

BORN OF LIGHT BOOK 1



FIRST MAGIC

RAVEN STEELE

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*As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light
in the darkness of mere being.*

~ Carl Jung

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PROLOGUE



“Sigmund Freud once said that the goal of all life is death.”

I paused from getting into the now-empty hearse, looking from the black-gloved hand gripping my arm, to the woman who'd spoken the depressing words. She wore a frumpy hat with white feathers and small red balls reminding me of cranberries. I tore my eyes away from the feathery concoction and stared at her. Like a typical adult speaking to a teenager, she most likely thought her words profound—a small, passed-on piece of wisdom to make me feel less miserable about suddenly becoming an orphan.

“What are you saying?” I asked, wiping my wet, snow-colored hair away from my cheek. Rain at a funeral meant something, but I couldn't remember what.

The woman tilted her head and gave me a sympathetic smile as if my simple brain couldn't reason. In actuality, I knew full well what Freud meant, but I simply thought it was a stupid comment. Why would life's goal be death? Unless life was on Prozac and lying in bed all day watching the Soap Network, I highly doubted life's goal included death. Anyone living life shouldn't be concerned with death at all. My mother had taught me that. Sure her life ended tragically, just like my father's, but all those who knew her, knew that dying was the last thing on her mind. Maybe that was the problem—and the problem with my father, too.

The woman began speaking again, no doubt explaining the rationale behind the lame quote, but I wasn't listening. I wasn't even staring at her cranberry hat

anymore. I looked beyond it, back where my father lay stuffed in a casket. Only my Uncle Jake remained, staring into my dad's grave. He would be like the rest of my family and wouldn't avoid death if it came for him.

But I would.

I made up my mind right then and there, while fruit-head rattled on about the necessity of death. Death would never claim me. I would blend in with society, and not try to stand out as others of my kind always did. Inevitably, that is always what got them killed. Even my mother, who insisted she was safe, died in spite of the fierce, almost obsessive protection of my father. She could've lived a lot longer if she hadn't been so boisterous and colorful. Of course, that is why everyone loved her. She brought joy to their normally depressed lives. This, she told me, is the Aura's purpose: to use our gift to comfort the heavyhearted and provide light to those who are lost. At the time she told me this, it sounded as wonderful as pink lemonade and cotton candy in summer, but now the thought of being someone's raggedy Kleenex was unbearable.

I ignored the lecturing woman and jumped into the front seat of the hearse, shutting the door behind me. The driver asked, "Did you want to wait for your uncle, Llona?"

"No, he'll come when he's ready. Please just take me home." As we pulled away from the cemetery, I didn't look back.

My mind was on the future and on my survival.

CHAPTER 1



“Every living thing will fight for its place on earth,” Mr. Yazzie, my science teacher, said. He stood in front of the class, chalk dust smeared on the front of his blue polo shirt. The blackboard behind him contrasted with the yellow walls, but his polyester pants matched the mustard color perfectly.

I leaned forward, chewing on my pen while he continued. “But if their environment changes and they don’t learn to adapt, then they will inevitably die. Nothing can save them.”

I lowered my gaze to the desk, wondering if I’d done enough to adapt. I hoped so because I was sick of moving. Since my father’s funeral five years ago, my Uncle Jake and I had moved four times, finally settling in Wildemoor.

I liked Wildemoor. It had a rural feeling to it and lots of tall, mountainous trees, but at the same time had all the amenities of a big city. I couldn’t complain about the weather, either. Wildemoor wasn’t as cold as Coast City. Gratefully, I only had to endure the cold of Coast City for a few months before I decided it was time to move again.

A bell sounded, interrupting my biology teacher just as he was about to reveal who he thought would win in a cage fight—protozoa or flagella. His face fell when students jumped up and rushed the door.

“Don’t forget about the assembly,” he called after them.

I let the classroom empty before I stood to relieve my stiff joints. Because of my delay, I caught Mr. Yazzie contorting his body into what looked like a dance

position—elbows bent, hands outstretched. He shuffled his feet a few times before he finally thrust his hips forward and left the room. I felt confident he wouldn't have done such an uncharacteristic move if he had realized I was still in the room, but alas, I often went unnoticed. Being invisible is, after all, my priority.

I gathered my books and followed Mr. Yazzie out the door. He didn't attempt the awkward jig again, but I had to wonder what caused this sudden break of character. Perhaps he had a hot date tonight, a lady friend he had met on the Internet.

Walking in front of me, Mr. Yazzie reached behind his back and tugged at invisible material stuck deep inside his butt crack. Okay, so maybe not a hot date. Maybe it was the season premiere of some new sci-fi series involving flagella and protozoa battling one another to the death. This theory made much more sense.

I veered to the left and down a long hallway to my locker, where I dropped off my books. I considered skipping the morning assembly. It was just a mini pep rally put on by the principal to get us excited for the new school year.

Behind me, other seniors had the same idea, but they bravely acted upon their desire and disappeared out a nearby door. I decided not to follow in case someone saw me. I might be considered “cool” if caught and thereby labeled. I was comfortable with my current label of “weird-girl” or “who?”, and I didn't want that to change.

I followed the sounds of noisy students down the hall and toward the gym. Highland High was like every other school I'd been to: light tan brick exterior, white interior walls, and short-weave blue-speckled carpet. The schools even smelled the same: sweat and chemicals, masked occasionally by a squirt of fruity perfume.

I moved into the gym and was about to cross to the other side when I heard, “Llona! Up here!”

May was sitting at the top of the bleachers holding a bag of chips. Today she sat with the stoners. Even though I knew she didn't get high, she blended in with them well. She wore a baggy, black sweatshirt and grey sweatpants. Her dark,

shoulder-length black hair may have been combed earlier, but now looked a mess. Her whole appearance looked unnatural, masking her true beauty.

I maneuvered my way up to her, careful to avoid stepping on anyone. About halfway, two freshman guys began wrestling. One of them bumped into me and knocked me off balance.

Afraid to reach out, I fell forward toward a girl with red hair. She had a metal clip of a grasshopper or a dragonfly—I couldn't be sure—sticking out of her hair. I closed my eyes and waited to feel the bug's sting when arms encircled my waist and pulled me back up.

The grip was strong, the motion skilled. I sucked in a breath and turned to thank my hero, but when I looked into his eyes, I couldn't speak. They were the color of the sky after a spring thunderstorm and were filled with as much calm.

"It's Llona, right?" the boy asked, smiling.

I flinched when he said my name. How did he know it? As far as I knew only one person knew my name—May. I immediately prickled, brought up walls with mental ten-inch spikes. "How do you know my name?"

He frowned, legit lines creasing his forehead. "Doesn't everyone?"

I searched his blue eyes, wondering what he meant. His tone wasn't insulting and yet, how else would he and others know my name unless word spread of how strange I was? It couldn't have been anything else. I wasn't popular, that much I was certain.

I gurgled something unintelligible, making his frown deepen. The expression looked wrong on him, unlike his smile. I wished I could've told him so, but I suddenly became aware of his hands still touching my waist. The heat from his touch burned into me, made my heart pound in ways it never had before.

"Hey, Llona! You coming up here or what?" May barked from above.

I looked past my hero. Behind him, May stood, hands on hips. "Gotta go."

I slid past him and took the next step up the bleachers, barely finding room for my big foot between two students. Finally, I sat next to May, my head down. I didn't dare look up for fear of meeting the strange boy's eyes again.

"What was that all about?" May asked.

"I almost fell. That guy saved me."

“Who is he?”

“Is he looking?”

“He’s way good looking.”

I elbowed her. “Is he looking at me?”

“Um . . . nope. Who is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Give me to the end of the day. I’ll find out everything there is to know about him.” May sucked a chip into her mouth.

I risked a glance upward. As if he could feel my eyes on him, he turned and stared at me with those intense blue eyes. Knowledge lurked beyond those glossy orbs, the kind that frightened me. A cold chill walked its way up my spine and exploded on my arms in the form of goosebumps.

May noticed. “You good?”

I averted my gaze and rubbed at my arms. “Cold is all.”

From the center of the gym floor, the principal, Mr. Wilcox, bellowed into a microphone. “Welcome students. Thank you for coming to this exciting assembly this morning. We have a great program today and a wonderful speaker who will share her valuable experiences with us.”

He pulled up his pants—his signature move. He had an oddly large belly resting on top of exceptionally small legs. This odd combination must’ve made wearing pants extremely difficult.

Mr. Wilcox opened his mouth to speak again, but a sound to his left distracted him. On the far end of the bleachers, two boys argued, their voices growing louder with each passing second. A few teachers hurried over to break it up, but before they could, the taller of the two boys shoved the other into a group of nearby students. One of them shoved back, and soon everyone was pushing and fighting.

May stood, taking me with her. “Sweet. A fight. We should totally join.”

Teachers swarmed the area to take control of the situation, but because of all the students, they couldn’t get up the bleachers. All they could do was yell, which was as effective as a soccer coach for three-year-olds.

The mayhem slowly spread across the gym, and fights broke out everywhere.

May moved to join a nearby one, a grin splitting her face, but I held her back. “Don’t go. You know what might happen if you do.”

Her expression fell, and she slumped back into her seat, realizing I was right. And I hated that for her, but her secret had to be protected.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a girl get punched in the face. She screamed as blood spurted from her nose. I covered my mouth with my hand, my heart thundering within my chest. More people were getting hurt.

I glanced up at the wide, circular florescent lights hanging from the ceiling. I could end this fight, but should I? A teacher fell to the ground and cried for help. More shouting, more crying.

There was only one way to end this brawl quickly and safely.

Staring at the lights, I concentrated hard. It was a lot to manipulate, but I felt confident I could do it. Turning lights on and off was the only part of my abilities I could reliably control. Lame, I know.

My vision burrowed into the light above us until my consciousness connected to it. That’s when I felt the burning inside me, rising from the shadows of the deepest part of my mind. It coated my muscles and bones, raced through my blood in a fevered heat. The First Magic, a power I barely understood.

Sweat broke on my forehead, and my jaw clamped shut as I tried to control the Light. Turn off. Turn off. Turn off. My insides rattled making my bones aches. So much power.

I gave one final mental push. Turn off! A burst of energy exploded from me like juice squeezed from a lemon. Then there was darkness.

CHAPTER 2



When I was a child, my mother would tell me a bedtime story. At first I loved the dramatic tale, but after hearing it night after night, I grew bored. I often asked for a different one, a book even, like other children, but she always insisted on telling our Auran history. Sometimes she would introduce new characters or change the scenery, but the plot remained the same:

“Once upon a time, thousands of years ago, Light lived among man as intelligent beings. Their presence brought equality and harmony to the humans, and the world was at peace. There was no sadness, pity, or pride; it seemed the righteousness of the people had banned evil from the earth. But when an older prince became jealous of his father’s love for his younger brother, he murdered the young prince in cold blood.

“This deliberate evil brought the once-forbidden darkness to the prince’s heart where he allowed it to remain. There he entertained it; fed it, until darkness overtook his thoughts and mind. Eager to corrupt others, he spread this darkness to those whose minds were open to greed, power, and lust. These new dark ones, Vykens as they were called, were unable to stand in Light’s presence without feeling unbearable pain. Hidden within the shadows of night, Vykens hunted and attacked the Light-filled beings at their weakest moments, almost to the point of extinction.

“To preserve themselves and maintain balance between good and evil, Light hid within the DNA of human females. These women passed Light on to their

female offspring, and they became known as Auras. Auras protected their identity for many years, and even learned to use Light's power to fight against the Vykens. But then the Vykens made a terrible discovery. They found that if they drank the blood of an Aura, they were no longer bound to the night. Not only did the sun no longer pose a threat, but Vykens learned they could manipulate an Auras' power, and they used it to grow stronger than ever before.

"For this reason, Auras gathered from all over the earth to learn how to protect their human form. They created a council to oversee their safety, and to ensure Auras appeared no different than others."

I'd heard this story so many times that when my mother reached this point, I was usually asleep. I never knew why she had insisted on telling me the same story over and over until I had it memorized. Even my father had asked her once, "Can't you tell her a different story, Ella?"

"No," my mother answered. "Llona needs to know Light's history. The truth."

"She will know the truth because she has us."

"Let's hope so."

Their hope had been in vain.

* * *

CRIES ROSE IN THE DARKNESS, but they were no longer the angry voices of a mob; they were cries of surprise. The doors on both sides of the gym opened, spilling light from the hallways into the blackened gym and onto the basketball court. This time when a teacher yelled to exit, students listened.

"Was that insane or what?" May asked.

I couldn't answer. Mentally shutting the lights off had weakened my body.

May touched me in the darkness. "You okay?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

Students on our bench stood up to leave.

"Let's get out of here," May said.

She followed the others out, but I remained still, allowing some time for my

strength to return. A tall male form stepped up the bleachers. He looked like a muscular shadow, floating gracefully toward me. His movements seemed so fluid, I was surprised to hear the bleachers shake from the weight of his footsteps.

“Are you all right?” a voice in a heavy English accent asked. It dripped with concern.

My head began to swim, swirling in a sea of muted colors. It was going to take a lot longer to recover than I thought.

He touched me on the shoulder. “Do you want help down?”

I shook my head, unable to speak, but I did manage to stand. Just barely.

“Can you see okay in the dark?” he asked, beautifully and perfectly.

“I think so.”

I followed him down the bleachers as if walking a tightrope. When we entered the crowded hallway, the man, probably a teacher, disappeared into a swarm of students.

After a few deep breaths, I turned the opposite way and slowly headed toward my locker. Like always, I kept my head down and followed the steadily moving line of students. All of a sudden, for a reason I couldn’t explain, I glanced up. Standing against a row of lockers was the same guy who had caught me earlier. He stared at me with a furrowed brow. Maybe he was just noticing how strange I looked.

I knew my appearance was different, shockingly so. My ghostly pale skin appeared to melt into my blonde, almost white hair, making my eyes stand out like the blue of an Arctic wolf’s. The only half-compliment I’d ever received (other than from my parents) was from one of Jake’s friends. He said I was really pretty, in a freakish, Tim Burton sort of way. A compliment? Highly unlikely.

Dropping my gaze, I continued forward, the only way past the guy. When I thought I’d walked far enough past him, I turned back around. He still ogled, but not the good kind. More like gaped at me with his mouth open, like I’d kicked his dog or something.

Could he have known what I’d done back in the gym? I thought about it the whole way to my locker, then to my next class and well into Mrs. Simmons’

lecture on Shakespeare. Impossible. No one could have known. He must be mad for some other reason. Maybe he was upset I'd fallen into him.

I shrugged it off. Oh well. One more person who thinks I'm mentally deranged.

Mrs. Simmons, who always wore pantsuits with shoulder pads, said, "Shakespeare wrote, 'So, ere you find where light in darkness lies, your light grows dark by losing of your eyes.' Can anyone tell me what you think he was trying to say?"

For the third time in my school career, I raised my hand. I couldn't help it. This was one of my favorite quotes.

"Yes, Llona?" The whole class turned and looked at me. "It means you can't find light in darkness, and if you keep looking for it, you'll lose your soul."

Erica, a popular girl, maybe even a cheerleader—I couldn't remember—laughed. "Are you for real?"

A couple of students snickered.

"That's a good question, Erica," Mrs. Simmons said.

My head snapped back to the teacher in shock. Did she just side with Erica?

"Is Llona's answer real?" Mrs. Simmons asked. When no one answered, she added, "I'll give you an example. Do you think it's possible for a person to continually attend parties where people use drugs? They have no intention of ever using themselves. They just want to go and have fun with friends. Is there anything wrong with that?"

The room fell silent. I could practically hear the grinding sounds of a faulty engine as their brains searched for an answer. Finally, the silence broke when another guy I didn't recognize raised his hand.

"I think her answer is real and happens all too often. Though a person's intentions seem good in the beginning, if they allow themselves to be a part of an environment that obviously ruins lives, they will first endure it, then pity the people involved, and eventually embrace the lifestyle themselves."

"Exactly. Thank you, Matt," Mrs. Simmons said. "I see you know Alexander Pope's work. I agree entirely."

Matt bowed his head as if a subject to a King in an English court. His long

fingers swept sandy blond hair behind his ears. He looked to be a little taller than me and skinny, but the good kind. Lean and muscular—the body of a runner.

After the bell rang, I gathered my stuff and moved to stand. I practically ran into Matt, who was suddenly standing directly in front of me. My pulse raced as an intense feeling of being trapped washed over me.

“I like what you said about Shakespeare,” he said. “Not many people understand what he’s all about.”

I swallowed a growing thickness in my throat. “I’m not sure I do either. He’s the master of cryptic.”

Matt laughed, a very non-threatening sound. “Very true.”

Throwing my backpack over my shoulder, I tried to relax my tense muscles and stepped to the side of him, but he blocked me again. What the hell?

“Listen,” he said, “I’m trying to get a group together to study the writings of the great ones, sort of like a book club. You interested?”

I shuddered and searched his eyes for any deceit. I hated that I couldn't trust people, but I had to be careful. Things like this, being social, connecting with strangers, is what got our kind killed.

Matt noticed my hesitation. “It’s okay if you can’t. I was just asking.” He turned around and walked away, his mouth tight.

The Light within me sparked, wanting to go after him. It was not in Light’s nature to make others feel bad, and it coursed through me now, anxious to relieve any sadness I may have caused him.

But I kept my feet firmly planted and closed my eyes. Survival first. It was my mother who would’ve gone after him. She loved being with others in any setting and they loved her in return. Then she was murdered.

“Do you need something?” Mrs. Simmons asked me.

I blinked. “No, sorry. I’m good.”

I bolted out of there and headed to my locker where I replaced my English book with my Trig book, then zipped up my backpack. Most students didn’t take their bags to every class, but there was something comforting about having it on my back. Without it, I felt naked.

The bell rang just as I closed my locker. Freak me.

I hurried down the almost empty hallway to my math class. We were getting a new teacher today. My old one officially went on maternity leave yesterday. I didn't know why she even bothered starting the new school year.

After a couple of left turns, I found the classroom at the end of the hall. Before I turned the door's handle, I sucked a deep breath. I hoped whoever this new teacher was wouldn't be upset I was late. I pulled open the door, and like I expected, heads turned my direction. I hurried to the nearest vacant desk at the back of the room and dived into it.

I casually glanced to the side. Matt sat next to me, grinning. I wrinkled my nose. What was he doing here? Granted, it was only the first week of school, but he hadn't been in here the few days previous.

"Do try to be on time, please," the teacher said to me in a familiar English accent. I glanced up and met the gentle eyes of the same teacher who had escorted me from the gym.

All thoughts of Matt left me.

My new teacher was the most gorgeous, perfect man I'd ever seen. His thick, short hair was blacker than a moonless night, and his full, arched eyebrows hung above deep-set green eyes, shading them as if they were treasured emeralds. He was tall, almost towering, or maybe it was his overpowering presence that made him seem so. He wore a black silk shirt tucked into grey trousers and whenever he moved, disrupting the air around him, the thin material pressed against his stomach, revealing a tight six-pack of bulging muscles.

"As I was saying . . ." he said.

The string of words that followed were like one giant, single word. I should be paying attention, but my thoughts were too busy tripping over itself.

As far as I was concerned, this man had only one flaw: he was my math teacher and by the looks of him, at least four years older. I glanced at the chalkboard to read where he'd written his name. Mr. Steele. His name couldn't have been more perfect, like a shiny metal gun sculpted just right for my hand. I shivered.

Sighing, I continued to watch his mouth open and close as he explained some complex math problem. Occasionally his eyes met mine and when they did, my

cheeks grew hot and my breathing quickened. I swallowed hard. This must be love at first sight. I always thought it would happen when I was older and with a guy more my age, but I guess love has no age restrictions. Too bad my infatuation is for an off-limits man. Didn't matter that I was turning eighteen soon. I sighed again.

Mr. Steele walked by me, and the faint smell of his cologne sent my head spinning. My knees weakened, but gratefully I was sitting down so I did nothing but slump further into my seat.

I removed a pen from my backpack and attempted to write, but when I looked down there was nothing on the paper. I shook the pen hard and began to write again, but still nothing came out. I stared at it for what seemed like an eternity, until I realized I hadn't been writing with a pen at all. In my hand, I gripped my mascara.

I looked up hoping no one noticed, but I wasn't that lucky. Mike Miller was staring at me as if I'd just shaved my head. He rolled his eyes and looked back toward Mr. Steele, who had returned to the chalkboard to continue his math dance with a piece of chalk. I quickly shoved the mascara back in my bag and felt around for a real pen.

My fingers grazed something soft, yet stiff. Wondering what it could be, I took hold of its small form and pulled it out. It fit in my palm like a lucky rabbit's foot, but there was nothing fortunate about it.

My teeth clamped down on the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood. It was the only way I could keep from screaming.

CHAPTER 3



The bell rang. I blinked once. Twice.

My backpack still sat in my lap, squished between my stomach and the desk. I tried not to think of what was lying dead inside. Gratefully, Mr. Steele left the room first, followed by the rest of the class. As soon as they were gone, I pushed my bag away, jumped up, and rubbed my tainted palm against my jeans.

A familiar head poked into the room. “What are you doing?”

“Trying not to freak out.” I inspected my hand for blood.

May hurried to me. “Why? What happened?”

“I found a dead mouse in my bag.”

“Are you kidding? Let me see.” She opened my bag and began to search it.

“You like dead mice?”

May frowned. “No, I just want to make sure it’s really dead. Maybe it’s just knocked out.”

“It’s definitely dead. Why do you care?”

“I kept them as pets when I was younger.”

“Is that sanitary?”

“Sure. My mom bought them for me. It was the only pet we could afford.” She stopped moving. “Got it.”

May removed the white mouse by its tail and held it up. Its head had been almost severed. A bloody string of skin, or maybe a spinal cord, was all that kept it from falling off.

“What happened to it?” she asked.

I looked away. “Wish I knew.”

May dropped it into the garbage. “It’s probably been in your bag since last night. Poor thing didn’t stand a chance.”

“Yeah. Poor thing.” I felt real sorry for it. “Let’s go wash our hands.”

After I scrubbed and rescrubbed my hands, we left the bathroom.

“You ready to go to lunch?” May asked.

“Aren’t you having lunch with Sean?” Sean was the pothead she’d been sitting by earlier.

“No. Maybe tomorrow. Of course Cindy wants me to hang out with them, so we’ll see.”

“Who’s Cindy?”

“You remember Cindy, don’t you? She was Lady Macbeth in the play last year.”

The drama crowd.

May shoved her books into her locker. “Do you want to go out for lunch or eat here?”

“I don’t care.”

“Let’s leave then. I hate school food.” She eyed my backpack. “Do you want to put your bag up?”

“I’m good.”

I was lucky to have a friend like May. I wouldn’t call her a best friend because both of us had an unspoken agreement that we couldn’t get too close—to anyone. Where I masked my desire for anonymity by being anti-social, she did it by being everyone’s friend. She knew everybody in the school, but not one person could call her their best friend. And though she did spend more of her time with me, it still wasn’t enough to make someone think we were close.

Our connection was a strange one, but made more sense to me than most people’s relationships. When I’d first moved here last year, May had been my lab partner. We’d only known each other for a few weeks before that day when we both realized the other was different.

The school day was almost over. May, who always smiled, was sitting

unusually quiet and somber. I noticed right away, but because we weren't really friends, I did nothing beyond asking her how she was doing. If I'd been my mother, I would have pulled her aside and found a way to help her. But I wasn't. Not even close.

When Mr. Allen handed out our experiment involving a liquid-filled beaker, I passed it to May while I read over our assignment. I became vaguely aware that the beaker in May's hand had begun to boil on its own. I quickly glanced around the room to see if that was what was supposed to happen, but all other beakers remained still. I looked back at May who was staring out the window with a serious, almost sad expression, oblivious to the boiling solvent.

I leaned over to get May's attention, when the beaker suddenly exploded into a round ball of fire. My long hair immediately lit up, followed by shocked screams from everyone in the room. I slapped at my head to extinguish the fire, ignoring searing pain as flames licked my palms.

The teacher rushed to help, but through all the commotion I couldn't tear my eyes away from May. She was staring at her hands in pure horror, and I had no doubts that, somehow, she had caused that beaker to explode.

When the teacher began to escort me to the nurse's office, May snapped out of her trance and insisted on following us. I jerked away from her when she reached for my hand. Not in anger, but because I had to keep my hands on my head to prevent anyone from seeing what I knew was about to happen. Even as I moved away from her, I could feel the hair beneath my hands growing.

Of all the strange things about me, this one was the most difficult to explain. For no matter what happened to my hair, it always grew back and always remained the same shocking blonde. I had tried everything from dying my hair to shaving it off but nothing worked. My mid-back-length, crazy hair refused to be anything else.

Once inside the nurse's office, I convinced Mr. Allen to return to class, but couldn't get May to leave too. When the nurse came in and asked me to put my hands down, I did so hesitantly. From under my hands my long hair spilled down past my shoulders, completely unscathed.

