry about that. Those milk cartons are slippery buggers."

Coach stared back with a blank expression. "Get out of here. Now."

Curving my fingers around Kat's elbow, I guided her around and started down the aisle. "Overreact much?" she whispered, face burning bright.

I shrugged. "It made me feel better. And I know you thought it was funny."

She cracked a tiny smile. "Yeah, okay. I did. A lot. Thank you."

"Uh-huh." I led her down the hall, stopping by the gym doors. She turned, leaning against the wall. I placed my hands on either side of her head and lowered my forehead to hers. "Can I tell you something?"

She nodded.

"I find it incredibly attractive when you're all feisty with me." I brushed my lips against her temple, smiling. "That probably makes me disturbed. But I like it."

"Focus," she said when my lips were near hers. She placed her hands on my chest, pushing lightly. "I have something more important to tell you than what disturbing things get you hot."

I grinned as I backed off. "Okay, back to what you saw. I'm focused. My head's in the game and all that."

Kat laughed under her breath, but the sound vanished as she drew in a deep breath. "I'm pretty sure I saw Blake today."

I cocked my head to the side. I did not hear that right. There was no way that idiot came back here. If so, he was a dead SOB, and he knew it. "Say what?"

"I think I saw Blake here, just a few minutes ago."

"How sure are you? Did you see him—his face?" My hands curled at my sides as a wave of anger rose swiftly.

"Yeah, I saw—" She stopped, her nose scrunching. "I didn't see his face."

Didn't see his face? How could she be sure she saw him then? I let out a low breath as a different kind of concern took root. "Okay. What did you see?"

"A hat—a trucker hat," she said, her fingers fidgeting. "That had a surfboard on it. And I saw his hand..."

"So, let me get this right. You saw a hat and a hand?"

"Yeah," she sighed, shoulders slumping.

I stared at her as the concern for her—for her well-being—unfurled, replacing the hotter, easier emotion to deal with. Kat had been through so much, so there was no surprise that she'd have a hair trigger right now, that she'd see Will or Blake when they really weren't there. I smoothed out my expression as I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, drawing her into my side. "Are you really sure it was him, because if not, that's okay. You've been under a lot of stress."

She wrinkled her nose. "I remember you saying something like that to me before."

"Now, Kitten, you know this is different." I squeezed her shoulders. "Are you sure, Kat? I don't want to get everyone freaking out if you're not sure."

Her gaze met mine for a second and then dropped. I squeezed her shoulders again, wishing like crazy she weren't in this position. That she didn't know this kind of fear.

"I'm not sure," she said after a moment.

Closing my eyes, I brushed my lips across the top of her bowed head. She wrapped an arm around my waist and pressed her cheek against my chest. "It's okay," I said, running my hand up her back.

"Sorry," she murmured, curling her fingers into the back of my thermal. "I didn't mean to freak you out. I just thought—"

"You don't need to apologize for that." Reaching down, I brushed her hair back from her face. "It's totally understandable." When Kat didn't reply, I held her a little tighter. "Tonight I'm on babysitting duty. Join me?"

There was a pause, and then Kat lifted her chin. "Sure."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes; it didn't erase the haunted look there. The smile changed nothing.

Hours later I sat with Kat beside me, and Dawson on the other side of her, two movies into a zombiethon. At first, we talked about different ways to find Beth, which kept going back to either the office building where Dawson had been held or at the warehouse with the cages.

Kat and Dawson were down with that plan, but I was the lone dissenting voice that repeatedly kept pointing out that the likelihood of her being there was slim, but we were still going to scope out the places this weekend.

Land of the Dead or Party of the Dead was on the TV. I had no idea which one, but some dead dude was eating some other soon-to-be-dead dude. I reached over, grabbing a handful of popcorn out of the bowl in Kat's lap. "I had no idea you were a zombie fan. What is it—the blood and guts or the in-your-face social undertones?"

Kat laughed. "Mostly the blood and guts."

"That's so un-girlie of you." I frowned as a zombie picked up a cleaver and started banging it against the wall. What the? "I don't know about this. How many hours do we have left?"

Dawson raised his hand and two DVDs shot into his palm. "Uh, we have *Diary of the Dead* and *Survival of the Dead*."

"Great," I muttered. Truth was, I was having fun. I had my girl and my brother next to me, and even if what was on the TV was weird as shit, which coming from me was saying something, there was no other place I'd rather be.

Well, having Kat upstairs and in my bed was another place... I shifted my foot on the coffee table.

"Wussy," Kat replied.

"Whatever." I elbowed her, knocking a kernel of popcorn between her chest and notebook. She sighed, and I kind of wanted to fish it out with my mouth. "Want me to get that for you?" I asked.

Kat shot me a dark look as she plucked it out and threw it in my face. "You're going to be grateful when the zombie apocalypse occurs and I know what to do because of my zombie fetish."

I raised my brows. "There are better fetishes out there, Kitten. I could show you a few."

"Uh, no thank you."

"Aren't you supposed to go to the nearest Costco or something?" Dawson asked, letting the DVDs float back to the coffee table.

I turned to him, incredulous. "And how would you know that?"

He shrugged. "It's in The Zombie Survival Guide."

"It is." Kat nodded eagerly. "Costco has everything—thick walls, food, and supplies. They even sell guns and ammunition. You could hole up there for years while the zombies are getting their nom nom on."

My mouth dropped open.

"What?" She grinned. "Zombies got to eat, too, you know."

"Very true about the Costco thing." Dawson picked up a single kernel and popped it in his mouth. "But we could just blast the zombies. We'd be fine."

"Ah, good point." She rooted around in the bowl, picking up a half-popped kernel.

"I'm surrounded by freaks," I said, resisting a smile. Hearing Dawson talk like...like it used to be was priceless. On the screen, some idiot got a chunk of skin and tissue ripped out of his arm. "What the hell? The guy just stood there. Hello. There're zombies everywhere. Try looking behind you, douche canoe."

Kat giggled.

"This is why zombie movies are unbelievable to me," I went on. "Okay. Say the world ends in a shit-storm of zombies. The last thing anyone with two working brain cells would do is just stand along a building waiting for a zombie to creep up on them."

Dawson cracked a smile.

"Shut up and watch the movie," Kat ordered.

"So you really think you'd do well in a zombie apocalypse?" I demanded.

"Yeppers," she said. "I'd totally save your butt."

"Oh, really?" I glanced at the screen and got a horrible idea. Concentrating, I mirrored the image

of zombie, taking on the gray and loose hanging skin, along with the patchy brown spots and decaying skin along the cheekbones and nose.

Kat shrieked and jerked into Dawson. "Oh my God..."

I smiled at her, knowing my rotting teeth were made of awesome. "Save my butt? Yeah, I don't think so."

She gaped at me.

And Dawson...he let out this hoarse, happy sound I hadn't heard from him in...in years. I lost hold of the mirror image and focused back on Kat. I cleared my throat. "I think you'd suck at zombie apocalypse."

"You...you are disturbed," she murmured, carefully settling down next to me.

Grinning, I reached for the popcorn, but came up empty. My gaze shifted to the popcorn-covered floor. I laughed, shaking my head as I glanced at Dawson. He was watching us. The ever-present sadness etched into expression was there, but so was determination.

"Anyone want more popcorn?" I asked. "We have food coloring. I can make it red for you."

"More popcorn but minus the food coloring please," she replied as I grabbed the bowl. "Want me to pause the movie?"

I raised a brow, and she giggled again. Heading toward the kitchen, I stopped at the door when one of the zombies' heads broke the surface of the water. What in the hell were we watching?

Didn't matter, though, because again, it was like having the Dawson I'd grown up with back, and if he wanted to watch zombie movies from here on out, that was fine by me.

Instead of grabbing one of the boxes of microwave popcorn, I went the old-school route, heated up some oil and popped some kernels. Took longer but tasted a hell of a lot better.

Once done, I headed back to the living room, stopping just short of entering when I heard Kat say, "I'd love to watch some of them this Saturday before we check out the buildings."

The freaking air I really didn't need got stuck in my throat. I knew what she was talking about. The ghost shows Dawson used to watch with me every Saturday morning. There wasn't an immediate response from him, and I started forward again, but then he spoke.

"Yeah, that would be kind of cool. I...I can do that."

"Really?" Kat asked, sounding completely surprised, and shit, I was shocked.

"Yeah."

Holy crap. I blinked and shook my head before entering the room. My gaze immediately met Kat's, and I smiled at her, really smiled. Her lips responded in kind, and unlike this afternoon, her smile did change everything.

Kat was changing everything.

Thursday morning, I sat in my car, watching people hurry across the parking lot, toward the gray PHS building. The scent of cinnamon filled the interior, steaming out of the cup I'd picked up for Kat from the coffee and bakery shop down the road.

"You ready?" I asked.

In the passenger seat, my brother laughed drily. "Not really."

I looked over at him. Dee had managed to get an inch of his hair cut off. It was still longer than mine. People would definitely be able to tell us apart now. "You don't have to do this today. It can

wait."

He sat there frozen for a moment. "No." Reaching between his knees, he picked up his backpack and then opened the door. Cold air rushed in. "It's better than sitting at home. That's going to drive me crazy."

"Understandable," I murmured, grabbing the coffee cup.

Sliding out of the car, my boots crunched on the snow-dusted gravel as I joined Dawson on the other side. His chin was down, and wavy strands of dark hair shielded the sides of his face. We didn't speak as we walked into the school, and it wasn't until then that anyone noticed Dawson.

It started with double takes.

People would look at me, look at Dawson, and then their heads would swing back toward us sharply, their eyes wide and full of shock.

Then the low murmur of chatter started. As I walked Dawson to the locker he'd been assigned, some just openly stared. He'd seemed oblivious to it, completely detached from everything around him.

I quickly scanned his schedule, seeing he had bio with Kat. That was good. I handed the thin slip piece of paper over to him. "You good from here?"

Dawson nodded as he closed his locker door and faced me. "I'm not going to run off."

I arched a brow. "I hope not."

His lips twitched into a semblance of a smile. "I'll see you later."

We parted ways at that point, and I swung by my locker, grabbed my books, and then made my way to trig. Kat was already in class. She glanced up with a soft smile as I placed the cup on her desk.

"Thanks." She folded her hands around the cup as I sat down and fished the pen out of the spiral along the side of my notebook. "Where's yours?"

"Not thirsty this morning," I said, twirling my pen. Glancing over my shoulder, I grinned at the girl behind me. "Hi, Lesa."

She sighed. "I need a Daemon."

"You have a Chad," Kat pointed out, referencing Lesa's boyfriend.

Lesa rolled her eyes. "He doesn't bring me lattes."

I chuckled. "Not everyone can be as great as me."

"Ego check," Kat muttered. "Daemon, ego check."

From across the aisle, Carissa, the quieter one, fiddled with her glasses, her eyes serious and somber as she peeked up at me. "I just wanted to say I'm glad Dawson's okay and back." Two red spots bloomed on her cheeks. "It must be a huge relief."

I nodded. "It is."

Carissa whirled around in her seat as I sat back, stretching out my legs. Class started, and I scribbled in the margin of my notebook throughout the lecture. When the bell rang, I stood and waited for Kat to gather up her stuff. We headed out into the hall, and in a second, I knew that half if not all of the school had seen Dawson.

People were standing completely still along the lockers, staring at me. Some appeared struck stupid. Others couldn't keep their mouths shut. Kat stiffened beside me as she wrapped her hand around my arm.

"Did you see?"

"Two of them again..."

"So weird that he'd come back without Beth..."

"Where is Beth...?"

"Maybe he came back because of Adam..."

My jaw flexed as I cut the voices out. All of this was expected. Still annoying, but expected.

Kat took a sip of her mocha. "Uh, maybe this wasn't a good idea."

I placed my hand on the small of her back as I held the door open to the stairwell. "Now what makes you think that?"

"But if he didn't come back, what was he supposed to do?" she reasoned.

There really wasn't a response to that. We knew what Dawson would do if we left him alone.

The stairwell was cramped, and even though my next class was on the first floor, I walked Kat to hers. Once we were outside of her English class, I leaned down. Her gray eyes met mine. "It was a bad and good idea. He needs to get back into the world. There's going to be fallout, but it's worth it."

She nodded, obviously relieved

Cupping her cheek, I kissed her quickly. "See you at lunch."

The rest of the morning was pretty much of a repeat of what had happened in the hallway. No one really came up to me. The rumor that Dawson was back had started on Monday, but I guessed seeing us again was another thing. I was used to the stares, though, so whatever.

After my fourth class, I headed to my locker to dump my books. My heart rate had jumped in the middle of the class, making me think of Kat. It had to be from her, but since she was in bio with Matt teaching and Dawson sitting alongside her, it made no sense.

I closed the door and pivoted around, frowning when I saw Matthew speed walking toward me, his jaw hard and lips a tense, fierce line. I stiffened and then stepped toward him. "What's going on?"

He looked around quickly, at the others milling around us, and then said in a low voice, "Blake is back."

CHAPTER 7

The words stopped the entire damn world. I stared at Matt for a good five seconds before I could even react.

"You're shitting me?" I demanded.

Matthew shook his head. "No. He showed up in bio class and acted like nothing had happened."

Raw fury pounded through me. "Where is he now?"

"Upstairs. I think he followed Kat," he said, and my stomach clenched. "I had to stop Dawson. He was putting two and two together based on how Kat was reacting in class and I couldn't—"

Dawson appeared behind Matt, looking confused as his gaze bounced back and forth.

"Shit." I spun around and headed for the cafeteria first. She wasn't in there. Then I went to her locker. Nothing. I checked out the whole first floor, and then I found the nearest stairwell. The jump in my heart rate was now explained. It had been Kat, and now that bastard was most likely with her.

I think I saw Blake.

Kat had said that on Monday, and I'd chalked it up to paranoia. Shit.

I bounded up the stairs; Matthew and Dawson were behind me, but I was focused on murdering Blake with my bare hands. In this moment, nothing would give me more pleasure. We'd given that bastard a chance, and he threw it back in our faces.

Blake was a dead man.

I burst out of the stairwell and turned, spotting Kat immediately. Relief punched through me. In four steps, I was in front of her. I grasped her shoulders.

"We've been looking everywhere for you," I said.

Matthew stepped to my left. "Did you see where he went? Blake?"

She swallowed. "Yeah, he...wanted to talk."

Steel dropped down my spine. The lockers in the hall rattled as energy pulsed through me. "What?"

She glanced nervously at Matthew. "He's been watching us. I don't think he's ever left."

Dropping my hands from her shoulders, I backed off as I struggled to get my anger under control before I blew out every window in the school. "I cannot believe he's here. He has a death wish."

Dawson stepped around me. "Why was he watching us?"

She drew in a deep breath as she fiddled with the strap on her book bag. "He wants us to help get Chris."

I whipped around. "Come again?"

"He wants us to help him get Chris free from Daedalus and he..." She glanced at Dawson. "He claims he's being kept in the same place that Bethany is. That helping him will help us."

A shudder of violent anger rolled through me. I couldn't believe it. Freaking could not wrap my head around the size of Blake's balls.

Matthew shook his head. "He...he can't think we would trust him."

"I don't think he cares if we do," she said, smoothing a shaking hand over her hair.

"But does he really know where they are keeping Beth?" When I looked over at Dawson, his eyes were feverish.

"I don't know." She dropped her bag and leaned against a locker. "There's no telling with him."

Dawson shot forward, suddenly in my face. "Did he say anything—anything we can use to find her?"

"No. Not really. I—"

"Think," Dawson ordered. "He had to have said something, Katy."

That was enough. I clasped my hand on Dawson's shoulder, yanking him away from Kat. "Back off, Dawson, I mean it."

He shrugged my hand off, body coiled tight. "If he knows—"

"Don't go there," I interrupted him. "He was sent here by the DOD to determine if Kat was a viable subject. To do to her what they are doing to Beth. He killed Adam, Dawson. We are not working with "

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kat sway to the left. I shot toward her, wrapped my arm around her waist, and pulled her close to my side. I frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I'm okay, really, I am."

"You're lying." She was pale and weak. Understanding flared. "Did you fight him?" I lowered my voice as my eyes dilated. "Did he try to hurt you? Because I swear right now, I will tear through this state—"

"I'm okay." She tried to wiggle free, but I wasn't letting her go anywhere. "It was more of the attack first, ask questions later," she said. "I tired myself out, but he didn't hurt me."

I wanted to believe her, needed to, because I was seconds from peeling the roof off the building like it was a tin can. I focused on Dawson. "I know you want to believe that Blake can help us somehow, but he can't be trusted."

Dawson looked away, a muscle ticking in his jaw. Frustration poured off him. Matthew spoke up. "Daemon's right." He paused as a door opened at the end of the hall and two teachers stepped out. "But this is not the place to discuss any of this. After school, your house." He left with one more warning look.

"I know what you're going to say." Dawson's features were sharp. "I'm not going to do anything reckless. I promised both of you I wouldn't. I'm keeping my end of the deal. You better keep yours."

That wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear from my brother. He walked off in the opposite direction of Matt. Hell, he was so going to back whatever Blake said if he thought there was the smallest chance he could help him find Bethany. "This isn't good."

"You have no idea." She waited until the two teachers disappeared from the hall. "Trusting Blake may be a moot point."

My eyes narrowed as I angled my body toward hers. "What are you saying?"

She cringed. "Blake confirmed what Will had said. The DOD and Daedalus believe my mutation wore off. Good news, right? But he's desperate—more so than we realized. If we don't agree to help him, he plans to turn us over."

Spinning around, I slammed my fist in the locker. The metal gave way like butter. Didn't even feel pain. Kat grabbed my arms and pulled me toward the nearby stairwell. I pulled free once the door closed behind us.

Shit. Damn. Fuck.

Thrusting my hands through my hair, I turned away from Kat and gripped the railing. Blake was going to blackmail us. After lying to Kat and me, almost turning her over to Daedalus and killing Adam, and then shoving the chance we—that I gave him, he was going to blackmail us. He was going to force us into what could be a trap.

Most likely was another trap.

Energy pulsed out of my hands and rippled across the railing, heating the metal.

"Daemon..." Kat placed her hand on my back.

Hanging my head, I worked my jaw. "I want to kill him."

"I know." Coming from behind, she wrapped her arms around me. "I'm totally on board with that idea, but...he has it set up that if anything happens to him, Nancy is notified about the mutation."

"Of course he does," I muttered, turning around in her embrace. Her book bag lay forgotten by the door. We had only a few minutes before lunch was over. I worked at calming myself down as I brushed her hair back. "You really are okay?"

"I'm the last person you need to worry about right now."

"You're the first person I always worry about." Folding my arms around her waist, I lifted her so she was standing on my boots. I held her tight in my arms. "This...this is a mess."

Kat didn't respond for a long moment, and then she lifted her chin, her gaze meeting mine. "It is, but we're...we're in this together. Always."

I dropped my mouth to her forehead. "Always."

Sitting through the afternoon classes about drove me out of my skin, but with Dawson just coming back, if we all bailed on school, that would just force more attention on us. I spent the entire time trying to figure out what we could do, and every option I landed on was damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Instead of driving my car home, I rode home in Kat's after I asked Dee to take my car back with Dawson. Kat thought I'd caught a ride to school with Dee, and knowing her, if she knew I was leaving my car in my sister's hands, she would probably insist that she'd be fine on her own.

Kat could take care of herself, but it made me feel a whole hell of a lot better to be within asskicking length of her. We used the time to talk about what we were going to do about Blake.

"We have two options: work with him or kill him," I said.

Her eyes widened. "And you'd be the one to do that? Not right. It shouldn't always be you. You're not the only Luxen who can fight."

"I know, but I can't expect someone else to carry that burden," I told her. "And I'm not trying to start another argument over whether or not you'd make a good Wonder Woman, but I'd never expect you or my siblings to do that, either. I know you would have done it to...defend yourself and us, Kat, but I don't want that kind of guilt on your shoulders. Okay?"

She nodded, her fingers sliding over the steering wheel. "I could handle it...if I had to."

I didn't like that sound of that.

Stopped at a streetlight, I reached over and placed a hand on her cheek. She took her eyes off the road for a moment. I smiled at her and said the first thing that came to mind, the freaking truth. "You burn bright, to me at least, and I know you could handle it, but the last thing I want is your light to be tainted by something so dark."

Tears filled her eyes, and then she gave me a watery smile. We didn't talk about the messed-up shit the rest of the way, because we were going to be spending all evening knee-deep in this crap.

We beat everyone back to the house. Kat lingered in the living room, pacing back and forth while I grabbed a bottle of water. I placed it on the end table next to the couch I sat on. I waited until Kat made another pass in front of me and I leaned out, snagging her around the waist.

I drew her into my lap and pulled her down so her head was resting on my shoulder. "You know what we have to do."

She wrapped her arms around my neck. "Kill Blake."

I choked on my laugh. "No, Kitten. We're not going to kill him."

"We're not?"

I pulled back, because she actually sounded surprised. "We're going to have to do what he wants."

"But...but...but..."

Grinning, I slid my hands down her arms, stopping at her elbows. "Use your words, Kitten."

"But we can't trust him. This is most likely a trap!"

"We're kind of damned if we do and damned if we don't." I shifted, dragging my hands along her lower back. "But I've given it thought."

"What? The whole ten minutes it took us to get home?"

"I think it's cute that you call my house home." I liked her responding flush. "By the way, it is my house. My name is on the deed."

"Daemon," she said, sighing. "Nice to know, but it's not important right now."

"True, but it's good knowledge to have, but anyway, since you went totally off topic there—"

"What? You're the one—"

"I know my brother. Dawson's going to go to Blake if we don't agree," I told her. "It's what I would do if our positions were reversed. And we know Blake better than he does."

"I don't know about this, Daemon."

I shrugged. "I'm not going to let him turn you over."

She frowned. "He'll turn you over, too, and what about your family? Bringing Blake into the fold is going to be dangerous...and stupid."

"The risk outweighs the possible consequences."

"I'm shocked," she admitted, dropping her arms to her lap. "You didn't want me training with Blake because you didn't trust him and that was *before* we knew he was a killer."

"But now we're both going into this knowing what he's capable of. Our eyes are open."

"That makes no sense."

It didn't really matter if it made sense or not, because we really had no choice. Car doors closed outside, catching Kat's attention. She glanced at the window. "The only reason you're going to work with him is for Dawson and me. That's probably not the wisest decision you've made."

"Maybe not." I clasped her cheeks, drawing her attention back to me. I kissed her deeply, keeping us connected until she moaned into my mouth. Then I dumped her on the cushion next to me and stood. "But my mind's made up. Be prepared. This meeting isn't going to go well."

As expected, the meeting went as well as rolling around naked in a pit of fire ants would.

Matthew looked like he was two seconds from drowning himself in a bottle of liquor. Dee, Ash, and

Andrew wanted to find Blake and murder him slowly and in a very bloodthirsty way. Admittedly, it was disturbing seeing Dee as fired up as she was. Adam's death had hardened her, just like it had me when we thought Dawson had died.

And Dawson was ready to say screw it all and invite Blake right into the house.

But Dee...damn, she was undeterred, even when Ash and Andrew, who'd lost their brother, seemed to realize the predicament we were in.

"Then we find out who he's talked to or working with and take care of them!"

My mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?"

"Yes!"

I turned away, unable to look at her. This wasn't my sister.

Dawson leaned forward on the couch. "Is your need for vengeance more important than finding and stopping what they're doing to Beth?"

When I glanced back at her, she stood there, staring at Dawson with a grim, determined look on her face.

"Because, little sister, let me tell you that what Adam went through pales in comparison to what she's experiencing. The things I've seen..." Dawson trailed off and his gaze lowered as he shook his head. "If you doubt what I say, then ask Katy. She's had a taste of some of their methods, and she can still barely talk from screaming."

The blood drained from her face as she glanced at Kat. They still hadn't really talked, but Dee knew what had happened to Kat when Will had hold of her. Dee looked away far too quickly, and based on the shit she was spouting earlier at Kat, it was obvious that she still blamed Kat for Adam.

"You ask a lot," Dee said, her voice hoarse. Her lower lip trembled as her shoulders slumped. Her tear-filled gaze swept the room, then she turned and walked out the door.

Andrew moved before anyone else, glancing in my direction. "I'll keep an eye on her."

"Thank you." I rubbed my palm along my jaw. "Well, that went wonderful."

"Did you really expect her or any of us to be okay with it?" Ash asked.

I snorted. "No, but I have a problem with my sister so willing to kill."

"I can't..." Kat didn't finish. She scrubbed her fingers through her hair.

"How do we contact Blake?" Matthew asked, getting the conversation back on track. "It's not something I can or wish to discuss with him in class."

"What?" Kat asked when eyes settled on her.

"You have his number, don't you?" Ash stared at her nails. "Text. Call him. Whatever. And tell him we're ridiculously stupid and plan to help him."

Kat wrinkled her nose, but she reached into her bag and grabbed her phone. Her fingers flew over the screen. I could tell he responded quickly, because she sighed. "Saturday evening." Her voice sounded weak. "He wants to meet tomorrow evening in a public spot—Smoke Hole."

I nodded.

She sent back a text and then said, "It's done."

The two words landed like a ton of cement in the center of the living room. No one was really relieved, but what was done was done. Dee and Andrew hadn't returned by the time Matthew and Ash left. Dawson had gone upstairs and Kat outside. I followed, walking up behind her, repeating what she had done for me this afternoon. I wrapped my arms around her, and she leaned into me. Several moments passed as neither of us spoke in the silence that was broken only by a distant call of a bird. In those few precious minutes, my thoughts raced over everything that had happened since Kat had moved into the house next door. Regret settled in my chest.

I rested my chin atop her head. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asked.

For a shit-ton, but I guessed I should start somewhere recent. "I shouldn't have flipped out over the whole Dawson thing last weekend. You did the right thing by telling him we'd help. If not, God knows what he would've done by now." I kissed the top of her peach-scented head. "And thank you for everything with Dawson. Even though our Saturday will take a turn into crapsville, Dawson… He's been different since zombie night. Not the old Dawson, but close."

There was a pause. "You don't need to thank me for that. Seriously."

"I do. And I meant it."

"Okay." Several seconds passed. "Do you think we made a mistake? Letting Blake go that night?" Mulling that over, I tightened my arms around her waist. "I don't know. I really don't."

"We had good intentions, right? We wanted to give him a chance, I guess." Then she laughed.

"What?"

Her eyes opened. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions. We should've blasted his ass."

I lowered my chin to her shoulder and thought about that. The old me? Yeah, I would've taken him out without thinking after what happened to Adam, but now? "Maybe I would've done something like that before you."

Kat turned her head toward mine. "What do you mean?"

"Before you came along, I would've killed Blake for what he did and felt like crap afterward, but I would've done it." I pressed a kiss against her neck, right where her pulse beat so strongly. "And in a way, you did convince me. Not the way Dee thinks, but you could've taken out Blake, and you didn't."

She gave a little shake of her head. "I don't know."

"I do." I smiled against her cheek. "You make me think before I act. You make me want to be a better person—Luxen—whatever."

Kat twisted around in my arms and stared up at me with an earnest gleam in her eyes. "You *are* a good person."

"Kitten, you and I both know that's incredibly rare."

"No-"

I placed a finger over her lips. "I make terrible decisions. I can be a dickhead, and I do it on purpose. I tend to bully people into doing what I want. And I let everything that had happened with Dawson amplify those...uh, personality traits. But—" I removed my finger and smiled at her. "But you...you make me want to be different. That's why I didn't kill Blake. It's why I don't want you making those decisions or for you to be around me if I am choosing those things."

Then I kissed her, and for a little while, not nearly long enough, there wasn't need for any words to be spoken.

CHAPTER 8

After catching one-on-one time with Kat that wasn't nearly enough time, we headed to the Smoke Hole diner Saturday evening. Kat was like a live wire as we were seated in a booth in the back, near the crackling fire. I knew she expected this to be a trap and for us to be seconds away from the DOD bum-rushing the place.

I wasn't going to let anything happen to her.

Besides, the DOD wouldn't come at us in such a public manner, and we hadn't come to the diner alone. Matthew and crew were hanging back in the parking lot, and some of the staff here were of the extraterrestrial persuasion, including our waitress, Jocelyn.

Quite a bit of the Luxen living in the colony worked outside of it. Obviously the football coach and some of the administrative staff at the high school lived in the colony but were employed in the human world; however, I was kind of surprised to see that Jocelyn was still working here since she just had her babies and had to have her hands full.

Kat was busy making kitten litter out of the napkin she was frantically ripping apart while Jocelyn appeared at our table. "Daemon, how are you doing? Haven't seen you in ages."

"Good. How about you, Jocelyn?"

Kat's fingers stilled as she eyed the redhead curiously.

"I've been real good," Jocelyn said. "I've stepped down from managing since the babies. Working part time instead, since they're a handful, but you and your family should visit soon, especially since..." She looked at Kat and her smile faded just a little. "Since Dawson has come back. Roland would love to see both of you."

"We'd love to do that." I winked at Kat. "By the way, Jocelyn, this is my girlfriend, Katy."

Kat's lips split in a wide smile as she extended her hand to the Luxen female. "Hi."

Jocelyn blinked and paled. "Girlfriend?"

"Girlfriend," I repeated.

She gave a little shake of her head and then shook Kat's hand before quickly releasing it. "Nice... nice to meet you. Uh, what can I get you two?"

"Two Cokes," I ordered, and Jocelyn rushed off to place the order.

"Jocelyn...?" Kat asked.

I slid over another napkin for her pile. "Are you jealous, Kitten?"

"Pfft. Whatever," she said. "Okay, maybe a little until I realized she was in the ARP."

"ARP?" I stood, moving to her side instead of sitting across from her. "Scoot."

She wiggled over. "Alien Relocation Program."

"Ha." I dropped my arm over the back of the booth and stretched my legs out. "Yeah, she's good people."

Jocelyn returned with our drinks, and I placed an order for a meat loaf sandwich. Kat didn't order anything, and I knew she was too nervous to eat. When Jocelyn left, I angled my body toward hers and lowered my voice. "Nothing's going to happen. Okay?"

Kat drew in a deep breath and nodded. "I just want to get this over with."

No sooner did those words come out of her lush little mouth than Blake walked into the restaurant, his gaze zeroing in on where we waited for him. The punk-ass swaggered up to our table like he wasn't at all concerned with the fact that the last time I'd seen him I wanted to kill him.

Behind Kat's head, my hand curled into a fist along the back of the booth. "Bart," I drawled, forcing my hand out of the clench. "It's been so long."

"I see you still haven't figured out my name." He slid into the seat across from us, frowning at the pile of torn napkins. "Hey, Katy."

I leaned forward, smiling coldly. "You don't talk to her." Kat pinched my leg under the table, but I ignored it. "At all."

Blake raised a brow. "Well, only talking to you is going to make this conversation real rough."

"Like I care?" I said.

Kat exhaled slowly. "Okay. Let's get to the point. Where are Beth and Chris, Blake?"

Blake's gaze slid to Kat again. "I—"

Placing my hand on the table, I allowed a current of electricity to course across the table, shocking Blake. He lifted his hand with a hiss, his eyes narrowing on me.

I smiled.

"Look, you tool, you can't intimidate me this time." Blake's voice dripped contempt. "So you're just wasting time and pissing me off."

"We'll see about that," I replied.

Jocelyn returned with the meat loaf sandwich and took Blake's drink order. The moment she left, Kat refocused. "Where are they?"

"If I tell you, I'd have to trust that you two, plus anyone else, aren't going to give me a cement swim."

She rolled her eyes, and I almost laughed at the lame reference. "Trust is a two-way street," she said.

"And we don't trust you," I threw out.

Blake drew in a long breath. "I don't blame you. I've given you no reason to trust me other than the fact that I didn't tell Daedalus about how well the mutation held."

"And I bet either your uncle stopped you from turning me over, or you thought he was doing his job," she countered. "But he screwed you over for money."

Blake's jaw hardened. "He did. And he put Chris in danger. But it's not like I haven't had to convince them otherwise after the fact. They think I'm happy to be an implant. That I've drunk the Kool-Aid and asked for seconds."

I snickered. "To save your own ass, I'm sure."

"The fact is, Daedalus doesn't believe you're a viable subject," Blake said.

"How do you know?" I picked up the fork, resisting the urge to implant it in his eyeball.

"The only real wild card here is Will. Obviously, he knew and used that knowledge."

"Will isn't our biggest or most annoying problem right now." I took a bite, chewing slowly. "You either have a lot of courage or are incredibly stupid. I'm going to go with the incredibly stupid part."

Blake snorted. "Yeah. Okay."

I did not like his attitude. Once he had his drink in front of him and Jocelyn was gone, I leaned

forward. Blake's gaze met mine, and the stupid ass had the brains to recognize his mistake. "We gave you a chance and you came back here after you killed one of our own. You think I'm the only person you have to look over your shoulder and watch out for? You're so wrong."

Fear churned in his eyes, but he hid it when he spoke. "The same goes for you, buddy."

I sat back, eyes hooded. "As long as we're on the same page."

"Back to Daedalus," Kat said. "How do you know they're watching Dawson?"

"I've been watching you guys, and I've seen them hanging around." He folded his arms. "I don't know how much work Will did to get him free, but I doubt he pulled the wool over anyone's eyes. Dawson is free because they wanted him to be free." He paused. "Here's the deal. I know where they're keeping Beth and Chris. I've never been there, but I know someone who has and can give us the security codes to get into the facility."

"Hold up." Kat shook her head. "So you can't really get us in. Someone else can?"

"Go figure." I chuckled. "Biff is virtually useless."

His lips thinned. "I know what level and cell they're being kept in, so without me, you'd just be running around the compound begging to be captured."

"And my fist is begging to be in your face," I shot back.

Impatience colored Kat's tone. "Not only are you asking us to trust you but to trust someone else?"

"That *someone else* is just like us, Katy." Blake dropped his elbows on the table, rocking his glass. "He's a hybrid but has gotten out from under Daedalus. And as expected, he hates them and would love nothing more than to screw with them. He's not going to lead us astray."

"And how does anyone get 'out from under' Daedalus?" she asked.

Blake's smile was freaking creepy. "They...disappear."

She tucked her hair back as she glanced at me. "Okay, say we do this, how do you get in contact with him?"

"You won't believe anything unless you're there to witness it for yourselves." He picked up his glass. "I know where to find Luc."

I smirked. "His name is *Luc*?"

He nodded. "He's not going to be reachable by cell or email. He's kind of paranoid about the government tapping cells and computers. We'll have to go to him."

"And where is that?" I asked.

"Every Wednesday night, he hangs at a club a few miles outside of Martinsburg," he explained. "He'll be there this Wednesday."

I laughed. "The only clubs in that part of West Virginia are strip clubs."

"You would think that." The smugness creeping into his expression needed to be knocked out of it. "But this is a different kind of club." He slid a quick glance in Kat's direction. "Females don't show up in jeans and sweaters."

Her eyes narrowed as she swiped a fry from my plate. "What do they show up in? Nothing?"

"The closest thing to nothing," he replied with a smile. "Bad for you. Yay for me."

"You really want to die, don't you?" I said.

"Sometimes, I think so."

That surprised me, because there was a genuine quality to his words.

"Anyway," he continued. "We go to him, he'll get the codes, and then it's on. We go in, you get what you want, and I get what I want. You guys will never see me again."

"That's pretty much the only thing you've said so far I like." I shifted in the booth. "The thing is, I'm having a hard time believing you. You say this hybrid is in Martinsburg, right? There isn't any

beta quartz near that place. How come he hasn't become some Arum's afternoon snack yet?"

Blake met my stare. "Luc can take care of himself."

"And where's the Luxen he's tied to?" Kat demanded.

"With him," Blake answered. "Look, what happened with Adam—I never wanted that to happen. And I'm sorry, but you of all people have to understand. You'd do anything for Katy."

"I would." Static built on my skin. "So if for one moment I think you're about to screw us, I won't hesitate. You won't get a third chance. And you haven't seen what I'm fully capable of, boy."

"Understood," Blake murmured, his eyes downcast. "Are we on?"

I reached under the table and found Kat's hand. I squeezed gently, and she drew in a shallow breath and said, "We're on."

CHAPTER 9

Since Blake was back in the picture and hanging around like a weed that wouldn't go away, Kat rode in with me Monday morning and Dawson ended up catching a ride with Dee. After school, we made a pit stop at the post office.

Of course.

Kat loaded my arms up with packages, and when we got to her house, she stacked them on her desk, her fingers lingering on the yellow envelopes.

I plopped down on the bed, folding my arms behind my head. "You can open them now if you want."

She twisted her hair up in a messy knot as she faced me. "I can wait."

Grinning, I kicked off my shoes. "I know you want to do it now."

Kat stuck her tongue out at me as she walked over to the other side of the bed and sat down, facing me. I knocked my knee off her hip. "You hanging in there?" I asked.

Nodding, she toyed with the string on her hoodie. "Yeah."

I eyed her, knowing there was a lot on her mind besides the return of Blake and where we were going Wednesday night. She had talked to Dee last night, or at least tried to. She hadn't talked to me about it, and neither had Dee, but I didn't think it went over well.

I patted the spot next to me. "Come here."

Kat crawled over.

"Closer." I patted the spot again.

She rolled her eyes, but inched over.

I fought my smile. "Lie with me."

An aggravated sigh was next. "You're so needy."

"I am the neediest needy guy out there right now."

She shook her head, but stretched out beside me on her side, facing me. "Happy?"

Brushing a strand of hair back from her face, I pretended to think about it. "I'm happy, but I'd be thrilled if you put your head..."

Kat's eyes narrowed as she peered up at me.

"...on my chest," I finished with a sly grin.

Her lips twitched, and then she planted her cheek on my chest. "How about now?"

I curled my arm around her back, settling my hand on her round hip. "Much, much better."

She laughed softly, placing her hand on my stomach. "I like when you're needy."

"I know." A couple of moments passed. "How did your talk go with Dee last night?"

Her fingers curled against my shirt. "Honestly? Not good. Not good at all."

I reached down, placing my hand over hers. She sighed and added, "She says she's not ready to

really talk about anything, and I totally understand that, but...I want her to be ready, because I miss her. She was my best friend."

"She *is* your best friend."

Kat didn't respond.

I twisted onto my side and scooted down. Those beautiful gray eyes were full of tears. "She is still your best friend," I repeated. "Dee still cares about you."

"You think so?" she whispered, touching my cheek with the tips of her fingers.

Kissing the end of her nose, I then pulled back. "Yes."

She smiled weakly. "I know I shouldn't be worried about my friendship when we're dealing with Blake and Dawson and Daedalus...and everything else under the sun."

I slid my hand off her hip, to her upper thigh. "Kitten, you can worry about whatever you want. I just wish you didn't have all that crap to be concerned with."

"Can say the same thing for you." She dragged her fingers down to my jaw. "You're having to deal with a ton of crap."

"It's nothing." My voice lowered as my hand tightened along her thigh.

She leaned forward, brushing her lips along mine. "What do you think we're going to see Wednesday night?"

"I have no idea." I nipped at her finger as the tip skated over my lower lip. "I'm not even sure about this club. Martinsburg isn't that big of a place."

"Bigger than here, right?" Her finger found my right dimple. "I know it's not far from where my mom works when she's in Winchester."

"It's bigger than here, but then again, most places are."

She grinned. "I wonder who Luc is."

"No idea. Never heard of him."

"Hmm..." She trailed off, and I knew there was more that she wanted to say, but she kissed me again.

And I couldn't complain about that.

The kisses started off slow and they were as sweet as sugar water, but it didn't take any amount of time for the kiss to turn deeper, rougher. There was nothing tentative about the way she kissed me or the way my tongue danced with hers. I rolled, shifting her onto her back. Her arms looped around my neck and fingers immediately went to my hair. Man, she loved getting her hands in it, and that was another thing I'd never complain about.

Bracing my weight on my forearms, I settled over her, chuckling when she moaned into my mouth. I caught that sound, and then I was the one groaning as she hooked one leg around my waist.

Hell.

I shifted my weight to my left arm, and then my right hand took a nice slow trip over the dips and swells until I slipped my hand under her loose sweater. Her back arched as my finger skimmed over the smooth skin of her belly.

Knowing her mother could walk in on us at any given moment, I forced myself to slow down, dragging the kisses out until I could break away. Sliding my hand out from under her sweater was probably one of the hardest damn things I'd ever done.

Her lashes lifted. "Your eyes are glowing."

One side of my lips kicked up in a grin. "I'm not surprised."

She brushed her fingers through my hair, dragging the shorter strands off my forehead. Our breaths mingled in the warm space between our mouths, and the only noise in the room was the sound

of our breathing. Kat pressed her forehead against mine, and as she splayed her fingers across my cheek, she let out a soft, shallow sigh.

I could live on those kisses.

I could live on those tiny breaths.

I could live on her.

By the time we hit Interstate 81, I wanted to kick Blake out of the damn car, tie him to the middle of the road, and run him over several times. At least fifty times. Maybe fifty-one.

Kat was actually wearing a coat, and based on the minuscule skirt she was wearing, paired with legit torn stockings, I was almost afraid of what she had on under the jacket, but those legs...

Yeah, I still had a thing for her legs.

We were running late because we hit a snow squall outside of Deep Creek, and jackass in the backseat just had to point out that if we'd gone south we wouldn't have hit the snow.

He was lucky that we were close to our destination, nearing the Falling Waters exit. "Which one?"

Blake popped forward, dropping his elbows on the back of our seats. I rolled my eyes. "One more exit—Spring Mills," he said. "You're going to take a left off the exit, like you're heading back to Hedgesville or Back Creek."

I followed his instructions, eyes narrowing as we cruised down a country back road. Two miles off the exit, Blake spoke again. "See the old gas station up ahead—the pumps?"

I saw what looked like gas pumps about forty years ago. "Yeah."

"Turn there."

Kat leaned forward, eyeing the tall weeds overtaking the shack near the pumps. "The club is in a gas station?"

Blake laughed. "No. Just drive around the building. Stay on the dirt road."

"You are giving my car a bath when we get back," I muttered, easing the SUV down the narrow dirt road.

Man, the farther we drove down what I was beginning to think wasn't an actual road, but more of a path, I imagined this is where many humans had traveled to never be seen again. Trees crowded the sides of the SUV, and we passed several run-down boarded-up houses that probably never saw electricity.

"I don't know about this," Kat said. "I think I've seen all of this in Texas Chainsaw Massacre."

I snorted, but I thought she was right. The SUV bumped over the uneven terrain, and then there were cars. Everywhere. Cars parked in haphazard lines, beside trees, crammed across a field. Beyond the endless rows of vehicles was a squat, square-shaped building with no outdoor lighting.

Kat sat back. "Okay. I think I actually saw this in *Hostel* one *and* two."

"You'll be fine," Blake said. "The place is hidden so it stays off the grid, not because they kidnap and kill unsuspecting tourists."

I parked near the back, away from the assholes I knew would open their car doors right into mine. As I killed the engine, a guy stumbled out from between the row of cars in front of us. My brows rose as I caught sight of the spiky green Mohawk. Interesting.

Kat opened the door and climbed out, hugging her coat close. "What kind of place is this?"

"A very different kind of place" was Blake's answer as he climbed out, slamming the door shut.

"Hey," I shouted as I gently closed the driver's door. "Slam my car door again, and it'll be your head."

Blake sighed as he turned to Kat. "You'll have to lose the jacket."

"What?" She glared at him. "It's freezing out. See my breath?"

"You're not going to freeze in the seconds it takes us to walk to the door. They're not going to let you in."

"I don't get it." She clutched her jacket. "So not fair."

I went to her, folding my hands over hers. "We don't have to do this if you don't want to. I mean it." "If she doesn't, then this was one huge time waster."

"Shut up," I threw over my shoulder, at Blake, and then focused on Kat. "I'm serious. Tell me now, and we'll go home. There's got to be another way."

Kat shook her head and stepped back, unbuttoning my jacket. "I'm fine. Pulling on big-girl undies and all that jazz."

Big-girl undies? What in... All thoughts vanished as she took the jacket off and tossed it inside the SUV. Holy shit, I wanted to get her up against the nearby tree and I also wanted her to put the damn jacket back on.

I stepped back, eyeing her from the pointy toes of her boots, up the ripped black tights, over the short denim skirt, and then my gaze got hung up on her *bare* stomach and that cute little belly button.

Oh damn.

"Yeah," I muttered, shifting so I blocked her from the...the world. "I'm not so sure about this."

"Wow," Blake said, admiration obviously in his voice.

I whipped around, letting go of a small pulse of the Source. Whitish-red sparks flew from my fingertips. Douche Bag darted to the side, narrowly avoiding the hit.

Kat heaved a sigh. "Let's get in there."

Sending him one more look of warning, I placed my hand on her lower back. We started forward, stalking between the cars as my palm burned from the contact. The building was pretty nondescript. No windows. Only a steel door, but as we drew close, music from inside could be heard.

Kat glanced back at Blake. "So do we knock—?"

I stiffened as a mountain of a man appeared from out of freaking nowhere. Dead of winter, and this dude was wearing overalls with no shirt on underneath. His hair, spiked in three sections, was purple. Piercings were all over his face—nose, lips, eyebrows. He had a planet pierced in each of his earlobes.

And even though he was human, he looked like he could lift a house with one arm.

Kat took a step back, stumbling into me, but Mountain Man was eyeing me like he wanted a piece. "See something you like?" I asked.

The guy smirked.

Blake jumped in. "We're here to party. That's all."

Mountain Man continued to stare at me as he reached for the door, opening it. Music blasted from the inside. "Welcome to the Harbinger. Have fun."

With my hand still on Kat's back, we stepped inside. The door shut behind us and Blake said, "I think he liked you, Daemon."

"Shut up," I said.

He let out a low laugh as he slipped past us in the tight, dark hallway. A few steps in and then we were in the club.

Jesus, I would never have expected this place to be here.

Dizzying blue, red, and white strobe lights flashed continuously. The dance floor was packed, and there was no escaping the scent of perfume, bitter alcohol, and sweat. Cages hung from the ceiling. Occupied cages. On the other side of the dance floor, near a bar, was a raised stage. People were everywhere, and not just humans. My senses were firing left and right. I could feel other Luxen, but among that, the darkness of nearby Arum slipped over my skin like oil.

Not liking this at all, I went on alert as I scanned the cavernous room. There were a lot of shadows, a lot of couches with...uh, questionable things taking place on them.

I glanced down at Kat and almost laughed at her wide-eyed expression. I spoke in her ear. "A little out of your element, Kitten?"

"I think you should've gone with the eyeliner," she replied.

I smirked. "Not ever going to happen."

Heavy drums pounded as we skirted the edge of the dance floor, and then everyone stopped—the ones on the dance floor and the chicks in the cages. Their fists shot in the air as they chanted in unison, "Safe from pain and truth and choice and other poisoned devils..." The yells picked up, drowning out everything except the drums.

Alrighty then.

We entered a narrow hall, leaving that mess behind. Kat was doing her hardest to stare straight ahead, studiously ignoring the couples along the walls. We stopped at a door that had the word Freaks scribbled over what used to be Personnel Only.

Sounded about right.

Blake started to knock on the door, but it cracked open. I couldn't see who was behind the door, but I had a feeling it was a Luxen.

"We're here to see Luc," Blake said. There was a pause, and the back of his neck turned red. Nice. "Tell him it's Blake, and he owes me." Another pause. "I don't care what he's doing, I *need* to see him."

"Great," I muttered. "He's friendless as usual."

Whoever was behind the door said something, and Blake growled. "Dammit, he owes me. These people are cool. Trust me. No bugs here." Finally, after forever, he turned to us, brows drawn tight. "He wants to talk to me first. Alone."

I drew up to my full height. "Yeah, not gonna happen."

Blake shook down. "Then nothing's going to happen. Either you do as he wants and someone will come for you, or we made this trip for nothing."

Yeah, I was so not cool with that.

Kat rose onto her toes and pressed against my back. "Let's dance."

I turned halfway and stared down at her.

She bit down on her lip as she tugged on my hand. "Come on."

Not a smart idea, but how was I supposed to turn down that lip? Or that sweater.

Or those tights?

I let her guide me back out to the dance floor, around the twisting and turning bodies. Once she found a spot she seemed to like, she stopped in front of me, and I watched her curiously, wondering if we were going to do this.

This wasn't like homecoming.

Closing her eyes, she stretched up and wrapped one arm around my neck and placed her other hand on my hip. We were close, very close, so I liked where this was heading already.

And then she started moving against me.

For a moment, I was still, because Kat...she knew how to move every part of her body—her shoulders and those hips. My mouth dried as her thighs rubbed against mine. I circled my arm around her waist and my chin grazed her neck. "Okay," I said into her ear. "I might have to thank Blake for being friendless."

Kat smiled.

My arm tightened as she swayed against me, the move fluid and sensual. "I think I like this."

That was the understatement of the year.

A fine sheen of sweat dotted Kat's face as she whirled around, pressing her back against my front. My hand slid to her stomach, and we moved together. Hell, I didn't have to do much of anything, because Kat had the lead on this. She danced away from me, and I caught her arm, spinning her back.

We were front to front, her on the tips of her boots and our bodies twisted together. Pure instinct and a near-primal need drove me to lower my mouth to hers. Our lips brushed, and power pulsed through me and over Kat. It created a flash of light that blended in.

Our hearts pounded in unity and our bodies surged with the music, fitting together, and when my lips pressed more firmly against hers, she opened up. We didn't stop moving, but her hand was sliding over my chest and lower, and mine was coasting over the curve of her back. Static crackled over our skin, and I was thinking about those couches I'd seen when we first came in and how incredibly useful—

A heavy hand landed on my shoulder, drawing me out of everything that was Kat. I let her go and spun, realizing it was Douche Bag. Before I could knock him into next year, Kat caught my arm.

Blake smiled as he yelled over the blaring music, "Are you guys having sex or dancing?"

"Do you want to ever have sex?" I shot back. "Because I'm about to fix it so you never can."

He stepped back, throwing his hands up. "Sorry. Geez."

My cheeks flared. Okay, maybe right now I'd be embarrassed.

"He's ready to see us if you're done eating each other's faces," Blake said.

One of these days, I was going to do more than seriously harm him.

Reaching down, I took Kat's small hand in mine, and we followed Blake back through the maze of people. I took the time to get my head on straight. Namely, start thinking with the head on my shoulders, which wasn't easy, considering.

When Blake went to knock on the door at the end of the hall again, the one marked Freaks, it opened before he could rap his knuckles off it.

The room was large and the air scented with vanilla. Several couches lined the walls, and one of them was occupied. A younger boy with shoulder-length brown hair was stretched out on the center couch, legs crossed at the ankles and his fingers flying over a handheld game. Around his wrist was a silver cuff that held a black stone with a reddish-orange flame in the center. The stone also had flecks of blue and green.

The kid glanced up, and purplish-colored eyes drifted over us, lingering on Kat for a second and then moving to the blond-haired man sitting behind a desk covered with stacks of money. The silver-eyed guy was definitely a Luxen, and he was shocked to see me there.

I stepped forward, and the Luxen male stood. "What's going on?" Kat asked.

From the couch, the kid coughed out a laugh as he tossed the game on the cushion beside him. "Aliens. They have this wacky internal system that lets them sniff each other out. Guess neither of them was expecting to see the other."

Kat twisted toward the kid.

He sat up, swinging lanky legs off the couch. "So, you crazy kids want to break into Daedalus

stronghold and you want my help?"

My head cocked to the side, and I almost laughed out loud. Luc, the person Blake had dragged us here to meet, was practically a toddler.

CHAPTER 10

Okay. A toddler was pushing it, but he couldn't have been older than fourteen or fifteen years old, and right now, our age difference felt as vast as the damn universe. This was who Blake brought us to see? Who could help us get into Daedalus?

A tween?

Luc smiled. "Surprised? You shouldn't be. Surprised about anything, that is." Standing, I was shocked to see he was almost as tall as me. "I was six when I decided to play chicken with a speeding cab. It won. Lost the coolest bike evah and a lot of blood, but lucky me, my childhood friend was an alien."

I eyed him, not sure if I believed the story he was spinning, because there was something about him that reminded me of someone else. Couldn't put my finger on it, but I immediately knew something wasn't right.

"How...how did you get away from Daedalus?" Kat asked.

Luc walked over to the table. "I was their star pupil." His grin was unnerving. "Never trust the one who excels. Isn't that right, Blake?"

Leaning against the wall, Blake gave a lopsided shrug. "Sounds about right."

"Why?" Luc sat on the edge of the desk. "Because eventually the pupil becomes smarter than the teacher, and I had some really, really intelligent teachers. So"—he clapped his hands together—"you must be Daemon Black."

I arched a brow. "That would be me."

"I've heard of you. Blake's a big fan," he said.

Blake raised a middle finger.

"Glad to know my fan club is far-reaching."

Luc tilted his head to the side. "And what a fan club—oh, my bad, I didn't introduce you to your fellow Luxen all-star. This guy goes by Paris. Why? I don't know."

The Luxen smiled tightly as he extended a hand toward me. "Always nice to meet another not bound by old beliefs and unnecessary rules."

I shook his hand. "Same. How did you fall in with him?"

Luc laughed. "Long story for a different day—if there's a different day." He looked at Kat. "Do you have any idea what they will do to you if they realize you're a fully functional hybrid?" He tipped his head down, grinning. "We are so very rare. Three of us together is actually quite amazing."

"I have a good imagination," she said.

"Do you?" Luc's brows rose. "I doubt Blake has even told you the half of it—the worst of it."

She glanced at Blake.

"But you know that." Luc stood and stretched. "And still you are willing to take the huge risk of

going into the hornet's nest."

"We really don't have a choice," I said. "So are you going to give us the codes or not?"

Luc shrugged as he ran his hands over the stacks of money. "What's in it for me?"

Kat exhaled roughly. "Other than pissing off Daedalus, we really don't have much to offer."

"Hmm, I don't know about that." He picked up a cluster of hundreds secured with a rubber band. A second later, the edges of the bills curled inward, paper melting until the scorched scent filled the air and nothing remained.

Really?

"What can we do for you?" Kat asked

"Obviously money's not an issue," I added drily.

Luc's lips twitched. "Money isn't needed." He brushed his fingers off on his jeans. "Power isn't either. Honestly, the only thing I need is a favor."

Blake snapped off the wall. "Luc—"

The young boy's eyes narrowed in warning. "A favor is all I want—one that I can collect at any time. That's all I want in return, and I'll give you all you want to know."

Kat frowned. "O—"

"Wait," I cut her off, not liking this. "You want us to agree to a favor without knowing what that favor is?"

Luc nodded. "Where's the risk if you know everything?"

"Where's the intelligence if we don't?" I shot back.

The kid laughed. "I like you. A lot. But my help doesn't come without its own peril for exchange."

"God, you're like the preteen mafia," Kat muttered.

"Something like that." He flashed a bright smile, and it was clear he was enjoying himself. "What you—all of you—don't understand is there are things much, much bigger than a brother's girlfriend or a friend...or even ending up under the Man's thumb. There's change brewing behind the winds, and the winds are going to be fierce." He looked at me. "The government fears the Luxen, because they represent mankind's fall from the top of the food chain. To fix that, they've created something much stronger than a Luxen. And I'm not talking about ordinary little baby hybrids."

"What are you talking about?" Kat asked.

Luc didn't answer.

Paris folded his arms. "Not to be rude, but if you're not willing to deal, there's the door."

I looked over at Kat, seeing she shared my concerns. She'd nailed it. It was like we were making the deal with the mafia, the hybrid mafia, and we didn't have all the necessary info.

"Guys," Blake said. "He's our only chance."

"Christ," I muttered, but he was right. "Fine. We owe you a favor."

Luc's eyes gleamed. "And you?"

She sighed. "Sure. Why not."

"Awesome! Paris?" He held out his hand. Paris bent over, grabbed a small MacBook Air, and handed it over. "Give me a sec."

I watched him punch away at the keyboard, his brows drawn in concentration. A door behind the desk opened and a young girl peeked in.

Luc's head jerked up sharply. "Not now."

The girl frowned, and for a moment I thought she was going to refuse, but she closed the door.

Kat's eyes widened. "She's the—"

"Don't finish that sentence if you want me to continue," Luc said, eyes fastened on the screen again.

"All deals will be off."

Okay then.

After a few moments, Luc placed the laptop on the desk, facing us. The screen was split into four sections, black and white, also grainy, like security film. One image contained woods. Another was of a tall fence and gate, another was of a security booth, and the final one showed a man in uniform patrolling another section of fence.

"Say hello to Mount Weather—owned by FEMA, secured by Homeland Security. Nestled away in the majestic Blue Ridge Mountains, it's used as a training facility and hideaway for all the pretty officials in case someone bombs us," Luc said, snickering. "Also known as a complete front for the DOD and Daedalus, because underground, there are six-hundred-thousand-mother-effin' square feet of training and torture."

Blake stared at the screen. "You hacked into their security systems?"

He shrugged. "Like I said, star pupil and all. See this section here." He pointed to the screen where a guard patrolled the fence, almost blending into the grainy background. "This is the 'secret' entrance that doesn't exist. Very few people are aware of it—Blakey-boy is." Pausing, he tapped the space bar, and the camera inched over to the right until a gate came into view. "Here's the dealo: Sunday evening at 9:00 p.m. is going to be your best bet—it's a shift change and staffing is at the minimal—only two guards will be patrolling this gate. 'Cuz, you know, Sunday is kind of down day."

Paris pulled out a pad and a pen.

"This gate is your first obstacle of choice. You'll need to take out the guards, but that's a duh. I'll make sure the cameras are down between nine and nine fifteen—you know, pull a *Jurassic Park* moment. You'll have fifteen minutes to get in, get your buddies, and get the hell out. So don't let a spitting dragon take you down."

I choked on a laugh. Kind of liked this kid.

"Fifteen minutes," Blake murmured, nodding. "Doable. Once inside the compound, the entrance leads to elevators. We can take them down to the sixth floor, go right up to the cell."

"Great." Luc tapped his finger off the screen, over the gate. "The code to this gate is Icarus. See a trend?" He laughed. "You get inside the compound; you'll see three doors side by side."

Blake nodded again. "The middle door—I know. The code?"

"Wait. Where do the other doors take you?" Kat asked.

"To the great Oz," Luc said, hitting the space bar until the camera was now focused on the doors. "Actually, nowhere interesting. Just offices and actual FEMA stuff. Anyone want to guess what the code to this door is?"

"Daedalus?" Kat threw out.

He grinned. "Close. The code to this door is Labyrinth. It's a hard word to spell, I know, but make sure you do it correctly. You get one chance. Enter the wrong code and it'll get ugly. Take the elevator to the sixth floor like Blake said and then you enter the code Daedalus—all caps. Voilà!"

I shook my head, doubtful. "There're only codes to enter? That's their security?"

"Ha!" Luc hit a few buttons and the screen went black. "I'm doing more than giving you codes and taking down cameras, my new BFF. I'm going to take down their eye recognition software. It can go down once a day for about ten to fifteen minutes without raising an eyebrow."

"What happens if we're still in there and it goes back up?" Kat asked.

Luc raised his hands. "Uh, kind of like being on a plane that's about to crash. Stick your head between your knees and kiss it good-bye."

"Oh, that sounds great," she said. "So you're like a mutant hacker, too?"

He winked. "But be careful. I'm not taking down any other security precautions they may've decided to put up. *That* will raise concerns."

"Whoa." I frowned. "What other security precautions could they have?"

"Nothing but guards, but it's a shift change." Blake grinned. "We'll be fine. We got this."

Paris handed over a sheet with the codes scribbled down. I snatched it before Blake could and slipped into my pocket. "Thank you," I said.

Luc's smile faded as he returned to the couch and picked up the game he was playing. "Don't thank me yet. Actually, don't thank me at all. I don't exist, you know, not until I need my favor. Just remember, this Sunday at 9:00 p.m., you have fifteen minutes and that is all."

"Okay," Kat drew the word out, glancing at Blake. "Well, I guess..."

"We'll be going," I offered, taking her hand. "It was nice, kind of, meeting you all."

"Whatevs," Luc replied, thumbs flying over the game board. We turned to the door, but he stopped us. "You have no idea what waits for you. Be careful. I would hate for my dealing to be one-sided if you all get yourselves killed...or worse."

Kat shuddered.

I nodded at Paris as we headed out, Blake closing the door behind him.

"Well," Blake said, smiling. "That wasn't too bad, was it?"

Kat rolled her eyes. "I have the feeling we just made a deal with the devil, and he's going to come back and want our firstborn child or something."

Hmm... I waggled my brows. "You want kids? Because you know, practice makes—"

"Shut up." She started walking ahead of me.

I laughed under my breath.

Mountain Man met us at the door. "Remember," he said. "You were never here."

CHAPTER 11

After school on Thursday, we were all gathered in the living room, hashing out the plans for the Sunday-night raid on Mount Weather.

Dee wanted to go in with us, but I wasn't having that. It was bad enough that Dawson would be in the line of fire if shit went wrong. "I need you and Ash to hang back just in case something goes wrong, along with Matthew."

She folded her arms. "What? You don't think I can handle myself with you guys? That I might trip and stab Blake to death?"

I wanted to laugh. "Well, now that you say that."

Dee rolled her eyes. "Is Katy going in with you?"

My body tensed as Kat dragged in a heavy sigh. "I don't want—"

"Yes," she cut me off. "Only because I got most of us into this mess, and Blake won't do any of this without Daemon and me."

Ash smirked from where she sat. "How valiant of you, Katy."

Ignoring her, Kat continued, "But we do need people on the outside in case something does go wrong."

"What?" Andrew asked. "You don't trust Blake? Go figure."

Sitting back, I scrubbed my fingers through my hair. "Anyway, we'll be in and out. Then everything...everything is over."

Kat was watching my brother. "How long... how long has it been since you've seen Beth?"

"I don't know. Time there was different. Weeks? Months?" Dawson stood, rolling his shoulders. "I don't think I was at that Mount place. The place was always warm and dry whenever I was taken outside."

My jaw clenched. When he was taken outside? Hell, I wanted to punch something.

Dawson let out a ragged breath. "I need to walk or something."

The sun had gone down a while ago, and it wasn't exactly walking weather, but I got why he needed out of here.

"I'll go," Dee offered.

Andrew stood. "I'll follow."

"I guess I'm out of here," said Ash.

Matthew sighed. "One of these days, we will get through everything without any drama."

I laughed tiredly. "Good luck with that."

Everyone except Kat left, and when I looked over at her, she was nervously fiddling with her sleeve. She'd been like that all evening, but who could blame her for being anxious?

We were finally alone, and I didn't want to think about Blake or my brother, or what we had to do

on Sunday night.

Kat looked over and our eyes met. "What?"

Standing, I stretched my arms above my head, noticing how her gaze dropped to the section of skin exposed when my shirt rode up. "It's quiet." I offered my hand and she took it. "It's never quiet around here. Not anymore."

She smiled as I tugged her onto her feet. "It's not going to last long."

"Nope." I pulled her to me. Her eyes widened in surprise as I lifted her into my arms. Her squeal was lost as I raced up the stairs and into my bedroom. I placed her on her feet. "Admit it. You like my method of travel."

Kat tipped her head back and laughed. "One of these days I'm going to be faster than you."

"Keep dreaming."

"Tool," she threw back.

My lips quirked up on one side. "Trouble."

"Oh." She widened her eyes. "Harsh."

"We should make use of this quiet time." I advanced toward her, liking how her cheeks flushed pink.

"Really?" The backs of her legs rested against the side of my bed.

"Really." I kicked off my shoes. "I say we have about thirty minutes before someone interrupts us."

Her gaze dropped and lips parted when I pulled my shirt off and let it fall somewhere on the floor. "Probably not that long."

I smiled. "True. So let's say we have twenty minutes, give or take five. Not nearly enough time for what I'd like to do, but we can work around that."

"We can?"

"Mm-hmm." I placed my hands on her shoulders and pressed down so she was sitting on the edge of the bed. I clasped the sides of her face as I knelt between her legs. "I've missed you."