May gasped. "How is that possible? Your hair was on fire!"

I shook my head, hiding my burnt palms in my lap. “Nope, I’m fine. It just looked like it.”

The nurse examined my head. “Nothing wrong here. I don’t know what all the fuss is about. Do you feel all right?”

“Actually, I have a massive headache. Can I go home?”

The nurse glanced at a clock on the wall. There was only twenty minutes left of school. “I guess it will be all right. Will you be able to drive?”

“I’ll take her home,” May offered.

My eyes flashed to hers, and I could tell she hadn’t bought my story.

On the way to her car, she grabbed my burned hands and turned them over. Angry burn marks had already blistered them.

“I knew I wasn’t crazy!” She stopped. “So why does your hair look fine now?”

I looked her square in the eyes and asked, “How did that fire start?”

She looked away, and I continued walking toward the parking lot. She caught up to me a moment later. “My car is over here.”

We didn’t say a word to each other the entire way home, but the next day I suddenly had a new friend, a strange one, but a friend nevertheless. We never spoke about that day again, but that bizarre occurrence had bonded us.

I was about to hop inside the passenger seat of May’s beat-up car when I heard a whistle. Passing directly in front of us, drove Adam and Mike in a sporty-looking red car. The new kid who had helped me earlier sat in the back.

May waved. “Hey, Adam!”

Adam waved his hand out the open window. Adam and his gang were jocks. May occasionally hung out with them, too.

“By the way,” May said after starting the car. “I found out who the new kid is. His name is Christian Stockett. He moved here from Portland. Apparently, he was the star quarterback there. Coach is really excited, but Alex is super pissed. It means he’ll have to be second string, and he hates not being the center of attention. Know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to be interested. I hadn’t grown up with these guys, so I didn’t know them like May, but I didn’t point that out.

“The new guy’s pretty cute. I bet Erica makes him her boyfriend within a week. She thinks just because she’s a cheerleader she can get whoever she wants.”

“Isn’t Erica your friend?” I asked, knowing May spent time with her.

“Not really. We had a class together is all. She’s too fake for me. Know what I mean?”

I shook my head no, but May kept talking. “Leah asked me if you were trying out for the basketball team this year.”

This got my attention. I liked Leah. She was in my P.E. class and one of the few people who talked to me. “Nah, I’m good.”

“I don’t know why you don’t. You’re amazing at sports.”

Which would put me in the spotlight, I wanted to answer. Make people notice me.

But it wasn’t just about that. I wanted to play sports. I think my body would love the exercise, the competition—for most of the month anyway. But when the moon disappeared, I could barely walk, let alone play basketball. How could I explain my “condition” to a coach? To teammates? They would never understand.

March 12th. That’s when it happened. I was barely fourteen. I thought that was kind of late; my mother had been twelve. I wish I were talking about my period. That would’ve been so much easier to deal with. Other girls knew nothing about real change. Sure their boobs might grow, and their tummies cramp, but whooptie-stinkin-doo. So they’ve become a woman. They knew nothing about transforming. But I did, and believe me it went well beyond a few cramps and perky boobs.

The day of my transformation, I’d never felt so alive and full of energy. I was on point, on fire; I could do no wrong. We’d played soccer during P.E., and I swore the ball and I were one. I scored nine goals, surprising everyone in my class, including the teacher who happened to be the varsity soccer coach. She begged me to try out, insisting she’d never seen anything like the way I played. Neither had I. It just came so easy. My body moved faster than ever before, and my movements were precise. It was an incredible feeling.

Because of my sudden, amazing soccer skills, some of the older girls invited me to a movie that night. Feeling on top of the world, I accepted without question, something I normally didn't do. But on that day I didn't analyze. I embraced my decision even to the point of suggesting we go rock climbing before the movie. They seemed surprised as I'm sure they thought me a weak, shy freshman who bent at the slightest breeze. Not that day, though. Like I said, I was on fire.

At the community rec center, I schooled the girls on rock climbing and afterwards engaged in a conversation with a much older boy. I could see awe in the eyes of the girls. I wasn't used to being looked at with admiration. It was a good feeling. During the movie, I couldn't sit still. My body refused to be motionless. Without saying goodbye, I rushed from the theater and away from my new friends. As soon as my feet hit the pavement, I ran.

I felt the full moon rise behind me. Its light tingled my skin, but I didn't stop to wonder how that was possible. Instead, I ran harder and faster, my eyes on the forest ahead. The muscles in my body vibrated and pulsed with new life. It was the life my mother had told me to prepare for: the day I became one with Light, the First Magic.

But I wish she would have told me how much the moon would affect my body. When the moon was full, it wreaked havoc on my muscles and only exercise helped relieve the painful sensation. Of course, the vast amount of energy and heightened abilities came with a price. After the full moon disappeared, my body was useless.

"Please consider trying out," May pressed, glancing at me as she maneuvered her car into a parking lot. "Basketball tryouts are in a few weeks."

"You know how I am though, right?" When she didn't answer, I added, "Most of the time I play well, but then there's my off days ..."

She glanced at me sideways. "I heard you get sick a lot or pissed off."

May turned off the ignition and jumped out of the car. The rusted metal door vibrated when she slammed it shut.

"Did you ever think to ask me what was going on?" I asked and tried to close my door.

“You have to slam it, remember?”

I slammed it.

“I know I should’ve asked you,” she continued, “but it was last year, and I didn’t really know you.”

“Do you think you know me now?”

She chuckled uncomfortably and shrugged. “Probably as much as you know me.”

I stopped just before we reached the front door. She was right. I didn’t know her that well. Why was that? There’s no way she could be a Vyken, not with her ability to use fire. At least I think that’s how it worked.

I swiveled around nearly running into her. “We should change that.”

Her face lit up. “For reals?”

I nodded.

“Huh.” She moved around me and opened the door. “I’d like that.”

I glanced at her sideways, swallowing hard, and hoped I wasn’t making the biggest mistake of my life.

CHAPTER 4



A breath of air conditioning ruffled my hair as I walked inside. I felt bad I hadn't thought of May's improbability of being a Vyken sooner. My summer would've been so much more fun than running the mountain every day or gaming with Uncle Jake, something I could only stand for maybe an hour.

We stepped up to the counter to place our order. A cashier with red curly hair stared at us expectantly.

May narrowed her eyes at me. "I'm going to order for the both of us and guess what you'll like. It will be a good way to get to know you."

I laughed. "Have at it."

It wouldn't be difficult. With my crazy energy, I burned through lots of calories and often ate whatever I could get my hands on.

"We'll get two double bacon burgers with curly fries and two sides of ranch. Oh, and two large root beers."

The clerk pressed some buttons while May handed him money.

"Hey, May," a male voice called. "Come eat with us."

I whirled around to see who had called the invitation. I groaned when I spotted Adam and his friends.

May glanced behind her. "Be there in a sec." She turned to me. "I'll wait for the food. Go ahead and sit with them."

I looked for an empty table by the window. "Actually I'm going to eat over there."

May let out an exaggerated sigh. "You can't be serious? Just go over and sit

down. It's not a big deal."

"You know how it is with me. Let's keep it that way."

"Ugh, but we're best friends now, right? Didn't I just order your favorite food?"

I smiled warily. "You did awesome, but it's important I keep my circle of friends very small. Can we hang out later?"

"We can hang now. I'll sit with you."

I held up my hand. "Go sit with Adam. I know you like him and," my eyes darted to the back of the restaurant, "by the way he keeps looking at you, he likes you too."

When she didn't respond, I shifted my gaze to the lone table I'd spotted earlier. Sunlight spilled in from the window, encasing the two-top as if it were in its own single world. "Seriously. I'm cool."

She exhaled a breath. "All right, but if you change your mind, you know where to find me."

After we split ways, I set my tray down and slid into the seat. I really didn't mind eating alone; it was something I was used to. I closed my eyes and let the light from the sun warm my skin.

"Why don't you come over and join us?" a gentle voice asked.

I opened my eyes and blinked once, twice, three times. I stared at the guy standing across from me as if I could see right through him. Christian. His eyebrows arched slightly, almost hopeful.

I lowered my gaze, my pulse racing. People didn't approach me. Ever. I'm not the approachable type, which meant this guy was up to something.

"I'm Christian." He held out his hand. His skin was light bronze like a perfectly baked cookie right out of a hot oven. I didn't reach for it, as appetizing as it looked. Instead, I sucked from my straw and pretended he wasn't breathtakingly hot.

Thoughts like that could get me killed. Make me let my guard down.

Christian cleared his throat and shifted his weight. I wasn't making this easy on him. I just couldn't figure out why he was talking to me.

He asked again, "Will you join us?"

I swallowed. Cool liquid slid down my throat and hit my stomach. The shock of it helped me find my voice. “I appreciate the offer, but I’ll just eat here in the sun.”

He nodded thoughtfully. A red car blaring rap music drove away from the drive-thru window; the bass shook the glass. He waited for it to pass before he asked, “What if I joined you?”

“Why would you want to?” I blurted before I had a chance to think how that might sound.

Christian didn’t miss a beat. “Because I like it here, too. There’s something about the sun’s light here.” He looked up and out the window toward the sky. “It’s peaceful and warm, like lying in a boat in the middle of a perfectly still lake.”

His words chilled my blood while my abdomen warmed a delicious heat. The contradicting emotions left me thoughtless. I’d never heard anyone speak about light that way. I didn’t know if I should be impressed or frightened.

Christian grimaced. “That sounded stupid. Sometimes I say lame things. Adam’s always giving me a hard time.”

“Have you known Adam long?” If he was going to stick around, I might as well get him talking. Figure out his angle.

Christian looked back to where he’d been sitting. “Hold that question. Let me get my food.”

I watched him walk away, scrutinizing his back side carefully, while I bit into my cheeseburger. I tilted my head so I could hear what he was going to say to his friends.

Ultra-sensitive hearing is another trait I’d inherited, but not from my mother. My father had joked that it was the only useful thing he’d given me. Whenever I asked where he got his good hearing from, he’d simply shrug and flash me a mischievous grin.

“Later guys,” he said. “I’m eating with Llona.”

“Why?” Mike spat with a mouth full of food. I practically heard hamburger chunks spray from his mouth and hit the table.

“She seems cool,” Christian said. The sound of his tray sliding against the

table echoed over his voice as he picked it up.

"You don't want to know her, trust me," Mike said. "She acts like my crack-head brother."

I gritted my teeth. Great. Now I'm being compared to a druggie.

"She does not," May's voice defended. "She's one of the nicest people I know."

"What about me?" Adam asked.

"See you guys later," Christian told them.

Having great hearing had its perks, but there were times I wished I were deaf.

Christian returned to my table and sat down. "Adam's my cousin."

I swallowed the bite in my mouth. "Huh?"

He unwrapped his chicken sandwich. "You asked me how I knew Adam. He's my cousin on my mother's side. We used to hang out a lot before his family moved here four years ago."

"Oh."

"What about you? Do you have family around?"

Yikes. Personal questions. Definitely not a direction I wanted to go. I shrugged. "Not much. So May tells me you're going to be the new quarterback?"

He shrugged. "I guess. I told coach I'd play whatever position, but he wouldn't hear of it. Alex is pretty mad."

"He'll get over it. Why did you move here?" A fly buzzed near my face. I flicked my wrist at it.

"My dad's work."

"What does he do?" I swiped at the fly again when it landed on my arm.

"He buys businesses that are in trouble and then makes them profitable again. Something like that. I'm not real sure."

"What about your mom?"

His eyes fell; the color changed to a melancholy blue, the shade of great sadness. I recognized it because I'd seen the same color in my own eyes.

"She died when I was three. Cancer. My dad never remarried."

I stopped a french-fry moving to my mouth. Suddenly I wasn't hungry any

more. "I'm sorry. That must've been hard."

"At times." He took a bite of his sandwich and chewed quietly. From across the room, May's high-pitched, chipmunk-like giggle broke the silence.

"That's some laugh," Christian said, smiling again. His eyes returned to normal, the sadness pushed back to wherever he kept it hidden. But sadness like that never leaves you.

I grinned. "It's contagious."

"So what about you? What does your dad do?"

The fly returned. I frowned as it completed an aerial swoop toward my half-eaten burger. Without warning, Christian's hand shot through the air like a missile. He caught the fly between his thumb and forefinger.

My heart skipped a beat. "That was fast!"

He wrapped the fly in a napkin with as much delicacy as he had unwrapped his chicken sandwich. "Not really. My dad is faster."

"Do you two catch flies often?" I mused.

"When the fish aren't biting. Whoever catches the most wins a prize."

"Have you ever won?"

"Not once, but I'm getting close."

"What's the prize?"

"I'm lucky if it's a bag of chips."

"Your life sucks."

He laughed, nodding. "I know, right?"

We continued talking. I could tell he was trying to get to know me, but he didn't know that I'd practically written the rules of the dodging-personal-questions game. Every time he asked one, I countered back, sending the conversation into a different direction.

I was really racking up the points, until he asked, again, "So where did you grow up? I don't think you answered me."

I reacted quickly. "Yes, I did. Remember? The sky?"

"Wait, what?" He looked totally confused. "You grew up in the sky?"

I laughed. "No, you were talking about your trip to Mexico over the summer and how a bad storm ruined it. Did you guys have to come home early?"

“Yeah, we got stuck at the airport.”

I leaned back in my seat and smiled as Christian told me all about his nightmare at the airport.

“You two seem to be having fun,” May said, approaching our table with Adam in tow. She turned to me. “You about done?”

“Yup. The burger was amazing. Good choice.”

From the door, Mike called to Christian, “When you’re done with freak-girl, I’ll be outside.”

Christian’s eyes darted to mine. “Sorry. He’s a jerk.”

“It’s not a big deal. Really.” I gathered our garbage with Christian’s help. My breath caught when his hand brushed mine and a line of heat raced through me. I couldn’t tell if it was the good kind or the kind meant to warn me of danger.

“Still, he didn’t have to be rude,” he said. “I’ll say something to him.”

I stood up, holding the tray. “Please don’t. I really don’t care.”

I moved to empty the garbage, but Christian took the tray from me. “I’ll get that.”

“Let’s go, Llona,” May called from the door. “I have to stop by the library before next period.”

“I’m coming.” I glanced one more time at Christian. With one clean jerk of his arm, all the garbage fell into the trash bin. He was different from the other students. But good different or bad different?

Outside, we moved to our separate cars.

“See you around,” he called. He flashed me the kind of smile that probably made most girls swoon. For me, however, it made my wall of stones taller.

Christian was a new kid who had taken an interest in me on the same day I found a dead mouse in my bag, one with a nearly severed head no less. A coincidence?

The wrong answer could get me killed.

CHAPTER 5



When the day finally ended I couldn't wait to get home, but when I walked through the front door of our house, I almost turned back. Everything was a wreck—the same as it had been that morning. I marched back to Jake's bedroom and cracked open the door. Jake was asleep, lying diagonal across the bed, wearing the same clothes he'd had on yesterday and maybe even the day before.

White static from the television projected ghostly images into the cluttered room. Jake's clothes carpeted the floor, probably both clean and dirty ones. I closed the door hard and walked back to my bedroom.

Jake's spirit had died the day we buried my dad. In a way, my dad, his older brother by ten years, had been like a father to him. From what I'd been told, their mother (and my grand-mother, whom I'd never met) had worked as a waitress in a Vegas casino. She worked hard but played hard, too. She played men as often as she played slot machines. My dad and Jake didn't share the same father, but you'd never have known it, as close as they were.

My father and mother married when they were both twenty, and they had me shortly after. I was five when Jake moved in with us on his fourteenth birthday. To me, Jake had always been an older brother, not an uncle.

When my mother died shortly after, it was Jake who was there for me. He practically raised me while my father was off trying to avenge her death. So when my dad died, it only seemed right to choose Jake to be my guardian.

The only other option was my aunt Sophie, my mom's sister. She had

offered, but she also wanted me to move back east to attend Lucent Academy, where she served on the board. I wasn't ready for that. Attending Lucent would've been like an announcement to the world, and maybe myself, that I was different. No, I chose to stay with Jake. Jake was safe, depressed, but still safe.

I closed my bedroom door and cranked the music. Because I hadn't heard a thing in trig class, I opened my book and began to read over the lesson, which looked like it was written in hieroglyphics. I hated math, but I had to get a good grade. I'd been left with plenty of money, but I didn't want to spend a dime of it on college. I figured if there were people out there who'd give me money for an education, then I was going to try and get it.

I rolled onto my stomach thinking a different position would help me retain more information. My gaze moved to the inexplicable hair rising on my arm. *Weird*. My heart began to pound. I tried to swallow, but it got stuck in my throat as if I was trying to jam an orange down my trachea.

Instinctively, I looked toward my window. I couldn't see anything beyond the darkness, but all my Auran senses told me I was being watched. Stop it! I closed my eyes and shook my head. No one is out there. But to be sure, I stood and peered outside.

There was just enough light from the half-moon that I could see the previous owner's metal swing set. One of the three swings swayed back and forth as if someone had just jumped from it. I gripped the windowsill, my pulse racing wildly out of control, as I scanned my backyard.

I focused on the line of trees where the grass ended. Darkness smothered the forest there so completely the world appeared to end. I tried to tear my gaze away from the never-ending black, but something drew my attention to it, forced me to look, wanted me to see. I could feel its desire building creating a pressure change in the air.

My skin cooled, and I stopped breathing.

Open your window.

I didn't hear the words, but I felt them all around me. Soothing me. Whispering past my skin. Warming my flesh. The room began to spin slowly, rhythmically, and I licked my lips as I moved to obey the seductive command.

My window slid open with ease. A gentle wind blew past me, lifting my hair.

From within the darkness, a pair of eyes appeared glowing a sickly yellow. Cold fear replaced the warmth. The emotion was so sudden, Light appeared beneath my palms and sprayed out the window with such force I stumbled back.

In the next erratic beat of my heart, a bobcat leapt from the darkness and bounded across my lawn. I placed my hand to my stomach and gasped for breath. What the hell just happened?

My mind replayed the events of the last two minutes. A bobcat could've made the swing move. The glowing eyes had to have belonged to the animal too. But what about the strange feeling? The words I'd heard... but I hadn't heard them. I'd more like thought them in some weird sort of trance.

I paced and shook out my hands. My hands! I stopped and stared at my open palms. I'd gotten so scared, they'd produced light. Shot it outward even.

Maybe this was another change that happened to Auras as they got older. I mean, I knew Auras could produce Light but at what age did that happen? Maybe the strange sensation I'd just experienced was part of that too.

When a cool breeze blew through the open window, I slammed it shut, wishing I'd left the screen in. I'd removed it the day we moved in here. Easier to get to the mountain without being seen. I didn't think Jake would like the amount of time I spent there alone.

Seconds passed, and my heart rate returned to normal. I didn't like that a third strange event had happened to me. And even though they could each be reasonably explained, it was probably time to move again to be on the safe side.

The thought of this made my heart clench. May and I had actually grown closer today. Maybe if I stuck around, it could turn into a real friendship. Plus moving again this close to my graduation would bug Jake.

I sucked in a quick breath. None of that mattered. Survival first. I'd talk to Jake the first chance I got.

Shaking out my hands again, I headed to the kitchen to get a drink but couldn't find any clean glasses. They were all piled up in the sink along with the rest of our dirty dishes. This is getting ridiculous. I turned on the faucet and waited for the water to get hot while I unloaded the dishwasher. By the time I

was almost done loading, Jake finally woke up.

“Could you be a little louder?” he said half-intelligibly through a yawn. His worn Levi’s had a big grease stain on the thigh, and his wrinkly red shirt looked like crepe paper. He moved to the refrigerator and pulled out a gallon of milk and drank it straight from the plastic jug.

“Can you not do that?” I asked.

He lowered the jug. “There’s no cups.”

“You could wash one.”

He blinked a few times. “So what did you do today?”

His shaggy brown hair, which hadn’t been cut in months, looked like road kill.

“I went to school.” I poured dish detergent into the dishwasher and closed the door.

“How’s your senior year going?”

“It’s going.” I opened the pantry and pulled out a Twinkie.

“Can I have one?” he asked.

I grabbed a second Twinkie and tossed it to him. “Isn’t this like breakfast for you?”

He chuckled. “I guess. So tell me about your classes?”

“Regular school classes.”

“Meet any friends?”

“No.”

“Any boys?”

“Double no.”

Through a mouthful of cream and pastry, he said, “You really need to get a social life. This is your senior year. You should have some fun.”

“You’re telling me to get a life?” I walked past him into the living room and sat down on the couch. The television came to life.

He followed after me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Without turning to him, I said, “Last time I checked, twenty-six-year-old men are supposed to have jobs.”

His eyes lit up. “I do! I mean, I might.”

“What are you talking about?” I sat up a little straighter.

“I have an interview tomorrow at a warehouse. Good pay. Insurance even.”

“Seriously?”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and glanced downward. “I’m trying, Tink.”

At the sound of my nickname that only he called me, my heart softened about moving. Him getting a job, getting back in the world, was a huge first step. I was afraid if we moved again, he might regress. Besides, other than the strange feeling I had in my room, the rest of the encounter could be explained by the bobcat.

“I’m proud of you, Jake. I can’t wait to hear how it goes. I’m sure you’ll kill it.”

His face brightened. “I hope so. What do you say we go out for dessert somewhere?”

“Will you shower first?”

He laughed. “Yes.”

“Then it’s a deal.”

Whatever I’d experienced earlier, I’d live those fears again just to see that real spark of happiness in Jake’s eyes again.

CHAPTER 6



*I*t was a sunny Tuesday morning. I hated Tuesdays. As far as I was concerned, Tuesdays could be removed from the days of the week and no one would ever notice. I swung my feet over the bed and slipped them into matted blue slippers to avoid the cold, wooden floor. After getting dressed in record time, I left my room feeling invincible. Must be a full moon tonight.

On the way to the kitchen, I peeked in on Jake. He still slept, covers pulled high over his head, but his room looked a little cleaner than the day before. He must've gathered his dirty laundry. Another small improvement.

He'd done well enough at his interview, and they had invited him back for a second one this week. Life seemed to be looking up for him. And me. Nothing else weird had happened, and life had returned to normal.

Smiling, I picked up my backpack from the hall closet and flung it over my shoulder, barely feeling the weight of the four thick textbooks it contained, and then grabbed an apple. My body pulsated with so much energy that I decided to run to school. It was hard to control my limbs with my muscles firing this way, and only extreme exercise helped relieve the prickly sensation.

I laced up my tennis shoes and stepped outside into the cool, morning air. The sun was just beginning to touch the tops of the golden trees; a few birds chirped its arrival. I didn't bother stretching. My leg muscles knew what was coming, and they hummed beneath my skin.

Across the street, my overweight neighbor opened his door. His tattered robe gaped open, revealing saggy man boobs that fell nearly to his navy blue boxers.

As he bent over to grab a newspaper, the two flaps of skin hung from his chest like slabs of beef. I couldn't help but stare.

Distracted, I took my first step, but when my foot came down it pressed upon something other than flat concrete. My ankle twisted, and I fell to the ground.

Lying on the porch, only a foot from my front door, was a woman's shoe. And not one I recognized. It was far too nice to belong to me. It was red with at least three-inch heels, and extremely narrow. It definitely wasn't my shoe. Even if I bound my feet in Chinese foot wrappings for months, permanently deforming them, my brick-like stubs wouldn't ever fit into such a shoe.

I placed the dainty high heel to the side of the porch wondering where it had come from. I knew it didn't belong to any lady friend of Jake's—as if he had any. No woman would tolerate a man who woke up at noon and played video games all day, breaking only for food and the bathroom.

I stood and brushed dirt from the back of my sweats. Maybe it would be gone when I returned later. I hoped so. I didn't know what to do with the thing, and I felt guilty throwing away such an expensive shoe.

My legs jumped.

"All right. I'm going," I said to no one.

After pulling my jacket hood over my head, I took off in a sprint, not stopping for anything. It felt exhilarating running at full speed and not getting the least bit winded. I leapt over fences, slid over parked cars, sidestepped traffic. At one point, to turn a corner sharply, I ran up the side of a brick wall, then twirled in the air, completing a perfect 360. I felt like a free runner.

The people up this early, the dog walkers, joggers, or other kids on their way to school, stared in awe as if I weren't human. I didn't stop to think how I was drawing attention to myself until I heard a little boy cry, "Look Mommy, Super Girl!"

I skidded to a stop, my breath hitching. What was I thinking?

After collecting myself, I forced my somewhat relaxed body back onto the sidewalk. My muscles had received the burst of energy they required, but I knew it was only a matter of hours, if not minutes, before they'd need it again.

I removed my hood and smoothed my hair into a neat ponytail. Casually, I

proceeded down the street as if I was nothing more than an average seventeen-year-old girl on her way to high school.

At Highland High the halls were beginning to fill. The first bell wouldn't ring for another fifteen minutes. I'd arrived too early. Now what was I going to do?