She wrapped her fingers around my wrists. "You've seen me every day."

"Not enough," I murmured, and pressed a soft kiss to where her pulse thrummed on the side of her neck. "And we're always with someone."

She smiled as I started a trail of kisses that followed her jaw. "We probably shouldn't spend it talking then."

"Uh-huh." I kissed a corner of her lips. "Talking is such a time waster." I kissed the other corner so it didn't get jealous. "And when we talk, we usually end up arguing."

Kat laughed, and I loved that sound. "Not always."

Pulling back, I raised a brow. "Kitten..."

"Okay." She scooted back and I followed, climbing over her, caging her in. "You might be right," she said. "But you're wasting time."

"I'm always right."

She opened her mouth, probably to disagree, but I claimed her lips before she could get a word out. I don't think she minded, because she melted into that kiss. Her fingers slipped through my hair, tugging me back when I lifted my mouth from hers.

Yeah, she didn't mind.

Loved that mouth of hers, but I had other...ideas. I kissed my way down her throat and then followed the edge of her cardigan, my lips dancing over her collarbone. I kept going, over the flower-shaped buttons and lower still, until her chest rose and fell deeply and sharply.

My hands skimmed over the thin tights covering her legs as I sat back on my haunches. I grabbed

one of her boots, brows rising at the softness. "What are these made of?" I tossed it over my shoulder. "Rabbit skin?"

"What?" She giggled. "No. They're faux sheepskin."

"They're so soft." I got the other one off. Then I inched off her socks. Catching an ankle, I pressed a kiss on the top of her foot. She jerked. "Not as soft as this, though." Lifting my chin, I grinned at her. "Love the tights, by the way."

"Yeah?" She wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were fastened on the ceiling, her hands flattened against the covers as I ran my hands up her calves. "Is it...because they're red?"

"That." I moved again, closer to her, fitting my shoulders between her knees. "And because they're so thin. And hot, but you already know that."

I watched her face as my hands slid over her outer thighs, under her skirt, and then over the tops of her legs. I didn't stop there. Oh no, the palms of my hands made their way along the insides of her legs. The bedside lamp flickered, and it wasn't from me.

"Kitten..."

"Hmm?" Her hands fisted the covers.

"Just making sure you're still with me." I kissed the inside of her leg, above her knee.

"Don't want you falling asleep or anything."

Her chest rose sharply.

"You know what," I said. "Give me two minutes. That's all I need."

"Whatever," she said. "What are you going to do with the leftover eighteen minutes?"

"Snuggle," I offered.

Kat's answering laugh was cut off sharply when I found the band along the top of her tights. I dragged them down. They got bunched around her ankles. "Dammit."

"Need help?" she asked.

"Got it," I muttered, balling them up and throwing them somewhere over my shoulder.

Kat's breath caught as my hands now glided over bare skin, and I blazed the same path I'd taken earlier, but this time, with absolutely nothing between us, my lips trailed down her skin. Her body trembled with each kiss, each touch. I kept my eyes open, one hand curled around the outside of her thigh, unwilling to miss even the slightest flicker of pleasure.

Not that anyone could miss it.

A faint luminous glow surrounded her body and limbs as she moved. Damn, she was beautiful, and her response, everything about her, from the softest breath to the feminine breathy sounds she made, completely awed me.

Her arms and legs went lax, and I was barely able to hold it together as I stood. Shit. My hands were shaking. "You glowed a little." My voice was rough. "I've only seen you do that once."

Kat sighed.

My lips curved up in the corner as I wrapped an arm around her and lifted her so she was fully on the bed. I stretched out beside her, my own movements a bit stiff, as I kissed her parted lips.

"Wasn't even two minutes," I reminded her. "Told you."

"You were right."

"Always."

Kat smacked me lightly on the chest as she rolled into my side, throwing a leg over mine. She was quiet for several minutes as we did exactly what I'd said we'd do with the remaining time. Cuddle.

"I can't move," she said finally, her voice muffled against my chest.

I laughed. "This is how we snuggle."

"I really should head next door." She yawned, making no move to get out of the bed. "Mom will be home soon."

"Do you have to leave now?"

She shook her head, and I prepared myself. We really needed to talk about Sunday, and she wasn't going to like this conversation. I placed a finger on her chin and tilted her head back. "What?" she asked.

My eyes searched hers. "I wanted to talk before you leave."

"About what?" The lethargic haze faded from her stare.

"Sunday," I said. "I know you feel like you got us into this, but you know you didn't, right?"

"Daemon..." She tensed. "We are at this point because of the decisions I—"

"We," I corrected gently. "Decisions we made."

"If I hadn't trained with Blake and had listened to you, we wouldn't be here. Adam would be alive. Dee wouldn't hate my guts. Will wouldn't be running around doing God knows what." She squeezed her eyes shut as she flopped onto her back. "I could go on and on. You get my drift."

"And if you hadn't made any of those decisions, we wouldn't have Dawson back. It was kind of a stupid-smart move."

She laughed drily. "There's that."

"You can't carry this guilt with you, Kat." The bed moved under me as I rose up on one elbow. "You'll end up like me."

She peeked at me. "What? An extremely tall and douchey alien?"

I smiled. "The jerky part, yes. I blamed myself for what happened to Dawson. It changed me. I'm still not back to where I was before everything happened. Don't do that to yourself."

Kat nodded, but I doubted it changed how she felt. "You don't want me going Sunday."

"Hear me out, okay?" When she nodded, I continued. "I know you want to help, and I know you can. I've seen what you're capable of. You can be pretty scary when mad, but...if things go south, I don't want you involved." My gaze held hers. "I want you to be somewhere safe."

"I don't want you involved, Daemon. I want you somewhere safe, but I'm not asking you to stay out of it."

I frowned. "That's different."

Sitting up, she tugged at her skirt. "How's that different? And if you say it's because you're a guy, I'm going to hurt you."

"Come on, Kitten."

Her eyes narrowed.

I sighed. "It's more than that. It's because I have experience. That simple. You don't."

"Okay, you have a point, but I've also been *inside* a cage. With that intimate knowledge, I have more reason than you not to get caught."

"And that's more of a reason why I don't want you doing this." Suddenly I was thrown back to that horrible night when I saw her, heard her pitiful whimpers. "You have no idea what went through my head when I saw you in that cage—when I *hear* how your voice still rasps when you get excited or upset. You screamed until there—"

"I don't need a reminder," she snapped. "Shit."

She placed a hand on my arm. "One of the things I love about you is how protective you are, but it also drives me crazy. You can't protect me forever."

Oh, I could so do that.

She exhaled roughly. "I need to do this—I need to help Dawson and Beth."

"And Blake?" I spat out before I could stop myself.

"What?" She stared at me. "Where did that come from?"

"I don't know." I moved my arm away. "It doesn't matter. Can—"

"Wait. It does matter. Why would I want to help Blake after what he pulled? He killed Adam! I wanted him dead. You were the one who was, like, turning over a new leaf or something."

I stiffened as her words settled over me like a coarse blanket.

"I'm sorry," she said in a rush. "I know why you didn't want to...do away with Blake, but I have to do this. It'll help me get past what I caused. Like making amends or something."

"You don't—"

"I do."

My jaw clenched as I looked away. I knew she could handle herself. I knew she was strong, but dammit, she didn't have to prove that to me. I couldn't bear the idea of something happening to her. "Can you do this for me?" I paused. "Please?"

"I can't," she whispered.

Of course not. Tension crept into my shoulders. "This is stupid. You shouldn't be doing this. All I'm going to worry about is you getting hurt."

"See! That's the problem! You can't always be worried about me getting hurt."

I arched a brow. "You're always getting hurt."

She gaped at me. "I am not!"

I laughed. "Yeah, try that again."

Kat scrambled off the bed, her cheeks flushed with anger, which thoroughly amused me despite how angry I was. "God," she muttered. "You tick me off."

My smile was slow. "Well, at least I got you—"

"Don't even finish that statement!" She snatched up the forgotten socks and tights. Rolling them on, she hobbled on one foot. "Ugh, I hate you sometimes."

I sat up. "Not too long ago, you were really, really loving me."

"Shut up." She moved on to the other leg. "I'm going with you guys on Sunday. That's it. End of discussion."

Throwing my legs off the bed, I stood. "I don't want you going."

Shimmying the tights on, she glared at me. "You don't get to say what I can and can't do, Daemon." She grabbed one of her boots. "I'm not a frail, helpless heroine in need of your rescue."

I rolled my eyes. "This isn't a book, Kat."

She yanked on the other boot. "No, really? Crap. I was hoping you skipped to the end and would tell me what happens. I actually love spoilers." She spun around and stomped out of the room, heading downstairs and then outside.

I followed her, damn near desperate to get her to understand where I was coming from, and the desperation fueled what I said next. "After everything that went down with Blake, you said you wouldn't doubt me. That you would trust my decisions, but you're doing it again. Not listening to me or using common sense. And when this blows up in your face *again*, what am I supposed to do then?"

She gasped, backing up. "That's...that was a low blow."

"It's the truth."

Her eyes glistened, and I cursed under my breath as she appeared to force the words out. "I know all of this is coming from a good place, but I don't need a friendly reminder of how badly I screwed up. I totally know. And I'm trying to fix that."

"Kat, I'm not trying to be a dick."

"I know, it just comes easily to you." Her gaze flickered over my shoulder. I looked. Headlights peeked through the fog, coming up the road. Her voice was hoarse when she spoke again. "I've got to go. Mom's home."

Kat hurried off the porch, but I wasn't done. Moving quickly, I ended up in front of her. She stopped, eyes widening. "I hate when you do that."

"Think about what I said, Kat. You have nothing to prove."

"I don't?"

"No," I said, and I'd say it a thousand times.

But I knew screaming it from the top of Seneca Rocks wasn't going to change how she felt. I watched her wait for her mom by their porch, and then I turned around.

Amazing.

Took only two minutes to turn her into boneless, happy, and sated Kat. And it only took two minutes to piss her off.

CHAPTER 12

Kat still wasn't a fan of mine come Friday morning, and I still wasn't thrilled with the fact that my concerns fell on deaf ears. My mood only briefly improved when I caught up to her outside of class and kissed her in a way that made sure she'd spend the bulk of the rest of the day thinking about me.

However, having found her with Blake was not on my top one million things I cared to repeat again. I didn't like him around her, not even in the same time zone as her, and the douche bag knew it. The fact that it was obvious I wanted to strangle him with my bare hands didn't deter him one minute, not even from texting her about meeting Saturday night to go over the Mount Weather plans.

Kat and I still needed to really hash out the whole Sunday business, but as I walked her to her car after school, I just wanted to do something normal, because normalcy was so underrated these days.

We caught an afternoon matinee. I had no idea what the hell the movie was about, because I was too busy monopolizing the bucket of popcorn and Kat's mouth. I was actually disappointed when the movie ended and we made the drive back home.

And that disappointment multiplied when we got home. The moment I stepped out of her car, I sensed one of my own in my house, and it wasn't Dee.

"Kat, I think you should go home."

"Huh?" She closed the car door, frowning. "I thought we were going to talk? And eat ice cream—you promised ice cream."

I chuckled under my breath. "I know, but I have company."

She planted herself in front of the porch steps. "What kind of company?"

"The Luxen kind," I said, placing my hands on her shoulders. "Elders."

Her brows lifted. "And I can't come in?"

"I don't think that's a good idea, and I don't think that's an option."

Kat looked over her shoulder as my front door opened and *the* Elder stepped out and stood in the doorway. I kept my expression blank as I eyed Ethan Smith, who for some reason was dressed like he had a job on Wall Street, three-piece suit and all.

I had no idea how old Ethan was. Silver hair framed his temples, but the rest was midnight black, and his sharp amethyst gaze missed nothing, and definitely not where my hands were on Kat's shoulders.

Ethan's smile was pleasant as Kat turned, facing him. My hand slid down the center of her back. "Ethan," I said. "I wasn't expecting you."

His gaze flickered over Kat. "I can see. Is this the *girl* that your brother and sister kindly informed me about?"

I did not like the way he said "girl."

"Depends on what they kindly informed you of."

His smile didn't waver. "That you've been seeing her. I was surprised. We're practically family."

"You know me, Ethan, I don't like to kiss and tell the world." Unease bled from Kat, and I moved my thumb in slow, soothing circles along her lower back. "Kat, this is Ethan Smith. He's like a..."

A giant pain in my ass?

"Godfather," Kat offered quietly.

Ethan lifted his chin. "Yes, like a godfather." He focused on Kat again. "You're not from around here, are you, Katy?"

"No, sir, I'm from Florida."

"Oh." Dark brows rose. "Is West Virginia to your agreement?"

She glanced at me. "Yeah, it's nice."

"That's lovely." He came down a step, extending his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Kat started to reach for Ethan's hand, but I intercepted, weaving my fingers through hers. I didn't trust Ethan; therefore I didn't want him touching her. Lifting her hand to my lips, I pressed a kiss against the center of her palm.

"Kat, I'll come over in a little while." I let go of her hand and shifted, shielding her from Ethan. "I have some catching up to do, okay?"

"It was nice to meet you," Kat said, her voice even.

"Likewise," he said. "I'm sure we'll meet again."

Not if I had anything to do with it.

Ethan watched her walk next door with a curious tilt of his head. "A human, Daemon?"

I ignored the comment as I walked up the steps and headed inside. He was right behind me, taking his time. "What can I do for you, Ethan?"

He followed me into the kitchen. I grabbed a water, and nope, wasn't offering him shit. Unbuttoning his suit jacket, he sat at the kitchen table. "There've been many, many rumors circulating, and it appears all of them are true."

Leaning against the counter, I unscrewed the lid on the bottle. To be honest, I wasn't too surprised that he'd heard them. "Is that so?"

His smile lacked all warmth. "Dawson has returned."

"I'm sure Lydia told you that."

He cocked his head to the side. "He was re-assimilated?"

"Uh-huh." For some reason, I didn't think he believed the question he was asking.

"Luxen are only re-assimilated for breaking the rules. Many are never rereleased," he said, tapping his fingers on the table. "What rules did Dawson break?"

I took another drink.

He laughed under his breath. "I'm sure I can guess what it is. The same rule you're breaking right now?"

"Hmmm..."

"You're seeing a human."

"Among other things," I said with a smirk.

That smile went down a notch. "I expected better from you."

Irritation pricked my skin as I took a drink of water. "That's too bad."

"You know the risks involved." His eyes flashed. "And yet you treat this as a joke."

"There's not a damn single thing I find about this as funny."

"That's not the message I'm getting."

"That's not my problem."

The smile was completely gone by this point, replaced by a tense slash of a month. "Then is it Katy's problem?"

I stilled.

My lungs stopped the useless task of sucking in oxygen as I stared at the Elder. "Are you threatening her?"

"No." He chuckled, waving a hand dismissively. "Now why would I do that?"

Yeah. Bullshit. "I don't know. You tell me."

He was quiet as he dragged his hand off the table. "I would not threaten a young girl, Daemon. That kind of classless tact is below me."

I snorted. "Sounds right up your alley, to be honest."

Ethan's eyes narrowed. "Your actions affect those in the colony—"

"My actions have nothing to do with those who live in the colony," I said, so very done with this conversation. "Or with you or Lydia or any other Elder. They never have. They never will."

He stood, buttoning his suit. "You're young, Daemon, and you're at an age where you think you know everything."

The side of my lips kicked up. "I know a lot of stuff."

Ethan ignored that comment. "And you're foolish because of your age, despite what you may believe. Do not think you're the only Luxen male...or female to sample outside of our kind."

I arched a brow.

"But all of us, including you, will choose one of your own."

"I hate to break it to you, Ethan, but that's not going to happen." I sat the bottle down, meeting his slightly widened gaze. "I'm not just 'sampling' the human race over here. You can outcast me." My smile spread. "You can threaten to report me to the DOD." Crazy for me to throw that out there, but it wasn't like the DOD didn't already know about Kat and me. "It's not going to change anything."

His shoulders stiffened. "You so sure of that, Daemon?"

"Positive."

An eerie smile crept across his face, leaving the room as cold as frostbite. "Everything changes."

Ethan's visit left me feeling...shit, weird as hell. His words left a sour taste in my mouth. His visit was a warning, but what could he seriously tell the DOD that they didn't already know?

But his visit did have me thinking about the fact that the DOD hadn't captured all of us yet, and what the hell were we supposed to do once we did get Beth out of Mount Weather, if she was really there?

No way would they let that slide.

Dawson and Beth...they would have to leave. There really were no other options, and there was a good chance all of us would have to make an exit, including Kat. God, that made me antsy as hell, because I hated that because of me, she would have to leave everything and everyone behind.

Wasn't that the end result?

I felt like shit, which made the weird feeling even weirder, so a little while later, when Ash and Andrew stopped over and asked if I was hungry, I said yes. Not like I was going to say no when Dee had given me those sad eyes of hers, complaining that I never spent any time with her. And that was true. I hadn't, not since...well, since she stopped hanging out with Kat, and Dawson had returned.

We'd gone to Smoke Hole, but the place was packed, so we ended up ordering a pizza and heading

to the Thompsons' place.

It had been months since I had been there, and while so much had changed since then, and Andrew and Ash were subdued compared to how they were before Adam's death, it felt good hanging out with them.

Up until we started talking about Sunday night. For one of the first times ever, I saw real fear oozing out of Ash when Andrew talked about taking part. She was afraid she was going to lose Andrew, too. Dee still wanted to kill Blake. It took hours to get everyone on the same page about Sunday.

I'd texted Kat, letting her know I wouldn't make it over to her place before she went to bed, but I didn't get a response. Telling myself she probably had her nose stuck in a book, I tried to not let it stress me out. "Tried" being the key word, because even though if I was standing and living, so was Kat, that didn't mean other things couldn't happen to her.

I got home around two in the morning. Still no response from Kat, but I sent her another text for when she got up Saturday morning. Slipping on a pair of loose, old sweats, I turned music on low and passed out the moment my head hit the pillow, and it was a dreamless, deep kind of sleep. A warm sense of awareness woke me hours later, and I smiled sleepily, recognizing the series of tremors along the back of my neck, even half asleep.

Kat was quiet as she opened the bedroom door and crept across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. For a couple of moments, she was impossibly still, and I could feel her gaze on me.

I rolled toward her without any warning, snaking an arm around her waist. I dragged her down onto the bed next me, burying my face in her neck. "Good morning."

"Morning."

Throwing a leg over hers, I held her tight. "Where's my bacon and eggs?"

"I thought you were offering to make them."

"You mistook what I said. Get to the kitchen, woman."

"Whatever." Kat rolled onto her side, facing me. I kissed the tip of her nose and then planted my face back in the pillow. She laughed.

"It's too early."

"It's almost ten o'clock," she replied.

"Too early." I draped my arm over her hips and turned my head so I was facing her. "You didn't respond back last night."

"I fell asleep and I...figured you were busy."

I arched a brow. "I wasn't busy."

"I stopped over last night to see you, and I waited for a little while." She fiddled with the edge of the sheet, twisting it around her fingers. "You stayed out late."

I pried an eye open. "So you did get my text and had time to respond." I sighed. "Why did you ignore me, Kitten? My feelings are hurt."

"I'm sure Ash soothed them for you." Her cheeks flushed.

Staring at her for a moment, I then smiled. "You're jealous."

"I'm not jealous."

"Kitten..."

She rolled her eyes and then opened her mouth. A rush of words came out. "I was worried about the Elder being here, and we were supposed to talk last night. You never showed up. Instead you went out with Andrew, Dee, and *Ash*. Ash, as in the ex-girlfriend Ash, and how do I find out? Your brother. And how did those seating arrangements work out? Did Dee and Andrew sit on one side and you and Ash

on the other? I bet that was real comfy."

I struggled to keep from smiling. "Kitten..."

"Don't 'Kitten' me." She scowled, on a roll now. "You left around five or so and didn't get back till when? Past two in the morning? What were you guys doing? And get that stupid smile off your face. This isn't funny."

There was no way I was keeping the smile off my face. "I love when your claws come out."

"Oh, shut up." She pushed at the arm I had around her hips. "Let me up. You can call up Ash and see if she'll make you some eggs and bacon. I'm out of here."

I shifted on her, not off her. Bracing my hands on either side of her head, I grinned down at her. "I just want to hear you say it: I'm jealous."

Her lips pursed. "I already said it, butt-face. I'm jealous. Why wouldn't I be?"

I cocked my head to the side. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe because I never wanted Ash, and I wanted you from the first moment I saw you—and before you get started, I know I had a bad way of showing it, but you know I wanted you. Only you. You're insane to be jealous."

"I am?" she questioned. "You guys were together."

"Were together now."

"She probably still wants you."

"I don't want her, so it doesn't matter."

Her lower lip trembled. "She's model beautiful."

"And you're more beautiful," I told her, and that was the God's honest truth.

She rolled her eyes. "Don't try to sweet-talk me."

"I'm not."

Kat bit down on her lower lip, and it made me want to do the same. "You know, at first I thought I kind of deserved last night. Now I know how you felt when I went out with Blake. Like I was getting schooled by karma, but it's not the same. You and I weren't together then, and Blake and I didn't have that kind of history."

Damn, hearing her put it like that finally knocked the smile off my face. I rolled my shoulders, feeling like shit. "You're right. It's not the same thing. I didn't go out with Ash on a date. Andrew stopped by and we got to talking about Ethan. Andrew was hungry, so we decided to get something to eat. Dee tagged along, and Ash was there because, you know, she's his sister."

She raised one shoulder.

"And we didn't go out to eat. We ended up ordering pizza, went back to Andrew's house, and we talked about Sunday. Ash is scared to death that she's going to lose Andrew, too. Dee still wants to murder Blake. I spent *hours* talking them through this. It wasn't a party you weren't invited to."

"Why didn't you tell me at least? You could've said something," she said. "Then my imagination wouldn't have run circles around me."

I pushed up and sat beside her. "I meant to stop by when I got home, but it was late. Look, I didn't think about it."

"Apparently," she muttered.

Rubbing at my chest, I closed my eyes briefly. A part of me still didn't understand how she could be jealous of Ash, but I did get where she was coming from. "I honestly didn't think you'd get this upset. I figured you'd know better."

Kat stared up at me. "Know better?"

"Yeah, that you'd know if Ash pranced into my bedroom right now naked, I'd still send her packing. That you didn't have anything to worry about."

Her nose wrinkled. "Thanks for that image you implanted into my brain forever."

Shaking my head, I laughed drily. "This insecurity thing ticks me off, Kat."

Her mouth dropped open, and then a second later, she sat up on her knees, and I knew what I said had not gone over well. "Excuse me? Are you the only one who's allowed to be insecure?"

"What? Why would I be insecure?"

"Good question, but what do you call your little episode with Blake yesterday in the hallway? And that stupid question about me wanting to help Blake?"

I snapped my mouth shut. She was talking about when I'd kissed her in front of Blake. What the hell was that supposed to mean? I could kiss her... Oh well, okay, I did kiss her in front of Blake, because I simply liked kissing her and because she was in front of the douche bag.

"Ha! Exactly. It's even more ridiculous for you to be insecure. Let me spell it out for you." Electricity jumped from her skin. "I loathe Blake. He used me and was ready to turn me over to Daedalus. He killed Adam. There's only a teeny-tiny bit of me that can actually tolerate him. How can you even be any bit jealous of him?"

My jaw popped. "He wants you."

"Oh, dear God, he does not."

"Whatever. I'm a guy. I know what other guys are thinking."

She threw her hands up. "It doesn't matter if he did. I. Hate. Him."

"Okay."

"And you don't hate Ash. There's a part of you that loves her. I know you do and maybe not in the way you feel about me, but there's affection there—there's history. Sue me if I'm a little bit intimidated by that." She pushed off the bed.

I followed, moving so I was standing in front of her. Cradling her cheeks, I looked her straight in the eye. "Okay. I see your point. I should've said something. And the stuff with Blake—yeah, it's stupid, too."

"Good." She folded her arms.

Oh, those claws were still out. Really messed up that I found it hot. "But you've got to understand that you are who I want. Not Ash. Not anyone else."

"Even if the Elders want you to be with someone like her?"

Where did that even come from? I lowered my lips to hers, kissing her softly. "I don't care what they want. I'm incredibly selfish like that. Okay?"

"Okay."

"We're good then?"

"If you promise not to give me any crap about going with you tomorrow."

Sighing, I pressed my forehead against hers. "You drive a hard bargain."

"I do."

"I don't want you going, Kitten." I wrapped my arms around her. "But I can't stop you. Promise you'll stay close to me."

"I promise."

I kissed the top of her head. "You always get your way, don't you?"

"Not always." She placed her hands on my sides.

Thinking about her being with me Sunday night made me shudder, but I wasn't going to be able to stop her. Just like I couldn't stop Dawson. "Come on. Let's get the bacon and eggs going. I'm going to need all my strength for today."

"What for..." She trailed off, and then seemed to remember that Douche Bag was coming over

today to go over plans for Sunday. "Oh, yeah...Blake."

"Yeah." I kissed her again. "It's going to take a lot for me not to commit bodily harm. You know that, right? So extra bacon for me."

CHAPTER 13

There was not enough bacon in the freaking world or in the universe to deal with the Blake meet-and-greet.

Dee had welcomed him into our home with a punch to the jaw that should've cracked it, which Andrew and I found hilarious.

Okay. Everyone in the room with the exception of Blake found it hilarious.

We'd gotten down to business immediately, because sitting around and chatting with that asshole wasn't on anyone's prerogative list. He'd brought a map of Mount Weather with him. The red line we'd be following tomorrow night was a fire access road, a back entrance into Mount Weather.

According to him, we wouldn't be able to drive the whole way up, which was a big "no shit." We'd have to park several miles down the road and travel by good old Luxen speed.

I looked up from where the map was sprawled across the coffee table and looked over at Kat. I'd only seen her get to those kinds of speeds once. "Can you do this?"

"Yes," she said after a moment of hesitation.

Shaking her head, Dee stood. "How fast can they really run?"

"Damn fast when need be," Blake said. "Come at me again, and I'll show you how fast I can run."

Dee snickered. "I bet I'll still catch you."

"Perhaps," he murmured and then said to Kat, "You need to practice all day tomorrow. Maybe even tonight. We can't have anyone slowing us down."

"I'm not going to slow anyone down."

"Just making sure." His eyes churned as they met mine.

Irritation flared. "She's not your problem to worry about," I snapped.

Matthew intervened before we could go way off topic. There was an old farm at the bottom of the access road, giving us a perfect spot to the park the cars and hide them. Ash and Dee, along with Matthew, would remain with the cars if things went south, allowing Kat, Andrew, and me to help Blake and Dawson retrieve Beth and Chris.

"This shouldn't even take fifteen minutes." I sat beside Kat and leveled a pointed glare at Blake. "And then you will take Chris and get the hell out of here. You have no reason to come back."

"And what if he does?" Dee asked. "What if he finds another excuse to blackmail you into helping him?"

"I won't," Blake said, and then he looked at Kat. "I don't have a reason to come back."

Man, I was going to seriously hurt this dude. "If you do, you're going to make me do something I don't want to do—I'll probably enjoy it, but I don't want to."

Blake jerked his chin. "I got you."

"Okay then," Matthew addressed the room. "We meet here at six thirty tomorrow. Do you have

things covered, Katy?"

She nodded. "Mom thinks I'm doing a sleepover with Lesa. She works anyway."

"She always works," Ash said, staring at her nails. "Does she even like to be home?"

Kat stiffened. "She's paying for a mortgage, food, bills, and all my expenses by herself. She has to work a lot."

"Maybe you should get a job then," she suggested, her eyes flickering up. "Like something after school that takes about twenty hours or so of your life."

Kat folded her arms, lips pursed. "Why are you suggesting that, pray tell?"

Ash smiled in a way I recognized. "Just think if you were concerned about your mom making ends meet, you should help out."

I placed my hand on Kat's back, prepared to tell Ash to knock it off, but Kat spoke, holding her own. "I'm sure that's why."

"There's only one thing we have to worry about," Blake said, changing the subject. "They have emergency doors that shut every so many feet when alarms are sounded. Those doors also have a defensive weapon. Don't go near the blue light. They're lasers. Rip you right apart."

Oh yeah, that's just a small detail.

Blake smiled. "But they shouldn't be a problem. We should be in and out without being seen."

"Okay," Andrew said slowly. "Anything else? Like an onyx net we have to worry about?"

Blake laughed. "No, that should cover it."

"Then it's time for you to go," Dee said, looking at him like she wanted another go at his face, and I sure as hell wasn't going to stop her.

Without further pressure, Blake was out. Our group disbanded, leaving Dee and Dawson behind with Kat.

Kat clasped her hands together. "I want to practice the speed thing. I mean, I know I can do it as fast as you guys, but I just want to practice."

Dee didn't say anything, but Dawson spoke up. "We can do that. I could use the practice myself."

I wrapped my arms around Kat's waist. "It's a little dark right now. You'll probably end up breaking your neck, but we can do it tomorrow."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she replied.

"You got it." I kissed her cheek.

Kat elbowed me and then turned in my arms, facing Dee. I felt her take a deep breath. "Will...will you help?"

I willed my sister to respond, to just say yes, because it would be a step in repairing the rift between them, but she said nothing as she left the room, walking upstairs.

Damn.

"She'll come around." I gave her a little squeeze. "I know she will."

Confusion marked Dawson's face. "I don't know what happened to her while I was gone. I don't understand."

"We all changed, brother, but things...things are going to get back to normal soon."

Grief crept into Dawson's eyes, and I longed for there to come a day when he wasn't haunted by the dark memories of his time with Daedalus. He blinked, and a wan smile appeared. "Ghost Investigators marathon?"

"You do not have to ask me twice." I raised my hand and the remote control shot forward. "I have like six hours saved up. Popcorn? We need popcorn."

"And ice cream." Dawson stood. "I get the munchies."

Smiling softly, Kat settled in next to me. I brushed my lips across her cheek. "He's coming around, isn't he?" I asked.

"Yeah, he is."

Our eyes met. "Let's just make sure tomorrow doesn't make it all for nothing."

We spent the better part of Sunday morning and afternoon practicing. Since the snow had melted, the ground was saturated, and Kat was covered in mud.

She was a dirty Kitten.

I swiped at her as she stalked past me, and she shot me a level look. I grinned. "You have dirt on your cheek. Cute."

Kat glared at me, and I knew why. There wasn't a speck of mud on me. We'd been running back and forth for hours, and I hadn't even broken a sweat. She turned to Dawson. "Is he always this annoyingly good?"

Dawson nodded as he wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. "Yeah, he's the best at this kind of stuff—fighting, running, physical stuff."

She kicked mud off her sneakers. "You suck."

I laughed.

Kat stuck her tongue out and returned to stand next us. We were at the edge of the woods that ran up to her front yard.

"Get ready," I said, hands curling at my sides. "Go!"

Beside me, Kat pushed off and this time, I could tell she was paying more attention to the terrain without slowing down. Trees blurred as I raced forward, enjoying the way the Source rippled over my skin.

Looking over my shoulder, I grinned when I saw Kat pass Dawson. Her body glowed faintly, and her smile was breathtaking.

I reached the stream only ten seconds before them, spinning around to watch them. Both of them had improved drastically from when we started, and they were *almost* as fast as me, and that was saying something.

Though Kat hadn't really gotten the knack of slowing down yet. Her muddy appearance could attest to that. Bracing myself, I prepared to snag her if she started to go down like she was sliding into home base.

And she was.

Kicking up soil and loose rock, she dug her feet in as she slowed. Her feet stopped, but her body kept going. I caught her so she didn't end up in the lake. Kat spun around as she laughed and stretched up. Her gray eyes shone. She kissed my cheek.

I grinned. "Your eyes are glowing."

"Really—like yours do? The whole diamond shining thing?"

Dawson stopped, brushing back the heavy waves of hair. "Nah, just the color's luminous. It's pretty."

"It's beautiful," I corrected. "But you better be careful not to do that in front of people."

Kat nodded.

I clapped my hand on Dawson's back. "Why don't we call it quits? Both of you are good to go, and

I'm starving."

She rubbed her hands together. "You guys go ahead and head back. I'm going to do some more runs."

"You sure?"

"Yep. I want to run circles around you."

"Never going to happen, Kitten." I sauntered up to her and looked for a clean spot on her to kiss. Didn't find one, but I still laid one on her cheek. "You might as well give it up."

She landed a playful shove on my chest. "One of these days you're going to eat crow."

"I doubt any of us will be around to see that." Dawson grinned over at me.

My chest seized as Dawson turned that grin on Kat—on *my girl*—and I was struck by the happiness behind the grin. It was Dawson, really him. That was his grin—easygoing and relaxed.

Completely unaware of me staring at him like he'd grown a third eye on his chin, he knocked his hair back from his forehead and then started running. "Race you, brother!" he shouted.

I looked over at Kat.

Go, she mouthed.

Sending her a quick smile, I jogged after Dawson. "You know you're going to lose."

"Probably," he replied. "But hey, it's good for your ego, right?"

I snorted. I could practically hear Kat's voice in my head, telling me that was something I didn't need help with.

We ran at normal speeds for a couple of moments, and then Dawson stopped fooling around. Tapping into the Source, he flew over the muddy, uneven ground. I stayed at his side the whole way back to the house.

Dawson slowed down at the same time I did, his sneakers kicking up gravel as he came to a stop on the driveway. He turned to me, his eyes iridescent as he grinned. "You can run a hell of a lot faster than that."

"Maybe." I knocked my shoulder off his as I walked past him. "My ego doesn't need the help."

"No shit."

Surprised, I laughed as I climbed the porch steps. Part of me wanted to turn around and grab him, but I knew it was smarter not to point it out. So I pretended that it wasn't a big deal that he was acting more and more like himself since he was back.

In the kitchen, I opened the fridge. "What are you in a mood to eat?"

Dawson kicked off his muddy boots and then dropped into the kitchen chair. "Anything, if you're actually going to make it for me."

I snorted as I grabbed the tub of butter and a couple of slices of cheese. "Grilled cheese sandwiches it is."

He was quiet as I buttered up the bread, making enough for when Kat joined us. "Are you nervous about tonight?" he asked.

How could I really answer that? I plopped the sandwich onto the heated, buttered skillet, mulling over my words. I settled on, "I'm confident that we will succeed."

"Same here." Dawson had a hand thrust through his hair when I glanced over my shoulder at him, his gaze focused on the floor. His brows were knit together as he frowned. "I don't... I'm going to need your help tonight."

Holding the spatula, I faced him. "You have my help, Dawson."

"No. I don't mean that. I mean..." He cleared his throat as he looked up at me. His face had finally filled out a little, but there was still a sharpness to his cheekbones. "I mean I might need your help

with...with Beth. I don't think she's in a good place, you know?"

Remembering how Kat had described how Beth had acted, I nodded.

"And I don't know if she'll...if she'll recognize me."

My hand tightened on the spatula. "She'll recognize you, Dawson."

"I don't know," he replied quietly, casting his gaze to the floor again. "There were times when she didn't. There were times when I didn't recognize her."

I forgot to force myself to breathe.

"I just want to get her out of there without her or...or anyone getting hurt." Dawson slowly lifted his gaze to mine. "And I don't know if...if when I see her and she doesn't recognize me, that I'm going to be...much help."

"I get it." Shaken, I twisted back to the stove and flipped the sandwiches. "I got you, Dawson."

There was a pause. "Thank you."

Throat closed, I nodded and hoped it didn't come down to any of that. I wanted his reunion with Bethany to be happy, but I knew better than to blindly hope for anything. That was just asking the universe to take a piss on your leg and tell you it was raining.

Sandwiches finished, I scraped them off the skillet and placed them on plates. I handed one over to Dawson when I felt my heart jump erratically in my chest, the feeling catching me off guard.

Kat.

It was different than her practicing. Tossing the spatula into the sink, I moved wicked fast, reaching the front door in under a second. I stepped outside, immediately seeing the black Expedition parked down the road. I saw Officer Lane, but I didn't see Kat.

I moved form the porch to Kat's driveway in a blink of an eye, surprising Lane.

"Is there something I can help you with, Lane?"

He took a step back and pressed his hand to his chest. "Daemon, God, I hate when you do that." When I didn't respond, the older man gave a little shake of his head. "I'm doing an investigation."

"Okay."

I tensed as Lane reached into the breast pocket of his suit and pulled out a small notebook, flipping it open. "Officer Brian Vaughn has been missing since before New Year's. I'm checking all possible leads."

What entirely messed-up timing for him to show up today, of all days, to question us about Vaughn. I kept my voice level and face blank as I folded my arms across my chest. "Why would I know what happened to him or care?"

Lane raised a brow. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"I haven't seen him since the day you guys showed up to do your check-in and you all wanted to eat at the disgusting Chinese buffet," I responded. "I still haven't recovered from that."

He gave a reluctant grin. "Yes, the food was terrible." He scribbled something down and then slid his notebook back into his pocket. "So you haven't seen Vaughn at all?"

"Nope." I glanced over his shoulder, spotting movement.

The other man nodded. "I know you two weren't big fans of each other. I didn't figure he'd make any unauthorized visits, but we have to check every avenue at this point."

"Understandable." I glanced over to where I'd seen something between the trees, but I couldn't be sure. "Why were you checking out the neighbor's house?"

"I was checking out all the houses," he replied. "You still friends with the girl we saw you with?" My eyes narrowed.

Lane laughed as he walked past me, clapping me on the shoulder. "Daemon, when are you ever

going to loosen up? I don't care who you...spend your time with. I'm just doing my job."

Like I truly believed that. Lane wasn't as much of a dick as Vaughn had been, but that wasn't saying much. "So, if I decided to exclusively date humans and settle down with one, you wouldn't report me?"

"As long as I don't see undeniable evidence, I don't care. This is just a job with a good retirement, and I hope to make it to that point." He started for his vehicle but stopped, facing me. "There's a difference between evidence and my gut. For example, my gut told me that your brother was in a serious relationship with the human he disappeared with, but there wasn't any evidence."

I leaned against his SUV. Now the conversation was leading into tricky territory. Either Lane was going to lie and pretend that he didn't know Dawson was sitting inside, most likely not eating his grilled cheese sandwich, or he was going to speak the truth. "Did you see my brother's body when they found him?"

A tense moment followed, and Lane lowered his chin. "I wasn't there when they said they found his body along with the girl's. I was only told what happened. I'm just an officer." He raised his head. "And I haven't been told any different. I'm nothing in the big scheme of things, but I'm not blind."

"What are you saying?" I asked.

Lane smiled tightly. "I know what's in your house, Daemon. I know that I was lied to—a lot of us have been lied to and have no idea what's really going on. We just have jobs. We do them, and we keep our heads down."

I nodded as my respect for the man increased. "And you're keeping your head down now?"

"I was told to check on Vaughn's possible whereabouts and that was about it." He motioned at his car door, and I stepped away from it. "I know not to address anything unless told so. I really want that retirement plan." He climbed in, closing the car door. "You take care."

I moved back. "See you around, Lane."

Tires spun and kicked up gravel as the Expedition pulled back onto the road, puffing out exhaust. That was an...interesting conversation. While I wanted to believe what Lane had said, I knew better than to view him as a non-threat.

Sighing, I wheeled around, scanning the woods. I caught a flash of blue—the sweater Kat was wearing earlier. I started up the driveway, pausing when Kat trotted out of the woods.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

I nodded. "Did you hear any of that?"

"Yeah, I was heading back when I saw him." She paused, nose scrunching. "Do you believe him?"

"I don't know." I dropped my arm over her shoulders, steering her toward my house. "Lane has always been a decent guy, but this doesn't sit well with me."

She folded an arm around my waist and leaned in. "Which part?"

"All of it—this whole scenario." I sat on the step down from the top of the porch and tugged her into my lap, wrapping my arms around her. "The fact that the DOD—even Lane—knows damn well that Dawson's back and that they have to realize we know they lied. And they're doing nothing." I closed my eyes as she pressed her cheek to mine. "And what we're doing tonight—it can work, but it's so insane. Part of me wonders if they already know we're coming."

Kat smoothed her thumb along my jaw as she kissed my cheek. "Do you think we're walking into a trap?"

"I think we've been inside the trap the entire time and we're just waiting for it to spring closed." I picked up her dirty hand.

She shuddered. "And we're going to still do this?" I met her gaze. "You don't have to."

"Neither do you," she replied softly. "But we both are."

"That we are."

Neither of us spoke for several moments, and then she kissed me. "I think...I'm going to spend some time with my mom before we leave. She should be awake soon."

I kissed her back, pouring into it everything I felt—the yearning for more time, the desperation that there wasn't enough, and everything I felt for her. When I spoke, my voice sounded raw to my ears. "That's a good idea, Kitten."

Hours later, everyone was tense on the way to Mount Weather. There were laughs and curses, but it was forced. We all knew that some or all might not make the drive back. That was a sobering realization that haunted every single one of us.

So I focused on the fact that Kat was wearing one of my old black thermals, and there was nothing more hot in this world than seeing her in my clothes. The amount of possessive pride I felt was probably a bit disturbing.

We took two cars—Dee, Ash, and Andrew were riding in Matthew's car. Made sense for Blake to be in mine, because I was slightly less likely to kill him on the way. The idiot stayed quiet for the first thirty minutes, but now he wouldn't shut up. It got so bad that Dawson muttered, "Do you ever stop talking?"

"When I'm sleeping," Blake replied.

"And when you're dead," I threw back. "You'll stop talking when you're dead."

There was a pause. "Point taken."

"Good." I focused on the road. "Try shutting up for a while."

Kat twisted around, facing Dawson. "What are you going to do when you see Beth?"

Remembering what he'd said in the kitchen, I had no idea how he was going to answer this question.

And then he said, "Oh, man, I don't know. Breathe—I'll finally be able to breathe."

Damn.

God. Damn.

Kat's voice was throaty as she spoke. "I'm sure she'll feel the same way."

She glanced at me, and I grinned a little. Her shoulders tensed as she looked back at Blake. "What about you?"

He didn't answer immediately. "We'll leave here and head west. And the first thing we're going to do is go surfing. He really dug the sea."

My lips twitched at that, because it sounded so damn normal.

Kat turned back around, focusing on her hands. "That's ...that's good."

When we were about a half a mile from the access road, a cell dinged from the backseat. "It's from Luc," Blake said. "He wants to make sure we're on schedule."

"We are," I answered.

Dawson leaned forward, in between the front seats. Might as well climb into my lap. "Are we sure?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"Just checking," Dawson grumbled, sitting back.

Blake took his place, and I groaned. "All right, Luc's ready to do this. He wanted to remind us we've only got fifteen minutes. Anything goes wrong, we get out and try again later."

"I don't want to try again later," Dawson protested. "Once we get in, we've got to keep going."

In the rearview mirror, I saw Blake frown. "I want to get them out just as badly as you, man, but we have a limited gap of time. That's all."

"We stick to the plan." I met my brother's gaze in the mirror. "That's it, Dawson. I'm not losing you again."

"Nothing's going to go wrong, anyway," Kat interjected. "Everything's going to go as planned."

My jaw tensed, seeing the access road up ahead. I slowed down, merging into the left lane. There were no markings, but this was the only road that resembled the one on the map. In the rearview mirror, I saw Matthew's headlights follow me. A couple hundred feet on the dark road, there was an old farmhouse to the right, barely lit under the silvery moon.

Bingo.

"Creepy," Kat murmured, staring at half the missing roof. "I bet your ghost guys would say this place is haunted."

I chuckled. "They say every place is haunted. That's why I love them."

"Ain't that the truth," Dawson said as we parked, and Matthew was right behind us.

Matthew and I killed the lights and engines. Glancing at the clock, I saw that we had five minutes till nine. There was no time to waste at this point.

Blake's cell went off again. "He's just making sure we're ready."

"God, he's an annoying little kid," I muttered, facing where Matthew parked. "We're getting ready to do this. Andrew?"

He slipped out, murmuring something to Dee and his sister. Then he turned, throwing up what looked like a gang symbol. What the hell? "I'm ready steady," he said.

"Geez," Blake muttered.

"We stick to the plan. At no time do *any* of us," I directed mostly to Dawson, "deviate from the plan. All of us are coming back tonight."

Everyone was in agreement as we piled out of the cars. I met Kat around the front, placing my hand on her arm. "Stick close to me."

She nodded.

Her nervousness was a tangible entity, and I couldn't blame her. I wasn't letting myself think too much about what we were doing, because it was freaking insane. "Time?" I asked.

Blake glanced down at his lit cell phone. "One minute."

In the darkness, I found Kat's hand and squeezed.

"Thirty seconds," Blake said.

I stopped making my lungs function.

"Ten seconds."

Giving her hand one more squeeze, I then held on. There was no way I was letting her go.

Beside us, Blake bent forward. "Three, two, go!"

We were gone, the five of us, rushing through the darkness. Energy rippled through the air, charging it with static. We hit the mountain, sticking close to the road but avoiding the streams of light.

I held on to Kat, but I didn't have to pick up her slack. She was keeping right beside us, moving just as fast as the rest of us. A little over a minute, bright spotlights lit a twenty-foot tall fence. We slowed down, coming to a complete stop behind the last stand of trees.

Red and white signs marked the fence as being electrical. Beyond them was a football-field-length open space and then a massive structure—Mount Weather.

"Time?" I asked.

"One minute after nine." Blake ran a hand through his hair. "Okay, I got one guard at the gate. Do you see any others?"

I scanned, not seeing anyone else. Luc had been right. It was a shift change, and only the gate was covered. We were going to have to hit the guard before he knew what was coming.

"Give me a second," Andrew said, slipping away from the trees, creeping toward the guard dressed in black.

Tensing, I watched as he dipped and placed his hand on the ground. Blue sparks flew and the guard started to twist toward where Andrew was crouched, but the surge of electricity reached the guard.

The man rattled like someone shook him. The gun he carried fell from his hands, and seconds later, he was lying on the ground beside it. The man was alive, but oblivious to the world.

"He doesn't know what hit him." Andrew grinned as he blew a breath over his fingers. "He'll be out for about twenty or so minutes."

"Nice," Dawson said. "I'd have fried his brain if I tried that."

I chose not to respond to that as I approached the gate. All I could rely on was that Luc had taken the cameras down and given us the right codes. If not, we were officially screwed.

And Luc was officially a dead kid.

"Icarus," Blake said quietly.

I nodded and then quickly typed in the code. A mechanical *click*ing followed, and a low hum broke the silence. Our breaths puffed, forming misty clouds in the cold air as the gate swung open.

Too soon to be relieved.

Motioning everyone forward, we raced across the field and reached the building. I scanned the wall, not finding the control panel to enter the second code.

"Where's the damn keypad?" Dawson demanded, pacing between the doors.

Kat stepped back. "There." She pointed toward the right.

Andrew jogged over to where the panel was stuck behind an overlay. "Ready."

Glancing at Kat and then me, Dawson nodded and focused on the middle door in front of us. "Ready."

"Labyrinth," I murmured from where I stood behind Kat and Dawson. "And please, God, spell it correctly."

Andrew snickered and then entered the code. A second passed and the door quietly slid open, revealing a wide orange tunnel. All the way at the end were the elevators. From there, we'd go down six floors, and then we'd find the cells.

What happened next was so fast.

Dawson stepped through the door, Kat right behind him. I reached for her, wanting her to stay at my side, but before I could even touch her there was this small hissing sound, as if we'd neared a pit of vipers.

Without warning, Dawson dropped to the ground in a withering heap. My stomach dropped as horror and anger rose swiftly. I raced to his side, placing my hands on him. He jerked as if my touch scalded him. I scanned his body, seeing no visible injuries.

What the hell?

"No one moves," Andrew ordered as Blake's face paled.

Then it hit me, the way Dawson contorted his body. It was so familiar, as was the glazed-over look

of raw pain in his eyes. *Onyx*.

The whole damn world stopped as I looked up. On the frame of the door, there was a series of nozzles, facing down. The hissing sound came again. Onyx, I realized stupidly, weaponized, airborne onyx.

I lurched forward, but it was too late.

Kat locked up, her back stiffening unnaturally. Her mouth dropped open in a silent scream as she took a direct hit.

CHAPTER 14

Instinct took over as everything else shut down. Reaching Kat, I winced when pain clouded her face as I picked her up. Gathering her against my chest, I spun around as Andrew grabbed Dawson. I had to get the onyx off her.

I ran fast, speeding across the lawn and back through the woods, near the access road, reaching where the others waited in less than a minute. I had no idea what kind of damage airborne onyx could do, but the bitter tang of fear was overwhelming.

"What happened?" Dee cried out, racing forward.

"Onyx—it was in the air. It's all over her." I stepped back when Dee came forward. "Don't. It'll get on you. Andrew is bringing Dawson. I need to get it off her. Now."

Matthew cursed, slamming his fist into the side of his car. Metal dented. He whirled on us. "The river! Get her to the river."

Spinning, I took off again, knowing that the river was at the base of the mountain. Wind howled as I raced to the river we'd passed on the way in. It was bone-chilling cold, but it was the quickest way for me to get the horrible stuff off her.

Everywhere she touched my bare skin, the onyx burned. The red-hot pain felt like tiny hooks were under my skin, digging in and ripping through bone and tissue. I powered past the fiery hell, focusing on the river. Once the musky scent of the water invaded my senses, I wanted to drop to my knees but couldn't. We hit the water at full speed.

"Hold on to me," I told her. "It's going to be cold, but the onyx is all over your clothes and hair. Just hold on, okay?"

Kat didn't answer, and I strung together a mouthful of curses as icy water lapped at my legs and then my knees. I gritted my teeth, and when the water reached Kat's leg, soaking through her pants, she tried to scramble up me, but I couldn't let her. Holding on to her and hating myself for doing this to her, I folded my hand along the back of her head and then dunked both of us under water.

Fuck.

The ice-cold water seized up every part of me, and I knew if it was this bad for me, it was worse for Kat. She was shaking her head erratically, stirring up sediment, but the burn was fading.

Using my knees, I pushed us both back up. Our heads broke the surface. Kat dragged in air by the lungful as I raced us out of the water onto the riverbank just as Andrew launched into the river, taking Dawson under. Gently, carefully, I laid her down on the bank. Hands shaking, I smoothed the clumps of wet hair off her pale face. Her gray eyes were wide, lips nearly blue, and her chest rose and fell sharply.

Behind me, water splashed. I looked over my shoulder, surprised to see Blake helping drag Dawson out of the water. They laid him next to Kat. She slowly turned her head toward them. None of us

moved.

Then Dawson flung an arm over his face as he bent one leg. "Crap."

Relief made my knees weak. I cradled her cheeks again, turning her head toward mine. "Are you okay? Say something, Kitten. Please."

"Wow," she croaked out.

I stared at her a moment. Wow? Then I was moving without thinking. Folding my arms around her, I lifted her into my arms as I fell back on my ass, holding her so tightly she let out a hoarse squeal.

"God, I don't even know..." I cupped the back of her head. "I was scared to death."

"I'm okay." Her voice was muffled. "What about you? You had to have—"

"It's all off me. Don't even worry about that." A shudder rocked me. "Damn, Kitten..."

Kat clutched the front of my wet sweater as I ran my hands over her, making sure there were no injuries I hadn't seen. When I found none, I kissed her forehead, then each eyelid. I couldn't get my hands to stop trembling.

Two sets of headlights appeared, and out of the stream of questions, Dee dropped to her knees beside Dawson, clutching his hand. "What happened? Someone tell us what happened."

Matthew and Ash walked up behind her as Andrew did his best to explain what happened. "I don't know. They had something that came out of the doors when they opened. It was some kind of spray, but it had no smell and we couldn't see it."

"It hurt like a bitch." Dawson rubbed his arms. "And there's only one thing that feels like that. Onyx. But I've never seen it like that before." With stiff movements and Ash and Dee's help, he climbed to his feet. "It was airborne. Insane. I think I swallowed some."

"Are you okay? Katy?" Matthew asked.

Kat nodded. "How did you know to get us to the river?"

Lifting my hand, I knocked the wet hair off my forehead. "I guessed it was onyx when I didn't see any visible wounds and it was on your clothes and skin. I remembered passing the river. Thought it was the best place to go."

"We didn't even make it past the first set of doors." Andrew barked out a laugh. "What the hell were we thinking? They have that place wired against Luxen and apparently hybrids."

Come to think of it, how did Blake not know about this? He'd been to Mount Weather before. How did he not know about the onyx?

Helping Kat stand, I dropped my arms and then stalked over to where Blake sat. "You've been to Mount Weather before, right?"

Slowly, Blake pushed to his feet. "Yeah, but nothing—"

I slammed my fist into Blake's jaw, knocking him back down. He leaned over, planting his elbow in the dirt as he spit out a mouthful of blood. "I didn't know—I didn't know they had something like that!"

"I'm finding that hard to believe."

Blake lifted his head. "You have to believe me! Nothing like that ever happened before. I don't understand."

"Bullshit," Andrew said. "You set us up."

"No. No way." Blake staggered to his feet, his back to the river. He placed a hand to his jaw. "Why would I set you guys up? My friend is—"

"I don't care about your friend!" Andrew shouted. "You've been there! How could you not know they had the doors rigged with that stuff?"

Blake turned to Kat. "You have got to believe me. I had no idea that was going to happen. I wouldn't

lead you guys into a trap."

"And Luc didn't know?" she asked, sounding doubtful.

"If he did, he would've told us. Katy—"

"Don't," I warned as the edges of my anger started to shimmer. "Don't talk to her. Don't even talk to any of us right now."

Blake opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He shook his head as he stalked back to the cars.

There was a gap of silence, and then Ash asked, "What do we do now?"

"I don't know." I watched Dawson pace. "I really don't know."

Dee rose. "This sucks. This sucks donkey butt."

"We're back at square one," Andrew said. "Hell, we're at negative one."

Dawson whipped toward me. "We can't give up. Promise me we won't give up."

"We won't," I assured him. "We're not giving up."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Matthew walk out from his car and drape a blanket over Kat's shoulders. He said something to her, and Kat hunkered down in the blanket. A second later, he guided her back to the SUV. I heard the door close and the engine come on.

Exhaling roughly, I faced Dawson. Our gazes locked. "I'm not giving up."

Dawson lifted his chin, his mouth pressed in a flat line. He didn't say anything as he stalked back to the SUV. I looked up. Stars blanketed the sky, as endless and unforgiving as our rescue mission had been.

Kat had stopped shivering halfway back to Petersburg, but I was still worried about her. She might be a hybrid, but she'd been doused with onyx, and I'd nearly drowned her in the Shenandoah River. There was no way I was letting her out of my sight tonight.

Near midnight, I pulled into the driveway. Blake had slunk off without so much as a word, and I hoped he walked off a cliff somewhere. I didn't care. Catching Kat before she could head next door, I steered her inside. Everyone was talking, but again, I didn't care. Still shrouded in Matthew's blanket, Kat looked numb and exhausted.

I took her hand. "Let's get you into some dry clothes."

She waved me off at the bottom of thestairs when I went to pick her up. "I'm fine."

I made a disgruntled sound, but stayed behind her as she slowly climbed the steps, just in case she went ass over teakettle. Once in my bedroom, I closed the door behind us.

Kat sighed. "We kind of deserved this."

Walking over to where she stood, I pried the blanket off her. "How so?"

"We're a bunch of teenagers, and we thought we could break into a facility run by Homeland Security and the DOD? I mean, come on. This was bound to go wrong—wait!" she said, grabbing my wrists as I grabbed the hem of the thermal. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you naked."

Her mouth dropped open. "Uh, wow. Way to cut to the point."

I gave her a half grin. "Your clothing is soaked and cold. And there are probably traces of onyx still on them. You need to get out of them."

She smacked my hands away. "I can do that myself."

Leaning in, I spoke directly in her ear. "Where's the fun in that?" I let go, though, and walked over

to my dresser. "You really think we were doomed to fail?"

The following rustle of clothing being stripped off really made it hard to not look.

"Don't...don't turn around."

Considering I'd seen it before, I shook my head as I rooted around for something she could wear.

"I don't know," she said finally. "It was a huge undertaking for trained spies. We're in over our heads."

"But we were fine until we hit those doors." I pulled out a shirt that would work like a gown on her, albeit a short gown. "I hate to say this, but I really don't think Blake knew about them. The look on his face when you and Dawson went down—it was too real."

"Then why did you punch him in the face?"

"I wanted to." Placing a hand over my eyes, I turned around and offered her the shirt. "Here you go."

She grabbed it quickly and for a moment, I split my fingers, catching the shirt billowing around her thighs.

"You were peeking," she said.

"Maybe." I took her hand and led her to the bed. "Get in. I'm going to check on Dawson and I'll be back."

Kat climbed onto the bed and made her way to what was turning out to be her side. She grabbed the comforter and tugged it all the way up to her chin. I headed out into the hallway, stopping at the top of the stairs. I could hear Dawson and Dee. Andrew's voice was in the mix. Matthew had probably already left.

I needed to go down and check on Dawson, but as I stood there at the top of the stairs, I told myself that Dee had it handled; so did Andrew. I wasn't always...needed. I didn't have to be the one to always take care of everything.

Instead of going downstairs, I pivoted and walked to my bedroom. Slipping inside the room lit by silvery moonlight, I went back to the dresser and grabbed a pair of pajama bottoms. Quickly changing, I then made my way over to the bed. I pulled the covers back and slid in.

Kat wiggled closer. "How's Dawson?"

"He's doing okay. He's not a happy camper, though." I didn't need to go downstairs to know that.

"Thank you for getting us out of there." She tilted her head back as I brushed the still-damp hair off her cheek.

"I had help." I pressed my lips against her forehead. "You feeling okay?"

"I feel fine. Stop worrying about me."

I curled my fingers through her hair. "Don't ever walk through a door first again, okay? And don't argue with me about it or accuse me of being chauvinistic. I don't ever want to see you in that kind of pain again."

I waited for her to argue with me, but she scooted over and placed a hand on my bare chest. Static jumped across her fingers as she kissed me. I returned the kiss with a soft one. The kiss was more of a benediction, sweet and tender, but the kisses changed. I don't think either of us planned for that, but the residual adrenaline from tonight kicked back in, heightening our senses.

Kat shifted onto her back, and I followed. There wasn't a moment where we lost contact with each other. I settled over her, her softness welcoming me, undoing me. In mere seconds, our failure at Mount Weather was shoved out of this room, locked away.

I smoothed my hand down, catching the borrowed shirt and baring her shoulder. I blazed a trail of kisses down her throat, shuddering when I heard her soft moan. When I kissed the smooth skin of her

shoulder, Kat lifted up and raised her arms.

There wasn't a moment of hesitation for me. God. There never was, not anymore, when it came to Kat.

I tugged her shirt off and I was struck motionless by the beauty of her.

My hand trembled slightly. *I* shook as I stared down at her. Since all of her clothing had been soaked, there'd been nothing under that shirt. I don't know why I didn't think about that until now.

Damn.

Kat undid me in ways she'd never know.

I was greedy with my hands. There wasn't a part of her I didn't want to touch, to explore, and she was the same. Her hands smoothed over my chest and my stomach, slipping under the loose band of the pants, and then they, too, were shed, and there was nothing at all between us.

In the back of my head, I wanted our first time to be perfect. Corny. Hell, I knew it was corny. Kat was worth perfection, but there was nothing but sensations and wants and needs. Energy coursed over us, and I was ready. She was ready.

"Don't stop," she whispered.

My heart freaking stopped at the sound of her plea. I kissed her deeply, and when I lifted up, electricity crackled over our skin. This was going to happen. Our breaths came in rough pants. Our hearts pounded in rhythm. We both were ready. Sitting up, I reached for the bedside table.

Kat's gaze met mine. She bit down on her lower lip, and then a giggle broke free. I smiled at the happy sound, and I spoke in the language rarely ever heard or spoken.

"What did you say?" she asked.

I grabbed a foil package from the nightstand. "There's really no translation for it, but the closest human words would be 'you are beautiful to me."

Kat sucked in a sharp breath, and our gazes locked. She reached up, sinking her fingers into my hair. I started to open the packet.

A fist pounded on the door, and Andrew's voice intruded. "Daemon, are you awake?"

Disbelief thundered through me. "If I ignore him, do you think he'll go away?"

Her hands fell to the bed. "Maybe."

The pounding came again, so nope. "Daemon, I really need you downstairs. Dawson is ready to go back to Mount Weather. Nothing Dee and I are saying to him is making a bit of difference. He's like a suicidal Energizer bunny."

Stomach sinking, I squeezed my eyes shut. "Son of a bitch..."

"It's okay." Kat started to sit up. "He needs you."

Yeah, but I needed Kat, like real bad.

I glared at the door. Cursing under my breath, I tossed the foil packet back into the nightstand. "Stay here and get some rest. I'll talk—or beat some sense into him." I kissed her briefly, and then gently pushed her back down. "I'll be back."

She snuggled in, smiling. "Try not to kill him."

"No promises." Grabbing the pajama bottoms, I pulled them on and made my way to the door. Stopping, I looked back at her. Seconds. I'd been seconds away from pure heaven. *Seconds*. I sighed. "Dammit."

Andrew was leaning against the wall across from my bedroom when I opened the door. The look on his face was knowing, sly. I smacked him upside the head as I walked past him.

"Ouch," he yelled. "What in the hell was that for?"

"Your timing sucks on an epic level," I shot back.

"Hey, not my fault, man." He fell into step beside me. "More like your brother has bad timing."

The moment I walked into the living room and saw Dawson's determined expression and Dee's concerned grimace, my libido was officially cooled. "What are you doing, Dawson?" I demanded. "It's now past one in the morning and—"

"I don't care what time it is." Dawson's eyes flashed an intense white. "Beth is still at Mount Weather, and we're here, doing nothing."

Dee shook her head. "You and Kat were injured. You—"

"We are fine," he shot back, stepping to the side, but I blocked him in. "There's no reason for us not to go back."

I stared at him. "Are you insane?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?" muttered Andrew.

Struggling not to shake sense into Dawson, I forced my voice even. "Think about this, Dawson. You can't just waltz into Mount Weather now. Besides the fact that the onyx will take you out again, Luc only took down the cameras and security functions for fifteen minutes. They are back up again. You will get busted the moment you near the gate."

"I don't—"

"Don't say you don't care," Dee argued, her eyes filling with tears. "You do care! You have to care about what happens to you. You have to care about us."

Before he could say something that would traumatize my sister, I jumped in. "You have to care about Beth. If you go back now, if you go back without us being more prepared, you're not going to help Beth escape. You will be captured, and she'll still be in danger."

"You don't get it," he seethed. "You can't understand. You have Katy. She's safe, upstairs right now, in your bed. You have her. You'll be able to go right back to her, but me? I don't even know"—his voice cracked—"if I'll ever see Beth again."

I drew back, stiffening. "I know I can't possibly fully understand all that you're feeling, but give me some damn credit here. You will see Beth again."

Dawson opened his mouth, but then snapped his jaw shut. He turned sideways, thrusting his hands through his hair. Desperation crept into the lines of his face.

"We're not giving up. I told you that. I promised that." I placed my hand on his shoulder and sidestepped him so I could meet his gaze. "We will find a way to get her out."

He lifted his chin. The harsh white light faded from his eyes, leaving nothing but pain and sorrow behind. "How? How are we going to get to her now?"

Damn, that was a good question. One I didn't have an answer for, because even if we got Luc to take security down again, how would we get past the onyx?

"I don't know," I said finally, "but we will figure something out. We're not going to leave her in there. We will figure something out."

His stare held mine for a long time, and then he nodded. Bone-deep weariness filled the void the anger and panic had left. Dawson settled down after that, but I stayed with him for a while, just keeping an eye on him. Eventually, he went to bed. Andrew stayed even though we had school in a few hours, crashing out on the couch. I was so done with today by the time I climbed the stairs.

Kat was out when I neared the bed, and while I would have loved to rekindle what we'd started, I didn't have it in me to wake her.