I was about to close my locker and head to the library when Christian appeared from around the corner. He walked toward me, grinning.

Inwardly, I groaned. Why? Why? Why? I closed my eyes and wished him away. The guy made me nervous with his sudden interest in me the last few days.

When I opened them back up, he was still there wearing a blue shirt and black sport's jacket. I wanted to pretend I hadn't seen him, but that would've been very difficult to do seeing how he was standing directly in front of me.

"Hey, Llona."

"Hey." I looked past him down the hall. Maybe if I appeared like I was waiting for someone, he'd leave me alone.

Accidentally, my eyes passed over his. A lone speck of brown in his right blue eye stood out like the first star in the night sky. My lower abdomen warmed.

Why did I have to see that speck?

"So basketball tryouts are today, right?" he asked.

"That's what I hear." Act casual.

"May said you might try out."

I laughed uncomfortably. "Oh yeah?"

"So are you?" He moved a little closer, a slight shifting of his body.

"I don't think so."

"You should. I hear you're good."

The warming sensation in my stomach turned sickly hot. I didn't like his questions, his assumptions, or how he had subtly moved closer to me. And I especially didn't want to feel his body heat, didn't want to see that lonely speck in his eye.

Trying not to appear too frantic, I glanced around for a way out of this mess.

My savior came in the form of a three-hundred-pound linebacker who looked like he'd just eaten a dozen powdered doughnuts. White dust sprinkled the corners of his mouth.

“Hey C. Where were you last night?”

Christian turned around. This is my chance. I quickly dove in line with other students on their way to first hour.

I moved fast, maneuvering my way in and out of them like an Indy race car driver. My muscles screamed for more of a release, but I refrained from pulling any stunts like I had earlier. I didn't stop walking until I reached my government class. I was the first student in the room, even beating Mr. Allen.

A television high up in the corner of the room was quietly tuned to the local morning news. I ignored it and opened my book. I pretended to read, but stopped when my exceptional hearing heard the chipper news lady say, “Her body was found at approximately 5:00 a.m.”—the reporter pointed to the side of a country road—“by a man on his morning run. According to the witness, the woman's throat had been cut, but authorities have not yet confirmed cause of death. Because the woman had no identification, the police have asked us to notify our viewers of her description in hopes someone may come forward to identify her. The deceased woman is described as 5'7", 130 pounds, mid-thirties, with red hair and blue eyes. She was found wearing a short black cocktail dress, black nylons, and only one red high-heeled shoe.”

The reporter continued talking, but all I could hear was a sudden buzzing in my ears. I found a shoe. A red shoe. On my front porch.

The humming continued, causing an instant headache. I touched at it and inhaled deeply, trying to break through an invisible, constricting band around my chest, but it wouldn't budge.

Over the high pitch ringing in my ears, I barely caught the muffled sounds of students as they filed into the room. The walls around me shifted, and my eyes lost focus. I gripped the edge of my desk, my knuckles bone-white.

As the teacher stood to take his place in front of the class, I bolted. I'd never freaked out before, but if these were the beginning signs of a major freakapalooza, I'd prefer to do it without any witnesses.

Walking quickly, yet cautiously, my hand against the wall, I headed for the double doors at the end of the hallway. My vision failed, making everything around me look like the end of a colorful kaleidoscope.

It's just a shoe. No big deal. I sucked in a hitched breath. A shoe a dead girl had probably worn. A murdered dead girl.

A garbage can sprung at me from nowhere, and I stumbled. Behind me, a gentle touch pressed against my back.

"Are you all right?" A male voice asked, the sound slightly distorted.

Please, heaven, let it be a teacher. I turned slowly, my eyes searching for clarity. I couldn't see distinct features, but by the way his light brown hair fell to the side of his head, I knew it was Christian.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You don't look fine."

"I just have a headache. I'm going home."

"You can't drive like this. You can barely walk."

"I can walk." And it was true. My muscles could've ran a marathon with the way they were feeling, but it was my vision and hearing that made the rest of my body behave like a theme ride gone wrong.

"You just ran into a trash can. Let me take you home."

He took hold of my hand firmly. It was warm against my cold palm and oddly soothing. In any other situation, I would've pulled away, but his grip seemed to release some of the pressure around my chest.

"Is everything okay?"

Both Christian and I turned around. Mr. Steele stood in front of us holding a briefcase. His eyes focused on mine, then dropped to where my hand gripped Christian's.

"We're fine," Christian said. "Llona wasn't feeling well so I was going to take her home."

The invisible band around my chest tightened. I needed to get out of here, like yesterday.

Mr. Steele studied Christian for a long moment with a scrutinizing eye. "If that's the case, she needs to see the school nurse first. Come with me, Llona.

Christian, get back to class.”

Christian didn’t move for an uncomfortable few seconds. He only squeezed my hand tighter and continued to look at Mr. Steele as if sizing him up. Sudden tension pressurized the air.

I dropped Christian’s hand and took an unsteady step forward. “I’ll go. I think I just have a migraine.”

Mr. Steele, recognizing my unsteadiness, stepped next to me and lightly touched my arm. His touch burned into me. “I’ll help.”

He glanced back at Christian, then gently ushered me forward. I appreciated his steady hand on me. My vision still blurred, but my hearing had improved somewhat.

“Llona,” he said, “do you know Christian well?”

I shook my head. “He’s new.”

He stopped me in front of the nurse’s office and faced me. “You must be careful. Boys your age ... well, let’s just say their motives aren’t always pure. I’d hate to see you get hurt.”

His accent, the sweet sound of his voice, curled around me. I wished my vision wasn’t so blurry because I’d love to look into his eyes, the same ones I felt staring into mine.

“Aren’t you new too?” I asked. I don’t know why I asked it.

“Only to this school. My first place of employment since graduating from Wildemoor State University just this summer.”

“How old are you?” I don’t know why I asked that either.

“A few years older than you.” He knocked on the nurse’s door. “I hope you feel better, Llona. And remember what I said.”

The nurse opened her door. She glanced from me to Mr. Steele. “Is something wrong?”

Mr. Steele leaned toward her. “This young lady seems to be having a terrible migraine. Please take special care of her. She’s very important.”

My head snapped his direction, but he was already walking away from me down the hall.

“Please come inside,” the nurse said.

I followed after her, my mind even more confused. The last few minutes had unsettled me as much as the murdered woman with the one red shoe. First Christian, then Mr. Steele saying I was important. I wasn't important. I was a boring, average girl who tried hard to go unnoticed.

So what's changed?

CHAPTER 7



After some medicine and a long rest in the nurse's office, she sent me home. My head still hurt but the rest of me had mostly returned to normal. It was my thoughts that still plagued me, the feeling of unease, the uncomfortable sensation that something was wrong.

I attempted to watch TV to clear my mind, something I desperately needed right now, but after ten minutes, I still felt anxious.

Jake appeared from the hallway rubbing his eyes. "Aren't you supposed to be at school?"

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed?" I snapped back but felt instantly guilty.

"What's your problem?"

"Forget it, Jake. I didn't mean to wake you."

He stepped in front of me, blocking the television. "All right. Let's have it."

"Have what?" I leaned to the side to see around him.

He shut off the TV. "You've been acting strange all week, and I want to know why."

"No, you don't." My knee bounced up and down with growing energy. How could I tell him how unsafe I'd started to feel? To anyone else, nothing would seem too out of the ordinary. Certainly not enough to pack up and leave.

"Yes, I do. We used to be close, Tink."

I forced a smile, my other knee jumping. "Seriously. It's nothing. Sorry I snapped at you. What time is your interview tomorrow?"

He studied me for a moment then said, "Early."

“You’ll easily get the job.” I came to my feet, practically springing out of the chair. “I have to get some homework done but dinner later?”

He nodded with narrowed eyes. “Fine, but we’re going to finish this conversation at dinner.”

“Whatever you say, Jake.” I hurried to my room and closed the door behind me, my chest tightening along with every muscle in my body.

Like a caged tiger, I paced the worn carpet, opening and closing my hands. Fevered Light raced through my veins igniting my body as if it were on fire. I had to expel this extra energy and fast. Already, my body temperature was rising.

I threw open the window. My feet hit the ground running.

I’d specifically chosen this house because of the backyard, which wasn’t a yard at all but more of a steep hill. The old home had been built against the Wasatch Mountains; they loomed over the house like a sleeping giant.

I raced up the giant, anxious to get as far away as possible. The steep grade proved no problem for my energized muscles. I dodged in and out of the trees like a ferocious wind until I reached the top. I’d never pushed myself this hard before, but then again, I’d never been this anxious before, either. With the clear blue sky laid out before me, I realized it wasn’t just fear over finding the dead woman’s shoe that had spurred me on, but something else.

I couldn’t find the words to express how I felt. Sure, I was frightened, but I also felt something I thought I’d written off long ago. The longing to love and be loved in return. Christian’s touch had made me feel this, but so had Mr. Steele’s. *Desire. Attraction.*

These feelings turned my body into an emotional blender, and the only way to sort through them was to run them right out of me.

After a few hours, I calmed down and decided to head back. I’d convinced myself that everything would be okay. I just had to get through my senior year, then could move wherever I wanted. I could ignore my feelings for that long.

As for the shoe on my porch, I wasn’t afraid anymore. It was unlikely the shoe was tied to the murder, but just in case, I decided to call the police later and tell them about it. I did consider myself a good citizen, after all.

I crawled back through the window and opened my bedroom door.

Immediately, I knew Jake was gone. The house was void of the familiar gaming sounds that were about as constant as a ticking clock.

“Llona?” a voice called from the living room.

I frowned. “May?”

I found her standing near the open door in gym clothes.

She grinned awkwardly. “Jake just left. He said I could come inside to find you.”

“What are you doing here?” She’d never been to my house before.

“I came to take you to basketball tryouts.”

I reared back in surprise. “But I didn’t say I was trying out.”

“Neither did I, but I decided that we’re both going to, so go change. I don’t want to be late.”

“May, I—”

She stepped forward, shushing me with a finger to my lips. “I know we don’t talk about it, Llona, but we’re different from others. And this has caused us to live in a protective bubble where we shut ourselves off from not only connecting with others, but letting ourselves do the things we really want.”

When I opened my mouth to speak, she shushed me again. “I know you like basketball, all sports for that matter. I’ve seen you in P.E. You’re extremely competitive, and you’re good. I feel like I might have a little skill too, but I don’t want to do it alone.”

She paused, watching me with hopeful eyes. “Please don’t shatter my dreams.”

The way she was staring at me, the pleading, desperate tone of her voice, made laughter bubble past my tight lips. The tension in my muscles left with it. “Whatever. I’ll go get dressed.”

She yelped with joy and jumped on top of me. We both stumbled into the wall laughing.

I had to admit, the thought of being competitive, pushing myself to my limits, made Light’s magic grow inside me. I could feel it urging me on, whispering encouraging and exciting words. It was a strange feeling. I’d always suppressed it before.

When May and I entered the high school gym, a few girls were already practicing. I resisted the urge to turn back. The thought of belonging to a team, socializing, playing in front of a crowd scared the hell out of me.

May stopped and looked back at me as I stood in the entrance. “What’s wrong?”

I continued forward, trying hard to ignore my racing pulse that came from both fear and excitement. “Nothing. I’m good.”

I don’t think my mother would’ve approved of me playing a sport. Auras were supposed to be gentle, loving, and kind. But most of all, because of our Light, we were supposed to be humble. According to my aunt Sophie (and probably my mother, too, but I was too young to ask) sports were prideful. Sophie thought they were a form of fighting—man pitted against man to see who was better.

A few years ago, I asked her if I could play soccer, just a rec league through the city, nothing serious. She’d completely flipped out. I tried to explain that I only wanted to join because it made my body feel better, especially around the full moon, but she’d thought that was just an excuse.

“Go running for five hours instead,” she’d told me. I didn’t bring up sports ever again.

May and I only had a few minutes to practice before Ms. Lindsey, the basketball coach and also my P.E. coach, yelled from across the court. “Let’s get started!”

I sat down on the bleachers next to May while Ms. Lindsey handed out a schedule. She was a tall, barrel-chested woman with short, blonde hair. Her shoulders were much larger than the rest of her body, making her look a little like an anime character.

“It’s great to see so many of you here today. I see the usual group and some new faces.” Her gaze settled on me and May. “That’s good. It means we will have a much better chance of creating a winning team.”

I glanced behind me. There were about twenty girls. Most of them I recognized. Even though I’d never played before, I often went to their games.

She continued, “Now I know you girls are mature enough to realize I’m only

keeping the top ten and maybe a few alternates. Just the hardest-working players will make the team, is that understood?”

May and I shared a look. We had to both make it. I didn’t want to do this without her. By the nervous look in her eyes, she was thinking the same thing.

“All right. Let’s get started. Laps first. Everybody on the court.”

The girls stood looking a little nervous, except for me—I jumped up. My body was more than ready to run.

Ms. Lindsey turned to me. “You seem awfully anxious, Llona. Why don’t you get started first? The rest of you follow. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

After fifteen minutes of circling the gym floor, a whistle blew again.

“Line up beneath the basket,” Ms. Lindsey barked.

I jogged over to the edge of the basketball court. The others weren’t so quick.

“Ladders next, girls. You know the routine. For those of you who don’t, follow the girl in front of you. Go until I say stop.”

I took off running, moving back and forth between the lines on the court. I thought I was focused on the task until my eyes caught movement in the doorway of the gym. Christian. My legs suddenly became like strings of licorice. The effect was ruthless.

I fell flat on my face and slid a short distance from him. The sound of flesh tearing on the polished gym floor screeched as loudly as Ms. Lindsey’s whistle. The other girls, thinking they’d heard just that, stopped. Several of them laughed when they saw me sprawled on the floor.

Christian knelt in front of me, his brows drawn together. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said and scrambled to my feet.

He shook his head. “No way. It sounded like your skin peeled off.”

We looked down at the same time. Sure enough, the top layer of skin on both my knees and part of my shins were gone. I grimaced.

“You all right, Llona?” Ms. Lindsey called.

Before I could answer, Christian said, “She could use some bandages, Coach.”

I cast him a sharp look.

“You know where the stuff is,” Ms. Lindsey said. “Can you take care of it?”

He grinned and met my gaze. “Sure. I’ve got this.”

My heart skipped a beat at his intense gaze.

“Who told you to stop?” Ms. Lindsey snapped at the other girls.

A few audible sighs lifted into the air, but they did as they were told.

Christian nodded his head toward the locker rooms. “Let’s go, speed racer.”

I reluctantly followed behind him, inhaling his wake that smelled like sandalwood with a hint of citrus.

“You know,” he said, once we were out of earshot from the other girls. “I can’t keep taking care of you.” He held his mouth tight to keep from smiling.

“It was your fault I fell,” I accused.

“Hardly! I was twenty feet away.”

“Well, you’re hard to miss.”

“Really?” There was no sarcasm in his voice.

I visibly jerked. “I didn’t mean—I was just surprised to see someone standing there.”

I thought I saw disappointment flash in his eyes but couldn’t be sure.

“The first aid kit’s in here,” he said.

“In the men’s locker room?”

“There’s probably one in the girl’s, but I don’t know where. Come on. No one’s in here.”

I slowed and glanced back at May who was still running ladders. She paused long enough to wink at me.

With a nervous smile, I followed him through a blue-tiled doorway. Inside was a typical locker room with wooden benches in the middle of each aisle.

“It stinks,” I blurted, covering my nose and mouth.

“We can’t all smell like roses.”

“Roses? I’d settle for day-old meatloaf. It smells like wet cat in here.”

He laughed. “It’s not that bad.”

I followed him into the coach’s office where he removed a first aid kit from the wall.

“Sit down,” he ordered.

“I can put a Band-Aid on myself.” I lowered into a chair across from the coach’s desk.

“Not while I’m around.” He opened the kit and removed bandages and antiseptic wipes. “I’m surprised to see you here, after the way you were this morning. What happened?”

“Bad headache is all. I’m fine now.” I flinched when he pressed an alcohol wipe to my leg.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No, it didn’t hurt. I’m just not used to—” I stopped, startled I was just about to admit that I wasn’t used to being touched.

“Getting hurt?” he suggested.

“Something like that.”

His warm palm slid behind my calf. I sucked in a breath as a chill raced across my flesh and straight to my lower abdomen. He didn’t seem to notice. His hand stayed there, his thumb sweeping across my skin.

“If what I hear about you is true,” Christian said, “then I think you have a great chance of making the team.”

The warmth in my stomach turned sour. “What could you possibly have heard? You’re new.”

Fear flashed in his eyes before a smile replaced it. “I heard May talking to Adam about it.”

My chest tightened, and I swallowed a growing thickness in my throat. Why did he lie? I shivered.

“Are you cold?” he attached the final strip of tape to a bandage on my shin.

“No.” I came to my feet and stepped to the side. “Thanks for helping me, but I better get back.”

“Are you sure you feel up to it with those wounds?”

“You have no idea.”

He looked at me questioningly, but I turned around, took a deep breath, held it, and then moved quickly through the reeking men’s locker room. Christian caught up to me in the gym just as I exhaled.

“Do you mind if I stick around?” he asked.

I searched his eyes, wishing I'd see something there that would tell me his true motives. "Why?"

"I'm bored and don't have a life." He cracked another smile, exposing that endless dimple on the side of his cheek.

"Do what you want." I jogged onto the court to continue running ladders. I had to get my mind off Christian. And not just the little lie I think I'd caught him in. His touch too. It still lingered on my skin, reminding me of how good it had felt.

After ladders, Ms. Lindsey rounded us up for other drills. Shooting was my favorite. I only missed a couple of shots—and those had been on purpose. I didn't want to seem too good, because I knew it was only a matter of weeks before I'd really suck. Damn moon cycle.

May did way better than I expected. I would never have guessed she hadn't played before. Everything just came naturally to her.

Ms. Lindsey blew her whistle. "Have a seat, girls." She waited for us to sit before continuing. "Tomorrow I'll post a sheet on my office door of the girls who made first cut. If your name is on it, return tomorrow at this same time. You all did a great job, but remember, I can't keep all of you. Have a great night."

Everyone began gathering their belongings. May laughed. "We totally killed it, Llona. Wasn't this fun?"

I wrinkled my nose through a smile. "It sort of was, wasn't it?" And I meant it.

"Llona!" Ms. Lindsey asked.

I turned toward the front of the gym. Two policemen stood side-by-side with Ms. Lindsey. She motioned me over.

May eyed me questioningly.

"It's nothing," I said and walked over. I glanced back in time to see Christian joining May on the bleachers. Both watched me expectantly, but Christian seemed more tense than curious.

I stopped in front of the officers. "How can I help?"

The taller one spoke first. "I'm officer Pieut, and this is officer Bryant. May we have a word with you?"

“Um, sure.” I turned to Ms. Lindsey. “See you tomorrow.”

She nodded. Her eyes darted back and forth between the officers and me, and then she walked away.

Officer Pieut glanced down at a small notebook in his hand. His bulbous nose protruded into his thick mustache. “You called us earlier today about a shoe.”

I swallowed. “Did you find it?”

Officer Pieut glanced at officer Bryant. “We did. And we have some questions for you. What time did you find it?”

“About seven this morning. I was leaving my house to go running when I tripped on it.”

“Where did you find it, again?” he asked.

“On my front porch.”

The officer’s looked at each other again.

“Did you hear or see anything strange last night?” Officer Bryant asked.

“No. Why?”

Officer Pieut scribbled on his notebook. “Thank you for your time. We’ll contact you if we have any further questions.”

“Wait!” I said.

They stopped and turned back toward me.

“Did the shoe belong to that woman?”

Officer Pieut glanced around and then focused his gaze on me. “It looks that way, but don’t worry. A dog probably dragged it onto your porch.”

I wanted to believe him, but I’d seen the shoe. There hadn’t been a scratch on it—no teeth marks, nothing. I ignored the spider-like chill crawling up my spine. It’s nothing. Strange coincidence is all.

I had to believe that, for the alternative terrified me.

CHAPTER 8



“What was that all about?” Christian asked as he walked up to me alongside May. His eyes followed the officers out of the gym.

“Nothing, really. They just wanted to know about a shoe I’d found.”

May furrowed her brow. “A shoe?”

“You know that lady who was killed?”

“The one who had her throat slit?” May asked, her voice higher than normal.

“Her shoe showed up at my house.”

May’s gaze drifted toward the darkened exit of the gym. “Kind of cool in a super freaky way.”

I shot her a wary look. “The police think a dog ran off with it and left it on my porch. Weird, huh?”

Christian touched my arm. “Are you all right?”

“Of course.” Think of something else. “You guys want to get out of here, go do something?”

“Aren’t you tired?” May asked. “I’m exhausted!”

I shook my head.

“I’m in,” Christian said, his expression eager. Maybe a little too eager.

“Good.” I heaved my bag over my shoulder and headed outside.

“Let me get that for you,” Christian said and made a move for my backpack.

I scowled and darted away. “I can handle it.”

“I know you can, but you don’t have to. You can let someone help.” He opened the gym door for me.

It was a strange thing to say. It was something my father would've said.

Just as I walked through and turned, I nearly ran into Matt, the guy from my English class. I yelped and jumped back, my hand going to my heart, my bag falling to the floor. Light's magic surged within me, taking my breath with it.

"Did I scare you?" He bent down and picked up my bag. His dark, intense eyes, peeking out from beneath strands of blond hair, searched mine.

Christian grabbed the backpack from him. "What are you doing here?"

"I forgot something in my locker." His gaze darted back to me. "Sorry about nearly running into you."

"It's fine." I forced a smile and glanced behind him. Lockers weren't anywhere near here. They were on the other side of the school.

"So you're trying out?" he asked me.

May stepped next to me, sizing Matt up while chewing on a nail. "We both did. Pretty sure we killed it."

"I bet you did." He smiled, his eyes never leaving mine. "See you around. And let me know if you change your mind about that book group."

He winked at me as he walked past us and into a darkened hallway.

May groaned a pleasurable sound. "That guy is creepy in all the right ways."

I had to agree with her. Something about him both scared me and drew me to him. Maybe it was his I-don't-give-a-shit attitude.

"What do you guys want to do?" May asked, as we walked outside. "Do you want to get something to eat?"

Christian glanced behind us back toward the school, his mouth pinched tight, but when he turned back around, a forced smile replaced it. "I'm game. Llona?"

My stomach growled at the mention of food, like it hadn't been fed in weeks. "I could eat."

"Where to?" May asked.

"Wherever you want," I told her, tapping my fingers against the side of my thigh. Light's energy had already begun to plague my muscles again.

"Let's go to Johnny's. I'm craving a burger."

Johnny's was a 1950s-style burger joint, and a popular hangout for high school kids. It wouldn't have been my choice because it was always packed, but

it fit May's personality. And right now, I wanted a friend, someone I knew I could trust. Craved it even. It had been so long since I'd let anyone into my life.

May glanced over at me from behind the steering wheel of her car. "You're quiet. You sure you want to go out? We could go back to my place and eat."

"Or grab food and go to a park," Christian added from the back seat. The two of them had been talking about movies the whole drive over to Johnny's. I would've joined in, I loved movies, but this social situation felt so awkward to me.

But I should try. I mentally shook out my hands, attempting to drain myself of my nervous energy. "I'm fine. Really. Besides Johnny's is right here, and they have the most amazing French fries."

May's eyes lit up. "Right?"

She pulled into the parking lot and noted all the parked cars. "Looks crowded. Hey, is that Adam's car?"

Christian leaned forward between us to stare out the windshield. "Where?"

I could feel the heat from his body, smell his musky scent. I inhaled deeply and leaned slightly toward him. Something about him felt so comforting. Intoxicating even.

As soon as May parked the car, she jumped out and rushed inside ahead of us. Christian stayed back by me, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

When I opened the door to Johnny's, the smell of grease and vanilla punched me in the gut, making my mouth water. Surprisingly, there were still a few tables unoccupied. Fifties paraphernalia cluttered the walls, and Elvis Presley bellowed "Heartbreak Hotel" from a lit-up juke box in the corner.

"How many?" a waitress dressed in a poodle skirt and pink top asked. Her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail; stray strands from a long day's work fell to the sides of her flushed face. She looked exhausted.

"Three," Christian answered.

"Right this way," the tired woman said.

I tried to think of something to say that might lighten her burden, but I wasn't used to reaching out.

"We'll tip her good," Christian said once we sat down.

“Huh?”

“Let’s leave a good tip for the waitress. She looks burned out.”

“You noticed?”

“Sure. She’s probably a single mom or something. I can’t imagine how hard that would be.” He opened his menu and scanned over its contents.

I stared at him, my mouth open. Who was this guy?

May bounded over with Adam next to her. She was in the middle of telling him about basketball practice. Adam pulled out a chair and sat next to Christian, while May sat next to me.

Just then the front door opened and in walked Mike. I shuddered.

“Hey, Adam!” he called from across the diner. I thought I recognized your car, you big putz.” He waved the waitress out of his face and strolled toward us.

“What are you losers doing?” he joked, even though, to me, he sounded serious. He stole a chair from a nearby table and sat at the end next to May and Adam.

“We just ran into each other,” May said.

“Don’t you guys have anything better to do?” he sneered.

“Don’t you?” I shot back.

He glared at me. “What are you doing here? I didn’t think you had any friends.”

“We just came from Llona and May’s basketball practice,” Christian said, his voice tense. He shifted his weight closer to me on his chair.

“Did Llona fall on her face?” Mike asked. He motioned the waitress over.

“Actually, she was amazing.” Christian’s blue eyes met mine. My heart skipped a beat.

“Whatever. Girls can’t play sports.”

“We can too,” May defended. “In fact, I bet Llona I could waste you at basketball.”

He snorted and laughed out loud. “Girls and their dreams.”

I resisted the urge to kick him under the table.

“What can I get you?” the waitress asked next to him.

“Get me a double burger with extra cheese. And a large Coke,” Mike said,

his lips wet with spit. The waitress turned to Adam, but Mike interrupted her. “And by the way, make sure the cook doesn’t drown the burger in ketchup. Last time I got one, I felt like I was drinking the damn thing.”

The waitress nodded, looking even more miserable. She moved around the table taking our orders, but when she got to me, her eyes glistened. Whatever she was going through, I had a strong feeling it went beyond her duties as a waitress.

Her suffering tore at my heart. Instinctively, I reached out and touched her arm wishing I could help. Without warning, Light’s energy passed through me and warmed the skin beneath my palm.

At the same time, I said, “Everything will be okay.”

Worry lines on her face instantly melted away, and her shoulders relaxed as if I’d injected her with melatonin. She smiled. “Thanks. It’s been one of those days.”

“I know what those are like.” I returned the smile, while inside I secretly rejoiced. I couldn’t believe I just did that. It had come so naturally, like learning to walk. I never knew what my mother had meant when she said she could comfort others—now I did.

“I’ll be right back,” Mike said, after the waitress left. He stood and walked over to a girl whose name I thought was Amanda.

“Why does he have to be such a jerk all of the time?” May asked the guys.

“That’s just Mike,” Adam answered. “He’s been like that for as long as I’ve known him. Everyone just ignores him.”

“Well, I think he needs his ass kicked,” May said. “The other day in Mr. Steele’s class—” my head snapped up— “Mike made a girl cry. It was horrible.”

“What did Mr. Steele do?” I asked.

“Gave him detention. He is the nicest teacher.” May’s eyes drifting toward the heavens.

Christian and Adam laughed. “I don’t think the girls like him because he’s nice.”

“He can’t help it if he’s also hot,” May snapped.

Christian turned to me. “What do you think, Llona? Do you think Mr. Steele’s hot?”

May answered for me. "How could she not? I think all the girls in his class are going to flunk. Hard to concentrate with him teaching."

"So true!" I laughed out loud.

"I could tutor you if you'd like," Christian said to me. "I do okay in math, and since I'm not as hot as Mr. Steele, maybe you'll be able to learn something."

"I think you're hot," Adam said. He leaned in for a pretend kiss, but Christian shoved him away, laughing.

Ten minutes later, our food arrived bringing Mike back to our table. We dove in, especially me. It was hard to consume enough calories to make up for all the energy I burned.

Through a mouthful, Mike said, "Did you guys see that girl I was talking to?"

"Amanda?" May asked.

"I guess that's her name. Anyway, she's going out with me tomorrow night."

"Why would you want to go out with a girl when you don't even know her name?" Christian asked.

He grinned and waggled his eyebrows. "Because I hear she puts out. I know she's kind of chunky, but I'll try not to look."

May tossed a French fry at him. "That's horrible!"

Mike shrugged. "I'm a player. That's what I do."

"Are you serious?" I asked without a hint of humor in my voice.

Mike leaned forward and glared at me. "What's your problem?"

"You're my problem." I paused to suck in a breath. "You like to play games? Let's play horse. I'll be the front end and you be yourself."

Adam dropped his head and shook it back and forth. May smirked and leaned back in her chair, while Mike's expression twisted with rage. He barely opened his mouth as he hissed, "Why don't you pull that halo down and choke yourself with it, you self-righteous little—"

Before Mike could finish his sentence, Christian lunged across the table and punched Mike in the mouth.

CHAPTER 9



Mike fell backwards out of his chair with Christian on top. He attempted to wiggle free, but Christian pinned his shoulder to the ground. With his free hand, Christian continued to punch Mike's face despite Adam's attempts to pull him back.

"Get off him, man!" Adam yelled.

Just then an enormous fry cook bounded out of the kitchen. He, too, tried to pry Christian off, but was unsuccessful. May burst into tears.

Finally, I found my voice.

"Christian!" I wanted to yell it, but his name barely squeaked out.

As if he'd heard me, Christian stood, breathing heavily, fists clenched tight.

"Get out of here!" the cook barked at Christian. Grease dripped from a spatula in his hand.

I wasn't sure if Christian heard or not, because all he did was turn to me and stare in shock—no, horror is more like it. He walked around the table, stepping over spilled food, and took me by the arms.

"Are you okay?" he asked, as if I'd been the one fighting.

"I'm fine. Let's go." I pulled him toward the front door, but he stopped briefly, reached inside his pocket, and pulled out a fifty-dollar bill. He dropped the money on the table and then followed me out.

Mike's voice echoed behind us, "Watch your back, Stockett!"

May caught up to us outside, her face streaked with tears. "Are you all right, Christian?"

He glanced at her as if he wasn't sure what she was talking about. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Can we just get out of here?" I asked. I didn't want to admit it, but the fight had both excited and frightened me. Part of me wished I was the one beating up Mike, while the other half of me was frightened by Christian's fighting skills. Fast and deadly accurate, like he'd been professionally trained.

Christian's eyes never left mine. "May, will you take us to my car? I'll save you a trip and take Llona home."

I should've argued, but I wanted to find out more about Christian. Did he scare me? Hell yes, but not in the way I expected. I was more frightened by the way I was starting to feel towards him. The desire, the yearning for something more. It made my insides tremble.

No one said a word the short ride back to the school and only when May parked the car did she turn and say, "Mike had it coming. Thanks for kicking his ass. Maybe he'll start treating girls with some respect now."

Christian shook his head. "I shouldn't have lost control like that."

"Actually, it was kind of hot, defending Llona like that. Right?" She looked at me with innocent eyes, but a smile teased the corners of her mouth.

My face warmed, and I chuckled uncomfortably. "See you tomorrow, May."

Christian followed me out of the car and stood next to me as May's car drove away. The extreme energy I'd felt before now felt scattered, like metal balls firing inside a pinball machine.

"I'm so sorry," Christian said. "I should never have fought."

I shook my head. "It's me who should apologize. I'm the one with the big mouth."

"You spoke the truth, but I didn't have to fight."

"It's not a big deal. Really."

"Not a big deal?" He pulled my arms from my chest and held my hands. I sucked in a breath at the warm contact. "You're shaking."

I snatched them back, embarrassed, but I hated the cold that came with the motion. "I just overdid it today."

"It's more than that."

How would you know? I wanted to ask. I didn't like that he seemed to be able to read my mind. "Can we just go?"

Christian eyed me thoughtfully. "Sure. If that's what you want."

He opened his truck door and waited until I was inside before closing it. The black, leather-upholstery was clean, and the car had been equipped with all the bells and whistles.

"This is nice," I said as we drove out of the parking lot.

"Thanks. My dad split the cost with me. I worked three summers saving up for it."

"Doing what?"

"Private lessons."

"What kind of lessons?"

"Um, fighting and stuff."

This sparked my interest. "Fighting? Like karate?"

"Something like that." Christian glanced in the rearview mirror after rounding a corner.

"So you're a professional fighter?"

He laughed. "I wouldn't say that. I've just had enough years of experience that I can teach."

"But you've been teaching for three years."

He shifted in the seat and cleared his throat. "It's nothing really."

I couldn't tell if he was being modest or if he was avoiding my questions. I decided not to press the issue. I looked out the passenger window and toward the full moon.

"You like the moon don't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, I guess."

"It is beautiful, especially when it's full." He checked the rearview mirror again, and I thought I noticed his grip tighten on the steering wheel.

I casually glanced behind us, but didn't see anything. "Why do you keep checking the mirror?"

"What?"

"The rearview mirror. What are you looking at?"

“Nothing. Just trying to be a good driver.”

The remaining way to my house, he tried to be more casual, but I still noticed his obsession with the mirror. And he didn’t look happy.

When we pulled into my driveway, he asked, “Is your uncle home?”

“Yeah.” Even though the garage door was shut, concealing his car, I knew Jake was there. Where else would he be?

“How can you tell? The house is dark.”

“He’s always home.” I opened my door. Christian jumped out and ran around to my side.

“I can get myself out,” I said, wondering why he was acting like we were on a date or something.

“I know you can. I just want to walk you to the door.” That’s what he said, but as we walked toward my house, he continued to shift his eyes the way a babysitter does when she feels she’s not alone in the house.

And then she’s murdered.

I pushed back my paranoid thoughts and turned to him at the door. “I never said thank you.”

“For what?”

“For standing up for me. No one’s ever done that before.”

Christian sighed and shook his head. “If Mike had any idea how special you are, he wouldn’t have said what he did.”

“What?” I asked, my pulse tripping over itself.

He spoke quickly. “I just mean that you are an incredible person. You’re great at sports, you’re kind, you’re not afraid—”

“All right that’s enough.”

“No, it’s not, but I’ll let you off the hook.” He smiled.

I reached for the doorknob, but he stopped me and said, “Before you go, promise me something.”

I waited for him to continue before I agreed to do anything.

“Promise me you won’t go running tonight.”

“Why would I go running?” Actually I was planning on going out later. It was only eight o’clock after all.

“You just seem to have this crazy energy. Will you promise?”

“Can I ask why?”

“With the murder that happened up Ian Road, I think it would be safer if you stayed inside.”

Right, the murder. The red shoe. That seemed like years ago. “Sure. I’ll stay inside.”

“Good. And remember, not everyone is who they say they are.” Before I could respond, he reached out and lightly squeezed my hand. A thousand butterflies bloomed in my stomach all at once. “Sleep well.”

I stared, blinking as he returned to his car. He’d done it again. Made feel wonderful and scared all within a few seconds. I sucked in a hitched breath.

I waited for his car to disappear before I ducked inside my house. Not a single light was on, and the house was unusually quiet. With a single thought, I mentally turned on the kitchen light and almost died from shock. The kitchen was spotless. I turned around. So was the living room.

I walked to Jake’s room and peeked in. “Jake?” When I didn’t hear a reply, I turned on the light. His bedroom had also been cleaned. A note on his dresser read:

TINK,

I GOT THE JOB! Don’t wait up for me. New bossman is taking me out to dinner to meet the rest of the crew.

Jake

P.S. I hope tryouts went well!

I CARRIED the note to my room, reading it several more times. All the confusion,

my fears, faded to the back of my mind. Jake had a job. Jake was hanging out with other people. It made my heart smile.

Sleep came easy but at some point in the middle of the night, my eyelids snapped open. It was dark—coffin dark. It felt heavy and pressed against my chest. I sat up and rubbed at my sternum, while sucking in air. Maybe it was just too hot in my room.

I stumbled to the window and peered into the black sky. Storm clouds must be hiding the full moon. Not even a hint of light penetrated its darkness. I frowned, realizing I couldn't even see anything in my backyard. It was like an impermeable darkness had swallowed my home.

I placed my palms on the glass and summoned Light to my hands; a soft bluish glow shined into the dark.

Thinking of the bobcat, I scanned the tree line first but saw nothing.

A sudden wind howled and shook the glass beneath my palms. I gasped and stepped back.

Forget fresh air. I moved to return to bed when I heard what I thought was a cat howling outside my window. Bobcat again? It wailed and moaned, sounding like it might be trapped in something. I couldn't let it suffer.

Approaching the window again, I called on Light's power and tried to locate the tortured feline within my bluish hue. Without warning, a shadow, blacker than night, bolted past my window.

CHAPTER 10



When the early morning sun warmed my room, I threw the covers off and mentally turned on the lights. I dressed quickly, anxious to get out of the house and away from the memories of such a horrible night's sleep. After whatever had bolted past my window, I'd ran back to bed and buried myself in the covers. The shadow had moved so quickly I couldn't be sure if the form had been human or animal. I didn't fall asleep until I'd convinced myself that it had been a deer.

I peeked in on Jake who slept peacefully without the television on, something I wasn't used to. I scribbled a note, telling him I was going running, and then placed it on his dresser. I stepped out our back door, stretched a little, and then raced up the mountain, toward the sun, and over to my favorite trail. When I returned an hour later, Jake was gone. A short note told me he had some errands to run and would be home before I returned from school.

Once again, I chose to run to school. The moon would be full for at least another day, and I couldn't be more pleased with the timing. If basketball tryouts had been one week later, I probably wouldn't have a chance at making the team.

I headed straight for first hour instead of going to my locker. The last thing I wanted was to run into Christian. As much as I liked being near him, he was merely a high school distraction and one that would only cause me pain in the end. Survival first, I reminded myself as I sat down. Me moving a lot wasn't good for a relationship.

After second period, I had to go running again. The tapping of my foot had

bothered everyone around me, including the teacher. While no one was looking, I darted outside and headed toward the track. I ran as hard and fast as I could to expend the most amount of energy (although I barely broke a sweat). I hoped that might help me pay attention in my next class, Trig. I was really starting to fall behind, and for the first time in my academic life, I was worried.

I arrived early and laid out my pencil and notebook, fully intending to write down everything he said. I wouldn't get distracted today.

"Llona?"

I swiveled in my seat and sucked in a hitched breath at the site of Mr. Steele standing next to me.

My eyes met his, and I licked my lips. "Yes?"

He knelt next to my desk and leaned to quietly whisper. "Everything okay at home?"

Behind him, Matt walked into the classroom with a few other students and sat down. His curious gaze swept over us, and he turned away as if he wasn't interested, but by the way his body leaned toward me, I could tell he was trying to listen in.

I blinked, and swallowed the lump clogging my throat. "Everything's good."

Mr. Steele frowned, unconvinced. "You're a straight A student in all of your classes, including the ones last year. But in my class? You're failing. What's going on?"

My heart beat so loud I could barely hear him over the sound. My gaze lowered to the pencil on my desk. "I don't know."

"I want you to know that you can talk to me about anything. I might surprise you with what I know." He leaned closer, and his musky scent filled me. "Trust me, okay?"

His warm breath feathered past the skin on my cheek. I resisted the urge to moan, and instead, focused on the warming sensation in my lower gut. It was a good feeling.

He straightened and walked to the front of the class, while I sunk into my seat.

Matt leaned over toward me. "If you're having trouble in math, I can tutor

you. I'm good with numbers. Let me help."

His dark eyes burrowed into mine, commanding, strong; a trait I clearly seemed to like.

I was about to answer when Mr. Steele began his lecture. My lips closed.

"Let me know," Matt whispered and faced forward.

I think I nodded.

By the time class ended, I'd managed to scribble a few things. *Progress*. I shoved the notebook into my bag and was the first to exit. I inhaled a huge breath in the hallway, welcoming the break from what easily could've been sexual tension. I wouldn't know for sure. This was all so new to me.

I totally wanted a boyfriend, but how could I ever trust a man after what happened to my parents? My heart ached at the thought. Sometimes, I really hated who I was. Hated that our kind would forever be hunted because of the Light inside of us.

An arm hooked inside of mine. I jumped but relaxed when I realized it was May.

"Let's eat in the cafeteria today. I'm tired of eating out."

I didn't argue. May would be great distraction from my dark thoughts.

Inside the lunchroom, I spotted Matt sitting at a table talking to a few girls. Our eyes met briefly, and he acknowledged me with a nod.

With my legs weakening at the site of him, I deliberately veered toward the furthest table from him. I dropped my backpack onto the table.

"Pizza good?" May asked, eyeing the line of students waiting to grab their slice.

"Perfect."

"You grab our drinks, and I'll get the food."

Eating lunch with May, talking with her, almost made me forget about math class, but I kept catching Matt looking at me. Not in a creepy way but more out of curiosity, like he was trying to figure me out. I think I would've preferred the creepy look. That I could respond to. Tell him to knock it off or just simply ignore him. But being curious about me? That scared me.

When lunch ended, I headed to my locker.

Christian caught up to me in the hallway. His timing couldn't be worse.
"How's it going?"

I kept my face forward. "Good. You?"

"Fine. Do you mind if I come to tryouts again today?"

"Actually, I'd prefer it if you didn't." *Be strong.*

"Really? Um, okay. Can I see you afterwards?"

I opened my locker. "I think my uncle has something planned."

He didn't say anything while I switched out my books, but when I closed my locker, he asked, "Did you go running last night?"

"No, which turned out to be good because of the storm and all." I shivered just thinking about how hard my window had shook.

"What storm?"

"Last night. The sky was pitch black and the wind was blowing a hundred miles an hour. It was freaky."

His body tensed. "There wasn't a storm last night. What time?"

"Not sure. I woke up to the sound of a cat howling like it was in heat or something. It was really weird."

"And you didn't go outside?"

"No."

"Don't go out tonight either, okay?"

"Why?"

"Just don't, please?"

I sighed. "Look, I appreciate the concern, but if I want to go running in the dark, I will. I'm a big girl."

He grabbed me by the arm, a little too rough in my opinion. "You can't go outside."

I shrugged him off. "Let go. What's your deal?"

I hurried away, surprised by his sudden aggressive behavior. Who was he to tell me what to do? We were barely friends.

Thankfully, he didn't chase after me.

* * *

THE SECOND DAY of basketball tryouts went as expected. Both May and I did well, almost too well. The other girls kept shooting us nasty looks. Most of them had been playing competitively for years and didn't appreciate us trying to steal their spots on the team.

As we exited the gym doors, May sighed. "That was seriously awesome. I love scrimmaging."

"I don't think the other girls had as much fun."

She laughed. "Wasn't that the best?"

I nodded, but I didn't dare agree out loud, afraid my Aunt Sophie might somehow hear even though she was hundreds of miles away. But it had been such an incredible feeling to push my body hard, stretch its limits. Many times during practice, I'd felt Light surge through me, giving me new strength and focus.

When I walked through the front door, Jake greeted me wearing an apron and holding a spatula. "Did you make the team?"

"I don't know yet." I inhaled. "You made cookies?"

He smiled and returned to the kitchen. "Double batch even."

"Since when do you bake?" I tossed my backpack onto the couch and sat down on a kitchen bar stool.

He turned on the oven light and peeked in. "I used to make them all the time, don't you remember?"

"Vaguely. But why are you making them now?" I also noticed he'd gotten a haircut. The short cut brightened his face and made his green eyes more pronounced.

"I was hoping we could celebrate you making the team, but I guess we'll have to do it later." Jake poured me a glass of milk. "But that doesn't mean these still can't be celebratory cookies."

I jumped from my chair. "Did you get the job?"

A grin split his face, and he nodded.

I cheered and raced into the kitchen to give him a giant hug. "I'm so happy for you!"

He laughed and squeezed me back. It's the first hug I'd gotten from him in

years that didn't feel full of guilt and sadness.

I released him and asked, "When do you start?"

"Tomorrow. My boss seems really cool."

"That's great!" I returned to my chair, surprised by how relaxed I suddenly felt. It's like I'd been carrying this worry for him on my shoulders, and I hadn't realized how heavy it had been until now.

He placed a warm cookie in front of me. "I need to apologize to you."

When I attempted to interrupt him, he stopped me.

"Ever since Mark, I mean your dad, died, I've been living in a fortress of solitude. Your dad, well, he was special, more so than even you know. After your mom died, we went through some crazy stuff together, and I think that kind of messed me up, too. I thought I could be like him, but I'm not."

"What are you talking about?"

He shook his head. "I promised your dad I'd take care of you, but how can I do that? I'm not him."

"Jake, I couldn't ask for a better second dad." I placed my hand over his and mentally transferred Light to him. I hated seeing him like this.

He jerked his hand away, and his eyes widened. "When did you start doing that?"

"Huh?"

"You're transferring Light to me. When did you learn to do that?"

I shrugged. "Just the other day, I guess. Why? What's wrong?"

"Your mother. She used to do the same thing whenever I felt bad. I can't believe you can do it, too."

"But can't all Auras at a certain age?"

"Maybe, I don't know. I only know what your mother did. What else can you do?"

"Just manipulate light and stuff, nothing big. And mostly when the moon is out."

He nodded as if he understood.

"Is there anything else I should expect?" I asked.

"I'm the wrong person to be asking. You should call your aunt."

“No way. She’ll try and make me go to that stupid school again.”

“What’s wrong with Lucent? Your mother went there.”

“A lot of good it did her. I think I’m safer out here than in there. All they do is fill your head with delusions of grandeur.”

He laughed. “I doubt that. Maybe we can check it out together?”

I grunted at the same time the oven timer buzzed.

Jake removed another batch of cookies and placed them on the stove.

“There’s something else I want to talk to you about.”

“What’s that?” I shoved a cookie into my mouth.

“Since I’m finally getting back into the world, I want you to do the same. Trying out for the basketball team is a great first step, but I know how you are, Tink. You keep everyone at arm’s length, and you certainly don’t trust others, which I get to a certain degree, but this is your senior year. You should be enjoying it, not hanging out here, plotting out every move of your future. Life is not meant to be scripted. Your mother and father would want you to be happy.”

“I am happy,” I mumbled.

“No, you’re existing. Just like I was. What happened to your parents is not going to happen to you.”

“How can you be so sure?”

He huffed. “I can’t but play the odds, Llona. They’re in your favor.”

“Can I think about it?” I asked.

“No! No more thinking. Take a chance and say yes. Come on. You can do it, right here, right now. Say yes, and you can have another one of my famous cookies.”

I wasn’t sure if it was Jake’s pep talk or the Light within me that made me say it, but all of a sudden I heard the word “yes” roll from my lips. Before I could take it back, Jake had his arms around me.

“This is going to be great,” he cried.

I tried not to laugh along with him, but I couldn’t help it. His happiness was contagious.

Maybe I would have fun this year. Play the odds, like Jake said, and do all the things I hadn’t allowed myself to do before. Possibilities flashed before me.

Christian. Matt. And even Mr. Steele, but I quickly pushed his image from my mind. Teachers were off limits.

Things were finally looking up.

CHAPTER 11



The next morning, I didn't dread going to school like I always had before. If Jake was trying hard, I should too, but cautiously. Hard to break old habits.

First thing I wanted to do was find Christian. I couldn't deny the attraction I felt towards him. I think it went beyond physical, but I had to know for sure. Plus, if I got closer to him, I could see if he really was trustworthy.

I made it to Christian's locker just as he placed a bag inside. His eyes widened in shock to see me there.

"Llona. Hey, about yesterday—"

"Forget it. I was wondering if you wanted to go out tonight? Maybe go running together or something?"

His eyebrows lifted. "I have football practice until seven, but I'm free after that."

"Great. It's a date then." I turned away, but he stopped me. "Hey, congratulations!"

"For what?"

"You made the team!"

Excitement I didn't expect flooded my system, and I grinned. "I did?"

"Haven't you checked yet?"

"I was just on my way."

He cringed. "I hope I didn't ruin it for you."

"No way. I'm glad I heard it from you." And I meant it. Seeing his eyes

twinkle with joy felt right.

“See you,” I called over my shoulder, my fingers wiggling with delight.

I only made it half way to the gym before May nearly tackled me from behind. “We made it!”

I laughed with her as we bounced up and down. I didn’t care who watched. For once in my life, I was doing exactly what I wanted.

“Hey, hey, hey,” a voice said as strong arms wrapped around the both of us and the person began to jump too. “I want in on this celebration.”

I glanced up into Matt’s dark eyes that sparkled with humor. The heat from his fingers burned into my bare forearm, and I sucked in a sudden breath.

May stepped back, laughing. She punched him in the shoulder. “This is our celebration!”

I also scooted away, needing to inhale a much stronger breath than the one before. Why was he so bloody intense?

“I think I should share in some of it,” he said to May. “I did practice with you.”

“Only once.”

I glanced from May to him. “You guys know each other?”

“Well enough to know that I’m better than him at basketball,” May joked.

“Maybe I faked being good because I’m that nice of a guy.” This time when May attempted to punch him again, he easily dodged it. “See? I’m skilled.”

It was strange watching them interact with such ease. I always felt tense around him, like I was standing on the edge of a cliff with stormy waters below.

But it shouldn’t be that way. I needed to get over this and find a way to trust people. Besides, Matt’s flirtatious behavior didn’t seem just focused on me. I think it’s just who he was.

“Are you still doing your book club thing?” I asked him.

His eyebrows lifted. “I am. Have you changed your mind?”

“What book club?”

“Me and a few others meet to discuss mostly older, classic books,” he explained. “You should both come. We’re meeting Monday at 7:00 at the city library.”