Carefully climbing back into bed next to Kat, I worked one arm under her and pulled her back against my chest without waking her. Still asleep, she wiggled her bottom and settled in against me. She hadn't pulled my shirt back on, so it was difficult to ignore the fact that she was gloriously,

perfectly naked.

Really difficult.

It was hard shutting down, especially after everything, but I forced my eyes closed and I held Kat close. The feeling left behind by Dawson's words, by the fear of losing her, haunted me even in my sleep.

CHAPTER 15

Blake was waiting for us Monday morning when we pulled into the parking lot of the school. He was leaning against a truck of few spaces down, and the moment he saw us, he pushed off the side and trotted over as we climbed out.

I groaned. "He is not who I want to see as soon as I get to school."

"Agreed." She wrapped her hand around mine. "Just remember we are in public."

"No fun."

Blake slowed as he reached us. "We all need to talk."

I kept walking. "Talking to you is the last thing I want to do."

"I can understand that." He caught up to us. "But I seriously didn't know about the onyx shields in the doors. I had no idea."

"I believe you."

Blake's step faltered. "You punched me."

"That's because he wanted to," Kat explained, and I winked at her. "Look, I don't trust you," she continued, "but maybe you didn't know about the shields. It doesn't change the fact that we're not going to be able to get in there."

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he stopped in front of us. "I talked to Luc last night. He didn't know about the shields either. He's willing to do it again—take down the cameras and stuff."

That was good to hear, since we needed to get back there, but that didn't really help us. I glanced around. We were huddled by the fence circling the track and no one else was around us, but I kept my voice low. "And what good does that do us? We can't get past those doors."

"Or if every door is set up like that," Kat added.

"Well, I was thinking about that," Blake said, shifting from one foot to the next. "While I was with Daedalus, they used to expose us to this stone each day. Our forks and silverware were encased in it. A lot of stuff was, almost everything we came into contact with. Burned like holy hell to touch, but we didn't have any other choice. I've walked through the doors before and recently. Nothing happened."

I barked out a dry laugh as I looked away. "And you just now thought this was a good thing to tell us?"

"I didn't know what it was. None of us did," he said. "I didn't think much about it."

Part of me didn't know what to believe, but it didn't take a leap of logic to think that maybe Daedalus had been conditioning Blake. Exposing him and others repeatedly to onyx, in doses, to build up tolerance. But why? Why would they want him to be able to pass through onyx, a weapon that could be used to keep them under control?

"You can't tell me you never knew about the onyx and what it could do," Kat challenged.

"I didn't know that it could incapacitate us."

Kat pressed her lips into a thin line. "You know, there's so much we have to just trust you with. That you really are working against Daedalus and not for them. That Beth and Chris are where you're saying they are, and now, that you didn't really know about onyx."

His shoulders tensed. "I know how this looks."

"I don't think you do." Letting go of Kat's hand, I leaned against the fence. "We have no reason to trust you."

"And you've blackmailed us into helping you," Kat added.

Blake exhaled roughly. "Okay. I don't have a glowing history, but I want nothing more than to get my friend away from them. That's why I'm here."

"And why are you here right this instant?" My patience was almost gone.

"I think we can get around the onyx," he said, pulling his hands out of his pockets and holding them in front of him. "Now, hear me out. This is going to sound crazy."

"Oh, goody," I muttered.

"I think we need to build up a tolerance. If that was what Daedalus was doing, then that makes sense. Hybrids have to go in and out of those doors. If we expose ourselves to it—"

"Are you insane?" As I clasped the back of my neck, I felt like I'd been asking that question a lot lately. "You want us to expose ourselves to onyx?"

"Do you see any other option?" he replied.

"Can we do this later?" Kat asked, watching me. "We're going to be late."

"Sure." He sidestepped me. "After school?"

"Maybe," she replied. "We'll talk later."

He didn't look too happy with that answer, but he backed off, leaving us by the fence. Kat shook her head as she faced me. "Expose ourselves to onyx?"

I huffed. "He's insane."

"Do you think it would work?"

"You're not...?" I trailed off. Shit. She was seriously considering this.

"I don't know." She switched her backpack to the other shoulder as we started toward the school. "I really don't know. We can't give up, but what other options do we have?"

"We don't even know if it will work."

"But if Blake really is sort of immune to it, then we can test it out on him."

Huh. I grinned. "I like the sound of that."

Kat laughed. "Why doesn't that surprise me? But seriously, if he has a tolerance to it, then we should be able to? It's something. We'd just need to figure out how to get some." When I didn't respond, she asked, "What?"

I squinted as the sun broke free of the clouds. "I think I have the onyx part covered."

"What do you mean?" She stopped even though the warning bell rang.

"After Will got you and a couple of days after Dawson came back, I returned to the warehouse and stripped most of the onyx from the outside."

Her jaw hit the ground. "What?"

"Yeah, I don't know why I did it. Kind of like my big FU to the establishment." I laughed, kind of embarrassed. "Imagine their faces when they went back and saw it all gone."

Kat was speechless.

I tweaked her nose.

She smacked my hand away. "You're insane. You've could've gotten caught!"

"But I didn't."

She smacked me on the arm, this time harder. "You're crazy."

"But you love my craziness." I leaned down, kissing the corner of her lip. "Come on, we're late. The last thing we need is detention."

She snorted. "Yeah, like that would be the biggest of our problems."

I wasn't surprised to learn that Blake had gotten to Dawson sometime during the day and told him about the whole exposing ourselves to onyx idea, and of course, Dawson was so down for that shit.

Couldn't really blame him for latching onto the idea, though, because it was giving him something to work toward. It was giving him back hope. I got that. Still didn't make me happy that Blake had gone to him. I didn't want that asshole anywhere near my brother. Or anyone in general.

When I told Kat about it on the way home after school, she looked as thrilled as I was about it all. Blake had managed to make sure we did talk about the onyx that night.

Kat sighed. "There go my reviewing and reading plans."

"Shouldn't it be reading and then reviewing?" I corrected with a grin.

"Whatever," she muttered.

I pulled out onto the road as my grin faded. "Why can't you still do that?"

"If Blake wants to talk tonight, then that's going to soak up all my time."

Hearing the pout in her voice, I glanced over at her. "You don't need to be there, Kitten. We can talk to him without you."

"Yeah, right." She laughed. "There's a good chance someone will kill Blake without me there."

"And would you really be torn up about that?"

She scrunched up her face. "Well..."

I laughed.

"And the fact that upon his untimely death, there's a letter delivered to Nancy Husher. So we kind of need him alive."

"True." Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, I reached over and caught a strand of her hair. "But we can keep it short. You'll have a normal Monday evening full of normal suck and not extraterrestrial suckage."

Looking away, she bit down on her lower lip as she squeezed her fingers together. "That's really selfish of me."

"What?" I tugged on her hair gently, not liking the sound of that at all. "It's not selfish, Kitten. Your whole life can't revolve around this crap. It won't."

Straightening her fingers, she smiled. "You sound so determined."

"And you know what happens when I get determined."

"You get your way." She laughed when I raised my brows. "But what about you? Your life can't revolve around this crap."

I pulled my hand away, dropping it to my thigh. "I was born into this. I'm used to it, and besides, it's all about time management. Say, like time management last night. We did our mission thing—"

"And failed."

"There's that, but the rest of last night?" Seeing her in my mind, as she'd been last night, under me, was really distracting when I was driving. "We had the bad—the not-normal. And then we had the good—the normal. Granted, the good was interrupted by the bad, but there was time management

there."

She stretched her legs out. "You make it sound so easy."

"It is that easy, Kat. You just need to know when to draw the line, when you've had enough." Slowing down, I turned onto the road leading to our houses.

"And if you've had enough for today, you have. Nothing to feel guilty about or to worry about."

There was no response as I pulled into the driveway. Turning off the engine, I looked over at her. "And no one will kill Bill."

She laughed softly as she unbuckled her seat belt. "Blake. His name is Blake."

Amused, I grinned at her. "He's whatever I decide to call him."

"You're terrible." She stretched over and kissed me, but when she pulled away, I wasn't done. I reached for her, but she evaded me and slipped out of the SUV. "And by the way, I haven't had enough today. I just needed a kick in the pants. But I do need to be home by seven."

I was out of the car and beside her before she even shut the door. "You haven't had enough?"

Her cheeks flushed as she stared up at me. "No, not nearly enough."

"Good." Hands on her hips, I tugged her to me. "That's what I like to hear."

Kat rose onto the tips of her toes and slid her hands up my chest. I met her halfway. Our lips touched. Our hearts pounded in tandem.

The front door of my house swung open and Dawson yelled, "Hey! I think Dee caught the microwave on fire. Again. And I tried popping some popcorn with my hands and it kind of went wrong. Like really, really wrong."

I pressed my forehead against hers and growled. "Dammit."

Kat giggled. "Time management, right?"

"Time management," I muttered.

CHAPTER 16

Mostly everyone was down for the whole onyx thing, and even though none of them spoke up as to why they were so willing to allow some of us to repeatedly expose ourselves to a ridiculous amount of pain, I knew better. They knew it was the only way to keep Dawson from running off and getting himself caught.

Or worse.

As I looked around the living room, seeing my friends and Kat, I realized then that even though Matthew and the Thompson siblings shared no blood with me, they really were the true definition of family. My throat constricted. Only this kind of family would continue to be a part of this craziness, risking their freedom and lives.

Look at me; I was actually getting a bit emotional.

"This is so insane," Dee said. "This is tantamount to self-mutilation."

Dawson's head dropped back, and he sighed. "That's a little extreme."

"I remember what you looked like when they brought you back down the mountain." She twisted her hair around her hand, an old nervous habit. "And Katy lost her voice for a while from screaming. Who signs up for that?"

"Crazy people." I sighed. "Dee, I don't want you doing this."

She didn't look surprised at all. "No offense, Dawson, I love you and want you to see Beth and to hold her, because I wish..." Her voice cracked, but her spine straightened. "But I don't want to do this."

Dawson placed a hand on her arm. "It's okay. I don't expect you to do this."

"I want to help." Her voice was wobbly. "But I can't..."

"It's fine." Dawson smiled as he folded his hand along the back of her neck. "Not all of us need to do this."

"Then who's in?" Blake scanned the room. "If we are going to do this, we need to start like yesterday, because I don't know how long it'll take to build a tolerance."

Dawson stood. "It can't take that long."

Blake let out a laugh. "I've been with Daedalus for years, so there's no telling at what point I built a tolerance...or if I really have one."

"We've got to test that out then." Kat grinned.

He frowned. "Wow. Kind of excited about that?"

She nodded, and I sort of wanted to make out with her right there.

Dee twisted around, eyeing Blake. "Can I test it out, too?"

"I'm pretty sure everyone will get a round." I smiled at Blake. "Anyway, back to the basics. Who's in?"

Matthew raised his hand. "I want to be in on this. No offense, Andrew, but I prefer to take your place this time."

Andrew shook his head. "No problem. I can wait with Ash."

Ash, who was surprisingly quiet, nodded.

"Oh." Kat folded her arms. "Yeah, I'm in. Don't start with me. I'm in. Nothing you can say will change that."

If she thought I wasn't going to try to convince her otherwise, she was also out of her mind. Plans were made to start after school tomorrow if it didn't snow, and then to make sure that Kat got to do what she wanted this evening, I ushered her outside and next door.

And of course, I wanted to talk to her.

She walked into the kitchen, placing her book bag on the counter. "Milk?"

"Yes, please, and thank you."

Kat pursed her lips, but grabbed a glass of milk for me. "Huh."

I downed the entire glass. "Can we talk about this?"

She hopped up on the counter and opened her bag, pulling out a textbook. "Nope."

My brows rose. "Kat."

"Hmm?" She flipped open to a chapter.

Stalking over to her, I placed my hands on either side of her crossed legs. "I can't watch you get hurt over and over again."

Ignoring me, she reached into her bag and dug out a highlighter. Okay. I saw how this was going to go, but I wasn't giving up easily. "Seeing what happened last night and when Will had you handcuffed in that stuff? And I'm supposed to just stand there?" I watched her highlight a sentence. "Are you listening to me?"

Her hand stilled. "I'm listening."

"Then look at me."

Thick lashes lifted, revealing steely gray eyes. "I'm looking at you."

I scowled.

Sighing, she popped the cap back on the highlighter. "Okay. I don't want to see you in pain."

What the hell? "Kat—"

"No. Don't interrupt. I don't want to see you in pain, and just thinking about you going through what that feels like makes me want to hurl."

"I can handle it."

Our eyes locked. "I know you can, but that doesn't change how horrible it's going to be to see you go through that," she said patiently. "But I'm not asking you not to do it."

Hell.

I saw what she did there.

Pushing off the counter, I pivoted as I dragged my hand through my hair. Kat placed her book aside and hopped off the counter. "I don't want to argue with you, Daemon, but you can't say it's okay for me to watch you go through this and not you." She came to where I stood and wrapped her arms around my waist. "I know this is coming from a good place, but just because it's getting ugly, I can't back out. And you know you're not going to. It's only fair."

Hell.

"I hate your logic." I placed my hands on hers, though. The idea of seeing her repeatedly in pain made me sick, just like it made her ill, but I...I had to let her make her own decisions. Shit. I hated it. But I couldn't control her. "And I'm really going to hate this."

Kat squeezed me.

"The only good thing is that I'm going to hold Buff down and make him kiss onyx over and over again," I said after a moment.

She choked out a laugh. "You're sadistic."

"And you need to study, right?" I asked. "It's school time management—not Daemon time management, which blows, because we're alone and it requires more effort for them to interrupt us over here."

She pulled free. "Yeah, I need to study."

I stuck out my lower lip. "All right, I'm leaving."

Kat looped her arm around mine and led me to the front door. "I'll text when I'm done, and you can come over and tuck me in."

I was going to do much more than tuck her in, because her momma was working. "'Kay." I kissed the top of her head. "I'll be waiting."

Kat wiggled her fingers bye as I headed back out into the chilly late-afternoon air. As I stepped off the porch, I saw that Matthew's and Andrew's cars were gone. Blake had left when I'd escorted Kat to her house. I walked past my car, stopping when I saw an odd glint along the driver's door. What in the hell? Was that a scratch?

I stalked over to the side and ran my fingers over the thin white line that stretched from the handle to the center of the door. When I realized it was just dust from the salt on the road, I smiled. I was going to need to wash my baby soon.

Wheeling around, I started back to my house. I was halfway there when I felt my heart rate unexpectedly kick up, skyrocketing into what I imagined a heart attack felt like. Tensing, I pivoted on my heel and my gaze flickered up.

The window of Kat's bedroom lit up with a flash of intense white light tinged in red. There was another flash and another. *Shit*. Energy burst through me as I raced over to her house. Throwing open the front door, I flew upstairs, reaching her bedroom in a second.

I came to a complete stop, my mouth dropping open as I stared at the catastrophe that was her bedroom. Papers were everywhere. Books lined the floor, some torn apart. Others burned. The mattress was on its side and her desk chair flipped over. Smoke wafted from her—oh no, her new laptop.

Kat stood in the center of the mess, among a pile of clothes, her hair windblown. Blood trickled out of the corner of her mouth. Red splotches, like strawberries, marked her cheeks.

"I can't leave you alone for two seconds, Kitten."

She launched herself forward, and I caught her around the waist. Her entire body trembled. "I came up here to study, you know, because I figured I'd get more work done, and I had a glass of orange juice with me." Her words came out in a jumbled rush. "And Carissa—Carissa was here."

"How did she get here? I didn't see her."

Kat's eyes were wide with shock as she shook her head. "She'd been here while I was downstairs. She was waiting for me, and I thought she was sick at first, you know, like she didn't know where she was, because she hasn't been in school. But she wasn't sick. Oh my God, she was—"

"Okay. Slow down for me, Kitten." My gaze flickered over her, landing on the burned spot in the floor. My stomach sank. If Carissa had been here, she wasn't here anymore. "What happened to Carissa?"

Kat shuddered. "She attacked me. Like legit attacked me."

Very few things surprised me nowadays, but this did. Carissa was a quiet, shy girl, the exact

opposite of their other friend Lesa. A book was the only thing I could picture Carissa attacking. Maybe a bug. But a small bug.

"She didn't even seem to know who I was. She was like the Terminator, Daemon—the Terminator. And she just kept coming at me. I asked her to stop. I told her I didn't want to hurt her, but she wouldn't stop." Tears filled her eyes, and my stomach sank as I thought about the burned spot on the floor. "She wouldn't stop."

"It's okay." I folded an arm around her shoulders. "You didn't have a choice. You were defending..."

"I didn't kill her." Kat broke free of my hold and stumbled back a step. She swung, throwing her arm out to the burned spot. "I didn't kill her, I swear. She— She self-destructed, Daemon. She—oh my God—she imploded like a bomb." Spinning back toward me, she lifted her hand and wiped at the blood under her lip. "She was mutated—she was a hybrid."

That absolutely made no sense and raised so many damn questions. "Okay. All right. Let's get you downstairs."

Kat stared at me like she didn't understand what I was saying. Pained, I took her hand and led her out of the room and down the stairs. Once in the living room, I sat beside her on the couch. Cupping her cheeks, I tapped into the Source and took care of the minor injuries.

"I don't understand what happened," she said. "She was normal last week. Daemon, you saw her. How did we not know this?"

My jaw tightened. "I think the better question is why did she come after you?"

She drew in a sharp breath. "I don't know."

That was an answer that I didn't even have. How did Carissa end up mutated? It would have to have been one of the Luxen from our colony. There weren't many around our age, but they didn't venture out from the colony often. How did this person meet Carissa? And why did she go after Kat? Because maybe someone from the colony hadn't mutated her. There was another explanation.

I frowned. "She could've known a Luxen—known the truth and knew not to tell anyone. I mean, no one inside the colony knows that you're aware of the truth."

"But there are no others around our age," she said.

"None outside the colony, but there are a few who are only a couple years older or younger than us *in* the colony."

She looked away, swallowing hard. "You don't think..."

"That Daedalus took her and forced a Luxen to heal her like with Dawson?" Anger punched through me. "I seriously pray that's not the case. If so, it's just..."

"Revolting," she said hoarsely, shoving her shaking hands between her knees. "She wasn't there. Not even a flicker of her personality. She was like a zombie, you know? Just freaking crazed. Is that what unstable does?"

Kat was completely healed, at least physically, but I was reluctant to remove my hands. I was afraid she was going to shake to pieces. I wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to my side.

"God, she...she died. Does that mean...?" Kat swallowed again.

I gently squeezed her. "If it was one of the Luxen here then I'll hear about it, but we don't know if the mutation held. Blake has said that sometimes the mutation is unstable, and that sounded pretty damn unstable. The bonding only happens if it's a stable mutation, I believe."

"We need to talk to Blake." She cleared her throat with a shake of her head. Her mouth worked for several seconds. "Oh...oh God, Daemon...that was Carissa. That was Carissa, and that wasn't right."

Weight slammed down on my chest as the tears streamed down Kat's face. I pulled her into my lap and held her. That was the only thing I could do while she sobbed for the loss of her friend. And it was more than just the loss. Kat wouldn't be able to tell anyone what happened to Carissa. She would have to pretend that she didn't know anything when people realized that the quiet girl from trig class had disappeared. Guilt would fester. I knew it would. So would the pain, because Carissa's death was absolutely senseless and beyond cruel, and that wasn't something you could easily, if ever, come to terms with. You just came to accept it.

All I could do was hold her, and as she cried, I whispered to her in my true language. I told her it would be okay. I told her that I'd be here for her, no matter what. And I told her that one day, she would live without any more of this pain or this fear.

I would make sure of it.

My brain started to turn over all the stuff that needed to be done. Kat's bedroom needed cleaning up. She needed something to cover the burned spot, because I didn't want her seeing that every day.

After some time, the tears slowed and Kat lifted her head. Her eyes were rimmed in red, but her voice was steady as she spoke. "She had a bracelet I'd never seen her wear before. The same kind of bracelet that Luc had on."

That was unexpected. "Are you sure?" When she nodded, I leaned back against the couch, keeping her in my lap. "This is even more suspicious."

"Yeah."

"We need to talk to Luc without our unwanted sidekick first." Unease churned. I didn't trust that kid. I didn't trust Blake. I didn't trust that Carissa met a Luxen, fell in love with the person, was injured, and then healed. "I'll let the others know what happened. I don't want you to have to go through telling them what happened."

She lowered her cheek to my shoulder. "Thank you."

"And I'll take care of your bedroom. We'll get it cleaned up."

Kat relaxed. "You're perfect, you know."

"Sometimes," I murmured, brushing my chin along her cheek. For once, I didn't feel anywhere near perfect. "I'm sorry, Kat. I'm sorry about Carissa. She was a good girl and didn't deserve this."

"No," she whispered. "She didn't."

"And you didn't deserve to have to go through that with her."

Kat didn't respond, and I reached up, carefully brushing away the tears that gathered under her eyes. Her voice was thick as she spoke. "Can we go to Martinsburg? Mom works on Wednesday. Do you think that's too soon to talk to Luc on our own?"

"No. I think that works."

She fell quiet after that, and eventually her breathing evened out. The fight with Carissa and the tears had exhausted her. Lifting her out of my lap, I laid her down on her side. She murmured something unintelligible that weaseled a small grin out of me. Grabbing the quilt off the back of the couch, I draped it over her.

I lingered for a moment and then walked into her kitchen, fishing my phone out of my pocket. I sent Dee a quick message. A minute later she was walking into Kat's kitchen.

"What is—?"

"Keep it down." I leaned against the counter. "Kat's asleep in the living room."

Dee frowned as she glanced at the wall clock. "Um..."

"Carissa was a hybrid," I told her, cutting to the point.

She stared at me, her mouth slowly parting. "Come again?"

I gave her a brief rundown of our suspicions. "She came after Kat. Attacked her and then she...she kind of self-imploded." My shoulders stiffened as Dee jerked back a step. "I'm sorry. I know you were friends with her, but I need you to do me a favor right now." God, I sounded like a dick, but I needed her to do this for me. "I know you're not really fond of Kat right now, but can you set that aside just for tonight? I need to go get a damn rug for her bedroom, and then I need to clean it up. I just want you to stay with her and be here in case she wakes up."

"Yes." She blinked once and then twice, but didn't hesitate. "Yes. Of course."

"Thank you." Relieved, I folded an arm around her shoulders and hugged her.

Dee hugged me back. "Carissa... She's really gone?"

I nodded as I stepped back.

She wrapped her hands around her hair and started twisting the length. "Oh my gosh, I don't..."

"I'm sorry." Two of the lamest words in history at the moment. I scrubbed my hand through my hair. "I'm going to grab Dawson and have him go with me. Okay?"

"Okay."

Before I left, I went back into the living room. Kat was still asleep, curled on her side. Under her eyes, the skin was puffy, but the red splotches on her cheeks were gone. I knelt at her side, brushing back her hair. I kissed her cheek. "I promise you," I whispered into her ear. "You won't have a life like this. I promise."

CHAPTER 17

"Damn," Dawson said from the passenger seat. His elbow was resting against the door, and the side of his face was plastered against his hand. "Damn."

My hand tightened on the steering wheel. "That pretty much sums it up."

Dawson and I were heading to the store to find some kind of area rug for Kat's bedroom. Because of the time and where we lived, options were limited. We had to leave Petersburg to hit up the nearest Walmart. Andrew was at the house just in case something else unexpected and insane happened.

"I know I haven't been around, but I can't see it being someone from the colony. No way," he said, shifting in the seat. "Those in the colony don't get close to humans in that way. Not unless that's changed."

I thought of Ethan's recent visit. "No, that hasn't changed." I paused, glancing over at him. His face was shadowed. "You think Daedalus is behind what happened to Carissa?"

He didn't respond for a few moments. "They'd bring in humans all the time and force us to heal them. It usually didn't work...and the humans would die, because they were injured. I lost count of how many died in front of me."

My jaw clenched. "None of that—those deaths—are your fault."

"Didn't feel like it then, when you're the only person who can save them. Anyway..." He cleared his throat. "Sometimes it would kind of work. I...I could heal the human and within a couple of days, the mutation would start, but it didn't hold. It never held."

I was quiet as we passed a semitruck, unsure of what the appropriate response to that level of messed-up shit would be. Honestly, I didn't want to say the wrong thing. Dawson had been becoming more and more like himself with each passing day, but he still wasn't very talkative, especially not about his time with Daedalus.

"Usually I wouldn't see those humans again—after they were brought to me to be healed," he continued, his voice gruff. "Once though, I did. I think Daedalus thought they had a success on their hands. The guy lasted longer than any other subject, but he...he wasn't right, Daemon. Like when a fever ravages the brain, he was out of control and he did what Kat said Carissa did. Self-destructed. As if there was a bomb inside of him, but instead of exploding, he imploded. Everything caved in..." He trailed off, shaking his head as he dropped his arm into his lap. "They haven't had much luck with successful mutations. That's why Beth and I were so...important to them." He looked over at me, and I already knew what he was going to say. "That's why you and Kat would be important to them." Hearing about some of the shit Dawson was forced to do and had seen always made me want to blow something up. I couldn't even begin to think of Kat ever being in the situation. "I'm sorry," I said after a couple of moments. "I'm sorry you had to go through any—"

"It's not your fault, man. Never has been. Never will be."

I nodded slowly. Trees crowding the road blurred. "Why do you think they're doing this? Mutating humans? Did they ever say?"

"Not really," he replied, stretching out his legs. "I always thought they were trying to build an army of hybrids."

Barking out a laugh, I shook my head. "That's freaking insane. One hybrid at a time?"

"Yeah." He tipped his head back against the seat and sighed. "But what other reasons would there be?"

Dawson had a point. Up ahead I saw the exit I needed and I eased into the next lane. I glanced over at him. "So they would mutate someone, knowing it would probably kill them?"

Yellow light from an oncoming car flickered across Dawson's face. "They're really capable of anything. They'll do anything. Daedalus doesn't have a heart. It doesn't have a soul."

Kat had stayed home from school on Tuesday. Even though she'd been asleep while I straightened her room and covered the scorched spot on her floor with the area rug, she looked worn out when I showed up at her house around one. Still the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, but tired.

"What are you doing here?"

I took her hand, leading her into the living room. "Nice jammies."

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

"You shouldn't be alone right now." I twisted my baseball cap around.

"I'm all right," she said.

Kat was the furthest thing from all right after what happened and that was okay, but I needed to be here for her, and that was why I'd left school. I went to the couch, where she'd obviously made a makeshift bed. Sitting down, I stretched out on the couch and tucked her against me.

She twisted around, facing me. We didn't kiss. We didn't talk. As the minutes ticked by, we just held each other. At some point, we dozed off in each other's arms. It was the scent of coffee that woke me around five.

Her mom was standing in the doorway, a steaming cup of coffee in hand and a soft smile on her face. She didn't appear angry that I'd obviously skipped classes and had fallen asleep on her couch with her daughter.

Kat sat up, smoothing a hand through her disheveled hair as she stared at her mom's Lucky Charms pajamas. "Where did you get them?"

"What?" She took a sip.

"Those...hideous pajamas."

She shrugged. "I like them."

"They're cute," I said as I took off my hat, earning me an elbow in the side from Kat. "I'm sorry, Ms. Swartz, I didn't mean to fall asleep with—"

"It's okay." She waved me off. "Katy hasn't been feeling well, and I'm glad you wanted to be here for her, but I hope you don't get what she has."

I cast Kat a sideways look. "I hope you didn't give me cooties."

She huffed.

Her mother's cell went off, and she dug it out of her pajama pockets, sloshing coffee onto the floor.

She smiled, her face lighting up. Kat stiffened as her mom turned and headed into the kitchen.

"Will," Kat whispered, standing.

I stood. "You don't know that for sure."

"I do. It's in her eyes—he makes her glow." She looked like she wanted to barf. Couldn't blame her. "I need to tell her why Will got close to her."

"And tell her what?" I blocked her from running into the kitchen. "That he was here to get close to you—to use you? I don't think that's going to lessen any blows." I placed my hands on her shoulders. "We don't know if it was him calling or what's happened to him. Look at Carissa." I kept my voice low. "Her mutation was unstable. It didn't take long for it...to do what it did."

"Then that means it held," she countered in a whisper.

"Or it means it faded off." I tried again. "We can't do anything until we know what we're dealing with. One at a time. We're going to deal with things one at a time. That's all we can do."

Kat took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm going to go and see if it was him."

I let her go, but called out, "I like your pajamas better."

She turned around and glanced down at her pink and purple polka-dot pajamas. Slowly, she raised her gaze to mine.

I grinned.

Her lips twitched. "Shut up."

I returned to the couch. "I'll be waiting."

The moment she disappeared into the kitchen, I let my head fall back on the couch. Sighing, I closed my eyes. Maybe on the outside it didn't appear that I was too concerned about Will. I didn't want Kat to stress over the situation involving him more than she already was. Will still in contact with her mom left a sour taste in my mouth. I knew we hadn't seen the last of him.

I just didn't know when we'd see him again and what that meant.

Issues with Will had to be shoved aside, because after Kat's mom left for work, we found ourselves standing at the lake, staring down on a glittering pile of onyx I'd buried.

All of us were there, and everyone knew what had happened the night before with Carissa. I knew that was why Dawson was keeping close to Kat.

Using a pair of thick leather gloves, I picked up a broken piece of onyx and turned to Blake. "This is your show."

Blake took a deep breath and nodded. "I think the first thing to test out is if I do have a tolerance to onyx. If I do, then that gives us a starting point, right? At least then we know that we can build up a tolerance."

I glanced down at the onyx and then shrugged. Shooting forward, I pressed the piece of onyx against Blake's cheek.

Kat's mouth dropped open while Matthew stepped back, uttering, "God."

Dawson laughed under his breath.

Nothing happened, though.

Blake knocked the piece of onyx aside, his nostrils flared. "What the hell?"

Huh, that was disappointing. I was hoping to send him to the ground, withering in pain. I tossed the stone in the pile. "Well, apparently you have a tolerance to onyx, and here I was hoping you didn't."

Kat covered her mouth, stifling a giggle that still managed to escape.

"What if I didn't have a tolerance to it?" Blake demanded, and I'm pretty sure my expression said I didn't care. "Good God, I kind of wanted to prepare myself for that."

"I know." I smirked.

Matthew shook his head. "Okay, back on track, boys. How do you suggest doing this?"

Shooting me a dark look, Blake stalked over to the pile of onyx. "I suggest Daemon go first. We hold it to the skin until you drop. No longer."

"Oh, dear Lord," Kat muttered.

Whatever. I stripped off my gloves and held my arms out. "Bring it."

Of course, Blake was jonesing for payback. Springing forward, he placed the onyx against my palm. Being prepared wouldn't have changed a damn thing. It was like cupping fire and keeping your damn hand over the flame. Red-hot pain rippled over my hand and up my arm. A tremor rocked me and then the pain was whipping out, scattering cells, and it became—

Blake removed the piece of onyx.

I hit the ground, on my hands and knees. "Crap..."

Kat was at my side, touching my shoulders. "Are you okay?"

"He's fine," Blake said, placing the onyx on the ground. I looked up, seeing his right hand shake. "It started to burn. There must be a limit to my tolerance..."

Unsteady, I pushed to my feet. "I'm okay." Turning, I saw my brother staring at Blake like he was seconds from tearing the hybrid apart with his bare hands. "I'm fine, Dawson."

"How do we know this will work?" Matthew demanded. "Touching onyx is completely different from being sprayed all over with it."

"I've walked out of those doors before and nothing happened. And it's not like they've sprayed onyx in my face before," Blake said. "This has to be it."

"Okay." Kat stepped forward. "Let's do this."

Locking my jaw down was the only way to stop myself from telling Kat not to do this. Wasn't easy standing there and watching Blake slip on the gloves and pick up the piece of onyx. Instead of bringing the jagged shard of onyx to Kat, he went to Matthew. Within seconds, the older Luxen was on his knees, gasping for air. Then it was Dawson's turn, and I forced myself not to look away or intervene when Blake placed the onyx against Dawson's hand.

It took a little longer for it to affect him, which would make sense if Daedalus had been prepping Dawson with it. But then he, too, was on his knees. The curse words I let loose pinked the tips of Kat's ears.