“What book are you guys reading?” I asked.

“The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

“I’ve been wanting to read that,” May said.

I personally thought it was an odd choice, but I’d give it a try, especially if May was going. Safety in numbers. “Sounds good.”

* * *

AND SO MY senior year at Highland High officially began.

May and I became even better friends, and at least a few times a week we hung out after school when we didn’t have basketball practice. I learned a lot about her. She’d been adopted from Italy when she was two and her adoptive mother was an artist, and quite a good one. The only problem with that was they often fluctuated between very rich or very poor. They’d moved to Bountiful four years ago so her mother could teach art classes at the community college.

As for May’s adoptive father, she hadn’t seen him in years. Her parents had separated when she was six. Last she heard, he was living in California working as a building contractor. Every once in a while, she would receive a letter from him. I could tell that she resented his absence.

Because of our growing friendship, I almost asked her about the lab fire incident, but whenever I tried to bring it up she quickly changed the subject. I figured when she was ready, she’d tell me and when that time came, I’d have to tell her why my hair never changed.

The thought of sharing my secret with someone felt both exciting and liberating. Exciting because my aunt had told me it was strictly forbidden, and for some reason I just didn’t feel like obeying her. And liberating because it sucked keeping this secret. I could talk to Jake about it, but he was a man and barely understood me as it was.

As for the book club with Matt, it turned out to be more than I expected, but in a good way. There were six of us that attended. In addition to Matt and May, there was Tracey, Anna, and Ryan. Everyone was so nice and friendly, and even Matt began to feel not so intense. So much so, that I let him help me with my

math homework. Between him and Mr. Steele's extra guidance, my grade in math had gone up.

But of all the new changes that had occurred, Christian was the one I couldn't do without. He had become like my favorite pair of jeans. I didn't mind wearing other pants, but whenever I wore them, I always found myself wishing I was wearing my perfect-in-every-way jeans. This was my Christian. We had become inseparable and even though we hadn't officially declared ourselves a couple, I thought we were.

The moon was barely a sliver, looking more like an old lady's painted-on eyebrow. I shouldn't be out here. My body still felt weak. I hated feeling vulnerable, and it didn't help that I was out in the woods in the middle of the night. But Christian had asked me to meet him, saying it was extremely important. Even if it wasn't important, I still would've come simply because he asked.

I leapt to a fallen log and spun around slowly on one foot, completing an almost perfect pirouette. Any minute now I would see his handsome face with his kind, gentle eyes, and his wonderful mouth that was always turned up into an amused grin, showing his one, seemingly endless, dimple.

Peering up the dirt path, I hoped to see where it disappeared into the woods, but darkness hid the opening from me. No matter. I spun again and hopped to the ground. I knew I had only to follow the path up a small hill to be back at my favorite bench, tucked between two oak trees.

The bench overlooked a windy, babbling brook. I'd always loved the words "babbling brook". The phrase made the water sound alive with a personality. That's why I frequented the place. Babbling Brook had heard more than her fair share of my problems over the last year. She was the perfect friend. I was lucky the only words she knew were "gurgle", "spray", and the occasional "glurp" which, if I would've been able to translate into English, "glurp" was probably a curse word.

I lifted my arm and touched the silver knob on the side of my wristwatch. The yellow face with a black Batman symbol lit up. Five minutes past midnight. Christian was late.

I imagined his crooked smile and bashful blue eyes gazing at me when he finally arrived, apologizing. I would easily forgive him, and if I felt courageous enough, despite it not being a full moon, I'd throw my arms around him and plant a big, fat—

Something moved out of the corner of my eye. My head snapped to my left. “Christian?”

Silence echoed back.

I peered into the dark wondering if I'd imagined the movement. I took a step forward and again saw something dart into a tree not far away. Squinting my eyes, I tried to make sense of what I was looking at it. The dark form sat on a thick limb partially concealed by a tree branch. Occasionally, it would shift its weight. Whatever it was, it was large. An owl?

I stared at it, hitched breaths barely escaping my lungs. The forest had become deathly still—even crickets had lost their voice. Resisting the urge to run, I bravely yelled, “Shoo! Fly away bird!”

The shadow remained still. Watching me.

I'll take care of this. I bent down and scooped up a small pebble. Moving my hand back in a pitching stance, I tossed the rock in the direction of the dark form. Instead of it flying away like I hoped, a long, shadowy-like arm snapped out and caught the rock midair.

CHAPTER 12



I stepped back, my pulse racing, fear clenching my chest. My feet tripped over a log, and I fell onto my back, my fingers digging into the cold earth.

The dark form, more human than animal, leapt to the ground in a crouch. Then, deathly slow, it unfolded itself into a tall and looming figure. And by its wide shoulders, probably a man. I could see nothing of its features, but an energy billowed outward from it. Powerful. Deadly.

As soon as it took a step toward me, a surge of Light raced through my veins and shot from my hands wildly into the forest. I gasped and scrambled along the ground backwards. My gaze returned to the shadows, frantically searching for the creeper, but he was gone. Or hiding again.

I jumped to my feet and bolted, running as fast as I could back down the trail, but because the moon barely shined in the sky, my muscles weren't a hundred percent. I stumbled and tripped, reaching and grabbing for anything to help steady me.

With the darkness also my enemy, I glanced at my watch and used my powers to illuminate its face until a brilliant light shined onto the path. This helped me find my way back to my house quickly. I was so frightened I didn't take a breath until I closed my bedroom door behind me.

My chest heaved up and down as I slid to the floor, gasping for air. This was exactly the kind of thing that would get me killed. I'd kept myself safe for years, but faster than I could say "love sick" I'd purposely put myself in a dangerous

situation—alone in the woods with someone, or some thing, I didn't recognize. The realization of how far I'd let my guard down frightened me. Christian was just a boy after all and, apparently, I was just a silly girl.

I stretched my hands out in front of me and stared at my open palms. Light had come when I'd most needed it, almost as if to protect me. And even though it hadn't been focused in any particular direction, I felt certain my Light had scared off whoever had been watching me in the forest.

After what just happened, I should be running to Jake and insist we move again.

My gaze lifted to the blue jacket hanging onto the back of my chair. May had given it to me just last week. I glanced from it to the pictures stuffed into the border of my mirror above my vanity. Photos of me and May, some of me and Tracey. Even a couple of Christian and Matt. *Friends*.

I didn't want to leave. But I also didn't want to put my life in unnecessary danger.

My eyes dropped to my hands again. Maybe with a little training, a little focus, I could get it to do more. I just had to figure out how.

Until then, I had to pull back from my recently active social life. I didn't think one of my friends was secretly a Vyken, but since I couldn't be sure yet, I needed to stay safe. I had no idea what that looked like without moving.

I barely slept that night. I couldn't stop thinking about the person in the woods. It was strange they'd been hiding in a tree watching me just before I was to meet Christian. How had they known? Unless ... I didn't like the direction my mind took me ... it had been Christian.

After waking up and dressing, I decided to walk to school. I needed time to think about how I was going to end things with Christian. And I did have to end it. Whether or not the person in the forest had been him, I needed to get focused on me again. On my survival.

But just the thought of not seeing him anymore made me sick. I placed my hand against a tree to keep myself upright. My stomach was twisting into tight knots. I waited for the pain to pass before I started walking again.

Christian's face appeared in my mind: his bright blue eyes, the lone brown

speck, his crooked smile, the dimple. My stomach tightened again, this time forcing me to sit down. Huge tears welled in my eyes. I was crying! I never cried. And the thought of not being around Christian anymore made it impossible to stop.

I cried for several minutes, completely unaware of my surroundings, until a shadow blocked the sun. I looked up through my hair.

In front of me stood Christian. I groaned and flopped my head back down to my knees.

“Llona?” His voice was gentle and kind. *Too kind.*

“What are you doing here, Christian?” I asked in anguish.

“I came to give you a ride to school.”

He’d never done that before. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I sensed that you needed me.”

I stopped breathing. Me, needy? Not in this lifetime, not ever. I looked up at him, the tears already drying on my cheek. “Well, I don’t. I’m fine.”

To prove my point, I stood straight and tall.

“What’s upset you?”

“Nothing I can’t deal with.” I continued my walk down the street. *I can do this. Keep moving. Don’t look back.*

“Hey, wait up!” He jogged to catch up to me. “What happened last night?”

“What do you mean? I waited, but you never came.” And then someone came at me.

“I did, but I was late, but only by fifteen minutes. I’m really sorry. Is that why you were crying?”

“I wasn’t crying. I have allergies.” The pain in my gut returned.

“Nice try. What’s wrong?”

“I’m late for school. And if it’s all right with you, I’d rather be alone.”

“Can I walk next to you if I’m really quiet?”

“Isn’t your car back there?”

He glanced behind him. “Do you want a ride?”

“No.”

He stopped, but I kept walking.

“I’ll see you at school,” he finally called.

Once I sat down in class and had a chance to clear my head, I relaxed. It was going to be hard to stay away from Christian, but it was the right thing to do, especially after what he’d said. How could he have known that I needed him? Thinking about it, I realized he often said strange things. It’s like he knew me, really knew me, and that terrified me.

At lunch time I begged May to eat somewhere we hadn’t eaten before. In fact, I convinced her to try somewhere new every day until the weekend. This made it easy to avoid everyone but her. But when the weekend came, and she had to go out of town with her mother, I was left alone at home. Even Jake was gone, and I had a sneaking suspicion he’d found a girlfriend but wasn’t ready to tell me about her yet.

Just after sunset, the doorbell rang. Thinking it was the pizza I’d ordered, I pushed my chair back from the dining table and my math homework, which I was barely passing, and opened the front door. My heart skipped a beat.

Christian stood in the doorway with a bouquet of yellow roses. “Hi, I hope this is a good time.”

My stomach pleasantly rolled, sending a line of heat straight between my legs. It took my breath away, but I didn’t relent. I kept one arm on the door, only letting it open so far. “It’s fine. What’s up?”

“These are for you.” He thrust the flowers toward me.

My heart clenched “They’re beautiful, thank you. But why?”

“I feel bad we haven’t hung out, and I can’t help feeling like I did something wrong.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, seriously.”

“Can I come in and talk?”

While I hesitated, the infamous angel and devil duo appeared on each of my shoulders.

“Let him in,” I imagined the angel saying. “He brought you flowers.”

The little devil snorted. “Flowers. Ha! He abandoned you. You can’t count on anyone but yourself.”

“Ah, come on, the guy said he was sorry,” the angel begged.

“Llona?” Christian asked.

The angel and devil disappeared into a puff of smoke.

I sighed and opened the door. “Come on in.”

In my mind, the imaginary devil cursed.

“Thanks.” He walked past me and dropped onto the sofa. “I’m not sure what happened or what I did, but I want you to know I’m sorry. Maybe you felt we were getting too serious or something, and maybe we were, I don’t know. But what I do know is I miss you. I want to be friends. Can we at least be that?”

“I don’t make a good friend.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

“I like to be alone.”

Christian laughed. “Not someone like you. You were born to make people happy.”

There he goes again, saying things that made me uncomfortable. “You don’t know what I was born to do. Don’t act like you know me.”

He pursed his lips and lowered his gaze to the floor. “Fine. Can we just hang out once in a while?”

“Why, Christian? I’ve completely blown you off. Why would you still want to hang out with me?”

He looked up and stared into my eyes with burning intensity. “You’re like no one I’ve ever met before.”

I swallowed and averted my gaze. “That could be a bad thing.”

“In your case, it’s not. Friends?”

I shrugged, too emotionally exhausted to care anymore. I lowered into a chair next to him. So we were friends. I could still keep him at arm’s length. Ignore his smile and that endless dimple. Avoid those penetrating eyes.

“Awesome. You won’t regret this.” He leaned toward me close enough that I caught his scent. Earthy mingled with the aroma of an approaching storm. It made my whole body tingle, then burn with addicting heat when he squeezed my hand briefly. My lips parted open.

“Do you want to watch TV for a bit?”

I mumbled something unintelligible and clicked the remote. I hated that he

affected me so much. His strong presence made me feel safe. I wanted it to be me who made me feel safe, not someone else.

Curling my hands up into my lap, my palms warmed with Light. I mentally focused on its warmth, on maintaining its shape and small size. Somehow, I'd find a way to use it for my protection. Maybe then I could truly open up to others.

CHAPTER 13



May sat next to me on the bleachers, her hand stuffed into a potato chip bag rummaging around for the last bit of crumbs. “Where’s Christian?”

I scanned the football players running onto the field. Stadium lights reflected off their silver helmets. I found number fifteen—Christian’s number—just as he and several of his teammates plowed through a long paper banner that cheerleaders were holding. The crowd around us cheered.

I pointed at him. “He’s right there with Adam running over to the sidelines.”

At the sound of Adam’s name, May jumped to her feet and cheered along with everyone else.

I had doubts about coming tonight, but none of those had mattered when May had called me thirty minutes ago begging me to meet her here. I didn’t admit it to her, but it was my first high school game I’d ever attended. I’d never had a friend to go with me before. Sad, I know.

Now that I was here, I was glad I’d come. The energy in the stands was contagious, something I needed right now. I could tell by the way my body felt that it wasn’t even going to be close to a full moon tonight.

I stood with May and whistled loudly, my voice adding to the already fevered pitch.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” a husky voice said in my ear.

I sucked in a breath as chills skittered across my flesh. I spun around, stunned to see Matt sitting behind me. He hadn’t been there five minutes ago.

“Matt!” May exclaimed happily when she saw him. “Join us.”

She slid over giving him space to sit between us. I frowned as he maneuvered next to me, his shoulder bumping mine.

“Are you a football fan?” I asked him, pretending that I didn’t like the way his thigh had found a comfortable home next to mine.

“Tonight I am. I was bored.”

I snuck a peek at him. Like always, he looked super-hot wearing baggy Levi’s and a plain red t-shirt, his blond hair swept to the side. Part of me wondered why I hadn’t considered him boyfriend material; my body clearly was attracted to his. But within a few minutes, I knew exactly why.

My eyes locked with Christian’s, and he winked at me just before running onto the field. My heart leapt within my chest, sucking my breath away. It didn’t do that with Matt.

True to his word, Christian had kept things casual between us all week, but, if we were honest with each other, both of us had deliberately looked for opportunities to be together as much as possible. It just felt good.

The football game moved quickly, and I enjoyed every second of it. I especially loved watching Christian play. There was something familiar about his quick and flawless movements, but I couldn’t put a finger on it.

With only a few minutes left of the game, Christian completed a touchdown pass. I stood to cheer with everyone else, but after only a few seconds I had to sit back down.

Matt leaned into me, his brows drawn together. “What’s up?”

“Nothing, just feeling a little light-headed.”

“Do you want me to take you home?” He grabbed my hand before I could answer.

“No,” I said, a little too quickly and withdrew my hand.

He smiled, but it looked forced. “Are you ready for Mr. Steele’s midterm on Monday?”

“Midterm?” I didn’t mean to stare, but I honestly had no idea what he was talking about.

“The big test. If you don’t get a passing grade, he’ll fail you for the whole

semester.”

Air deflated from my lungs. “I’m dead.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t know. All we did in class today was review for it. Weren’t you listening?”

Clearly I wasn’t.

I took my time standing. “I’ll be right back. I have to go get my trig book so I can study all weekend.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No, watch the game. I’ll hurry.” I carefully stepped down the bleachers, but considered falling in hopes I’d break a leg. That would get me out of the test.

I moved deathly slow across the lawn toward the school. I hated walking in the dark when the moon wasn’t out. Gratefully, the stadium provided just enough light for me to see my next steps.

I entered the front doors and, as quickly as possible, maneuvered my way around the half-lit school until I found my locker. I retrieved my math book and was about to close the door when I heard laughter. I held still and focused my hearing, but jumped when something smashed against lockers.

More laughter.

I crept to where I could peek around the corner. On the other end of the hall, three guys walked in my direction. And one of them carried a bat.

I pressed my back against the wall. Great, just what I need. I moved back down the short hallway to the doors. Very quietly, I pushed on the bar that normally opened, but what I suspected turned out to be true. The door was locked. I would have to return to the main entrance past the wanna-be gangsters.

“If we can’t beat them on the field,” I heard one of the boys say. “We’ll at least make sure they remember us.”

Another crashing sound. My nerves jumped as if I’d been hit instead of the metal lockers.

Their voices grew closer. I frantically looked around for a place to hide, but schools weren’t designed to have hiding places. I decided my best option was to act like I hadn’t heard or seen anything. I turned the corner and walked quickly.

“Hey!” one of them shouted.

I kept moving, gripping my math book tightly to my chest.

“Wait up,” a deeper voice called.

I quickened my pace. Footsteps pounded the hard floor behind me.

I thought about my Light magic, hoping I could spark something I could use, but like the moon, it had retreated.

A hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. A tall boy stood in front of me with a crazy grin and dilated pupils. His face was littered with pimples, and if I hadn't been so scared, I might've been tempted to connect the dots.

“Where are you going in such a hurry?” he asked. His buddies moved behind him like a pack of wolves.

“She sure is pretty,” said a frumpy-looking boy. He held an open beer can in his hand.

“I was just going back to the game,” I said and turned to leave.

Pimple face put his hand on my shoulder again. This time he didn't remove it. “So you're a student here at gay-land?”

The boys behind him laughed.

“I really have to be going.” I shrugged my shoulder hard enough to make him lose his grip.

“Whoa! Not so fast.” This time he grabbed both my shoulders. My math book crashed to the floor. “I bet you're a cheerleader here, aren't you? Or maybe on the 'never-been-drilled-team'.”

His friends laughed even harder.

“Let go of me,” I growled. I would've given anything for it to be a full moon. I could've easily out run them, probably even out fight them if I had to, but I was on my own.

“Let's decorate her,” one of the other boys suggested.

“That's a great idea, Tek. What do you think, Blondie?” he said to me. “You wanna show some school spirit?”

I brought my knee up as hard as I could between his legs. He doubled over with an agonizing grunt. I bolted toward the doors but one of the guys tackled me from behind. I fell face first and felt my lip split against the floor. Blood filled my mouth.

“I’ve got her!” Tek yelled. “What should we do with her, Jared?”

“Give me a sec, moron,” Jared moaned.

Tek rolled me over while straddling my waist. Above me, the bigger kid whose name I had yet to learn, stared as if he’d never seen a girl before.

“I’ve never kissed a chick this hot before,” he said.

“That’s cause you only hang out with sluts,” Tek spat. A string of spit fell from his mouth to my face.

“Please, just let me go. Please?” I tried wriggling free, but my limbs felt too heavy. So did Tek.

Jared stumbled toward us, still hunched over. “Who has the paint?”

Big-kid reached inside his jacket and pulled out a can of black spray paint.

Jared tore it from his hand. “How ‘bout that school spirit, pretty?”

He bent over and spray-painted my forehead. I turned my head to the side to keep it from getting into my eyes.

“Don’t get her hair!” Big-kid cried.

“Quit being such a jack—” but Jared didn’t finish his statement. His body flew over me, stopping only when it crashed into the wall.

Tek looked behind him just in time to get punched in the face. He toppled to my side but not without his elbow cracking the top of my head first. My vision exploded with bright stars.

“Get out of here before I call the police,” a familiar accent said.

My eyes fell upon an angry-looking Mr. Steele, his face blurred with the ones around me. Footsteps ran away until I heard the crashing of a door, but the sounds were muffled, as if they were being filtered through a foam pad.

Mr. Steele leaned over me. “Are you all right? Do you need help?”

Did I? I quickly assessed my body. Besides a mind-numbing headache and a fat lip, I was otherwise unharmed. But my nerves felt like they had been ground up in a blender. I mumbled something incoherent but felt my head shake “no.” No more attention. I just wanted to go home.

“You don’t look well. Let me help you up.” His arm slipped behind my shoulders, and, as if I were a piece of cotton, he lifted me into a standing position.

Everything spun, and my whole body weakened. I leaned into him and dropped my head to his chest. His breathing tightened, and his hands came to my waist and gripped me tightly. My skin buzzed where his fingers met my skin.

My own breathing became labored. I lifted my hand to his stomach and ran my fingers over his chiseled abdomen. I wasn't sure why. It's like an invisible pressure had curled around us and squeezed us together.

Or maybe I'd hit my head much harder than I thought. I lowered my hand.

"I want you to know," he breathed into my ear. "I will make sure those kids are severely punished."

"Llona?"

I heard the muffled sound of my name but couldn't tell from which direction.

Mr. Steele stepped away from me. The cool air rushing between us brought some clarity to my mind. I looked up at him, then followed his line of sight down the hall.

Christian rushed toward us wearing his full football uniform, parts of it green with grass stains. His sweaty brown hair was matted to his head. "Llona? What happened to you?"

"Some boys from the other school were too rough in their celebration," Mr. Steele said, his tone hard.

Every part of Christian tensed, and he glanced around, growling, "Where are they?"

"That's none of your concern. I will make sure they are properly disciplined."

Christian reached up with his hand and carefully touched my lip. I flinched. He kept his focus on me while asking Mr. Steele, "The police. Have you called them?"

"I was just about to when you showed up."

Police? I rubbed at my aching head with the palm of my hand. I'd had to deal with them enough. "Can I go home?"

Mr. Steele stared down at me. I felt myself getting lost in his dark, intense gaze. "You may, but be prepared to make a statement if they require one."

"I'll take you home." Christian held out his hand to me, waiting for me to

take it.

“Are you comfortable with that?” Mr. Steele asked me.

I nodded slowly and tentatively slid my trembling palm into Christian’s.

“Go ahead, Christian,” Mr. Steele said to him, “but I’ll be calling Llona to check up.” He turned to me. “Is that okay with you?”

My lips parted, and I whispered, “Sure.”

Christian gently pulled me along, keeping a warm, steady hand on my back. That pressure, though gentle, also felt full of tension and anger. Even when we walked outside, he craned his neck to look around as if searching for my attackers.

Once outside, I inhaled deeply and let my mind clear. The realization of what had just happened to me came crashing down, and my whole body began to shake, my pulse racing. I had never wished for a full moon more than in that moment. I needed its strength.

Christian drew me into his arms and held me tightly. “It’s okay. I’ve got you. Take in slow, deep breaths.”

I obeyed and sucked in a long breath. *Think of something else.* Christian’s body pressed against mine did the trick. My pulse slowly returned to normal.

When he felt my body relax against his, he pulled back. “Are you all right?”

“I think so. I got conked pretty good.” I touched my head where a goose egg was beginning to form. “I think it messed with me.”

Christian moved my hand away to inspect the bump. “What were you doing in there?”

“I went into the school to get my trig book but ran into some guys from the other school.” I shivered, remembering the way they had touched me. How helpless I had felt.

Christian glanced over my shoulder. “What did they look like?”

I moaned. “I should go find May. She can take me home instead.”

He didn’t seem to hear me. “This could have been a lot more serious.”

“But it wasn’t.”

He let out a sigh through his nose and flexed his jaw. After a long pause, he asked, “Why were you alone?”

“It’s a school. Why would I ever think I couldn’t go into one alone?”

“That’s not what I meant. You’re weak. You shouldn’t be by yourself.”

My heart skipped a beat, and I stepped away from him. “What did you say?”

“I mean you look sick,” he said, a little too quickly.

“Get away from me, Christian.” I continued moving back. Of all the strange things he’d said to me, this one scared me the most. It hit too close to home.

CHAPTER 14



“Llona, please. That’s not what I meant.”
When he moved toward me, I turned and ran.
“Llona stop!” he called but gratefully didn’t follow.

I weaved my way in and out of the steady stream of cars leaving the parking lot until I found mine. My head was killing me and my insides trembled, but I’d just have to deal with it until I was home.

I moved to open the driver’s side door but froze. My front tire was completely flat. I groaned and cursed.

Looking up, I scanned the exit by the bleachers. Several spectators were still standing around. Maybe May was still here.

I texted her, but when she didn’t answer, I ducked around the corner from the exit and waited, hoping I’d see her pass. I could only imagine what I looked like with spray paint on my face and a fat lip.

“Hey,” a voice said behind me.

I whirled around and came face to face with Matt standing in the shadows of the bleachers. He frowned at my appearance. “What happened?”

I glanced behind him. “Long story. Is May still here?”

“She already left. Do you need a ride?”

My stomach dropped. Matt was nice enough, but for some reason, I didn’t want to be near him right now. Too much had happened tonight.

I glanced back toward the school for Christian but didn’t see him. I sighed. “That would be great, thanks.”

He led me to his car and opened the passenger door. Once we were out of the parking lot, Matt asked again, "What happened?"

I sucked in a deep breath and relaxed into the seat. "A couple of kids from the opposing team ambushed me, but Mr. Steele chased them away."

"Wow! I'm so sorry. I should've gone with you."

"How could you've known? It's not a big deal."

"Actually, it is. Most girls would be bawling their faces off."

I shrugged. "There's nothing I can do about it now. Besides they were just stupid boys."