But then it was her turn.

Blake started toward her, but I couldn't let him be the one to do it. He was not going to hurt her again. Swiping the other glove off the ground, I took the piece of onyx from him.

"No," Kat said, stepping back. "I don't want you to do this."

"I'm not letting him do this."

"Then let someone else do this. Please." She looked away, but no one stepped forward. "This isn't right."

None of this was right, but I didn't trust anyone else to do this. "It's either me or no one."

Her gaze sharpened and a moment passed. "Do it."

Shit. A part of me was hoping she wouldn't let me do it. Anger dug in as she met my gaze. "I hate this," I said, my voice low.

"I do, too." She took a deep breath. "Just do it."

Once again, I wanted to look away, but I wouldn't let myself. I was going to be here with her for this, but she lowered her gaze, and for that I was grateful. I didn't want to stare into her eyes while I was handing her unimaginable pain. Hating everything about this, I placed the onyx against her hand.

A moment passed and then her brow creased. Her lashes slammed down, fanning her cheeks. Her jaw jutted out. My stomach churned. She bit down on her lip. Her body jerked, and then she was on her knees.

Fuck.

Throwing the rock aside, I knelt down next to Kat. She shuddered. "All right...okay...not too bad."

"Bull." I hauled her to her feet. I couldn't do this—watch her in pain every damn day to build up tolerance. My skin was crawling. "Kat—"

She tugged free, dragging in air. "Really, I'm okay. We need to keep going."

Looking away, I counted to ten in my head, then fifty, and I made it to a hundred without it doing any good, because all of us went through the same process again. None of us were able to withstand the onyx any longer than the first time.

"It's like getting hit with a Taser," Matthew said, as he dropped a sheet of plywood over the onyx, then placed two heavy rocks on the board. It was late, and all of us were feeling the pain. "Not that I've ever been Tased, but I image that's how it feels."

We started to head back to the house, and I was a few steps in front of Kat. Blake was trailing her, and I was close enough to hear what he was saying.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I liked Carissa. I wish..."

"If wishes were fishes, we'd all throw nets, right? Isn't that what they say?" Bitterness sharpened Kat's tone, and I hated hearing that.

"Yeah, that's what they say." Blake paused. "Things are gonna get crazy at school."

"Why do you care?" she fired back. "You're going to leave as soon as you get Chris. You'll just be another one of those kids who vanished into thin air."

"I would stay if I could. I can't, though."

I slowed down. That bastard was not staying. If I had to hog-tie him and this Luxen and ship them out to the West Coast in one big box, I would.

"I would stay," I heard Blake say again. "I—"

That was it. Spinning around, I saw him place his hand on her shoulder. I was in front of him in under a heartbeat, prying his fingers off her shoulder. "Don't touch her."

Blood drained from his face as he stepped back. "Dude, I wasn't doing anything. Overprotective, much?"

"I thought we had an understanding. You're here because we don't have a choice," I reminded him. "You're still alive because she is better than me. You're not here to comfort her. Got that?"

Blake's jaw popped as he stalked around us. "Whatever. I'll see you guys later."

"That was a little overprotective," Kat said, peering up at me.

"I don't like him touching you. I don't like him even being in the same time zone as you. I don't trust him."

Stretching up, she kissed my cheek. "No one trusts him, but you can't threaten him every five seconds."

I snorted. "Yes, I can."

Kat laughed as she stepped in, wrapping her arms around my waist. She rested her cheek against my chest, above my heart. My hands slid down her back, and we stood there for a few minutes. "Do you really want to do more days like this? An endless stretch of days filled with pain?"

"It serves as a pretty good distraction, and I need that right now."

This was a good distraction? Jesus. This was what our lives had come down to. Almost laughable. My gaze flickered to where the moonlight filtered through the bare limbs. Except nothing about any of this was funny.

My hand curled around her thick hair. "We need a date night soon."

She snuggled in closer. "I don't think we have time for that."

"There is always time for date night." I lowered my gaze. She was peering up at me now. "Remember? Time management?"

Kat smiled a little, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I do."

"Tomorrow night, we're supposed to head into Martinsburg to see Luc. That doesn't really count as a date night."

"It doesn't?"

"Hanging out with the preteen mafia leader? Uh, no." I grinned when she laughed. "But there is no excuse for us to not make time to do the normal stuff. Right?"

"Right," she murmured. "It doesn't...feel wrong, though? Like we're being selfish?"

"If wanting to enjoy you and the time I have with you makes me selfish, so be it." I lifted my other hand, cupping her other cheek. "Look," I said after a moment. "Who knows what is waiting for us tomorrow or next week."

She wrapped her hand around my wrist. "We don't know."

"We need a couple of hours here and there."

"You're right." She stretched up again and kissed me. "I hate it when you're right."

Laughing, I stepped to the side and draped my arm over her shoulders. She leaned into me as we started back to the house, the moonlight lighting our paths. For a...a normal couple, this would be a romantic walk, but for us it seemed like that moonlit path was foreshadowing that there was more darkness than light in store for us.

CHAPTER 18

Wednesday night, while everyone was down at the lake playing with onyx, Kat and I were on the way back to Martinsburg. There was a chance that Luc wouldn't see us. Hell, the kid might not even be there, but since Kat was wearing this sweater that was like a second skin, I considered it a win no matter what.

Getting to Martinsburg was a lot easier this time around without any of the snow or Blake running his mouth nonstop.

Kat wasn't smiling a lot, though, and I couldn't blame her. After school, we'd joined the hastily-thrown-together search party for Carissa. Even though both of us knew there would be no finding Carissa, it was cathartic for Kat, I thought, for her to take part. To distract her, we started to play I Spy, and although she claimed that I cheated, she was smiling and laughing.

When we finally reached the door leading up to the club, cars lined the field like they had last time. I couldn't understand how this place stayed off the map with this kind of traffic.

Kat shed the loose sweater she'd worn over the tighter one as soon as I parked the SUV. We climbed out and started around the rows of cars. She stopped in the first row, bent over, and tossed her hair over her head, shaking it out, and that was an instant turn-on.

"This reminds me of a Whitesnake video," I said.

"Huh?" She straightened, running her hands over her hair. The waves fell in a sexy tousle down her back.

I swallowed a groan. "If you start climbing on car hoods, I think I might marry you."

She rolled her eyes. "Done."

Staring at her, I felt pressure in my chest. A good kind. Also a frightening kind. "You're cute."

"You're weird." She stretched up and kissed my cheek, and then I watched her teeter through the high grass that hadn't been there the last time we'd been there.

Mountain Man, the bouncer I was sure really liked me, like really liked me, appeared out of the shadows, blocking the door. He folded massive arms over his chest. "I thought I told ya two to forget this place?"

I stepped in front of Kat. "We need to see Luc."

"I need a lot of things in life. Like I wish I could find a decent stock trader who wouldn't lose half of my money."

Um, all right.

Kat cleared her throat. "We won't be here long, but please, we really need to see him."

"Sorry," Mountain Man replied.

Sighing, I tipped my head to the side. Obviously, Luc was here. "There's got to be something that we can do to convince you."

Mountain Man raised a brow and waited.

I smiled, and the bouncer's brows rose even further, but before he could respond, his cell phone went off. He pulled it out of the pocket of his overalls. "What's up?"

Kat elbowed me, and I glanced down at her. "What? It was working."

The bouncer laughed. "I ain't doin' much. Just talkin' to a douche and a pretty lady."

"Excuse me?" I said, surprised.

Kat choked out a laugh.

Mountain Man smiled broadly and then sighed. "Yep, they're here for ya." There was a pause. "Sure." He clicked the phone shut. "Luc will see you. Go in and go straight to him. No dancing tonight or whatever it was the two of ya did last time."

I didn't need to even look at Kat to know she was blushing, because what we'd done last time on that dance floor sure as hell wasn't just dancing. Placing my hand on her lower back, we started toward the door.

Mountain Man stopped me with a wink as he handed over a business card. "Ya not normally my type, but I can make an exception."

I took the card with a smile and then ushered a gaping Kat inside. "Told you."

Kat snapped her mouth shut and faced forward. Like last time, the dance floor was packed, but we skirted the edges, heading straight for the hallway.

Standing at the door to Luc's office was Paris. He nodded at me and then stepped aside, opening the door, and the scent of peaches welcomed us. I focused right on the couch. Luc wasn't there. The stacks of hundreds were gone, but Luc was behind the desk, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

"Please sit." Luc didn't look up as he waved at the nearby couch.

Kat glanced at me, and then we went to the couch. She sat close to me, her leg pressed to mine.

"Heard you guys didn't get very far at Mount Weather last time." Luc closed the laptop after a moment and then folded his hands under his chin.

"About that." I leaned forward. "You didn't know about the onyx shields?"

Luc's weird purple eyes met mine, and there was an intellect to them that was far beyond his age. "I warned you that there may be things I'm unaware of. Even I don't know everything about Daedalus. But I think Blake's on the right track. He is right about everything being encased in a shiny blackish-red material. Perhaps we did build a tolerance so we were not affected by the onyx shields."

"And what if that's not it?" Kat asked.

"What if it's not? I have a feeling that's not going to stop you from trying again. It's a risk, and everything has risks. You're lucky you got out of there last time before anyone realized what happened," he said. "You get another chance. Most people don't."

"You're right," she said. "We're still going to try."

"But not knowing all the perils ahead seems unfair?" He tucked a strand of brown hair back, his expression impassive. "Life's not fair, babe."

I stiffened. "Why do I have a feeling there's a lot you're not telling us?"

Luc's lips formed a half smile. "Anyway, you came here for a reason other than those onyx shields. Let's get to the point."

Annoyance rose. "An unstable hybrid attacked Kat."

"That's what unstable people do, hybrid or not."

"Yeah, we figured that much, but she was my friend." Kat drew in a shallow breath. "She gave no indication that she knew anything about the Luxen. She was fine, got sick, and then came to my house and went nuts."

"You didn't give any indication you know ET didn't phone home."

What a little asshole.

"I get that, but this was out of the blue," Kat argued.

Luc leaned back in his chair, kicking his legs onto the desk. He crossed them at the ankles. "I don't know what to tell you about that. She may've known about the Luxen, got hurt, and some poor sap tried and failed to heal her. Or the Man pulled her off the street like they do at times. And unless you know some darn good torture techniques and are willing to employ them on an officer of Daedalus, I don't see how you'll ever know."

"I refuse to accept that," she whispered.

He shrugged. "What happened to her?"

Kat's hands balled into fists. "She's no longer..."

"Ah," Luc murmured. "She did the whole spontaneous combustion thing? Sick. Sorry about that. A twisted history lesson for you—you know all those unexplained cases of spontaneous combustion throughout history?"

I grimaced. "I'm afraid to ask."

"Funny how there's not many cases known, but they do happen out in the noob world." He spread his arms wide. "Hybrids—my theory at least, and it makes sense if you think about. Most hybrids do the self-destruction thing in the facilities, but a few do outside. That's why the occurrence is rare to humans."

"My friend was wearing a bracelet—"

"Tiffany's?" he asked and smirked.

"No." She smiled tightly. "It was just like the one you're wearing."

Surprise crawled over his face, and it was the first time I'd seen the little punk caught off guard by anything. "Not good."

"Why is that not good?" I demanded.

Luc glanced up at the ceiling and then shrugged. "Oh, what the hell. You'll owe me, hope you realize. But what you see here?" Luc tapped his finger off the stone in the cuff around his wrist. "It's a black opal—so rare that only a few mines can even unearth these babies. And it's only *these* kinds."

"The ones that look like they have fire in them?" Kat stretched to get a better look. "Where are they mined?"

"Australia, usually. There's something in the composition of a black opal that's like a power booster. You know, like Mario gets when he hits a mushroom. Imagine that sound. That's what a black opal does."

Now this was interesting, Mario sounds aside. "What kind of composition?"

Luc unhooked the bracelet and held it up in the dim light. "Opals have this remarkable ability to refract and reflect specific wavelengths of light."

Holy shit.

"No way," I breathed.

"Yes." Luc smiled at the stone. "I don't know who discovered it. Someone in Daedalus I'm sure. Once they figured out what it could do, they kept it away from the Luxen and ones like us."

"Why?" Kat glanced between us, her brow furrowing. "What? I don't have a degree in alien mineralogy. Geez."

I patted her thigh. "It's okay. Refracting and reflecting wavelengths of lights affects us, like the obsidian affects Arum and onyx affects us."

"Okay," she said slowly.

Luc tilted his chin up. "Refracting light changes the direction and speed. Our friendly neighborhood aliens are made of light—well, made of more than that, but let me explain it this way: Let's say their DNA is light. And let's say that once a human is mutated, their DNA is now encased in wavelengths of light."

She nodded. "And onyx disrupts those wave lengths of light, right? Kind of makes them bounce around and go crazy."

"Opal's ability to refract allows a Luxen or a hybrid to be more powerful—it enhances our ability to refract light," Luc explained.

"And the reflection part—wow." I grinned. Kat still looked unimpressed. I nudged her with my elbow. "We flicker or fade sometimes because we move fast. And sometimes you see us just fade in and out—it's just reflection. Something all of us have to work at to control when we're younger."

"And it's hard when you're excited or upset?" Kat asked.

I nodded. "Among other things, but to control reflection?" I looked at Luc. "Are you saying you can do what I think you can?"

Laughing, Luc hooked the bracelet around his wrist and sat back, dropping his legs on the desk again. "Hybrids are good. We can move faster than humans, but with the obesity rates nowadays, turtles can move faster than most humans. Sometimes we're even stronger than the average Luxen when it comes to the Source—it's the mixture of human and alien DNA that can create something powerful, but that's not standard." He smiled, clearly enjoying himself. "But give a Luxen one of these, and they can completely reflect light."

Kat's lips parted. "You mean...like invisible?"

"So cool," I said, wanting one of those stones like yesterday. "We can change the way we look, but become invisible? Yeah, that's new."

"Can we be invisible?"

"No. Our human DNA gets in the way of that, but it makes us just as powerful as the strongest Luxen and then some." Luc shifted in his seat. "So you can imagine that they wouldn't want any of us having these...especially one that hasn't been proven to be stable, unless..."

Kat shuddered. "Unless what?"

The smile slipped from his face. "Unless they didn't care what kind of damage the hybrid caused. Maybe your friend was a test run for a bigger incident."

"What?" I tensed. "You think they did this on person? Hooked up an unstable hybrid and sent her out into the wild to see what happens?"

"Paris thinks I'm a conspiracy theorist with a hint of schizophrenic paranoia." He shrugged. "But you can't tell me that Daedalus doesn't have a master plan up their sleeves. I wouldn't put a single thing past them."

"But why would she come after me? Blake says they don't know the mutation held. So it wasn't like they'd send her after me." Kat paused. "And, well, that's if Blake's telling the truth."

"I'm sure he is about the mutation," Luc responded. "If he wasn't, you wouldn't be sitting here. See, I'm not sure even Daedalus knows everything that this stone is capable of and how it affects us. I'm still learning."

"And what have you learned?" I asked.

"For starters, before I got my grubby paws on one of these, I couldn't pick out another hybrid if one did a jig in front of me. I knew the moment you and Blake arrived in Martinsburg, Katy. It was weird, like a breath washing over my entire body. Your friend probably sensed you. That's the least terrible probability."

I blew out a long breath, concerned with what he was saying. Carissa's going after Kat could've been a pure accident. Then I thought of something else. "Do you know if it can enhance the Arum's abilities?"

Luc's gaze sharpened. "I imagine it could if they're bloated on a Luxen's powers."

Kat started to sit back, but then jerked forward. "Do you think the opal can, like, counteract the onyx?"

"It's possible, but I don't know." Luc's lips twisted in a wry grin. "Haven't played with any onyx recently."

"Where can we get some of the opal?"

Luc laughed. "Unless you have about thirty thousand dollars lying around and someone who mines opals or want to ask Daedalus for some, you're out of luck. And I'm not giving you mine."

Kat's shoulders slumped. Damn. Having at least one piece of opal would come in handy.

"Anyway, it's about time for you guys to hit the road." He tipped his head back, closing his eyes. "I'm assuming I won't hear from you two again until you're ready to go to Mount Weather?"

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" I asked as Kat and I stood.

"Sure, I have something else." Luc lowered his head and looked up at us. "You really shouldn't trust a soul in this game. Not when everyone has something to gain or lose."

CHAPTER 19

Petersburg changed in small, infinite ways over the following weeks. It wasn't just the steady rise of temperatures, heralding that winter was now a not-too-distant memory. Or the restlessness that always surrounded the thaw-out accompanying the warmer months.

The small, mostly unknown town in a state that a god-awful number of people still referred to as "western" Virginia was yet again the center of another missing persons case.

Candlelight vigils were held for Carissa on a weekly basis, and her parents appeared on the nightly news, pleading for any information regarding the disappearance of their daughter. A somberness settled over the school, and I knew there was more than just sadness driving the whispers whenever I saw groups of students huddled together, watching Dawson or one of us. Suspicion was buried very deeply, because out of the people to disappear, Dawson had been the only one to ever return.

And Dawson's return had signaled the disappearance of others.

Carissa's disappearance triggered a morbid curiosity in the broader world. News crews showed up, wanting to talk to anyone who knew Carissa or had a theory on why so many teens—Bethany, Carissa, Simon, and even Adam to name a few—disappeared in this sleepy little town.

Bet the DOD and Daedalus just loved that.

And then, around three weeks after Carissa disappeared, Dr. William Michaels became news. His sister reported him missing, and from what Kat could gather, he'd also stopped contacting her mother. Investigators had informed Ms. Swartz that there had been no conference—no shit—and no one else had heard from Will since he'd left Petersburg.

More whispers.

Some suspected that Will had something to do with Carissa and Simon. They all disappeared one after the other, and no one could fathom how a well-known, respected doctor could just vanish. Some believed that Will had to have something to do with their disappearances, maybe even others.

Part of me wondered if the DOD was behind the sudden slanting of the news. Made sense. We knew that Will had betrayed them, and he now made the perfect scapegoat.

But the inevitable happened.

As the grass started to turn green and the wind whipping through the budding trees warmed, people...people moved on. It wasn't that they forgot Carissa or Simon or anyone else. It was just what happened. Life happened. By mid-April, it stopped becoming nightly news, and then weekly. Whispers at school were still there, but less frequent.

Kat had asked me one evening, after working with the onyx, if that was what would happen to her if we didn't come back from Mount Weather. She wanted to know if I thought people would just forget and get over it.

Hearing her ask that kind of question was like having my heart shoved into a blender. No one

should ever wonder if they would be forgotten one day. I came up with some kind of pseudo-intellectual response that sounded legit, but her question had kept me up most of that night.

Would Kat be forgotten one day?

Would I?

I knew that one day, no matter what, we'd become one of those statistics. It wasn't something Kat and I talked about, but I think she knew, too. If we succeeded in freeing Bethany, there would be consequences. Staying here wouldn't work. We'd have to leave, possibly even go into hiding. I had money saved up to make that transition work for at least a period of time, but that didn't make it easy to think about or accept.

I'd changed Kat's entire life.

And sometimes I could admit how ridiculously selfish I was, because there were moments, many of them, where I knew I wouldn't change a thing. Made me a shitty person, totally got that, but I tried the whole stay-away-to-protect-her business. Didn't work.

The only way for us to be in charge of our future, to *willingly* disappear one day, was to prepare ourselves for our next Mount Weather raid.

We focused on training with the onyx every day that we could. Repeatedly exposing ourselves to the damn stones drained all of us of energy. After every session, Kat and I crashed, and I think we spent more time dozing than we did anything else.

Progress was slowly, painfully being made. Each of us was able to increase our resistance, and by the beginning of May, all of us could withstand the onyx for about fifty seconds before ending up flailing on the ground.

Ash and Dee had started joining us just to watch us basically mutilate ourselves, and today had been the first time Ash tried out some onyx, much to Kat's amusement. I'd tried to deter Ash, but she didn't listen. She'd lasted a whole second before shrieking and dropping the stone.

Ash couldn't understand, after experiencing the pain firsthand, how anything or anyone would be worth subjecting themselves to this, and she was obnoxiously vocal about this, upsetting Dawson. He'd stormed off from the lake and I had followed, talking him down. Dawson had gotten a lot better at handling the rawness of his emotions, but there were still moments when I feared that he was going to run out of the fragile patience and go after Bethany on his own.

Once I was sure Dawson was as settled as he could be, I headed back to the lake. Halfway, I ran into Blake.

He kept a decent distance from me. "How is he?"

Ignoring him, I kept walking. Dawson's current state was none of his business.

Blake sighed. "Kat is still down by the lake. I didn't want to leave her—"

Stopping, I wheeled around so fast he looked like he got whiplash from it. He must've seen something in my stare, because he quickly backed off with his hands in the air.

"I just didn't want her to be out here by herself."

My hands curled into fists. The fact that he acted as if he were Kat's protector was revolting, but truth was, it had been smart of him to hang around. Being alone, out in the open, wasn't wise. I watched Blake disappear among the trees before I resumed my trek. I broke free of the last couple of trees and stopped walking. Probably stopped breathing, too.

Everyone had left except Kat. Near the edge of the lake, she lay in the sun, her head resting on the springy grass. Eyes closed and dark hair spread out around her, she was just...just *lovely*. Walking toward her, I realized she was asleep.

I couldn't let myself think about the fact that Blake had been creeping nearby while she slept, even if

it were necessary. If I did, it would ruin this moment, and dear God, Kat and I had seriously been lacking one-on-one time that didn't involve us passing out due to exhaustion.

A tired smile tugged at my lips as I stretched out on my side beside her. Propping my head up on my hand, I watched her for a few moments. I thought about what I'd ordered for her over the weekend. It should be here by tonight, and I chuckled as I pictured her expression when she saw it.

If I were a good guy, I'd let her sleep, but I was unable to help myself. I brushed my lips over hers.

Her lashes fluttered and then swept up, revealing soft, unfocused gray eyes. "Hey," she murmured.

"Hey there, sleeping beauty..."

Kat smiled. "Did you kiss me awake?"

"I did." I placed my hand on her stomach. "Told you, my lips have mystical powers."

She laughed. "How long have you been here?"

"Not long." My eyes searched hers. "I found Blake skulking around the woods. He didn't want to leave while you were out here."

Kat rolled her eyes.

"As much as it bothers me, I'm glad he didn't." It actually pained me to admit that, like cutting off my own nose or some crap.

"Wow. Pigs are flying." When I narrowed my eyes, she used her fingers to brush the hair that had fallen over my forehead back. My eyes drifted shut. It was incredibly soothing whenever Kat fooled around with my hair. "How's Dawson?" she asked.

"Calmed down. How's Kitten?"

"Sleepy."

"And?" I smiled.

Kat dragged her fingers along the side of my cheek and then over my jaw. I turned into the caress, kissing the palm of her hand as I unbuttoned the cardigan she was wearing. "Happy you're here."

Thrilled to hear that, I spread my hand over the thin tank top she'd worn under the sweater. "And?"

"And glad I didn't get eaten by a bear or coyote."

Not expecting that, I arched a brow. "What?"

She grinned. "Apparently, they're a problem around here."

I shook my head. "Back to talking about me."

Kat wasn't in a talking mood, more of a showing mood, which I was so freaking down for. Her fingers trailed over my bottom lip, and then her hand dropped to my chest. She caught the front of my shirt, pulling my mouth to hers.

I fell into that kiss.

What started off as slow and questioning escalated into a flood of deep, raw sensations that crashed over us in waves. Kissing her. Touching her. It could never be enough. I could get drunk on the way she tasted, high on the breathy sounds she made as my fingers slid over the bare skin of her belly, forget the world because of the way she wrapped her arms around me, holding me tight, and live off how she felt beside me, under me.

I pressed her down, carefully settling my weight over her. The kisses took on a harder, deeper quality. She curled her leg around mine. Her fingers tugged on my hair, and when she moved, my name was a gasp on her lips that nearly broke me.

"I need to stop," I said, voice rough to my own ears. Kat and I had been on the verge of taking everything to the next level, to *that* level, for a while now. But moments like this, when we were so close, when I knew she was as ready as I was, I was seconds from doing something stupid. Like getting her out of her clothes in the middle of the woods, and man, that was so not where our first

time should take place. Or losing myself completely without us even getting to that part, because *damn*, I was close. "Like right now."

Kat threaded her fingers through the hair at the back of my neck. "Yeah, we should."

Good idea. Great plan. We did need to stop. Like right now.

I kissed her again.

And Kat held me tighter, sliding her hands down my back until they were under my shirt, and that kicked up a whole new riot of sensations. She arched her back, pressing her chest into mine, and I could feel her heart beating at the exact rate as mine. Our breaths were coming fast as my fingers brushed over the delicate lace of her bra.

A shiver of awareness skated over my skin. I stiffened a second before I heard my sister shriek, "Oh, dear God and baby Jesus in the manger, my eyes!" Dee shrieked. "My eyes!"

Kat's eyes flew open as I lifted my head. Dee stood a few feet away from us, arms folded across her chest, staring at us like she'd just walked in on us engaging in wild animal sex.

Kat yanked her hands out from under my shirt as she whispered, "Oh my God."

"Dee, you didn't see anything." And then I added much lower, "Because you have impeccable timing."

"You were on...her and your mouths were doing this." She unfolded her arms and smushed her hands together repeatedly. I frowned at the gestures. That was not how Kat and I looked. "And that's more than enough I want to see. Like ever."

Kat pushed at my chest, so I rolled off her. She sat up, twisting around.

"What do you want, Dee?" I asked.

She huffed, pressing her hands on her hips. "Well, I don't want anything from *you*. I wanted to talk to Katy."

Kat stiffened with tangible surprise. "You do?"

"Ash and I were going to this new little shop in Moorefield Saturday afternoon. They sell vintage dresses. For prom," she added.

"Prom?"

I looked over at Kat. The way she said "prom" was like it was a totally different language. While our heads hadn't been wrapped up in all things prom-related, it was a given that we would go to it. I didn't care what anyone had to say about it, I'd be damned if she didn't get to experience her senior prom.

"Yeah, prom's at the end of the month." Dee looked over at me. "And most of the dresses are going to be gone. And I don't know if the place has anything, but Ash heard about it and you know how she is with clothes, so she's in the know. Like a couple of days ago, she found this really cute cropped sweater that—"

"Dee," I said, a small grin tugging at my lips.

"What? I'm not talking to you." She faced Kat, exasperated to the point I wanted to laugh. "Anyway, would you like to go with us? Or have you already gotten a dress? Because if you have gotten a dress, then I guess the trip is pointless, but you could still—"

"No. I haven't gotten a dress," Kat said.

"Good!" Dee grinned. "Then we can go on Saturday. I thought about asking Lesa if she wanted to go..."

"Wait," she said. "I wasn't planning on prom."

"What?" Dee's mouth dropped open, and my brows flew up. "It's senior prom."

"I know, but with everything going on... I haven't really thought about it." And that had to be a lie,

because the entire school was plastered with prom flyers.

Dee's incredulous expression grew. "It's senior prom."

"But..." Tucking her hair back, she glanced me. "You haven't even asked me to go."

I smiled. "I didn't think I needed to ask. I assumed we would go."

Dee rocked back on the balls of her feet. "Well, you know what they say about people who assume."

My grin faded, because Kat was staring at me like I grew a second, not nearly as attractive head. "What, Kitten?"

She blinked. "How can we go to prom with everything going on? We're so close to having enough tolerance to go back to Mount Weather and—"

"And prom is on a Saturday," I said, pulling her hand away from her hair. "So let's say that in two weeks we're ready to go, it will be Sunday."

Dee hobbled around with excitement, and it was really weird to see. "And it's only a few hours," she insisted. "You guys can halt the self-mutilation for a few hours."

I could see the indecision on her face, and I knew where it was coming from. It didn't have anything to do with practicing with the onyx. I slipped my arm around her and leaned in, keeping my voice low as I spoke to her. "It's not wrong, Kat. You deserve this."

She closed her eyes. "Why should we get to celebrate when she can't?"

Hell.

I rested my cheek against hers. "We're still here, and we deserve to be normal and do normal things every once in a while. It's not your fault." I kissed her temple. "Will you go to prom with me, Kat?"

Dee shifted some more. "You should really say yes, so we can go dress shopping and so I don't have to witness a really awkward moment of you turning my brother down. Even though he deserves to be knocked down a peg or two."

Kat laughed as she glanced at Dee. My sister gave her a small smile, and I hoped that smile was a white flag. Five months of each of them circling each other was enough time.

"Okay." Kat took a deep breath. "I'll go to prom—only because I don't want this conversation to get awkward."

I tweaked her nose. "I'll take what I can get for as long as I can get it."

Kat was acting a little weird after school on Thursday. She was quiet and tense. I picked at her until she relaxed, and by the time we left the post office and made it to her house, she was smiling more than she was frowning, so I considered that a win for the day.

Once inside her house, she opened a window in the living room while I helped myself to a glass of milk. When she walked back into the kitchen, her appreciative gaze was hard to ignore as it roamed all over me.

My head immediately went to a happy and fun place, but I had a surprise planned for her today, and if I got too distracted—and that wasn't hard around her—I would never get to show her what I wanted before we had to go down to the lake.

But we were alone, so...

Sitting the empty milk glass on the counter, I moved wicked fast. In front of Kat, I cupped her cheeks and tipped her head back, kissing her as I backed her toward the bottom of the stairs.

She pulled away, her eyes soft as she grinned a little. I kissed the tip of her nose and then lifted her.

She wrapped her legs around my waist. I carried her upstairs and into her bedroom. Inside, it was no small feat when I lifted my mouth from hers. I grinned.

Lips swollen, her brows knit in confusion.

I looked at her desk pointedly and then put her down.

She followed my gaze, and her mouth dropped opened as she saw the MacBook Air in a cherry-red sleeve. "I..." She looked at me and then at the desk again. She took a step forward and stopped, facing me once more. "Is that for me?"

There was no keeping the smile off my face when I felt her heart rate kick up. "Well, it is on your desk, so..."

"But I don't understand."

"See, there's this place called an Apple Store and I went there, picked one out. They didn't have any stock." I paused as she stared at me. "And I ordered one. Meanwhile, I ordered a sleeve. I did take some liberties since I prefer red."

"But why?" Her eyes were wider than I'd ever seen them.

I laughed softly. "Man, I wish you could see your face."

She clasped her hands over her cheeks. "Why?"

"You didn't have one, and I know how much blogging and that stuff means to you. Using the school computer isn't doing it for you." I shrugged. "And we really didn't do the Valentine's thing. So...here we are."

A moment passed. "When did you put it here?"

"This morning, after you left for school."

Kat took a deep breath as she turned back to the desk. "And you got this for me? A MacBook Air? Those things cost a lot of money."

"Thank the taxpayers. Their money funds the DOD, who then turns over the money to us." I laughed as she wrinkled her nose. "And I save money. I have a small fortune stashed."

"Daemon, it's too much."

"It's yours."

Her hands slipped down and she folded them under her chin. "I can't believe you did this."

"You deserve it." The thing was, she deserved so much more.

Kat was still and then she launched herself at me. Laughing, I caught her around the waist as I sat down on the bed. "Thank you." she said in between kissing every inch of my face. She was so excited, she drove me down, flat on my back. "Thank you."

Laughing, I tipped my head back against the comforter. "Wow. You're pretty strong when you're excited."

She sat astride me, grinning. "I can't believe you did this."

"You had no idea, did you?"

"No, but that's why you kept bringing up the blog stuff." She smacked my chest playfully, referring to the one hundred and one hints I'd dropped over the week. "You are..."

I folded my arms under my head. "I'm what?"

"Amazing." She leaned over, kissing me. "You're amazing."

"That's what I've been saying for years."

Her laugh was warm against my lips "Seriously, though, you shouldn't have."

"I wanted to." I watched her glance at the desk. "It's okay. I know what you want to do. Go play."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Squealing, she kissed me again and then hopped off, racing toward the desk. Grabbing the laptop, she climbed back on the bed and sat next to me. She immediately started playing around with it, and over the next hour, I helped her get familiarized with the different settings and themes.