"Yeah, but what if Mr. Steele hadn't come by?"

"But he did. I'm not going to get upset over a 'what if'." I probably should've been more upset, but all I could think about was what Christian had said.

"You're a different girl, Llona, you know that?"

I chuckled. "You don't know the half of it."

"That's a good thing. You're one of the few who will actually make it far in life. Not just survive but really succeed."

I turned to him, my eyebrows lifted. "You really mean that?"

"Of course."

"I think that's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me." I smiled, thinking how great it would be to not only survive, but also live a long and happy life. "Hey, did we score again while I was gone?"

"With only a few seconds to spare." Matt proceeded to give me a play-by-play of the last few minutes of the game, while he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to music just barely playing through the speakers. "By the way, did you get your trig book?"

I groaned. "I did, but it got knocked from my hands. What am I going to do now?"

"You can borrow mine. I'll bring it by tomorrow."

"Don't you need it?"

"Nah. I'm good."

We were almost to my house when I noticed a car in our driveway: Jake's

and someone else's. Probably the secret new girlfriend he wanted to finally introduce me to. "Can you drop me off at Mueller Park? It's just a few blocks away."

"Why?"

"My uncle has a date over, and I don't want to bother him quite yet, especially with how I look right now. I don't want to worry him."

"So what are you going to do?"

"There's a trail that practically leads to my backyard. I'll sneak in my window."

"Do you want me to walk you?"

I looked out the window to the darkened trees beyond, wondering what my chances were of meeting tree-creature again. It was only ten o'clock, I told myself, as if that mattered. "No. That's okay."

Matt parked his car next to the entrance to the canyon. "I feel funny dropping you off here, especially after what just happened."

"You saw how close it is to my home. I'll be fine. Thanks for going with me tonight." I jumped out before he could protest any further.

I walked up the trail until the light from Matt's car disappeared. I hadn't realized how dark it was until his headlights were gone. I felt for my watch, hoping I could use it for light, but then I remembered I'd left it at home.

I remained still, listening to the night's gentle symphony: crickets chirped, water babbled, leaves rustled, and the wind sighed through the tops of the trees. Its melody soothed my nerves and for the first time in a long while I felt at peace.

Because I couldn't see as well as I'd hoped, I considered cutting over to a trail that ran parallel to the road. It went in the opposite direction from my house, but it was close enough that light from the street lamps should make it easier to walk. Once the trail ended, I figured I could just walk on the road back to my house. It also happened to cross over a thin, finger-like appendage of Mueller Park Lake. During the day it was a pretty cool place to visit, but I'd never seen it at night. Now's as good a time as any. And maybe by the time I returned, Jake's girlfriend would be gone. I wasn't ready to meet another stranger.

I cut through the trees, pushing my way through heavy vegetation. Normally, this wouldn't have bothered me as I was used to being outdoors, even at nighttime, but for some reason my heart began to pound and sweat pooled in my pits. Maybe it was the fact that I couldn't hear the crickets anymore, or maybe it was the wind that had suddenly stopped blowing.

Whatever it was, my body recognized the unseen threat and began to panic.

I picked up my pace, shoving one branch after another out of my way. The night grew inexplicably cold, chilling my skin. A sound, like claws on bark, pierced the silence of the night. I froze.

A twig snapped to my left. And then another.

"Hello?" I called.

"Hello?" A mocking voice echoed back.

Move! My body responded sluggishly moving up and around a thick bush. Behind me, the snapping of twigs picked up its pace in response to my own hurried movements.

"Llona," the voice, a high-pitched, almost whining sound called.

I couldn't tell which direction it was coming from. It seemed to be floating around me, teasing me as if we were playing hide-n-seek. And I was terrible at hiding, but "it" was doing a great job of seeking.

A sharp branch tore through my sleeve, and I stifled a cry when it cut into my skin. Finally, I broke free from the forest and ran toward the bridge. If I could just get there, then at least I'd have some options of escaping whoever was stalking me.

While I ran, I slapped my hands together, trying to get Light to appear. Sparks appeared, then sputtered. Concentrating harder, I closed my right hand tightly. This time when I opened it, a jagged concentration of Light hovered just above my palm. Before it could die out, I turned and tossed it into the darkness toward the forest. Before it dissipated, I met the yellowed eyes of something hidden within.

I yelped and ran faster.

The old railroad bridge was about thirty feet above the lake. I'd jumped from it a few times before landing safely in the water, but that was when I had Light's

full strength to back me up. I didn't feel like jumping from it now, but if it would save my life and help me get away, I'd do it.

I was almost to the bridge when I heard, "Llona!"

This voice was different. This voice was familiar. I stopped and turned around.

Jogging on the trail leading out of the woods was Christian. I backed away from him. Could it have been him messing with me in the forest?

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"How did you find me?" I took a step backwards, my feet finally on the bridge.

He moved toward me. "It doesn't matter. We need to go."

I ground my teeth in frustration. "Why are you doing this Christian?"

"Doing what?"

"Messing with me. It's not funny!" It had to have been Christian. His timing couldn't have been a coincidence.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about," I said. "Back in the woods. You were trying to scare me to death."

I couldn't see his expression, but when he spoke his voice was stern. "I wasn't in the woods, and I wasn't messing with you. I wouldn't do that."

"Oh yeah? Then how did you find me if you didn't follow me?"

He spoke slowly. "I ran into Matt at the gas station. He said he dropped you off here and that you were going to walk the rest of the way home."

"But this isn't the way to my house."

"I know. I just had a feeling you went this way." He took another step.

"Nice try. Now leave me alone."

"I'm not leaving you out here, especially after what happened to you tonight. There's no way."

"And I'm not going to let you mess with my head." I took another step toward the side of the bridge. I had to get away and fast. I knew I wouldn't be able to outrun him, but I hoped if I jumped, he wouldn't follow, and then I could swim to the other side.

“What happened in the woods, Llona?” He was moving forward but very slowly, probably hoping I wouldn’t notice.

“You should know. You were there.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“So you’re saying it wasn’t you calling my name and—hunting me?”

Christian froze. “Why did you use that word?”

“What word?”

“Hunted.”

“Because that’s what it felt like.”

He darted toward me. “We have to get out of here now. It’s not safe.”

His rushed movements caught me off guard. Before I could stop to think, I made a mad leap from the bridge. I thought I’d cleared the wood railing until my hand caught on something. My body dangled in the darkness like a fish on a hook. I could see nothing but a bottomless black world. I looked up to see what had stopped me.

Christian was leaning over the ledge on his stomach, holding my hand. I couldn’t believe he had gotten to me so fast.

“Give me your other hand,” he grunted.

I felt my hand slipping from his, but I did nothing to stop it.

He stared directly into my eyes. “Trust me, Llona. Please.”

I couldn’t trust anyone but myself. Completely calm, I said, “I can’t.”

And then I let go.

CHAPTER 15



I fell through the night like a shooting star, except I wasn't a star. I was a complete idiot. What was I thinking falling from this distance in my condition?

Before I could come up with an answer, I smashed into the cold water. I kicked my legs hard, but they may as well have been taped together. I simply had no strength to fight my way to the surface.

Just as I was about to panic, an arm came around my waist and pulled me upwards. I gasped for air the second my head broke the surface. The person saving me was the same person I'd just accused of wanting to hurt me.

I relaxed against Christian's chest, too exhausted to offer any assistance. I dreaded the conversation we were going to have once we reached the shore. Jumping from the bridge had been a bad decision, and I was sure he was going to tell me that. When my feet touched the murky bottom, I stumbled with him until we both collapsed to the ground, waves lapping at our legs.

I rolled onto my back and stared into the sky, which was blacker than ever. The stillness of the night was broken up by our labored breathing, and that's when I realized how dangerous my foolish decision had been. I could've hurt not only myself but him too.

I opened my mouth to speak but closed it again. What could I possibly say? I guess something was better than nothing. "I'm so sorry."

He rolled toward me. Propping his head up with his hand, elbow on the ground, he smiled. "You still don't get it, do you?" He pushed wet, stray hairs

away from my face. "I would never let anything happen to you."

"In the woods, it really wasn't you, was it?"

His smile disappeared, and he glanced all around. "It wasn't. We need to get out of here."

He stood and offered his hand. This time I accepted it without question.

"Do you know who it might've been?" I asked as I wrapped my arms around my shivering body.

He shook his head, seemingly oblivious to the cold. "A couple of weeks ago, I came running up here. I thought I was being followed too."

"Do you come here often?"

"Sometimes." He guided me back to the trail. I could tell he wanted to move faster, but he didn't rush me. He kept his head on a swivel, alert and ready. When we heard a branch snap, his hand tightened on mine, and he pulled me close. "Keep moving. It's probably nothing, an animal maybe."

We made it to his car alive, no thanks to me. He opened the passenger door.

"I don't want to get your seats wet," I said.

"That's the last thing I care about. Get in."

After helping me in and handing me a blanket, he moved to the rear of the car and opened the hatch. A second later he jumped in next to me holding a duffle bag and a towel. He removed his shirt and dried off.

"Let me see your arm," he said.

"Why?" I asked suddenly suspicious.

His eyebrows lifted. "Seriously?"

"Sorry, bad habit." I moved my arm out from under the blanket. I wasn't used to trusting others, but I was ready to start with Christian. What else did the poor guy have to do?

Christian rolled up my sleeve revealing the cut I'd gotten earlier. "That's bad."

"I've seen worse."

"I'm sure you have." He pulled out several butterfly bandages. "I don't think you need stitches, but you might want to have your uncle look at it. Speaking of Jake, how are you going to explain the paint and these injuries?"

“Could we go to your place so I can wash it off?”

He hesitated with a panicked expression.

“Never mind,” I blurted. “I’ll stick to my original plan and sneak into my bedroom.”

“Why don’t you want your uncle to know?”

“I don’t want him to worry.”

He pursed his lips, thinking. “You can come to my place.”

He started the car and turned up the heat. Halfway there, Christian took my hand and pulled me next to him.

“Are you getting warm?” he asked.

“Mmm,” I moaned. I was so warm I began to fall asleep.

“Llona?”

I sighed deeply.

“Llona, wake up. We’re here.”

I opened my eyes, but still didn’t move because I was shocked to find myself in my current position. My head was lying on Christian’s bare chest with his arm wrapped around me. I could smell his skin, hear his heartbeat.

“How long have I been out?”

“About twenty minutes.”

I sat up. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

He grinned. “And I didn’t mean to enjoy it.”

My face reddened, and I turned away.

In front of us loomed a huge white house with tall pillars leading from the roof to the ground. Two wings spanned out from a thick center and on each side of the front double doors, two lions perched regally. The house looked more like a hotel than a home.

My mouth fell open. “Is this where you live?”

Christian didn’t look up; he was rummaging through a bag. “Yup.”

“I had no idea you lived on top of the hill.” It was one of the richest places to live in Wildemoor, and the further up people built, the richer they were. I didn’t think we could get any higher.

“It’s too big for me, but my father loves being the center of attention.” He

pulled out a shirt and smelled it.

“Remind me again, what does he do?”

He must’ve found the shirt acceptable because he pulled it over his head. “Buys companies.”

“He must have great business sense,” I said, still in awe of the house.

“That he does, but that’s where his good qualities end.” Christian jumped out of the car.

When he opened my door, I asked, “Is it okay that I’m here?”

He paused and darted his eyes to the house and then back to me. “It should be fine. My dad can be kind of weird sometimes, so just ignore him if he is. Come on.”

His sudden nervousness made me feel guilty, and I instantly regretted coming. It had been a strange enough night without having to meet a weird adult.

Christian opened the door to a grand entryway. I could practically see my reflection in the polished floor. In the center of the massive entrance was a marble staircase that swept up to a second floor.

“You have got to be kidding,” I whispered, afraid the sound of my voice might break the crystal chandelier above us.

“And that’s why I never have people over. I mean, seriously, who can feel comfortable in this?”

Christian turned left at the top of the stairway. We were about halfway down a wide hallway when a male voice said, “Christian? Is that you?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“Who’s with you?” he called from behind slightly parted double doors.

Christian motioned his head for me to follow him. He pushed open the doors, revealing an office or a library, or I guess both. The walls were lined with dark wooden shelves, and there were at least four love seats in the room and several tall Queen Anne chairs. A man that I assumed to be Christian’s dad sat behind a long, mahogany desk with a laptop in front of him. He was thin with a full head of blond hair and a narrow face. His eyes were the same almond shape as Christian’s, but they were dark blue instead of Christian’s electric blue. He had very few lines on his face, unless they were hidden behind his five o’clock

shadow.

“Who’s your guest?” he asked Christian, but he kept his eyes on me.

Christian hesitated, as if embarrassed. “This is . . . Llona.”

He may as well have said, “This is the devil” because all of a sudden his dad stood and the lines I thought were missing from his face appeared in angry creases across his forehead.

“What are you doing with her?” he demanded.

It was the way he said it that made me step closer to Christian. It wasn’t a generalization, like ‘what are you doing with a girl,’ it was directed entirely at me.

“Calm down, Dad. As you can see, she ran into some trouble. I brought her here to clean up, that’s all.”

The lines in his forehead disappeared, but he still didn’t sit. His gaze turned toward me, and he asked, “What happened?”

“She ran into some—”

“Can’t she speak for herself?”

I searched frantically for my voice. “Some students got a little too excited in their celebration,” I croaked. “I got caught in the crossfire.”

He glanced at Christian. “You can’t afford to be careless.”

“I wasn’t, and none of this was her fault, Dad.”

He shrugged and sat back down. “It never is. Show her to the guest bathroom and get her some clothes in the closet.”

Christian led me out with an expression that was anything but friendly.

“Sorry about my dad,” he said, once we were out of earshot.

“What did he mean by ‘It never is my fault’?” I asked.

“Who knows? My father is pretty bitter toward all women, so it was probably some kind of derogatory comment.”

“Why doesn’t he like women?”

“He just thinks they’re the cause of all his problems.”

“It doesn’t look like he has many problems to me,” I mumbled, glancing around at all the fancy artwork.

“Looks can be deceiving.” Christian opened a door and showed me into a

room. “This is the guest bedroom. There’s a bathroom over there and in the closet is a bunch of girl clothes. You should find something that fits you.”

“Why do you have a bunch of girl clothes if your dad doesn’t like women?”

“Oh, he loves women when the mood fits him, which is entirely too often in my opinion. I’ll be waiting for you downstairs.”

After the door closed, I quickly ducked into the bathroom. The last thing I wanted was to stay in this house any longer than I had to. I had a distinct impression Christian’s father highly disapproved of me, and not just because I was a woman.

It took me longer than I thought to scrub the streak of spray paint off of my face, and by the time I was done, my face sported a big red welt. I frowned. It was a slight improvement from the paint. At least the swelling in my lip had gone down.

After showering, I opened the bedroom closet and gasped. It was bigger than my room at home. I moved among the designer clothing trying not to touch anything unless I thought it looked my size.

A few minutes later, I found the least dressy outfit: a blue empire style shirt with a black satin sash that tied below my breasts. I also found a pair of black slacks that were a little too big. A skinny belt hanging from a hook made it possible to keep the pants around my waist. I combed my hair and then searched the bathroom for a rubber band but came up empty. You’d think a room dedicated to women would contain a rubber band, a hair clip, or something.

Because my shoes were still wet, and no other shoes fit, I left the room barefoot. I didn’t make a sound as my bare feet padded across the carpeted floor. Up ahead, raised voices echoed from the office. I was about to let my sensitive hearing eavesdrop on their conversation, but jumped when I heard a loud thumping sound from inside, along with Christian’s dad saying, “That is enough!”

The door flew open. I darted back into the bedroom before whoever was coming out saw me. As I shut the door, I heard Christian say, “Just because you did things a certain way, doesn’t make it right.” He slammed the door behind him. I waited several minutes before I dared venture out again. When I peered

back into the hallway, everything was quiet.

I moved quietly, careful to avoid the closed office doors, but I inadvertently ran into a picture that jut out further than I had anticipated. It made a scraping sound against the wall.

In the next beat of my heart, the door flew open, and I was standing inches from Christian's father.

CHAPTER 16



“Hello, sir,” I said, avoiding direct eye contact.

He stared at me for a moment before he said, “Christian’s probably downstairs.”

“Um, thank you.” I hurried past him, but he stopped me. “Tell your uncle hello.”

I turned around. “My uncle, Sir?”

“Didn’t you know he works for me? At Bodian Dynamics.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“He’s a good worker. It’s hard to find men like him. Mark taught him well.”

I visibly jerked at the mention of my father’s name. “You knew my father?”

Christian’s dad stepped into the hallway. I noticed he was limping on his left leg. “I did, a long time ago.”

“How did you know him?”

“We went to school together.”

“In Vegas?”

“No. It was a private school in Washington.”

Now I was really surprised. “I didn’t know my dad lived there.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, looking suddenly tired. “We had our differences, your father and I, but I always respected him. I was real sorry to hear about his death. I always told him he was too careless.”

“Careless? He was killed by a drunk driver.”

He stared at me for what seemed like a very long time. “You have a nice

night, Llona.” He turned around and walked back into his office closing the door behind him.

That’s it? Who says something like that and then walks away? I had half a notion to storm in there and give him a piece of my mind.

“Llona?”

Christian stood at the top of the stairs. Sadness bled from his eyes.

“You okay?” I asked.

He nodded. “It’s getting late. I should probably take you home.”

I followed him down the stairs. “Actually, could I ask for one more favor since it’s on the way?”

“Name it.”

“My car is back in the high school parking lot but it’s got a flat tire. Would you mind helping me change it?”

“So that’s why Matt took you home.” He stopped and turned around on the stairs. “How did it go flat?”

I shrugged. “I probably drove over a nail or something.”

He pursed his lips, thinking, then continued to descend the stairs. Over his shoulder, he said, “Sorry about my dad. Sometimes he talks too much.”

I stopped him at the bottom of the stairs and spun him around. “I don’t care how your dad is. It’s you I want to hang out with, not your father.”

“Are you saying you trust me now?”

I took his hand and smiled. “With my life.”

He stared down at our joined hands, the knot in his throat bobbing up and down. His mouth parted open, releasing the gentle hiss of a breath. “Llona…”

My name on his lips was a plea for something more. I moved closer to him, close enough to feel the heat of his body, close enough that when I inhaled, my breasts brushed his chest.

He reached up and slid his palm along my jaw line and to the back of my neck, his eyes roaming over every inch of my face. “You are so beautiful.”

The sincerity in his voice, the longing tone, made my skin buzz with want. I wanted to feel his touch, his lips, every part of him against my flesh. This desire flooded through me and overwhelmed my senses, awakening even my Light. It

raced through my veins and spread to my muscles.

I was just about to lift up on my toes to satisfy my cravings with a kiss, when he stepped to the side of me and avoided my eyes. “We should go.”

Imaginary water doused my fire.

It took me a few seconds to follow after him. On our way to the school, tension and silence polluted the air. In an attempt to break it, I said, “You never told me Jake works for your dad.”

His brows drew together. “Really? I didn’t know.”

“Truly?”

“Why would I? He owns so many different companies, he probably employs half of Wildemoor’s population.” He pulled into the school’s parking lot and parked next to my car. It was the only one left in the lot.

“Thanks again. For everything,” I said. “And for helping me with my tire.”

He nodded but avoided looking at me again. “Anytime. I’ll get my jack, you grab your spare. It’s probably in the trunk.”

He jumped out of the car before I could respond. I sighed and opened my door. I rounded the back of my car but stopped abruptly.

A cool autumn breeze blew through the loose cotton of my shirt; its breath gave me pause. Not because it chilled me, but because it was laced with an odd smell. The odor reminded me of a leaky, rusty pipe in an old basement.

Instinctively, I glanced down. My tail pipe looked normal, but what was sprayed beneath it wasn’t. Someone must have broken a bottle of Merlot. My foot partially rested on the crimson splatter. As I moved forward, my foot sticking slightly, I came in view of the carnage scattered along side my car.

I didn’t immediately process what I saw, or didn’t want to, and instead found myself staring into the night sky. The dull stars seemed to be swimming in a sea of black. Lost. Disoriented. I stepped back and inhaled a deep breath.

Christian said something to me from the back of his car, but I couldn’t decipher the words over the high pitched squealing in my ears.

Convinced I’d imagined the grisly scene, I lowered my eyes. The side of my car was no longer white—it was red. Shattered glass lay scattered along the pavement, stuck in the same scarlet fluid.

But this wasn't what made me collapse to the ground, darkness overtaking my mind. It was the mass of blonde hair and bloodied flesh clinging to the broken glass poking through my driver side window.

* * *

MY EYELIDS FLUTTERED OPEN. It took a few seconds for my vision to clear and focus on the face hovering over me. *Christian*. And behind him stood officer Pieut.

"Llona. Llona! Can you hear me?" Christian said. I moaned and tried to sit up.

"Lay still," the officer said. "Help is on the way."

"No. I'm fine. I just want to go home." I stood, but my legs gave out when I saw the blood again. Christian caught me.

"Why don't you take her home?" Officer Pieut asked. "We can get her statement later."

"Thanks, officer." Christian kept his arm around my waist as he guided me to his car. "It's okay. I'll get you out of here."

I let him help me into the passenger seat. I even allowed him to buckle my seatbelt. All I wanted to do was pretend I was dreaming. Any minute I'd wake up. The blood, the torn scalp never existed. Death and violence wasn't following me. But when I opened my eyes, I couldn't fool myself.

"Do the police know what happened?" I whispered as he drove out of the parking lot.

Christian took hold of my hand. "There was another murder."

"But I didn't see a body."

"The police found it across town. It appears the murderer attacked a woman in the school parking lot and then dumped her body at the park."

"Did we know her?"

He squeezed my hand. "No. It was the mom of a kid from another school. The team we were playing against."

I turned to him, my heart skipping a painful beat. "Was she the mom of one

of the kids who attacked me?”

“Why would you think that?”

I shook my head, unable to answer, but my stomach replied, twisting and turning in knots.

“I told the police what happened,” Christian said. “I’m sure we’ll find out later who it was.”

I leaned back in the seat, feeling even more sick. “Why my car?”

“You need to know that this had nothing to do with you. It was just a coincidence, nothing more.”

“And the shoe?”

His eyes met mine. “There’s nothing to worry about. I promise. You trust me, right?”

I nodded.

“Good.”

Nothing else was said until he pulled into my driveway. “Let’s go inside and get you to bed. I’ll explain everything to your uncle.”

I nodded again and let my mind shut down. Christian would take care of everything.

I slept in the next morning. When I stretched my arms they felt better, stronger. But my mind felt like it had been battered by horror films all night.

Jake accosted me the moment I stepped out of my room. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.”

He hugged me. “I was worried about you.”

I walked into the kitchen and pulled a mug out of the cupboard. “So what happened after I went to bed last night?”

Jake took the cup from my hand and poured orange juice into it. “Christian stayed for a while, filling me in. I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

I shrugged and turned on the oven. German pancakes sounded really good right now.

“What should we do about my car?” I asked, taking out eggs and milk from the fridge.

Jake pushed me aside and began to crack the eggs.

"Just two," I said.

"The police will have it for a couple of weeks. Are you going to be okay with that?"

"Hell yes." I'd be happy if I never saw the thing again. I measured a cup of flour, but Jake took it from me too. "Would you stop already? I'm fine!"

"I'm sure you are. How much milk?"

I gave in and just let him do it. "One cup."

Jake stirred for a minute. "The police stopped by this morning."

"They did?"

"They want your statement. I told them you'd go by the station later today."

"Okay."

"Do you want me to come with you?" he asked.

"No. I can do it."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

I let out a long sigh. "I think so. No. But I will be."

"I'm here for you. If you ever need to talk."

"I know. Thanks."

"Oh, I almost forgot," Jake said. "Christian called and asked if he could come over tonight. I told him it was fine."

"Okay. Thanks."

After we finished eating, I said, "I met Mr. Stockett."

"You did? Where?" Jake asked.

"I was at Christian's house last night. How come you never told me you work for his dad?"

"I didn't think it mattered. What were you doing there?"

"Washing off paint. I was only there for a little while."

Before he could question me further, I asked, "How come I never knew my dad went to a private school?"

Jake stiffened. "Who told you that?"

"Mr. Stockett."

Jake waited a moment before he answered. "He went to one for a little while."

It's where he met your mother."

"I thought he met her in Vegas?"

Jake glanced at me sideways. "Yeah, sort of."

"So which is it?"

He threw up his hands. "I don't know. I only heard about it. I don't remember the details."

"Then what about my dad's accident?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Stockett said my dad was being careless. Why would he say that?"

Jake clenched his fists. "It's none of his business."

"But why would he say that? Is there something I don't know about my father's death?"

"I'm not having this conversation." He stood. "I'll be in my room."

"Jake—"

"Another time, Tink." He disappeared before I could say another word.

CHAPTER 17



The doorbell rang at noon. I quickly pulled a beanie over my messy hair and opened the door.