"There's the webcam," I said, leaning over her shoulder. Opening the application, she squeaked when our faces appeared on the screen. "You should do your first vlog right now," I suggested.

She hit record and squealed, "I have a MacBook Air!"

Burying my face in her hair, I laughed. "You dork."

She turned off the webcam and closed the lid before placing it on the bed. Throwing her arms around me, she squeezed me tight. "Thank you."

Lying back down, I pulled her with me. Several locks of hair fell forward, so I brushed them back. My hand lingered against her cheek. "I like it when you're happy, and if I can do something small, then I will."

"Something small?" Shock heightened her tone. "That's not something small. That had to have cost ___"

"It doesn't matter. You're happy. I'm happy."

Her eyes lightened. "I love you. You know that, right?"

I grinned. "I know."

Kat stayed in my arms for a moment and then sat up, kicked off her shoes. She glanced out the window. "You're never going to say it, are you?"

"Say what?" I sat up, placing my hands on her hips.

She looked over her shoulders at me. "You know what."

"Hmm?" I slid my hands up her sides, wondering how much more time we had before we had to go down to the lake. Glancing at the wall clock, I saw that we had absolutely no time. Sigh. I kissed her cheek and then slid off the bed. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it," she replied.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Seriously, I do love it. I can't thank you enough." "I'm sure you can."

Rolling her eyes, she pushed me and then started scanning her bedroom floor. I had no idea what she was looking for. She knelt down, lifting the edge of her comforter as she peered under her bed. Then she lay down on her belly and stretched. I heard her hand smacking the floor.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Trying to get my flip flops."

"Is it really that hard?" And couldn't she just use the Source to do that?

She ignored me. "What the...?" One flip-flop flew out from under the bed and then another. I stepped back as she wiggled out and sat up. She opened her hand. "Oh my God."

"What?" I knelt beside her and then saw what she held. I sucked in a sharp breath. "Is that what I think it is?"

She held a shiny black stone, streak red through the center, like a flame, in her hand. I'd seen a similar stone before. On Luc.

Kat was holding a piece of opal.

CHAPTER 20

For several moments, Kat and I stared at each other. It was all we could do, because neither of us could believe that we'd found a piece of opal under her damn bed of all places.

Obviously, it had to have been Carissa's, and somehow, when the room had been wrecked and we cleaned it, the piece of opal must've ended up under there. We made it downstairs; that was as far as we went.

Kat dropped the stone in my hand. "Try something—like that reflection thing."

Folding my hand over the stone, I concentrated on the environment around me—the couch, the floor, and the TV. I figured it would be the same as reflecting the image of a person, but what did I know? I'd never done this before.

Energy skated over my skin, seeping through tissue and bone. I could see the faint shimmer appearing over my hand and it traveled up my arm. A second passed, and then my arm blended into the floor.

Kat's eyes widened. "Daemon?"

I chuckled.

"Daemon?" She turned toward the couch. "I can't see you at all."

"Not at all?"

She shook her head as her eyes narrowed. Stepping back, her forehead scrunched as she stared right where I stood, in the front of the couch. "Oh my God, you're totally like the Predator."

"This is so cool." I let go of the reflection. "God, I am so going to sneak into your bathroom like the Invisible Man."

Kat shot me a bland look. "Give me the opal."

Laughing, I handed it over. "Want to hear something crazier than me being completely invisible? It barely took any energy away. I feel fine."

"Wow." She turned the stone over. "We need to test this out."

We headed to the lake about fifteen minutes before anyone else was supposed to show. "You try it."

Kat stepped back from me. In one hand she held the opal, and she lifted the other hand. Within seconds, a ball of whitish-red light appeared on her hand. "Wow." She glanced at me, awed. "This is... different."

I nodded. "Do you feel tired or anything?"

"No." Pivoting, she walked to the bank of the lake. "I could never do the heat-to-fire thing. Burned my fingers pretty bad the last time I tried it."

"Should you be trying it now, then?"

"But you're here to heal me."

I frowned, moving closer to her. "Worst logic ever, Kitten."

Kat grinned as she focused on a slender crooked branch. The ripple of energy washed over my skin. The scent of burned ozone filled the air. White light flared over her knuckles and within a second, the stick collapsed into an ash replica. "Uh."

"That wasn't fire," I said, "but it was pretty damn close.

"Let me have it," I said. "I want to see if it has any effect on the onyx."

Handing it over, she followed me to the pile of onyx. I held the opal in one hand and then unearthed the pile of onyx. Preparing myself for the very unpleasant sensation, I picked up one of the shards.

Nothing. No burn or sting. Just nothing.

"What's happening?" she asked.

I lifted my gaze to hers. "Nothing—I don't feel anything."

"Let me try."

It was the same for Kat. The onyx had no effect on her while she held the piece of the opal. Both of us knew what that meant. Whoever carried the opal would have no reaction to the onyx, and they got a nice power-up.

Of course, I would make damn sure that Kat carried it.

The others arrived, and I slipped the piece of opal in my pocket. With Blake there, I didn't want him to know we had it. Since it was in my pocket, I quickly discovered that unless it was against my skin, it had no effect on the onyx. In my mind, I saw Luc's cuff. No doubt the opal was sewn in so it was always touching his skin.

As the night wound down and everyone else headed back, Kat stayed behind with me. "It didn't work in your pocket, did it?"

"No." I dug the opal out. "I'm going to hide this somewhere. Right now, I don't think we need anyone fighting over it or it getting into the wrong hands."

"Do you think we're ready for next Sunday?"

Nervousness gathered in her voice. We had a little over a week before we headed to Mount Weather.

I slipped the opal back into my pocket and then gathered her in my arms. "We're going to be ready as we ever will be, and I don't think we can keep Dawson off much longer."

Kat agreed with the last part. Truth was, even if we weren't ready, we were going to have to do it, because I'd been right about Dawson. He hadn't said anything, but we couldn't hold him back much longer.

No matter what, we'd be ready for Mount Weather on Sunday.

While the girls went dress shopping on Saturday, I headed out with the guys to grab an early dinner. I was wondering how the whole thing was going down for Kat. It was the first time she was hanging out with Dee since Adam died, and Ash was also with them.

I was pretty sure Ash still hadn't forgiven Kat for spaghetti-gate.

We piled into a booth in the back of Smoke Hole. Dawson immediately grabbed the menu. Every time he came here now, he wanted to try something new. Luckily, the menu was absurdly large, and he usually found something on it he hadn't tried. It was strange. He'd never done that before.

After ordering our drinks, I checked my phone and found a text from Kat.

What R U doing?

With Andrew, Matthew & Dawson, getting dinner. Want smthing?

Andrew stared at me. I ignored him. My phone dinged.

You

Hell, that made me sit up straighter. Standing, I ignored the way Matthew sighed. "Be right back."

Dawson grinned slightly as he focused on his menu. "Watch. He's going to leave our asses here."

Shooting him a look, I texted back *Really?* Then I added *of course*, *I alrdy knew that*. Stepping outside, I called her before she could respond.

Kat answered on the first ring. "Hey."

"I wish I were home," I said as a car in the street honked. "I can be there in seconds."

"No. You rarely get guy time," she said. "Stay with them."

I glanced back at the windowed front of the restaurant. "I don't need guy time. I need Kitten time."

There was a pause, and when she spoke again, I thought she sounded a little breathless. "Well, you can get Kitten time when you come home."

Walking down the cracked pavement, I decided that I would have to wait. "Did you get a dress?" "Yes."

"Will I like it?" I asked, squinting up at the weakening sun.

"It's red," she said. "So I think so."

My lips tipped up at the corners. "Hot damn."

"Daemon," Andrew yelled from the door. I turned, flipping him off. He returned the gesture. "If you don't come back in, I'm going to order a salad for you."

I sighed. "Okay. I'm going back in. Want me to pick you up anything? Andrew, Dawson, and I are at Smoke Hole."

"Do they have chicken-fried steak?"

"Yes."

"With homemade gravy?"

I laughed as I started back toward the door, where Andrew waited like he needed to escort me. "The best gravy around."

"Perfect. I want that."

"I'll bring you more than you can eat." When she laughed, my smile spread. "See you in the little bit."

"Bye," Kat said, hanging up.

Andrew smirked as I slid my phone back into my pocket. "If you need help finding your balls," he said, reaching for the door, "I'm sure Katy knows where they are."

Snickering, I stopped beside him. "She knows where they are, because that's where they belong." Flicking him in the cheek with my finger, I laughed when he jerked back, stumbling into the wall. I might've put a little bit of the Source behind that flick. "Whoops."

Andrew placed his hand over his cheek. "Jesus, man. Asshole."

Still chuckling, I made my way back to our booth and slid into the seat next to Dawson. He glanced at me. "I ordered you meat loaf."

"Perfect."

Matthew's brows rose as Andrew sat down, and he eyed his red cheek. "What happened to your face?"

"My balls," I replied, sitting back.

Dawson choked on his drink.

On the other side of the table, Matthew slowly looked over in my direction while Andrew raised his

middle finger again. "You know," Matthew said, "I don't even want to know."

I chuckled as I tossed my arm over the back of the booth. My gaze flickered over everyone at the table. It had been a long time since we'd done anything like this. It was so damn normal that I could almost forget about the fact that next Sunday, we'd be raiding a government facility again, you know, like ordinary teenagers would do.

"We heading to the lake when we're done?" Dawson asked.

Aaand the sense of normalcy ended right there.

Matthew took a drink of his water as he eyed my brother with a level of patience I couldn't even fathom. "I think we all can afford to take the rest of the day off."

Beside me, Dawson stiffened. "I don't think so. We need—"

"We can handle the onyx for about fifty seconds," Andrew replied, voice low so we weren't overheard.

"Another five seconds isn't going to make a difference, bud. Either we can walk through those shields or we can't."

"He's got a point, Dawson. Taking a day off isn't going to change anything. We all need—" A sharp, startling pain in my chest cut my words off.

"You need—whoa, dude, what's wrong?" Dawson twisted toward me.

"I..." The red-hot, oxygen-stealing pain shot across my chest once more. Jerking forward, I clutched my chest. Opening my mouth, I couldn't get my tongue to form words for a moment.

Matthew's face blurred. "Daemon, what's going on?"

Blood drained from my face as the pain amped up in my chest, spreading throughout my arms and legs. I started to stand, but my legs gave out. I slid back into the booth. My name was called out again, but the voice sounded so very distant. Terror dug its way up my throat as my chest seized—my heart seized frantically, and I knew what was happening.

"Kat," I gasped out. "It's...Kat."

CHAPTER 21

My legs weren't working right. The muscles in them, usually so damn strong, had gone soft and useless. I couldn't walk. Couldn't even stand on my own. Eyes followed us as Andrew and Matthew all but carried me outside.

Dawson was on the phone with Dee, and the words he spoke sounded a million miles away. "I don't know what's happened. He can't walk or stand—I don't know. We're bringing him—"

"Kat," I croaked out, struggling to think around the burning fire spreading through my chest. "It's *Kat*."

Matthew sucked in a shrill breath as he tightened his arm around my waist. "Tell her to go check on Katy. It has to be her."

Dawson did just that. His body wobbled as he moved in front of me. We were standing near my SUV. "Dee is going to check on her. We—"

"Get me there," I rasped as the sky blinked out for a second. "Get me there now."

No one was moving fast enough. Or at least it felt that way. I had to get there—to Kat. I couldn't fail her, and I was failing her, right now. I tried to take a step forward, but I would've face-planted in the parking lot if it hadn't been for Dawson and Matthew. The ground waved in a weird way, as if it were pulsating.

"Get him in the car now." Dawson shifted, his voice strained with panic. "Shit. We need to get him there now." Hefted up into the backseat, I slumped against the side, barely able to hold myself up in the sitting position. My heart labored painfully with every passing second. Dawson clutched the front of my shirt and he was talking fast—too fast. The inside of the car blurred. Tires squealed. Voices, so many voices, but all I could focus on was Kat's face. This was her—she was hurt, very badly. She was dying. Oh God, she was dying, and I wasn't there for her. A shudder rolled through me as my chest labored for breath.

Was this it? It couldn't be. Dammit, it would not be it. I would see Kat again. I would hear her voice—those lush lips speaking my name. I would kiss her again. I would feel her breathe against me. I would touch her again.

I would love her.

This wasn't it.

The SUV jerked to the stop. Things were fuzzy. Dawson shifted out of the backseat, grabbing me by the legs. What was happening? I thought I asked that out loud, but no one answered. He dragged me out of the car. My hold on my human form slipped. I felt that. Someone cursed.

Kat.

And then there were trees whirling above me. The sky was down and the ground was up. Warm wind tore about my clothing. Someone was carrying me—no. It was Dawson and Andrew. They were

racing over the ground and through the trees.

Time slowed to infinity, and then finally, their footfalls thumped off of wood. A door opened, and I felt the warm tingle along the back of my neck. Cool air reached out, wrapping itself around us.

I forced my eyes open and for my body to shift back into my human form, and I dug in, held on to the waning strength. I needed to for her—for us. Dawson and Andrew placed me down on the floor, and I saw her then. My vision cleared, and a thousand fears were confirmed.

Kat was lying on the floor, her beautiful face pale and strained. The front of her shirt was covered in red. The blood was under her, on her mouth and chin.

"Daemon..." she whispered.

"Shh..." I forced a smile as I willed my arm to move. Dee was on the other side, her luminous light flickering in and out. She was keeping Kat alive—keeping me alive.

"Don't talk. It's okay. Everything is okay." I grabbed Dee's bloodied hands, pulling them away from Kat. "You can stop now."

I can do this. I can fix her, Dee responded.

"We can't risk you doing this," I told her, shifting onto my side. Or Dawson shifted me. He was holding me up. "You have to stop."

"Man, you're too weak to do this." Andrew moved to where Dee was kneeling, grabbing Kat's limp hand. "Let Dee do this," Andrew urged.

I couldn't allow her to do this. If she saved Kat, she would be bonded to her—to Kat and me, and that was too risky.

Dee slipped back into her human form as she scrambled back. Her arms were shaking. "He's crazy. He's absolutely crazy."

I might be crazy, but I knew I could heal Kat. There was no doubt in my mind. Slipping into my true from, I placed my hand on her nearly-still chest. Using every ounce of Source I had in me, I funneled everything into Kat, because she was my everything.

It's going to be okay. I've got you, Kitten. It's going to be okay.

Heat flowed from me and into her, and I heard her saying my name over and over, and I felt her heart stuttering, and then it picked up, beating stronger and steadier. Her chest inflated, and the oxygen she needed so badly to survive rushed in, filling all of her starved lungs.

You can let go now, I told her.

Kat did.

"Everything has been taken care of," Dawson said, his voice low.

Leaning against the wall outside my bedroom, I exhaled softly. "Thank you."

He stepped in, placing his hand on my shoulder. "You don't ever need to thank me for any of that." Concern filled eyes identical to mine. "Man, should you even be up? The fact that you healed Katy after how badly it affected you? You should be out cold."

"I was out cold while Ash and Dee cleaned Kat up." I scrubbed a hand over my face. "And I just woke up a little bit ago."

Dawson glanced at the closed door beside me. "Has she woken up?"

I knew he'd been worried about her, and I was...yeah, I was happy to know that Kat had come to mean a lot to Dawson, and I...I should've been like that with Bethany. I realized that now. Realized a

lot of shit now. "She hasn't yet, but she will."

"Yeah," he murmured, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I can't believe he came back—that Will came back and did that to her."

Closing my eyes, I nodded. Will's body had been found after Kat was healed. She'd killed him, but somehow he'd managed to shoot her with the gun he'd brought. Seconds—mere seconds—and Kat and I wouldn't be here. That's how close we'd come.

The dread that Will Michaels was going to reappear had been valid. We'd been so focused on going back to Mount Weather that we—or at least I—hadn't taken the threat of him seriously enough. Guilt churned in my stomach.

"Did he...did he look that bad before?" Dawson asked.

I shook my head. I'd only caught a brief glimpse of Will before Matthew had taken his body outside and destroyed it, but the messed-up doctor looked like he'd aged by decades. Obviously, the mutation hadn't held, but I didn't know why he'd looked as bad off as he had.

"Everything is cleaned up next door." Dawson pushed off the wall and turned to the stairs. "Dee is with Ash and Andrew, and Matthew just left a little while ago. I'm going to grab something to eat. You need anything?"

I shook my head. What I needed, Dawson couldn't provide, because right now, I needed Kat to open her eyes.

Dawson turned and then stopped, facing me. His voice was hoarse when he spoke. "I'm glad you're okay. I...I couldn't deal with losing you," he said, and it sounded so strange to be on the other end of those words. "And I'm glad Katy's going to be okay."

Unable to find the right words, I hugged my brother. There was a moment when neither of us moved, and then Dawson stepped away. As he went downstairs, I stepped back into the room lit with just a candle I'd placed on the desk.

"Daemon?"

Kat's voice was hoarse, but it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. Walking to the bed, I sat down beside her. Shit, my throat clogged a little. "I'm here. Right beside you."

She turned her head, and her gaze focused on me. "I can't move my arms."

I chuckled. "Here, let me fix that for you." Either Ash or Dee had tucked her in to the point she was practically sealed to the bed. I found the edges of the blankets and loosened them. "There you go."

"Oh." Her arms appeared, and the blanket slipped down her bare shoulders. Her eyes widened, and then she winced as she clasped the edge of the blanket. "Why am I naked?"

"You don't remember?"

Kat stared back at me for a moment, and then she sat up suddenly. Dark hair tumbled over her shoulders. She moved to yank the blanket down, but I stopped her. "You're fine. There's just a tiny mark—a scar, but it's really faint." I closed my hand over hers. "Honestly, I doubt anyone would notice it unless they were looking really close, and I'd be perturbed if anyone was looking that close."

Shock flickered across her face. Her mouth moved without words, and I knew she had to be remembering everything, even the things I didn't know about yet.

"Dee helped get you cleaned up. So did Ash." I paused. "They put you in the bed. I didn't...help then." I started to touch her but stopped. Her silence was starting to worry me. A lot. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Kat nodded slowly. "I shouldn't be sitting up and talking to you. This is..."

"I know. It's a lot." I touched her then, placing the tips of my fingers on her lips. Feeling her warm breath on my fingers was like touching the sun. "It's really a lot."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "How did you know?"

"I felt short of breath all of a sudden." I dropped my hand and inched closer to her. "And there was this red-hot feeling in my chest. My muscles wouldn't work right. I knew something had happened. Luckily, Andrew and Dawson were able to get me outside without causing a scene. Sorry, no chickenfried steak."

I smiled faintly. "I'd never been so scared in my life. I had Dawson call Dee to check on you. I... was too weak to get here myself."

"How do you feel now?"

"Perfect. You?"

"I feel fine. You saved my life—our lives."

"It was nothing." And it should've never happened.

Kat gaped at me before twisting on the bed. She looked at the nightstand clock. It was past one in the morning. Panic flashed across her face as she gathered the blanket around her. "I have to go home. There has to be blood, and when my mom comes home in the morning, I don't—"

"It's all been handled." I stilled her. "They took care of Will, and the house is fine. When your mom comes home, she won't know anything happened."

She relaxed a little, but it was short term. Her eyes closed, and her forehead wrinkled.

"Kat," I said. "Kitten, what are you thinking?"

"I killed him." Tears welled up and spilled down her cheeks. "I killed him, and I didn't care at all."

I placed my hands on her bare shoulders. "You did what you had to do, Kat."

"No. You don't understand. I didn't *care*. And I should care about these kinds of things." She laughed hoarsely. "Oh God..."

Pain, as real and as potent as any, slammed into me. "Kat—"

"What's wrong with me? Something *is* wrong with me. I could've just disarmed him and stopped him. I didn't have to—"

"Kat, he tried to kill you. He shot you. You acted out of self-defense."

She shook her head, and then she broke. The pain and horror of what she had faced, what she *had* to do, was etched into her face, and it filled every tear that fell. I made a sound in the back of my throat as I pulled her into my arms, keeping the blankets and all. The tears continued to come as I rocked her, holding her so close.

Kat started to pull free, but I held her. "I'm a monster," she said. "I'm like Blake."

The words cut through me. "What? You are nothing like him, Kat. How can you say that?"

"But I am. Blake—he killed because he was desperate. How is what I did any different? It's not!" In a state of disbelief, I shook my head. "It's not the same."

Kat dragged in air by the lungful. "I'd do it again. I swear I would. If anyone threatened my mom or you, I would. And I knew that after everything that happened with Blake and Adam. That's not how people react—it's not right."

"There's nothing wrong with protecting those you love," I argued. "Do you think I've enjoyed killing those I have? I haven't. But I wouldn't go back and change those things."

She wiped at her cheeks with the backs of her hands as her shoulders shook. The tears kept coming. "Daemon, it's different."

"How is it?" I grasped her face, forcing her to look at me through tear-soaked lashes. "Remember when I took out those two DOD officers at the warehouse? I hated that I did that, but I had no other choice. If they reported back they saw us, it was all over, and I wasn't going to let them take you." I chased the tears from her face, catching her gaze when she tried to look away. "And I hated what I

have done—I hated every time I've taken a life, Arum or human, but sometimes, there is no other choice. You don't accept it. You don't become okay with it, but you do come to understand it."

She grasped my wrists. "But what...what if I was okay with it?"

"You're not okay with it, Kat." How could she not see how incredibly not okay with it all she was? "I know you're not."

"How can you be so sure?" she whispered.

I smiled a little. "I know you're good inside. You're warmth and light and everything I don't deserve, but you—you believe that I deserve you. Knowing all that I have done in my past to other people and to you, you still believe I deserve you."

"I—"

"And that's because you're good inside—you've always been and will be." I slipped my hands down to her shoulders. "There is nothing you can say or do that will change that. So grieve what you had to do. Mourn it, but never, ever blame yourself for things that are beyond your control. Now get the rest of that crap out of your head, because you're so much better than that. You're more than that."

The tears slowed, and those stormy eyes turned soft. Still shaking, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against mine. My fingers tightened on her shoulders. Kissing her—hell, kissing her was something that I'd feared I would never experience again. I could taste her tears on her lips and a rising, heightened yearning. The kiss deepened, and it was different, so very different from all the times before.

Because there were a hundred emotions pouring into the kisses—hope for a tomorrow and for a real future, acceptance of each other, and so much pent-up longing that it threatened to swallow us whole, and damn, I wanted to be swallowed. I wanted it to drag us down.

Kat pulled back. Our eyes locked. I cupped her cheek and spoke three short words in my own language, words that were powerful but still didn't match what I felt for her.

"What did you say?" she asked.

Smiling, I kissed her again. The moment she let go of the blanket, letting it slip to her bare hips, I faltered.

I gently guided her onto her back, and she wrapped her arms around me. Time sped up and slowed down as we kissed. There was nothing else but us in this room, experiencing what we were sharing. There was no place for anything else. The blanket was pushed aside, and her legs were curled around mine. We moved and twisted against each other. My arms shook; my hands trembled against her flushed skin as she arched her back. I explored her, paying extra attention to the faint scar so close to her heart, tracing the tiny mark with my finger, then my mouth, and finally my tongue.

Lifting my head, I pressed my cheek to hers. My voice felt raw and scratchy when I spoke. "Tell me to stop and I will."

Instead of saying no, she looped her arms around my neck, and she tugged me back down for another scorching kiss. I settled over her, not quite touching at first. Static built between us, filling the air with electricity. She pulled me closer, sweeping her thumb over my lower lip, and then she slid her hands down to my chest. I trembled and closed my eyes.

Kat's slightest touch could do that to me.

And then her hands were moving again, over my lower abs and down to the button on my jeans. My eyes snapped open. Heat rolled off me as I sat up, pulling her into my lap. Our hearts pounded in unison as my hands cradled her hips, tugging her as close as I could get her. Her soft moans were a symphony, a prayer, and I wanted this to last. It had to last. I laid her back down, marveled at her beauty, at the fact that she was choosing me—had chosen me.

I didn't want to rush a moment of this.

Even as she pressed against me, her hips twisting and her nails digging into my skin, I wanted to savor every damn second. I kissed her skin, blazing a path down the column of her throat and then lower...and then lower again. I didn't speed it up, not even when I started to lose the hold on my human form. Light flickered, fading in and out.

When I made a trail all the way back to her mouth, she whispered against my lips, and she tugged on my hair. Message received, loud and clear.

Damn, girl.

Rising off her, I shucked my pants, and I grabbed protection. Then our bodies were flush, hard against soft. Our hands were everywhere—hers and then mine. There wasn't a part of me she didn't touch. There wasn't a square inch of her I didn't familiarize myself with. I slowed it down, kissing and nipping, touching softly and holding her until neither of us wanted to wait a heartbeat longer.

I hated that moment of pain, the way her entire body tensed, and I did everything I knew, and then I got creative, to take away that pain. And I washed it away, as if it were never there, but that was nothing compared to what she did to me. She twisted me up into knots, so tight I thought I would snap apart, and she did—I did.

Our breaths slackened. Our racing hearts and pounding pulses slowed. I was shaken, blown apart and stitched back together. What we'd done, what we shared...nothing had ever felt like that. Sounded so freaking cornball, but it was true and it was so right, so damn perfect that there was that thickness in my throat again.

Dragging my hand to her cheek, I kissed her softly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm perfect."

And then Kat yawned, right in my face.

I busted into laughter. Damn. Kat turned her cheek into her pillow, trying to hide, but I wouldn't let her. I chased after, kissing her once more. Rolling onto my side, I pulled her with me, situating her so we were face to face.

Damn, I was full—my heart was full. "Thank you."

"For what?"

I trailed my fingers over her arm, smiling when she shivered. "For everything."

CHAPTER 22

Silvery moonlight streamed through the bedroom window, shining enough light for me to see what I was doing. I should be asleep. Tuesday morning, and school was going to come soon enough, and I should be exhausted after messing around with onyx all evening, but I wanted to get this done before I forgot.

I carefully wrapped the white rope around the center of the piece of opal. The rope was thin, leaving most of the stone bare. It would work, at least temporarily. Kat would be able to wear it under her shirt.

Most likely, she was going to fight me on the opal, but that was one battle I wasn't going to lose. Speaking of Kat...

Lifting my chin as I felt the warm tingle along the back of my neck, I smiled as I placed the opal and the white rope into my desk drawer. I turned toward the bedroom a second before the door cracked open. Slim fingers curled around the door.

"Kitten..." I chuckled. "Breaking and entering again?"

"I didn't break anything. I let myself in." There was a moment, and then Kat poked her head in, brow furrowed. "You're awake," she whispered.

"Uh-huh."

Her frown increased. "You were supposed to be asleep."

My lips kicked up on one side. "For what reason?"

More of her head appeared. Her hair was pulled up in a topknot. "I wanted to sneak into your bed and surprise you."

"I can make that happen." I started to stand. "I'll go crawl into bed and pretend to be asleep."

She pouted. "Not the same thing."

"No?"

Kat shook her head. "No, because you're awake."

"All right then." I sat back down, grinning. "Are you going to come into my room or stay halfway in the hall?"

"I don't know yet."

I chuckled. "Kitten..."

Huffing, she slipped inside my bedroom and closed the door behind her. Muscles tightened all over when I got a good look at her. Wearing striped cotton shirts and a long-sleeved shirt that was amazingly thin, she was dressed for bed.

I toed my desk chair around so I was facing her as she made her way across the room. "Your mom is going to be very upset if she catches you not in your bed."

"She won't catch me. I was quiet and stealthy—"

"Like me?" I reached out, catching one of her hands.

She grinned. "Better. Like a ninja."

Chuckling, I tugged her into my lap. The chair groaned under our combined weight. She placed her hand on my bare chest as she dipped her head to mine. My lips brushed overs hers. "When I left your house, you were half asleep."

"I napped." She slid her hand up my chest and looped her arm around my neck. "I woke up and couldn't fall back asleep."

Leaning back in the chair, I dragged my thumb along the side of her jaw. "You were missing me."

"Maybe."

"Just admit it." I swept my finger over her lower lip.

She pressed a soft kiss to the tip of my finger. "I don't need to admit anything, because if your ego gets any bigger, it'll need its own zip code."

I snorted. "I know something else that'll need its own zip code if it gets any—"

"Oh my God." Kat laughed. "Don't even finish that sentence."

Chuckling, I kissed her, and she melted into me. Everything and nothing had changed between us since Saturday night. Each kiss and touch seemed to mean infinitely more, and I didn't think it had to do with the sex. Though the sex was really awesome. It had more to do with the whole almost-dying part.

Both of us knew there was no guarantee of tomorrow, but what happened Saturday had been a real harsh reminder that no second was promised. It made every moment with her more precious.

"Why aren't you asleep?" Her lips brushed mine as she spoke.

I kissed the corner of her lips. "I was missing you."

"Shut up."

Folding my arms around her, I held her tight as she pressed her cheek to my chest. "Just wasn't sleepy." I rested my chin atop her head.

"Hmm..." She wiggled a little, getting comfortable. "Were you thinking about Sunday night?"

I kissed the top of her head. "I was thinking about Saturday night."

Kat laughed. "Whatever. You were not thinking about prom."

"Maybe I was. I have big things planned for you." That was the truth.

"What stuff?"

"It's a surprise."

"Tell me," she demanded.

I laughed. "Then it wouldn't be a surprise, Kitten. You know how these things work. I keep it a secret until the perfect moment."

She sighed. "You're no fun."

"And we're probably going to break this chair."

Snorting, she squirmed out of my lap. "I should probably head—" Her words were cut off when she squealed as I picked her up, carrying her to the bed.

I dumped her on it.

Kat squeaked like a little toy. "Oh, you're so gonna get it."

"I hope so." Climbing over her, I prowled up her length and planted my hands on either side of her head. "You're going to stay the night with me."

She placed her hands on my chest. "I just need to get back next door before my mom wakes up."

"Doable."

Kat lifted her head, but before our lips met, I asked, "You were thinking about Sunday night,

weren't you? That's why you're awake."

She bit down on her lower lip. "Yeah, I was. Kind of hard not to."

Understandable. We were down to days, and I knew it was wearing on everyone's mind, including mine. But I didn't want to spend the next handful of days worrying about Sunday. I wanted to live them.

I wanted to live these days with Kat.

And tonight, I didn't want her thinking about anything but us. Lowering my mouth to hers, I kissed her softly, smiling when her fingers found their way into my hair. I made sure she didn't spend a second more worrying about Sunday.

CHAPTER 23

When I first saw Kat in her prom dress, I was more than willing to skip the whole damn dance so I could have her all to myself. And while I normally had no problem acting on my selfishness, Kat deserved this night.

Ms. Swartz had clutched her camera in her hand like it was going to run away from her while I'd waited for Kat in their living room. She'd come down the stairs, absolutely gorgeous in the red gown.

Damn.

Red really was my favorite color.

Lips painted to match her dress had parted as she'd eyed me. I didn't wear tuxedos often, but when I did, I made them look damn good.

But she had looked beautiful, and as her mom had taken a thousand pictures of us, I couldn't stop staring at her. I'd spent every moment of the dance staring at her, and when she'd said she was ready to go, I couldn't get her out of there fast enough.

The moment we got inside my car, Kat stared at me expectedly, and I cast a long, knowing glance in her direction. "You're dying to know, aren't you?"

"Yes." She nodded eagerly. "You should tell me."

Kat really had no idea what I had planned for her tonight, and I wanted to keep it that way. Thank God the weather was nice. A little cool, but no rain. It made what I wanted to do perfect.

I managed to keep her in the dark on the drive back home. Parking the car in the driveway, I turned to her. "Stay in the car, okay?"

Looking entirely suspicious and excited, she nodded. I grinned as I stepped out of the car and hit record-breaking speeds as I raced down to the lake.

Covered with a canvas, the cooler was where I left in. On top of it were several thick blankets and pillows. Waving my hand, I spread them out around the branches piled inside a stone circle. The blankets spread out, along with the pillows, forming a comfortable nest.

Placing my hand on one of the branches, I summoned the Source. Sparks flew, igniting the driedout branches. Flames swirled down their crooked lengths. Thin wisps of smoke billowed up.

Done, I headed back to where Kat waited in the car. I walked up to the passenger side and opened the door, extending my hand. "Ready?"

Kat gave me her hand. "So my surprise...?"

"You'll see."

Hand in hand, we started walking toward the lake, and when we crossed the street that had basically exposed what we were to Kat, I couldn't help but wonder what it would've been like if Kat hadn't walked out in front of that truck. She would definitely be safer, and my brother wouldn't be here with us. So much stuff would be different, and I wasn't sure if the pros outweighed the cons.

"Do you think you can walk in those heels?" I asked, realizing the wickedly sexy shoes she was wearing couldn't be easy to walk in.

She squeezed my hand. "Yeah, I'll be fine."

I took it slow, and when we entered the heavy woods, I lifted my free hand and let white light crackle over my knuckles, lighting our path over the uneven ground. Man, I hoped she didn't think this was corny and stupid. Okay. It was a little corny, but when we stepped out of the last of the trees and I could see the moonlight reflected off the still lake, the look on Kat's face said I had made the right decision.

"Surprise," I said, stepping ahead, my back to the fire. "I thought this would be better than a party or whatever. And you like the lake. So do I."

Kat pressed her hand to her chest as she blinked rapidly. "It's perfect, Daemon. Oh my God, it's wonderful." "Really?" I cleared my throat, relieved. "You really like it?"

"I love it." She laughed, the sound lilting and heady. "I really love this."

I smiled.

Kat launched herself at me, wrapping her arms and legs around me. She kissed my forehead and then each of my cheeks. "You really love it. I'm glad."

I walked us over to the blankets and then placed her down. We kicked off our shoes and settled in. Kat tucked her legs under her. "What's in the cooler?"

"Ah, the good stuff." I moved to the cooler and knelt down, cracking it open. I pulled out two wineglasses. "Wine cooler—strawberry. Your favorite."

The skin around her eyes crinkled as she laughed. "Oh my God."

I poured each of us a glass and handed hers over.

"What else?" She leaned over, peering inside. She made a little squeak as I pulled out a canister and peeled the lid off, revealing chocolate-covered strawberries. "Did you make them?"

"Ha. No."

"Uh...did Dee make them?" she asked.

I laughed, because Dee would've burned down the house if she had tried to melt chocolate without burning it. "I ordered them from the candy shop in time. Try one?"

Kat plucked one up. "They are so good."

"There's more." I pulled out a plastic container full of sliced cheese and crackers. "Also premade from the store, because *I* am not a cook or whatever."

Unveiling the cucumber sandwiches and veggie pizza next, we dug in as we sat on the blankets facing each other.

"When did you do all of this?" She asked for another slice of veggie pizza.

Picking up a strawberry, I thought it was kind of small. A wimpy strawberry. "I had the stuff in the cooler down here and the blankets wrapped in canvas. All I did when we got back was come down here real quick, spread the stuff out, and start the fire."

She finished off the slice. "You're amazing."

I raised a brow as I tossed the strawberry back in the canister and rooted around for another. "I know it didn't take you this long to realize that."

"No. I've always known it," she said. "Maybe not in the beginning..."

I peeked up. "My awesomeness is all about the stealth."

"Is it?"

"Uh-huh." I grinned, closing the bowl and placing the rest of the food back in the cooler. Tossing her a soda, I cleaned everything up. "I can't show all my dynamic sides at once."

"Of course not. Where's the mystery in that?"

The temps had dropped a little, so I picked up a throw blanket. I draped it over her shoulders as I sat beside her. "There is none."

"Thank you." She pulled the material close.

"I think the general public would be shocked to know how deep your sweetness runs."

Stretching out, I rested on my side. "They can never know."

Grinning, she leaned forward and kissed my lips. "I'll take the secret to my grave."

"Good." I patted the spot next to me. "We can go back whenever you want."

"I don't want to leave."

"Then get your happy little hybrid butt over here."

Kat laughed as she scooted over and lay down beside me. I moved the pillow so it was under her head. "I had fun at the dance, but this...this was way better."

I played with one of her fat curls, twining the hair around my finger. "I'm glad. I wanted tonight to be special."

"It is." She idly flicked a button on my dress shirt. "Best senior prom ever."

Chuckling, I let go of the curl. "It's your only senior prom."

"Still..." She tipped her head back and smiled at me. "So I looked over the applications to the University of Colorado. Even mentioned it to my mom."

Pleased to hear that, we talked about the college until well after midnight. It was late, and the temps had definitely dropped again, but neither of us wanted to leave yet.

"Are you worried about tomorrow at all?" she asked, running the tips of her fingers along the curve of my jaw.

Her fingers drifted close to my lips, and I kissed them. "I'm worried—but I'd be insane not to be—but not about what you think."

"What then?" She slid her hand down my neck, over my shirt.

I shifted closer. "I worry that Beth won't be like Dawson remembered."

"Me, too."

"I know he can handle it, though." Because I was getting jealous, I slipped my hand under the blanket. "I just want the best for him. He deserves it."

"He does." Her chest rose sharply as I followed the curve of her waist and hip. "I hope she's okay—that everyone is okay, even Chris."

I nodded as I gently eased her onto her back, smoothing my hand over the skirt of her dress, all the way down to her knee. "Something else is bothering you."

There was a moment of hesitation. "I don't want anything to happen to you." Her voice cracked. "I don't want anything to happen to anyone."

"Shh." I kissed her, wanting to wipe away that fear. "Nothing will happen to me or anyone."

Kat's hands fisted in my shirt, holding me close. "What happens if we do succeed tomorrow night?"

"You mean *when* we do?" I settled over her. "We go back to school on Monday—boring, I know. Then we hopefully pass our classes, which we will. Then we graduate. And then we have all summer..."

"Daedalus will come looking for Beth and Chris."

"And they won't find them." I kissed her temple and then the curve of her brow. "That is, if they get close enough."

"Daemon..."

"It'll be okay. Don't worry." It had to be. I would make sure of it, one way or another. "Let's not

think about tomorrow. Let's not think about next week or the next night. It's just us right now and nothing else."

Kat's heart rate kicked up. Her eyes drifted shut, and her arms tightened around me. The distant call of some nighttime bird echoed around us as the small, slow kisses became longer and faster.

Our clothing shifted. Our hands followed familiar paths. Flames crackled from the fire as we stripped away everything between us and we moved together, a tangle of limbs and blankets. Kat shuddering in my arms was one of the most shattering experiences, and hours later, as she and I stared up at the dark blue sky, watching the stars blink out, one by one.

Just like the minutes and hours was ticking by, fading away into forever, counting down until there was just Mount Weather and us.

Succeed or fail.

CHAPTER 24

Time sped up, and before any of us knew it, we needed to get to Mount Weather. Kat had spent the morning with her mom, and I'd monopolized her afternoon. I'd given her the opal I'd fashioned into a necklace, slipping it around her neck. She'd wanted me to wear it, but that wasn't going down.

We'd just lain together, both of us awake. Nothing like last night...or this morning, but I really couldn't think about that at this moment.

Right now, Kat was inside her house. She'd be out in minutes, along with Ash and Dee, because we needed to hit the road.

"Andrew is staying behind this time, at the farm. He'll be waiting with Ash and Dee," Matthew explained. "But since he's been working on and off with the onyx, he should be able to come in in case..."

In case shit went bad, which was why I wanted to talk to them before we headed out. "I need a promise from each of you," I said, meeting Matthew's and Dawson's gazes.

Matthew sighed as he leaned against my SUV. "Why do I have a feeling I'm not going to like what you're about to say?"

"You're not." I folded my arms. "If things start to go bad there tonight, no matter what, I want both of you to promise me you will get Kat out of there."

The older Luxen's brows flew up. "Daemon—"

"I know you're going to be focused on Bethany. I get that," I said to Dawson. "But please, I'm begging both of you, if something happens, I want you focused on Kat. Not me."

My brother stared at me for a long moment, and then he nodded. "I feel ya."

I knew he did, because he got it.

Matthew cursed under his breath as he looked away, eyeing the woods. "I'm not okay with this."

"Matt—"

"Let me finish," he said, flipping his crystalline gaze to mine. "I don't like this—this whole idea that somehow I'll have to pick between you and Katy. I don't even want to think of that happening."

"Me neither," I assured him. "And I don't think that's going to happen, but if shit starts to go bad, I want you to get her out of there. No matter what. I want to make sure we all have her back. She can hold her own, but I want..."

"You want us to protect her." Dawson clapped his hand on my shoulder. "We understand." He looked over at Matthew. "And we will do that."

Placing his hands on his hips, he nodded after a moment. I exhaled roughly, relieved. "Thank you." Matthew dipped his chin. "Please don't thank us for this."

"None of this will probably be needed," Dawson reasoned, running his hand through his hair.

I hoped so. Turning to the porch, my chest clenched as Kat stepped out, dressed in black leggings

and a matching shirt. She smiled when she saw me, her gray eyes lighting up.

Damn, I really hoped so.

We arrived at the farm at the base of the darken access road with a few minutes to spare. Like before, we'd taken two SUVs, and when we all climbed out, Blake got the text from Luc.

Then it was go.

We raced up the mountain again, nearing the gate, and I was the one who took out the guard this time. Tense, I approached the gate and entered the first code. Icarus. No problem. Racing across the lawn, we headed straight for the three doors.

This was the first big one. Kat would make it through the doors because she had the opal—we believed—but the rest of us? There was no guarantee the training was going to work. Working with the onyx in an attempt to be able to walk through the doors had been a theory—a theory held together with duct tape and a Hail Mary.

I glanced over at Kat. The necklace was under her shirt, the opal against her skin.

My brother keyed in the word "labyrinth."

The door slid open with an airlock sound, and I stepped forward, being the first one through. Air puffed, and I felt it. Instead of it dropping me to the ground, it was like standing too close to an open flame. I forced one leg in front of the other and then I was on the other side, standing in the wide hallway highlighted in orange. Looking over my shoulder, I smiled.

Matthew exhaled roughly. It had worked.

Dawson and Blake followed Matthew and Kat through the onyx-protected doors. She stuck close to me as Blake, who'd been here before, moved out in front of the pack. He led the way. The hall was shadowed, lit every twenty feet or so by small wall lamps. I kept an eye out for the emergency doors he'd mentioned before, the ones that could supposedly cut us into bite-size pieces.

"Onyx," Blake whispered, catching Kat staring at the shiny ceiling. "The whole place is covered in onyx."

God, what a lovely addition.

The tunnel split into a crossroads with elevators in the middle. Matthew inched toward the opening, checking out the space first. "Clear," he said.

Silent, we filed into the elevator. I checked on Dawson. Razor-edge determination was set in his jaw. Kat was looking at the ceiling again, and I noticed it was also outfitted with onyx.

Reaching between us, I found her hand and squeezed. I could feel her heart racing. She looked up at me, and I winked. She shook her head. We were almost there. The elevator came to a smooth stop and the doors opened, revealing a waiting room—a white waiting room. Everything was white—walls, ceiling, floors.

"Lovely decorative colors," Matthew muttered.

I smirked, but it quickly faded as Dawson moved ahead of us, approaching the third and final door. "Careful, brother. We take this slow."

Dawson nodded. "I've never been here. Blake?"

Blake moved to his side. "Should be another tunnel, shorter and wider, and there'll be doors on the right side. Cells—really, outfitted with a bed, a TV, and a bathroom. There'll be about twenty rooms. I don't know if the others are occupied or not."

Others?

Kat looked at me sharply. "We can't just leave them."

Before I could answer, Blake intervened. "We don't have time, Katy. Taking too many will slow us down, and we don't know what kind of condition they are in."

"But—"

"For once, I agree with Blake." I met her shocked stare, and I hated myself for this. "We can't, Kitten. Not now."

Kat pressed her lips together, and I knew she wasn't okay with this, but we didn't have the time, and we hadn't planned for rescuing more than Chris and Beth.

Blake keyed in the last code: Daedalus.

The sound of several locks sucking back into place broke the silence, and a light at the top of the door, on the right, flashed green. I moved in front of Kat as Blake inched the door open, and Matthew had done as I'd asked, blocked her from behind.

"We're clear," Blake said, sounding relieved.

We went through the door, discovering another onyx shield. Now we had two to get the others through. This wasn't going to be easy. The tunnel was like the one above, but it was all white and much shorter, wider.

We were here.

My gaze tracked my brother as Blake called out before rushing down the hall, toward the last of the cells. "The third cell is hers."

Dawson spun around as Kat and I moved close to him. He reached for the onyx-coated door handle. There was a flicker of pain across his stoic face, but the door opened, and my brother... My brother started trembling. His entire body shook as he croaked out one word, "Beth?"

I saw her then, a slender girl sitting on a narrow bed, and she looked like I had remembered—brown hair tucked back in a smooth ponytail and her elfin face pale. The moment recognition flared in her eyes, the second her gaze locked with my brother's, I wanted to whoop with relief.

Dawson staggered forward, hands opening and closing at his sides, and all he could say was her name over and over.

She scrambled forward, her gaze darting all around, but then hitting him and staying.

"Dawson? Is that... I don't understand."

They moved at the same time, coming together in a rush. Their arms went around each other. Dawson lifted her up as he buried his face in her neck. When he kissed her, I shifted my gaze, wanting to give them the privacy we really couldn't afford, but seeing them together, clinging to each other, got me right in the gut.

Dawson and Beth loved each other, and I had been an asshole to not support them since the beginning.

But we needed to get out of here.

"Dawson," I said quietly.

My brother pulled away from Beth as he grabbed her arms, and the moment her mouth wasn't occupied with Dawson's, she started asking questions. "What are you guys doing? How did you all get in here? Do they know?"

Dawson was grinning like his face was going to split into two. "Later," he said. "But we have to go through two doors and it's going to hurt—"

"Onyx shields, I know," Beth said.

Whelp. Douche Bag had been correct. Speaking of him, I frowned as I saw him coming up the hall,

carrying the prone body of a dark-haired Luxen boy. "Is he okay?"

Blake nodded, but he was pale and tense. "I...he didn't recognize me. I had to keep him quiet."

Kat hastily looked away, and I knew despite all the crap Blake had done, she felt bad for him in this instance. Hell, who wouldn't?

Beth turned toward Blake. "You can't—"

"We need to go." Blake cut her off and prowled past us. "We're almost out of time."

Beth was shaking her head vigorously. "But—"

"We need to go, Beth. We know." Dawson kissed her quickly, and she nodded, but the panic was building in the wide hall, threatening to infect us all.

Urgency kicked adrenaline into high gear, and without any more delay, the five of us took off down the hall. Skidding to a stop, I punched the code into panel on the wall, and the door opened.

I jerked.

Simon Cutters was standing in the waiting room, so obviously not dead. Everyone stumbled to a halt behind me.

"Oh shit," I said.

Simon smiled. "Missed me? I missed you guys."

Then he raised an arm. Light reflected off a metal cuff he wore, with, of course, a piece of opal embedded into it. He opened his hand and let loose a damn hurricane of wind. All of us were lifted up off our feet. Kat was thrown back, smacking into the nearest door. Dawson whirled, forcing Beth against the wall, taking the brunt of the gale-force winds. Matthew hit the wall, and my legs were knocked right out from under me. I skidded several feet down the hall.

Damn.

Someone was now a souped-up hybrid, and I had no idea how that happened, but there wasn't any time to play ask and answer.

I picked myself up, quickly looking for Kat. She was standing with Blake's help, favoring one leg over the other. I didn't see what Blake had done with the passed-out Chris.

Anger turned my blood to lava. "Oh, you are so dead."

"Ah, I think that's my line," Simon responded, letting out a burst of energy.

"Daemon!" Kat shouted.

Spinning out to the side, I avoided a direct hit. Immediately, I summoned the Source and reared back. Energy arced across the room, a whitish-red light.

"You're going to wear yourself out, Luxen," Simon sneered, dodging my hit.

I smirked. "Then so will you."

Simon winked and then spun toward Kat, throwing his hand out again. She and Blake skidded back. I shot around Simon as Blake caught Kat with arm around her chest. Appearing in front of them, I shoved Kat behind me.

"This is so not good," Blake said, edging closer to Simon. "We're running out of time."

"No shit," I spat.

Dawson shot toward Simon, but he threw him back, laughing. Another blast of energy flew at Blake and then toward Matthew. Both of them dive-bombed the floor to avoid taking a hit, and Simon kept advancing, smiling like a psycho.

Simon darted to one side, focusing on Kat. "Want to play, Kitty Kat?"

Aaand I was so done with this.

"Oh, screw this," I growled.

Striking like a cobra, I shot past Blake and Matthew and within a second I was directly in front of

Simon. The hybrid lifted his arms. I could feel the Source roaring through him as I placed my hands on either side of his head and twisted.

A *crack* echoed through the room, and Simon hit the floor.

Stepping back, I exhaled roughly as I closed my hands. "I never liked that punk in the first place."

Kat stumbled to the side as I turned around. "He's...he was..."

"We don't have time." Dawson pulled Beth toward the elevators. "They have to know we're here."

Blake scooped Chris up, casting a look at Simon as he passed the prone body. He said nothing as I threaded my fingers through Kat's. "Are you okay? You took a nasty hit."

"I'm okay. You?"

I nodded, not letting myself think about the fact that I'd just broken Simon's neck. Granted, he was trying to kill us, and he hadn't understood the concept of no, but still, it was another life that was on my hands.

"Come on." Matthew slipped into the elevator, his face pale. "We need to prepare for anything once these doors are open."

I nodded. "How is everyone?"

"Not feeling very good," Dawson answered, his free hand open and closing. "It's the damn onyx. I don't know how much is left in me."

"What the hell was up with Simon?" I turned on Blake as the elevator pitched into motion. "He barely seemed affected by the onyx."

Blake shook his head. "I don't know, man. I don't know."

What in the hell was up with that? Was it because of the opal? Had to be. There was really no time to think about that. I could feel the dread pouring off Kat, and that was my number one concern. I needed her to keep it together.

"It's going to be okay. We're almost out of here. We got this." I smiled, and that damn organ in my chest actually squeezed when I saw her lips curve in response. "I promise, Kitten."

It was a promise I'd go down to keep.

"Time?" Blake asked.

Matthew glanced at his wrist. "Two minutes."

Aw, man, this shit was making me anxious. Two minutes. The doors slid open with a *pop*, and thank God, the hallway was empty.

Blake was out first, carrying Chris. Then Matthew, quickly followed by Dawson and Beth. As planned, Kat and I were the last to leave. "Stay behind me," I told her, keeping my hand wrapped firmly around hers.

She nodded as we raced forward, slowing only when Blake shifted the unconscious Luxen to his shoulder and banged in the code. The door opened, and the darkness from the night beyond seeped in.

Blake stepped out and then paused. He looked over his shoulder. Not at me. At Kat. My free hand formed a fist as I saw Kat reach with her other hand toward her neck. Awareness pricked at my skin, crawling up the back of my neck like an army of a thousand fire ants.

Then Blake smiled.

Shit.

He raised a hand, and a white rope dangled from his fingers. At the end was the piece of opal I'd given to Kat. "Sorry. It had to be this way."

Rage exploded inside me like a bottle rocket.

"Son of a bitch!" I shouted as I dropped Kat's hand and shot forward. That was it. I was going to kill him *dead*.

I'd made it halfway when I felt the shiver of coldness skating over my skin. I skidded to a halt, snapping in fury.

Arum.

The shadows around that asshole deepened and spread out, slipping into the entrance and stretching over the walls and ceiling like a damn fungus straight from hell. The shadows dropped as lights exploded in a shower of sparks.

Seven of the bastards formed and then stepped right past Blake and the Luxen he carried, walked right past him.

And then Blake was gone.

Fury burned inside me like a volcano erupting. This was not happening. This was not *fucking* happening.

I met the first Arum that charged forward. Shoving my hand into the Arum's chest, I slammed it back into the wall just as Dawson pushed Bethany to the side and took down the other Arum.

Fights broke out all around. Matthew shanked an Arum with a piece of obsidian, and it went byebye in an explosion somewhere along the ceiling. Kat had tapped into the Source, laying out another Arum. The asshole didn't stay down long, and there was no way she could keep tapping into the source.

Turning back to the Arum I was facing, I simply ended it—quickly. Brutally. I wheeled around, just in time to see the Arum touch her. If I thought I was pissed before, I'd been wrong, because I could taste it on my tongue.

"Daemon!" she shouted.

I spun around, catching an Arum creeping right up on me and got out of its way. I didn't have time for this shit. I heard the shout of the Arum Kat had faced off with, and then it was up on the ceiling, doing its imploding thing. I grabbed the Arum in front of me, tossing it to the side.

We need to get out of here. Dawson sent the message to me, and I tossed a no shit look back in his direction.

I spun toward Matthew, who was picking himself up. Our gazes collided. Unease built in his eyes, and that bad taste spread in my mouth. *Remember the plan. Get Kat out of here*.

That message was sent directly at Matthew. He pushed forward, lips pressing into a firm, thin line as he nodded.

"Go! We need to go!" Dawson had a hold of Bethany and was practically carrying her out of here.

I turned, starting back to Kat, and I saw my mistake in painful detail. I'd told her to stay behind me like I was some kind of alien Hercules. She'd listened; for once in her life, she'd listened to me, and now there were too many feet between us. She was limping forward, her gaze on mine. Then she was down, catching herself with her hands as she hit the cement floor. Panic punched into my gut as she twisted onto her side.

Picking up speed, I was a body length from her when I heard it, when the hairs all over my body rose and the panic spread in me like a damn virus.

Light drenched the tunnel. Locks slammed into place in an endless stream of we-are-so-screwed.

"No," Matthew cried, turning to where we'd come from. "No."

Those words were on an endless replay as I saw the movement behind Kat. Blue light flashed from the ceiling to the floor, every ten feet, over and over. One of the shields cut an Arum, slicing right into it, and then it was gone in a poof of dirty dust.

Holy shit.

My heart leaped into my throat right along with my stomach as I lurched, reaching for Kat as she

scrambled forward. The tips of my fingers were inches—*fucking* inches—from her, and then a blue stream of light smacked down right in front of my face.

Right in front of Kat.

"Shit," I gasped out as she jerked back, her hair blowing off her face from the impact of the lasers.

No. No. No.

I shook my head as I stared at her form through blue light. No. Hell no. Absolutely no.

Our eyes locked and horror poured into me, invading every cell, and the bitter twang of fear coated the inside of my mouth. I staggered to the side, searching for a way around, but there was none. She was on the other side, and she wasn't alone. There were Arum and there were soldiers piling into the hall behind her. She was trapped.

She was trapped with them.

I couldn't breathe. "Kat..."

Sirens blasted.

No.

I shot forward, but I wasn't fast enough. It was too late. Emergency doors started to slide down from the top and the bottom. Pure panic fueled my actions. I stopped thinking as more and more of Kat disappeared behind the doors. I reached for her, determined to make it through the lasers in one piece out of sheer will.

She threw out her hand, and I felt the Source punch through the shield, smacking into my chest and pushing me back—away from the lasers. I fought the concentrated blast until arms clamped down on my waist, holding me back, pulling me away from her.

I lost my mind.

Twisting around, I slammed my fist into Matthew's jaw, but he held on, and after another punch, I gave up on him. Dragging him forward, I reached for Kat. I had to get to her, one way or another, I had to get to her.

Kat dropped to her knees, and I was a second behind her, hitting mine as Matthew managed to bring me down. Her lower lip trembled as her chest rose sharply. Something cracked in my chest, fissured down my core. Terror I'd never known before exploded.

"No! Please! No!" My voice broke. "Kat!"

They were crowding in around her, but she never took her eyes off me. She held my gaze as I tried to shake off Matthew.

Then she smiled a little, and my chest imploded. It was weak and wobbly and frail, and a part of me died right there.

"It'll be okay," she said, her eyes welling with wetness. "It'll be all right."

The doors were almost closed as I reached out, my fingers spread. Matthew jerked me back, and I braced myself with my other hand. My heart pounded as she was seconds from disappearing behind the door, seconds from being cut off from me.

My chest ripped right open and I said what I should've said days ago, weeks and months ago. "I love you, Katy. Always have. Always will. I will come back for you. I will—"

The doors sealed shut.

She was gone.

I stared at the doors, shaking my head again. "Kat? Kat!" I shouted.

"Come on." Matthew pulled me back, coming to his feet. "Daemon, we've got to go."

I didn't move. I was dead weight.

"Kat!" I screamed at the door, my voice breaking over the siren.

Dawson was suddenly there, grabbing my other arm, and I pulled free, swinging at him, but Matthew caught me from behind, wrapping his arms around mine, pinning them to my sides.

The look in Dawson's eyes was wild. "I'm sorry, but we've got—"

"This wasn't the plan!" I shouted in his face. "We were supposed to make sure she got out!" I twisted in Matthew's grip. "Let me the hell go. I need to get her."

"You can't," Matthew said. "We can't get to her now. Daemon, we've got to go."

The horror of reality soaked into me. "She's gone," I whispered, staring at my brother, and then I lost my shit all over again.

I broke free from Matthew and whirled toward the door. I pulled on the Source, intent on blowing a hole right through it. I would get to her, one way or another I would get to her.

Matthew cursed.

Sudden pain exploded along the back of my head, and I took one step before my legs went out from underneath me. I crumbled like a damn paper bag, down for the count, seeing blackness instead of stars. My brother's face blurred into focus for a moment.

"She's gone," I repeated as my vision darkened. "Kat's gone."

And then there was nothing.

Somewhere off Spring Mills exit in Berkeley County, West Virginia

"I know you're pissed at me."

Paris closed the door behind him, eyeing the young man who was more than just his boss. Luc was his savior. The kid might only be fourteen, and had been much younger when they'd first met, but Luc had saved his life more than once.

"Pissed might be too strong of a word," Paris said after a moment.

Luc had moved from the couch to the cash-covered desk, and he sat behind it once again. He slowly lifted his chin, piercing Paris with the odd purple-colored eyes. Eyes that were a sign of his kind, because Luc wasn't human, and he wasn't a hybrid like Blake and Katy.

Luc was something far, far different.

"I know what I'm doing." Luc leaned back in the chair and kicked his feet up on the desk, knocking over a stack of hundreds. He was holding something in his hands, and it wasn't that damn game system for once.

"Do you?" Paris's silvery gaze filled with doubt and a small measure of disappointment.

"You know what's going to happen to them."

"Who?" he asked innocently.

His lips thinned as he neared the desk. The money flew off the floor and he caught the stack. Dropping it on the desk, he then folded his arms. "You know who I'm talking about. There is no way that girl and Daemon are going to make it out of Mount Weather."

Luc knocked a strand of brown hair out of his face. "I know."

The disappointment increased as he stared at Luc. "You have to stop this. You have—"

"I don't have to do anything." Those amethyst eyes sharpened.

Paris unfolded his arms and raised his hands. "You know what I mean."

"And you know why I have to do this. Why I need them to get inside Daedalus."

Struggling to not let his frustration show, Paris motioned a chair toward the desk. He sat in it once it settled on all four legs. "You have the serum, Luc. You tried it. It didn't work."

A muscle spasmed along Luc's jaw. "The old serum didn't work. I want the serum they gave to that girl that was just in here. That serum could work."

"Luc—"

"Don't," he warned, his eyes flashing. "Don't tell me this is a lost cause. Nothing is a lost cause."

"That trip inside Mount Weather sure as hell is a lost cause," Paris shot back.

"For them, yes. Not for me." Luc shrugged, causing the edges of his hair to sway. "They get captured, they'll get back out, with what I want."

For a moment, all Paris could do was stare at Luc. There was no guarantee that if those two teenagers were captured, they'd survive long enough to get what Luc wanted, but Luc knew that. Luc was just willing to risk their lives.

Luc would risk everyone's life, including Paris's, to get what he wanted.

He sighed as his gaze flickered to the closed door behind the desk. "And what if it doesn't work, Luc? What if the newest serum doesn't heal Nadine?"

A flicker of emotion crawled across Luc's normally impassive expression, tightening the corners of his almond-shaped eyes. "Then I will make sure Sergeant Dasher and Nancy Husher pay for what

they've done to her." Paris didn't respond to that, because what could he say? Killing was bad? Revenge got you nowhere? And what Dasher and those at Daedalus had done to Nadine, what they had done to so many innocent people and Luxen, weren't actions easily forgivable.

Leaning forward, Luc tossed what he held onto the desk. It was a photograph. Paris immediately recognized the man. It was Sergeant Dasher in full uniform standing next to a shorter woman with sleek ash-colored hair. In front of them was a young blonde girl. She smiled at the camera so broadly that her full cheeks looked like she had a mouthful of cotton. A cute little thing—a cute little human thing.

An icy chill powered down Paris's spine as he lifted his gaze and looked at Luc.

"You know who that man is," Luc said, laughing softly. "That's his wife, Sylvia. She's what men with small...well, you-know-whats, like to call a trophy wife. And that big-cheeked girl is his daughter, Evelyn. We all know what Husher loves most in this world and that isn't her. I will take them. And that girl there?" He paused. "That's his pride and joy."

Paris had no idea how Luc got a hold of the family picture, but then again, Luc could get almost whatever he wanted.

"I will destroy him and Nancy, and everything they cherish in this world," Luc said calmly, as if he were discussing inviting them over for dinner.

"Even the girl?" he murmured. "Seriously?"

His purplish gaze was flat. "Even her."

Those two words rocked Paris. He jerked in his seat. Sometimes he forgot that there were very few things in this world more frightening than what Luc was and what he was capable of.

And then there were moments like this when Luc, oh so kindly reminded him that he was the furthest thing from human and that he would do anything, risk anyone, to get what he wanted.

Paris's gaze fell to the photo lying next to the cash. He didn't look at the sergeant or his wife. His gaze lingered on the smiling face of the girl only a year or two younger than Luc.

Evelyn Dasher.

Paris knew, and maybe even a small part of Luc realized, that what had been done to Nadine could never be undone, no matter what Luc got his hands on.

Evelyn Dasher was as good as dead.

OBSIDIAN

There's an alien next door. And with his looming height and eerie green eyes, he's hot...until he opens his mouth. He's infuriating. Arrogant. Stab-worthy. But when a stranger attacks me and Daemon literally freezes time with a wave of his hand, he lights me up with a big fat bull's-eye. Turns out he has a galaxy of enemies wanting to steal his abilities and the only way I'm getting out of this alive is by sticking close to him until my alien mojo fades. If I don't kill him first, that is.

ONYX

Daemon's determined to prove what he feels for me is more than a product of our bizarro alien connection. So I've sworn him off, even though he's running more hot than cold these days. But we've got bigger problems. I've seen someone who shouldn't be alive. And I have to tell Daemon, even though I know he's never going to stop searching until he gets the truth. What happened to his brother? Who betrayed him? And what does the DOD want from them—from me?

OPAL

After everything, I'm no longer the same Katy. I'm different...and I'm not sure what that will mean in the end. When each step we take in discovering the truth puts us in the path of the secret organization responsible for torturing and testing alien hybrids, the more I realize there is no end to what I'm capable of. The death of someone close still lingers, help comes from the most unlikely source, and friends will become the deadliest of enemies, but we won't turn back. Even if the outcome will shatter our worlds forever.

ORIGIN

Daemon will do anything to get Katy back. After the successful but disastrous raid on Mount Weather, he's facing the impossible. Katy is gone. Taken. Everything becomes about finding her. But the most dangerous foe has been there all along, and when the truths are exposed and the lies come crumbling down, which side will Daemon and Katy be standing on? And will they even be together?

OPPOSITION

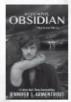
The world changed the night the Luxen came, and now Daemon will do anything to save Katy...even if that means betrayal. For Katy, the lines between good and bad have blurred, and love has become an emotion that could destroy them all. As it becomes impossible to tell friend from foe, and the world crumbles around them, they may lose everything—even what they cherish most—to ensure the survival of their friends...and mankind. War has come to Earth. And no matter the outcome, the future will never be the same for those left standing.

SHADOWS

The last thing Dawson Black expected was Bethany Williams. As a Luxen, an alien life-form on Earth, human girls are...well, fun. But since the Luxen have to keep their true identities a secret, falling for one would be insane. Dawson is keeping a secret that will change her existence...and put her life in



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