Matt and Tracey stood on my front porch. I frowned. “Hey guys. What are you doing here?”

Tracey looked like she was attending a movie premiere in a cute summer, black dress. She always did look her best around Matt. I suspected she had a major crush on him, but he was oblivious.

“We were at the library. Here’s my trig book.” He handed it to me.

“Right. Thanks. Come on in.”

“I like your house,” Tracey said, her cheeks puffed when she breathed. With her short brown hair and brown eyes, she reminded me of an adorable chipmunk. “I bet it’s fun to have a mountain in your backyard.”

“I like it. Have a seat.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked. He reached up and swept his fingers over my forehead where paint had been the night before. His touch made warm shivers explode on my skin.

“I’m good, much better.”

“You make it home okay last night?”

“In one piece.”

“I felt bad leaving you like that, especially after Christian tore into me.”

My eyebrows lifted. “What did he say?”

“He asked if I dropped you off at home. When I said you wanted me to take

you to the park, he completely freaked out. I thought he was going to punch me, but he didn't. Did he ever find you?"

"Yeah."

"Were you okay?"

I wondered how much to tell him. I didn't want him to feel bad. "I was fine. He didn't need to worry."

"Good. Do you want any help studying?"

"No, I got it, but thanks."

"Do your parents work on Saturday?" Tracey asked.

"I live with my uncle. Are you guys doing anything fun today?" I quickly changed the subject before she could inquire further. I hated explaining why I didn't live with my parents. Tracey looked at Matt expectantly. Matt didn't notice.

"We just had breakfast," he said, "but I have to go home now and help my dad. We're remodeling our basement."

"That sounds fun. What about you, Tracey?"

"No plans. My parents are out of town, so it's just me. Are you doing anything?"

"No. Just hanging out."

"Do you want to go shopping?" she asked me.

I hesitated. My expression must have been awfully grim, because Tracey said, "That's okay. We can do it another time."

"No. That's not it at all. It's just that—well, I have to go to the police station."

"Why?" Tracey and Matt said together.

I inhaled a deep breath and told them what had happened to my car.

"Wow," Matt said. "That sucks."

"I heard on the news they found another body. I can't believe you're involved," Tracey said.

"Hoping to be uninvolved by this afternoon."

Tracey stood and walked over to me. "Why don't I go with you? Then, if you feel like it, we could go shopping afterwards."

“Sure. Why not?” At least it would take my mind off the blood-soaked hair.

An hour later, I gave the police my statement, which wasn’t very long since I didn’t know anything to begin with, and then Tracey and I drove to the mall. I never did like shopping—of course I always did it alone so the whole experience never lasted long. “In-and-out” was my motto, but being with a friend suddenly made the whole experience new and exciting.

We shopped for a little while, then decided to take a break and eat. We sat down at a table in front of a restaurant kiosk that served just about every kind of food you could think of on a stick. I was leery at first, but quickly found that for some reason food did taste better on a stick.

Tracey took a long sip from her soda, and asked, “What are you doing tonight?”

“Christian’s coming over.”

“Are you two dating?”

“Not sure.”

“Then you are. You just need to make it official. Maybe that’s what tonight’s about. You should—” Tracey grabbed my arm, eyes wide. “You’ll never believe who’s walking toward us.”

I turned around, but regretted it a second later because all of a sudden I went weak. Strolling toward us, as if a super spy in a preview for a blockbuster thriller, was Mr. Steele. At any moment I waited for him to pull a shiny revolver from behind his back and arrest the skinny wiener man behind the counter for being a terrorist.

As if he sensed my thoughts, he locked eyes with me, then walked over, smiling. “Hello, ladies.”

“Hello, Mr. Steele,” Tracey chimed back.

He glanced from me to her. “I didn’t know you two were friends.”

Tracey winked at me and said, “Best.”

“That’s wonderful. It’s good to see two kids from different groups become friends.” His expression turned serious, and he rested his hand on my shoulder.

“I want you to know, Llona, that those boys were punished.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you get home all right?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Good. You girls have fun and stay out of trouble.” His gaze shifted to mine, and for a moment I swore I saw a warning flash in his eyes, but before I could be sure he walked away.

“We will,” Tracey called after him. She turned to me. “He has got to be the hottest man I know. Don’t you think?”

“For a teacher, yes.”

“Yeah, but technically he’s only a few years older than us,” she said wistfully. After a long sigh, she added, “So what guys was he talking about?”

I set the last of my cheese stick down onto my plate, no longer hungry. “Just some assholes from the game last night.”

By the time we were done shopping, I ended up with two new pairs of jeans and several tops that I would never have had the courage to pick out on my own. I chose one of these pieces to wear on my date with Christian—if it was a date.

Just before Christian was to arrive, Jake knocked on my bedroom door. “Can you come out for a minute, Tink? There’s someone I want you to meet.”

I set my math book down and focused my hearing. Beyond the door, I could hear Jake whispering for someone to stay put, followed by the sound of a woman’s giggle. I grinned. It was about time I got introduced to his mystery woman.

Deciding to make this easy on Jake, I opened the door and asked, “How long has it been official?”

His face paled. “What?”

I pushed past him and walked down the hall. A pretty woman with black spiky hair and a diamond-studded nose piercing looked up at me from her position on the couch and smiled. “Hey. I’m Heidi. You must be Llona.”

Jake hurried up behind me.

“I am. It’s nice to finally meet you.” I dropped next to her onto the couch.

“How did you know?” Jake asked me.

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, now. You’re always cleaning the house now, including your room. You got a haircut. You’re shaving every day.”

Heidi laughed.

Jake looked at me hopefully. "And you're cool with it?"

"Of course I am!"

We talked for a little longer before the conversation turned to gaming, something I didn't know much about, but Heidi sure did, which clearly made Jake happy. She was definitely a keeper.

I finished my hair, which I actually curled and left down, then waited for Christian in the living room. Five minutes before he was to arrive, the doorbell rang.

"You're early," I said to Christian who stood in my doorway looking exceptionally good. It wasn't that he was wearing anything special, but his jeans and blue t-shirt fit his muscular frame like a glove.

"I wanted to make sure I wasn't late. I remember how mad you got last time. Are you doing better today?"

I joined him on the porch, closing the door after me. "Much, and I wasn't mad at you. I was mad at myself."

"For what?"

"For letting myself become distracted. I've always done things a certain way and since I met you, I've been doing things differently."

"Is that good?"

"I think so. I guess I just got scared, but after what you did for me last night, I don't see how I can't trust you. And others for that matter. It's time I let go of my fears." I squared my shoulders.

"You are the bravest person I know," he mocked, but his expression was serious.

I lifted an eyebrow. "That's nice of you to say, but you don't know me."

"I know you better than you think I do."

"What does that mean?"

"I've got something special planned tonight."

I eyed him suspiciously. "Okay."

"But before we go, I need to give you some bad news." I opened my mouth to speak, but he interrupted me. "And then afterwards, I want you to forget it. It

means nothing. It was just a coincidence.”

I swallowed and waited for him to continue.

“The woman they found last night. She was the mother of one of the boys who attacked you.”

My knees weakened, and I sat down on the nearest chair. “Why didn’t the police say anything to me when I was there this morning?”

“I asked them not to. I wanted to be the one to tell you.”

I looked up at him. “What does this mean?”

“Nothing. Like I said, a coincidence. The police are pretty certain that whoever killed the other woman also killed this one. And she had nothing to do with you. So don’t worry.”

But the last murder did have something to do with me. Her shoe anyway. I inhaled deeply, trying to remain calm. Christian was right. I needed to forget about this. Shove it as far down as I could.

“You’ve had a rough time, but tonight I want to give you something else to think about, okay?”

I barely nodded.

“Good.” He slid his hand into mine and led me outside toward his truck.

I stopped him halfway. “By the way, why were you late that night you asked me to meet you in the woods?”

His body tensed. “I had something important to do.”

“At midnight?”

He looked me in the eyes. “I promise I’ll tell you but not now. Is that all right?”

I guess it didn’t matter. I had worse things to stress about. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not a big deal.”

“No, it is. And I promise to tell you when the time is right.”

We didn’t stay in town like I expected. Instead, Christian drove into a canyon and up and over the mountain. The light from the setting sun blanketed the valley changing the autumn leaves into golden ribbons of yellows, reds, and oranges.

“This is amazing,” I said. “I’ve never come through here at sunset before.”

“I thought you’d like it. I love coming up here this time of day. It’s so peaceful—just what I think you need.”

“Can we pull over?” I had a crazy urge to touch the golden leaves to see if they were real.

“We will. There’s a pull-off just up ahead.”

I was expecting it to be more of a rest stop, but it was exactly as he said. There was barely enough room for his car to park alongside the shoulder. When I stepped out of the car, I practically tripped over a concrete barrier. On the other side, the ground dropped off sharply and led to a small stream. It reminded me of my babbling brook back home.

Christian rounded the car and joined me. “Get on my back. I’ll carry you down.”

“That’s okay. I can make it,” I lied as I imagined myself rolling end-over-end until I belly flopped into the water. Even though I felt better, I didn’t feel steep-hill good.

“Whatever. Get on my back.” He turned around. Reluctantly, I wrapped my arms around his neck and jumped up; my legs hooked around his waist.

He groaned.

“Am I hurting you?” I cried. I tried to get off, but he clung to my legs, laughing.

“I’m just kidding. I can barely feel you.”

I stared down the steep incline. “You sure you can do this?”

“Have you ever seen The Man from Snowy River?”

“No.”

“Huh. Well, this is going to seem a lot less impressive then. Hang on!”

He leapt over the concrete barrier and practically ran down. With every step, his foot slid, and I thought for sure we were going to eat it, but somehow he maintained his balance. I placed my chin on his shoulder to keep my head from bouncing all over. My cheeks flushed when I felt the heat from his neck warm my skin.

Before I knew it, we were at the bottom. He let go of my legs, dropping me to the ground. “This way.”

I followed behind him alongside the creek. The further upstream we walked, the brighter the light became and the more magnificent the colors. I couldn't stop commenting on its beauty.

After a short distance, he stopped at a rock wall where a miniature waterfall spilled from a rocky ledge spraying the trees around it. The sun on the wet leaves transformed them into thousands of jewels: rubies, topaz, and garnets. The only word I could come up with to describe the luminescent trees was "celestial." I stared, mouth open.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Christian whispered.

All I could do was nod my head.

And then something strange happened. Light jumped inside me, giving me a huge adrenaline rush. It seemed to push away the anxiety still lingering inside me from the previous night. I gasped for air and staggered to the side.

Christian caught me. "What's wrong?"

"I ... I don't know," I stuttered. My insides vibrated like a tuning fork. I inhaled several deep breaths until, very slowly, Light retreated back to wherever it went when the moon was small.

"Do you need to sit down?"

I shook my head. "I think I'm okay now. That was weird."

"Maybe I shouldn't have brought you here," Christian mumbled.

"What? No. I'm so glad you did." I looked him in the eyes. "Thank you."

His eyes darted to my lips, and his mouth parted open. I reached for his hand and twisted my fingers into his. The same longing I'd experienced the night before, roared awake inside me again.

He lowered his gaze and frowned as his whole body tensed. Something was bothering him. Maybe we were moving too fast for his liking.

To ease the tension, I asked, "How much longer do you think the trees will look like this?"

"Turn around."

I spun back around. The sun had already shifted positions; its light no longer transformed the leaves.

"It's only like this for a few minutes," he said.

“Thank you for showing it to me. It was awesome.”

“You act like this is the end of our date.”

“Isn’t it?”

A smile teased the corners of his mouth. “Not quite. We still have a long night ahead of us.”

CHAPTER 18



Back at the car, Christian stopped me just as I was about to get into the passenger seat. “There’s one rule. You have to wear this.” From behind his back he produced a black bandana.

“Why?”

“It’s a surprise. I don’t want you to see where we’re going.”

“Can’t I just keep my eyes closed?”

“No, you’ll be tempted to peek. Now turn around so I can put this on you.”

I eyed him suspiciously, but then smiled and did what he asked. He tied the bandana around my eyes and helped me into the car. After he joined me, I expected to hear the sound of the car’s engine, but after a minute of silence, I finally asked, “Christian? What are you doing?”

“Right. Sorry. I just like looking at you too much. I think it’s going to be my downfall.”

I laughed. “Careful. That comment’s borderline creepy.”

“True.” He started the car. “My bad.”

I laughed again but then had to swallow the fullness growing in my throat. I was not prepared for this. I thought this was going to be more of a friend date, but the sexual tension between us was undeniable. I know he felt it too, but at the same time, he seemed to be fighting it.

We drove in silence, but not long after, he began to whistle and took hold of my hand. His warm palm felt good against mine, which was inexplicably cold, as was the rest of me. I uncoupled my seatbelt and slid over next to him to rest

my head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around me and lazily dragged his fingers across the skin on my upper arm. The motion, the scent of him, practically undid me.

I lowered my hand to his upper thigh and raked my fingers in deliberate circles. A small moan escaped his lips, and he shifted his weight. I liked knowing my touch gave him pleasure. I wish I could see his expression.

Christian turned onto what felt like a dirt road. I could tell by the way we bounced around as if we were riding in a horse-drawn carriage. "Where are we?"

"Still in the mountains. It's not far now."

Several minutes later he stopped the car. "We'll have to hike the rest of the way."

I cringed. "How far?"

"It's close. Don't worry. I'll help you if you need it."

I know he said he'd help me, but he probably wasn't counting on me being so clumsy. He practically had to carry me the entire way as I kept tripping over the smallest things. Without my eyesight, I was ten times worse. I wished it was a full moon, or even a half moon. He probably thought I was the weakest girl he'd ever met.

Christian stopped and let go of me. A moment later I heard a zipping sound.

"Duck your head and step up," he told me.

"I'll try." I did what he said, but still tripped and fell onto canvas-like material.

"You can take the blindfold off now," Christian said.

I ripped off the bandana and about fainted when I saw what he had done.

We were inside a tent that looked like it was meant for eight people. It had been filled with pillows on one side and on the opposite end was a big screen TV. A pizza box and a six-pack of soda lay in the middle.

I laughed. "This is awesome. How did you get electricity out here?"

He flashed me a you'll-never-know smile. "Hungry?"

"Starving."

"Help yourself. I'll start the movie."

I moved to the other side of the tent, still in shock that he was able to pull

something like this off, but I was also incredibly flattered. No one had ever done anything this thoughtful for me before.

After we ate, we propped ourselves up with pillows behind our backs. His arm came around me, and I snuggled up to him, my head on his chest. It felt like the most natural position in the world, like it was where I was meant to be.

He inhaled and exhaled a contented sigh. His free hand came to mine and began to stroke it. I lifted my hand and slid my fingers into his. A perfect match.

I never thought I'd feel this way about someone. So comfortable. So safe.

Letting go of his hand, I dropped it to his chest and ran my palm up and over his pecs. He shuddered beneath my touch.

The voices on the television became a distant sound as every part of me focused on Christian. The way his fingers were digging into my arm, needing, wanting. His quick inhales of tight breaths. It sparked my own desires, and a powerful wave of heat raced through my body.

“Llona, I—”

I rolled over onto him, and propped my hands on the floor on each side of his shoulders. I stared down, my gaze roaming over his perfectly shaped face. The man I'd given my complete trust to.

His hands slid to my hips, and he stared back at me, his expression a mixture of emotions. Longing and want, yet there was also hesitation as if something held him back. I wanted to crash through that doubt.

But he beat me to it.

He lifted and pressed his mouth to mine while his hand slid up my back, fingers tangling into my hair. I relaxed my body and melted into his arms. His lips were warm, hungry and demanding. I kissed him back just as fiercely, overwhelmed by the way my body had become alive beneath his touch. Every nerve ending yearned to be caressed and stroked. I ground my hips into him, all thoughts gone from my mind.

It wasn't until I felt myself being lifted that I realized Christian was scrambling out from under me, his breathing hitched. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—I don't know what I was thinking.”

I swallowed the growing thickness in my throat. “Did I do something

wrong?”

He shook his head in frustration. “Not at all. It’s just I can’t get serious.”

I stared at him and tried to comprehend what he was saying. “To clarify, you can’t get serious with anyone or just me?”

He averted his gaze. “Anyone. I can’t let anything distract me from college. And sports. I have to do good in sports, and I probably should get a job. A girlfriend would really complicate that.”

He continued to rattle on for several minutes, one excuse after another. Half of them didn’t even make sense. I finally stopped him.

“Look, I get it. You don’t want a girlfriend. Fine. No big deal.”

“Really?”

I shrugged. “We can continue to be friends, but only on one condition.”

“Name it.”

“No more of this.” I waved my arms around. “No more holding my hand, hugging me or even touching me. You’re sending all the wrong signals for someone who doesn’t want a girlfriend.”

He glanced around as if seeing it for the first time. “You’re right. I never realized what I was doing. It just felt right.”

If it feels right then why do you want to stop?

“Will you forgive me?” he asked.

I forced a tight smile. “What are friends for?”

“You are so amazing.”

Hooray for me. Bloody fantastic. Let’s hear it for the girl. This sucks. “I know the movie’s not over yet, but do you mind taking me home? I’m kind of tired.”

His eyes grew. His stupid, perfectly blue eyes. I couldn’t stand to look at them any longer.

“I made you mad, didn’t I?”

“No. I really am tired, and it just feels weird being out here so secluded.”

He grinned.

“What?”

“We’re not that secluded. Look.” He unzipped the tent and helped me out.

Not more than fifty feet away was a huge cabin. And not far from it were several other cabins, most of which had lights on.

“You mean we’ve been this close to civilization the whole time?”

He nodded.

“And here I thought you were a magician.”

His smile disappeared. “I’m really disappointing you tonight, aren’t I?”

“No big deal. I’m used to it.” I forced another smile so he’d think I was kidding, but as soon as I turned around, my smile was replaced by utter disappointment, masked by the cover of darkness. At least Christian had achieved his goal. He’d said he wanted to give me something else to think about.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Yup.”

I didn’t cry that night even though I’d wanted to. So he had rejected me as a girlfriend, big f’ing deal. I still had him as a friend and that should be enough. Then why did I feel so crappy?

When morning came, I felt better—invigorated actually. And not because the moon was stronger, but because I knew exactly what I was going to do.

I showered and dressed in one of my new outfits—one that was much brighter and tighter than the clothes I normally wore. With a push-up bra, it even showed off some of my cleavage. I left my hair down and styled it. No hat today. I even upped the makeup. When I looked in the mirror, I almost jumped at the girl before me. I looked . . . dare I say it? Kind of hot. I couldn’t wait to get to school and show Christian my new look. I knew what I was doing was so immature, but I wanted him to realize what he was missing.

After Jake left for work, I exited my room. Gratefully, Heidi had picked him up for work so I could borrow his car. I grabbed a granola bar in the kitchen and headed to the garage.

I arrived at school several minutes early and parked in the back next to a storage shed. While I waited for Christian to arrive, I practiced calling upon my Light. It sparked in my hand a few times, nothing impressive, but I didn’t give up.

My thoughts wandered to the day before and the waterfall Christian had

shown me. I remembered the trees around it, the golden hues of the leaves. Just like it had then, Light swelled within me and appeared in my hand. I gasped and stared down at its brightness. Very carefully, I cupped my other hand around it and shaped it into a large ball of bright energy.

The distant sound of a familiar truck's engine had my heart racing. The Light disappeared as I swiveled around in my seat in time to see Christian's truck parking three rows over.

When he got out, my heart ached. His sandy blond hair looked messy; uneven bangs flopped to the side of his face. He was dressed nicer than usual in tan slacks and a black shirt. Must be a game tonight. He walked toward the school with a confidence I rarely saw in other guys.

I sighed and leaned my forehead against the cool glass. Why couldn't he like me? I let my pity party last only a minute before I straightened, inhaled deeply, and glanced in the mirror one more time.

The imaginary mini-me devil appeared on my shoulder. "You are smoking hot," it said, and blew me a kiss.

The tag-along angel appeared on the opposite shoulder, frowning. "I don't even know who you are."

"Are you blind?" the devil sneered. "This is what she was meant to look like."

The angel shook its head. "No, it's too hard. It takes away from her Light."

"Who cares about Light? Isn't she allowed any 'me' time?"

"Be careful with your definition of 'me' time. This isn't *me* time, this is her trying to get even."

"You're so lame," the devil said.

"That's enough," I finally cried. "I'm going in."

I threw open the car door and jumped out. Who invented a conscience anyway?

CHAPTER 19



When I walked into the school, I kept my eyes forward and moved straight toward Christian's locker. I was vaguely aware of people's heads turning my direction. Someone even whistled, but I blocked it all, afraid any disruption in my concentration would cause me to chicken out.

I turned the corner, my strides long and confident. In the back of my mind the Rocky theme began to play: "Rising up, back on the street, Did my time, took my chances . . ." I felt like I was on my way to save the world. This was for all the girls who'd been rejected. Vengeance was mine!

"Llona?"

I came to a screeching halt at the sound of Christian's voice. I sucked in a deep breath and turned to face Christian who had somehow managed to get behind me.

"Hello, Christian," I said and flashed the most brilliant smile I could come up with.

He stared at me with a strange expression—not the expression I'd been expecting. It was several seconds before he said, "You look incredible."

I tried not to grin. "Thanks."

"But why the sudden change?" He tilted his head, like he was trying to figure me out. It made me squirm.

"I just felt like shedding my cocoon."

"Not buying it, not you." Then his eyebrows raised, and I wouldn't have been surprised to hear him say "eureka!", but instead, he said, "You're getting

back at me, aren't you?"

I heard the countdown of a bomb in my head. "What? No way."

Three. Two.

I looked around frantically for an escape route.

"Llona, I'm so sorry. I thought you said everything was cool. I didn't mean to hurt you."

One.

The bomb exploded. "You didn't hurt me. I got to go."

I hurried away before he could stop me. He called after me several times, but I ducked into the nearest bathroom, which just happened to be the men's room. One boy, a freshman who was relieving himself into a filthy urinal, shrieked like a girl while two other boys with dilated pupils whistled. I managed to squeak out a "sorry" before I speedily exited.

Once I was safely inside the girl's bathroom, and behind a locked stall, I slumped upon the toilet, head in hands. What a morning. It went from bad to stupidly worse. I should've known Christian would see right through my scheme.

"What are you doing?" a voice from above asked. May peered down at me from the top of the bathroom stall, grinning ear to ear.

"Trying to figure out why I'm such an idiot."

"Pshhh. You're hardly an idiot. You look amazing, by the way. Different, but amazing."

I rolled my eyes.

"What's with the new look?"

I shrugged. "Thought I'd try something new. I know. It was a stupid idea."

"Why stupid? I do it all the time." I heard May step off the toilet next to me. "You want to come out?"

I sighed and unlocked the door. "I'm going home at lunch to get out of this drag. I'll catch up with you later."

"Rock it, Llona!" she called after me.

I headed straight to first hour, head down, and dropped into a desk at the back of the room. I hoped to go unnoticed, but a guy whom I'd never talked to,

leaned over and asked me, "Are you new?"

I stared at him. Really?

A girl sitting in front of me turned around. "She's not new. That's Llona. She just looks different."

"Llona?" he said. "Oh! you're on the girls' basketball team, right?"

"That's me."

"Huh. I didn't recognize you with your hair down."

I kept waiting for him to turn around, but he continued to stare.

"Anything else?" I asked.

He blinked. "What? No."

When he finally faced forward, I slumped my head into my hands. How in the world did my mother do this? I hated this kind of attention.

The rest of the morning was much of the same with me causing a commotion. It wouldn't have been a big deal if I could've embraced my new look instead of being such a spaz about it, but I didn't know how to act. I felt like an ant in a beehive.

By the time the lunch bell rang, I was more than ready to go home. I headed straight for my car, clenching my keys tightly. I was vaguely aware of someone approaching me from the right. *Keep moving.*

"Wait up, Llona," a male voice called.

I kept walking but glanced over. Mike caught up to me.

I grimaced. "What do you want?"

Neither of us had spoken to each other since the encounter at Johnny's, and I was just fine with never speaking to him ever again. I didn't stop moving.

"I never had a chance to apologize for what I said to you."

I grunted. He was as transparent as a jellyfish.

"I mean it. I was very rude."

When I reached my car, I whirled around. "What do you want, Mike?"

He folded his arms to his chest, forcing his biceps up. "I've been feeling bad about what happened at Johnny's and wanted to make it up to you. Can I take you to dinner tonight?"

"Just because I look different doesn't mean my personality has changed." I

put the key into the lock.

The corner of his mouth turned up. "I don't care about your personality. You're hot."

I stared him straight into his eyes. "We will never hang out for any reason, got it?"

His arms dropped to his side, and his large beefy hands balled up. "Any girl here would die to date me."

"Then go find one of them and leave me alone." I opened my door, but he shoved it closed, whirled me around, and pressed himself against me. I brought my knee up between his legs hard enough to make him childless for life. He doubled over and stumbled to the ground, moaning.

"Is there a problem?" Christian called. He was jogging toward us, darting between parked cars.

"Not anymore." I opened the car door again and hopped in. Christian knocked on my window just as I brought the car's engine to life. Reluctantly, I rolled it down.

"What happened?"

"Go ask weenie over there." I nodded my head toward Mike who had managed to get back onto his feet and was hobbling across the parking lot.

"Did he hurt you?"

"Do I look like I'm the one who's hurt?"

Christian leaned his head against the top of my car and closed his eyes. I wanted to reach up and touch his face. He doesn't like you, I reminded myself. I remained face forward.

He took a deep breath before he said, "Llona, I really am sorry. It was mean of me to lead you on like that. I guess I let myself get caught up in the excitement and didn't stop to think what it could mean for the future."

"Not to be rude," I interrupted. "But I need to go."

"You really do look beautiful, but I thought that before the dramatic change." He moved away from the car.

I wanted to speed off in a blaze of glory, but I didn't. I was done playing games. "Thanks. And don't worry about anything. We're friends. I'm just being

insecure.”

“You don’t need to be.”

I shrugged. “See you later, okay?”

“Um,” Christian paused. He looked toward the school and then back to me. “You mind if I come with you?”

“Yes.”

“Right. See you when you get back then.”

I drove away from him, my fingers tight around the steering wheel. So many ups and downs this school year. So many changes. I still wasn’t convinced any of them were good. Thinking of Christian, my heart felt like it would shatter, and yet, thinking of loving him, touching him ... I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

At home, I changed into practical clothing, and tied my hair back, but I couldn’t bring myself to go back to school.

I made lunch and sat on my bed, eating and listening to music. My eyes wandered around the room, looking at nothing particular until I saw a yellow daisy painted onto an old shoebox sitting on a shelf in my closet. It had been months since I’d looked at it. Everything I had left of my mother existed in that tiny space. It made me sad. She’d had such a huge personality, so to have her whole life confined to an old shoebox was depressing.

I lifted the lid and thumbed through several pictures and letters my mother had written to my father. There was only one letter written to me. Very carefully, I unfolded it and remembered the day I’d found it.

It was the day of my mother’s funeral. I remembered it clearly because it was the first letter I had ever received. I discovered it resting in the arms of my stuffed teddy bear, which usually sat at the foot of my bed, but that day the bear had oddly been sitting on top of my pillow. The over-stuffed animal normally held a red heart pillow in its paws, but the heart was gone and in its place was the letter. I never stopped to think about the missing heart; I only wanted to know what the letter had said.

Secretly, I hoped the envelope was left by my mother. Maybe she knew she was going to die and had written me a farewell note, but even as I tore into the perfectly sealed envelope, I knew my hopes were in vain. My mother never

thought of the future. She lived every day to the fullest, enjoying life as if it were a never-ending rollercoaster—always going up and never coming down. But it had come down, crashing down, destroying herself and all those around her.

As I read the words, a new (foolish) hope entered my head. The fancy calligraphy words read:

LITTLE ONE,

You are so lovely, despite your fitful sleep as if the weight of the world is on your shoulders. But all this is about to change. I wish I could take you now, but you are too young and the time is not yet ripe. But I promise, I will come back and you will fear no longer!

Forever, your Angel

BACK THEN, I thought for sure my mother had written the letter. It was just the sort of thing she'd do: fake her own death only to follow it up with the biggest surprise she could ever give. I tried to logically, as logical as my little brain could reason, think of a way my mother could still be alive despite the fact I'd seen her dead body only hours before. Perhaps it was her evil identical twin we'd buried. Or maybe my mother had pretended to be dead in the polished, wood casket, and the strange way her head looked as if it had been pieced together had only been a really good makeup job. My mother did have the most interesting friends. They could've fixed anything with makeup.

But even the best Hollywood makeup job couldn't have fooled my father. No, my mother had died, and no matter how many fantastic stories I came up with, none of them seriously convinced me that she had survived.

So if my mother hadn't written the letter, then who? I never once thought it could be my father. It just didn't make sense. He was still alive and taking care of me. There was no reason for him to say he would come for me when he already had me. I never showed him the letter. He had enough to worry about, but as I grew older, I wondered if that had been a mistake. Regardless, it was too

late now. My father was dead, too, no doubt spending an eternity with my mother in some celestial tropical paradise.

When my father died, I had pulled out the letter again and read it several more times, even though I already had it memorized. I then slipped it into my wallet where it remained up until a few months ago. It had become so worn that I wasn't able to read a few of the faded words. Afraid it would get damaged even more, I'd returned the letter to the shoebox with the rest of my mother's things. It was one of my most cherished belongings as it gave me hope.

Because one day, someone was going to come for me, and I'd never be frightened again.

CHAPTER 20



*I*t was nearing Halloween. May found me eating lunch with Matt and Tracey in the cafeteria and said, “Tonight a bunch of us are going to a corn maze. Do you guys want to go?”

“Sounds fun.” I finished the last of my milk and set it down.

Matt studied me for a moment, making me shift my weight in the chair. “I’ll go.”

“Isn’t this beneath you, Matt?” Tracey asked. May and I stifled a laugh.

Matt narrowed his eyes. “No.”

“Good,” May said. “We’re meeting there at eight. It’s the one in Centerville.”

“I know where it’s at,” Tracey said. “Do you want me to pick you up, Llona?”

“Why don’t you pick us all up?” May suggested. “That way we can go together.”

“I’ll drive separately,” Matt said. “I live a ways out, but I’ll meet you there.”

A few minutes after eight, we pulled up next to Matt’s car. He jumped out to join us.

“Anyone else coming?” I asked May.

“Um, Adam, Christian, and whoever else they invited,” she said, averting her eyes.

I thought it strange Christian hadn’t said anything to me about it. We’d been friendly with each other the last couple of weeks, speaking nearly every day at school. But when we arrived that night and walked toward the entrance, I knew

exactly why Christian hadn't said anything. He stood awfully close to a girl I didn't recognize. Adam talked on the other side of him with a date of his own. Matt had beat us there and had already joined them.

"How's it going, guys?" May asked. She glanced over at me nervously, but I kept a smile plastered on my face and pretended the wound on my heart hadn't reopened.

I learned the girl's name was Haley. She and her friend, Anne, were from a neighboring school. Everyone began talking and laughing, about what I couldn't be sure. My main goal was to appear like nothing was wrong. Every once in a while I faked a laugh and avoided looking at Christian as much as possible. As long as I did that, I could possibly endure the rest of the night.

Besides, I had no right to be upset. Christian had been very clear about not wanting anything serious.

Tracey asked, "Should we do this in teams?"

I snapped back to the conversation.

"Teams are a great idea," I blurted. "Let's do boys against girls. This would be easier if I didn't have to see Christian with Haley the whole night.

May agreed. "Perfect!"

I still had yet to look at Christian, even though I could feel his eyes burrowing into me. I don't know if Matt noticed or not, but he stepped closer to me, blocking Christian's view.

Tracey began to hand out blue cards. "First team to get their card stamped at all stations wins. Meet back here when you're done."

I glanced down at my card, trying to figure out exactly what it was we had to do. Apparently, we had to find our way through the maze to various stations like "Demons Alley" and "Witches Way." With it being a full moon and me feeling as great as I did, this should be a breeze. Already, if I concentrated hard enough, I could sense the first station, as I could hear kids talking at it.

"You ready, ladies?" I asked Ann and Haley.

They looked at Adam and Christian hesitantly.

"You're not going to let them beat us, are you?" I prodded.

They shook their heads and smirked at the boys. "No way."

“I didn’t think so. Let’s go.”

We were each handed a flashlight and, after parting ways with the boys, who spoke very confidently about their abilities, we sprinted off first.

Cornstalks towered well over our heads blocking most of the moonlight, and cool air nipped at my bare arms. I glanced upward into the sky. It felt like it might snow soon.

May tugged on my shirt. “This is freaky!”

“Turn your flashlights on,” Tracey said.

Beams of light cast shadows all around us. I peeled May off me. “Better?”

“Not really. I had no idea how scary this would be!”

“We’ll be fine,” I assured. “In fact, if you guys want, if we jog through it and you follow me, I think I can guarantee us a victory. I sort of have a sixth sense about mazes.”

Haley laughed and motioned in front of us. “By all means, lead the way.”

I didn’t have to be told twice. I ran forward, then took a sharp left all while focusing my hearing on different voices within the maze. Within a matter of seconds, we were already at the first station.

“You weren’t kidding about mazes, were you?” Haley asked, out of breath.

I pressed a stamp into our card. “Ready for the next one?”

They all half-heartedly agreed. I took off again and in less than ten minutes we had four more stamps.

“How about we walk to the next one?” Tracey suggested, panting heavily.

Though I would’ve loved to run, I agreed. From the back of the group I heard May call, “Hey, Llona. Wait up! My flashlight’s broken.”

“You guys go ahead. Take your next two rights.” I walked back to where May was standing shaking her flashlight.

“It just stopped working,” she said. “Stupid plastic piece of crap.”

“Let me see it for a sec,” I said.

She handed me the flashlight, and I pretended to examine it while I secretly transferred my Light into it. After a few seconds, it lit up as if the batteries were brand new.

“What did you do?” May asked, surprised.

I grinned. “My secret touch.”

We continued to walk. Up ahead, I could hear the other girls talking about the guys. I quickly tuned out when I heard Christian’s name.

“So what’s up with Ann and Haley,” I asked. “Do you think Adam and Christian are in to them?”

“I doubt it. I’ve never seen them hang out before.” She paused. “At least I hope not. I wanted to ask Adam out to a movie next weekend.”

“May!” Tracey’s voice called from up ahead. “Come up here. Haley thinks she knows your cousin.”

“I’ll be right back,” May said and jogged off.

I called after her, “Tell them to take the next right, and then the next two lefts.”

She raised a hand in acknowledgment.

As soon as May disappeared around a bend, I turned off my flashlight and let the light of the moon guide me. My heartbeat slowed to a steady beat, and I inhaled a deep breath. There was something calming about walking by myself in the dark, especially under a full moon. It made me feel more connected to nature than any other time, and I hadn’t realized until now that I hadn’t done it in some time. Mostly because I’d promised Christian I would stay indoors at night on account of the recent murders.

Sudden movement from within the cornstalks made me jump. I stopped and peered into the darkness, straining my hearing. I couldn’t see anyone, but I could hear their footfalls crunching against fallen stalks of corn. Why weren’t they on a trail?

I was about to run to catch up to the others when the whole world around me began to spin and tip on its axis. I stumbled forward, nearly falling to my knees. My limbs grew heavy, and even my eyelids felt like closing. Somehow, though, I was still moving, completely unaware of which direction.

Echoing, as if far away, May called my name. I wanted to call out to her, but my body was no longer my own. I shuffled forward toward an unknown destination, and it was like I was watching myself from up above. I tried screaming at myself but no sound came out.

Abruptly, my body turned into the cornfield. The cool stalks brushed my face and arms, but I didn't bother pushing them away. I just continued to follow . . . follow what? What was I doing and where was I going? Wherever I was headed, the pull became stronger, stopping my ability to even think. My vision began to go next, the browns of the stalks deepened to a dull gray, followed by spots of black. And then there was darkness.

My eyes opened. I blinked at the cornstalks in front of me. What happened? I whirled around. I was still in the cornfield but was standing directly inside a clearing no more than ten feet in diameter. There were no paths leading to it, and I wasn't sure how I'd gotten there. In the distance, May still called for me. I was about to respond when my eyes focused on the only other object within the circle with me.

I stared at it for what seemed like an eternity, trying to determine exactly what was lying in a crumpled heap at my feet. Hands shaking, I turned on my flashlight and screamed.

CHAPTER 21



I couldn't stop the screams that tore from my lungs. They just kept coming in great waves of pure horror and absolute fear. Never before had I seen anything so cruel and sadistic. My screams finally stopped when May swung me around.

"Llona! What's wrong?" she cried.

I still couldn't believe what I'd seen and had to look one more time. Very slowly I turned around and shined the light. Lying in a pool of blood was a dead, white bunny. Its throat had been slit and carved into its side was my name written in blood.

"Who would do this?" May gasped. "It's horrible!"

"Llona!" Christian's voice called. I clearly detected a hint of panic. He was nearby and moving fast.

I grabbed May by the arms. "Please! I don't want him to see this."

I don't know why I didn't, there wasn't time to process my feeling, but I felt strongly he shouldn't.

"Please, May," I begged again.

Her eyes flashed to the rabbit and back to me. The conflict in her eyes marred her pretty face.

Footsteps grew closer, racing though the stalks. May lifted her hand and with the flick of her wrist, the bunny burst into flames, completely erasing my name.

Christian burst into the clearing. "Are you okay?"

He looked at me and then at the fire, which burned so hot and brightly, you

couldn't tell what lay crisping at the inferno's mouth.

"What happened?" he asked.

"A stupid prank," May answered for me. "Llona saw the fire through the corn and came to inspect it."

He turned to me, brows furrowed. "Why were you screaming?"

I crossed my arms to my chest to stop them from shaking. I didn't want to lie to him, but I couldn't tell him the truth either. He seemed to have this obsessive need to protect me, and I wanted him to want to be with me, and not because he thought I needed him.

"She fell," May blurted. I glanced at her gratefully. Christian was about to say something more, but the others joined us.

"What is this?" Tracey asked. She circled the fire.

May shrugged. "Someone else started it."

Matt walked over to me and placed both hands on my arms. The motion was firm and warm. "Why were you screaming?"

"Someone scared me," I whispered. The image of my blood-carved name into white fur appeared in my mind.

Christian narrowed his eyes. "I thought you fell."

"I scared her and she fell," May corrected.

I have to get out of here. I wasn't thinking clearly and was going to end up saying something I'd regret.

"So who won?" I said, changing the subject.

Adam pulled out his card. "We've got nine stamps. How many do you guys have?"

"We've got eleven," Tracey cheered.

Christian stared at me. "Let me see your card, Llona."

Without thinking, I moved to give it to him, but my hand shook so badly the card dropped to the ground.

"I'm taking you home." He reached to take my arm, but I stepped away.

"No. I'm fine. You guys owe us a dinner." I tried to make my voice sound as strong as possible, but it still cracked.

"Don't try and get out of this, Christian," May said, elbowing him. "We won

fair and square. Let's go. I'm starving."

May turned into the cornstalks, and I quickly followed. Everyone else followed, too, except for Christian. When he finally appeared back at the entrance, his lips were pursed tightly together, and the sides of his jaw muscles bulged big. Something had sure pissed him off.

I quickly turned to Matt. "Can I ride with you?"

"Sure. Where we going?"

"Let's go to that new restaurant on Fifth," Tracey said. "I hear it's really good."

"Cool. We'll meet you there," Adam agreed and motioned Christian forward.

Matt surprised me by taking my hand and guiding me to his car. The forwardness of the motion caught me off guard, and I almost pulled back, but then I caught Christian's eye. He looked even madder if that were possible. I hoped it was because he was jealous. Maybe he'd know how I felt seeing him with Haley.

Matt stopped me at the passenger door of his car and stared down at me with intense eyes. "I don't know exactly what happened out there, but I can tell you're lying. Crazy stuff has been happening in this town lately so you need to be careful. You never know who could be next."

Words caught in my throat.

He leaned toward me so close I could feel his warm breath on my lips. "You mean a lot to me, Llona."

His hand brushed against my hip as he opened the door. I couldn't get in fast enough. My whole body trembled, still with fear from earlier, but also something else. A kind of energy like I'd done something naughty or maybe was about to. That could be dangerous.

Matt slid into the driver seat and started the car. I glanced at him sideways, at his strong jaw line, his muscular chest. My heart began to pound. It's not like I was with Christian. I could do whatever I wanted.

Matt turned a corner and glanced at me, smiling seductively as if he could tell what I was thinking. It was the heated look in his eyes that doused the sparks inside me. No matter what my body felt, my heart belonged to Christian.

“Would you mind taking me home?” I didn’t feel like socializing anymore. The night had gotten too weird and, honestly, quite scary. I shook my head to erase the image of the burning bunny from my mind.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I just don’t feel very good.”

“You mean you don’t feel like socializing,” he said. “Or more specifically, being around Christian.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“I can help you forget him.” His tone had deepened, and though his words were vague, I knew exactly what he meant.

“Thanks, but I’ll be okay.” I turned my body slightly away from him.

“You can trust me, Llona. I wouldn’t ever hurt you.”

His words startled me, and I looked at him. “I don’t think that you would.”

“Good.” He faced forward and didn’t say anything the rest of the way to my house.

I might’ve tried to decipher what he had meant, but I was too busy thinking about the rabbit. Who would’ve done something like that?

“We’re here.”

I blinked and looked out the windshield.

Matt was parked in my driveway and staring at me expectantly. “Are you sure you’re okay? I could come inside with you.”

“I’m fine. Really. You should go join the others. I think Tracey would like that.”

He frowned. “Tracey?”

I winked and smiled, then closed the door. He may have not noticed Tracey’s interest in him, but maybe now he would.

As soon as Matt’s car was out of view, fear reclaimed me. I dashed inside, my eyes scanning the darkness as if it were a cobra ready to strike.

“You’re back early,” Jake said, surprising me. I expected him and Heidi to be gone somewhere as they rarely spent time at our house, but there she was sitting next to him with a big smile. It quickly disappeared the moment she saw my face.

Jake noticed too and hurried over to me. “What’s wrong?”

“Huh? Nothing. Why?” I darted into the kitchen and pretended to be looking for something to eat.

“You look scared.”

With my head in the fridge, I forced my face to relax and turned around. “I’m fine. We had a lot of fun. Those corn mazes are really cool. Have you ever been, Heidi?”

“Lots of times!” She began to tell Jake all about her childhood, and I could tell it wasn’t going to be a short conversation. Jake returned to the couch next to her, his eyes only on her. The two were so obviously in love, it made me sick. One of them could’ve said they had rabies, and the other would’ve thought that was the most adorable thing in the world.

I easily snuck back to my bedroom and shut the door. Finally, I could think without having to put on a “brave” face. What I’d seen tonight had been terrifying. Who could have done it and why, were the only words that raced through my mind.

Faster than any brain should work, images of everyone I knew flashed through my mind as potential suspects. I started with those who had been with me. I crossed off the girls from my list first. I just couldn’t see one slitting a bunny’s throat and then carving my name into it. I also didn’t think they would’ve had enough time to get it done and then still be able to find us in the maze.

That left the guys. There was just Adam, Christian, and Matt. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t see any of them doing something so horrible. Besides, what would be their motive? I thought of other people I knew. There were several others I could think of that didn’t like me, but enough to do something like this?

I sat up in bed. There was one person I thought could be ruthless enough and definitely think I deserved it. *Mike*. The more I thought about him, the more I convinced myself that it was him. He could’ve easily found out where we were going from Adam, and then planned the whole thing ahead of time.

My suspicions made sense except for one thing: the strange feeling that had

come over me and led me to the bunny. Maybe I'd sensed the dead animal. I still wasn't sure how Light worked exactly, and maybe because it was a full moon, I was more sensitive to death. I liked this theory best as it was much easier to accept than what the back of my mind kept trying to tell me.

I shook my head, dismissing the ugly thought again. It just wasn't possible. A Vyken wouldn't mess with me like that. He would just kill me, drain the Light from my blood, and be done with it. That's what I convinced myself, but the truth was I didn't know what a Vyken would do. My mother and father never told me, and if my aunt had said anything, I hadn't listened.

I made a mental note to call Sophie later and ask her about it. I dreaded the call but better to be safe than sorry.

Later that night, Jake knocked on my door. "Llona? You still awake?"

I mumbled something incoherent.

"May's here to see you."

I sat up. "What time is it?"

"Almost eleven."

I mentally turned on the lights. "Send her back. Thanks, Jake."

My room was a mess, and I looked like a train wreck, but I didn't care. I tried to smooth my hair back with little success.

May wrinkled her nose as she came into my room. "Sorry it's so late, but I wanted to check up on you."

I sighed. "I'm seriously fine. I just didn't feel like going to dinner."

"I don't blame you." She shoved off dirty clothes from my vanity chair and sat down. "And to be honest, that's the real reason I came over. We need to talk about happened in the maze."

"What do you mean?"

May scowled. "Come on. You saw what I did."

Stunned, I dropped my gaze to the bedspread and twisted a thread through my fingers. I wasn't expecting this. "We don't have to talk about it."

"But I want to. I have no one else, and for some reason I trust you. Probably because I know you're different, too."

I shook my head and opened my mouth to deny it, but she interrupted me.

“Can we please just be honest with each other?”

I sighed. “Listen, May, I don’t care what you can do. So you’re different. We’re different, but I think it’s better if we don’t talk about it.”

“Why?”

“To keep us safe.”

“But what about what happened out there? Someone’s messing with you, and I think it’s because of what you can do.”

“You think someone’s messing with me because I can’t cut my hair?”

May laughed, half-heartedly. “Do you really think I’m that dumb? There’s a lot more to you than just invincible hair.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

She let out an exaggerated sigh. “Really? So you’re saying you can’t manipulate light?”

I wrung my hands together. “What makes you think that?”

“I wasn’t sure at first.” She leaned back. “I mean I definitely had my suspicions. Lights do crazy things when you’re around, like the blackout at the school assembly and the way you acted afterwards. There were other signs too, but after the corn maze I knew for sure.”

“What happened at the corn maze?”

“I took the batteries out of the flashlight, yet you still made it work.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Maybe you just thought you took them out.”

“We’re both different, Llona, and the sooner you admit it, the sooner I can feel a whole lot better about myself.”

“How’s that?”

“My whole life I’ve felt out of place, like I don’t belong anywhere. And because of my scary ability, I’ve never allowed myself to get close to anyone. I was afraid they would see what a freak I was, but now that we’re friends, I finally feel like I’m not so different. Because if there’s you and me, then there’s got to be others, too.”

“When did you first find out about your ability?”

May twisted her hair between her fingers. “A few years ago. It was really scary at first because I couldn’t control it. Little fires would appear out of

nowhere. I could just be looking at a wall and all of a sudden it would burst into flames. For the longest time, I didn't believe it was me doing it."

"What did your mom say?"

"She thought I was a pyromaniac. For almost a year, she had me going to a shrink. It was horrible. Eventually, I was able to get it under control, mostly anyway, and just in time too. She almost sent me to an institution."

"Where does your fire ability come from?"

"I have no idea, and I have no one to ask. I almost wonder if it came from my real parents, but I have no way of finding them to ask. Maybe when I'm older ..." her voice trailed off.

"I'm really sorry. I can't imagine not knowing where it came from. What a trip."

"So what about you?"

I swallowed hard. I couldn't believe I was about to tell someone my secret. "I know this is going to sound crazy—"

"Highly unlikely."

"—but I can only explain it by starting with a story because that's how it was told to me." I tried to think of a way to tell my tale without it sounding weirder than it was.

"Apparently, thousands of years ago, Light used to be an actual personage, sort of like us. The world was a good place then. There was no evil and everyone was happy. But then some Prince killed his brother and the forbidden darkness entered his heart which basically changed him into a monster. He spread this dark poison to others and soon they were hunting Light, the only beings who could destroy them. These monsters became known as Vykens. To protect themselves, Light hid within the female DNA. We call ourselves Auras. As for the freaky hair, I think it's just a weird side effect or something."

May's eyes were big. "And Vykens?"

"They're still out there somewhere. The real crappy part of it is they've figured out that if they drink the blood of an Aura, then they are no longer confined to the night."

"Wait a minute. So Vykens are like vampires?"

“No, vampires are like Vyken. The myth came from them.”

“Can they do the same things as vampires?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I know they’re strong, and incredibly fast, but they don’t drink just anyone’s blood. I guess they could, but it would be pointless. Only an Aura’s blood gives them power.”

“Don’t they need blood to survive?”

“From what I understand, they don’t even need to eat.”

“So they’re like a demon in a human shell,” May whispered.

We both shivered.

May shook her hands as if to rid herself of the blanket of creepiness that had just spread across the room. “Okay, I am totally freaked out now.”

“So you believe me?”

“Of course. I wish I knew where my ability came from. I’m probably possessed or something.”

I laughed. “Not even close.”

May crossed the room to me and sat down. “I guess that explains why you isolate yourself so much.” She paused. “This may be too personal, but can I ask how your mother died? Was it a Vyken?”

I nodded.

“What about your father?”

“After my mother died, he became obsessed with trying to find her killer. He barely ate or slept. One night, while he was away, he was hit by a drunk driver and killed.” Tears filled my eyes. I’d never spoken of this to anyone before. “The thing that really sucked was, before he left that night, I never told him goodbye. I was mad at him for leaving again so I threw a dumb temper tantrum. I’ve never forgiven myself for being so stupid.”

May’s arm came around me. “There’s no way you could’ve known.”

I wiped at my eyes, suddenly feeling very silly for crying in front of May. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Stop that. It is a big deal. You don’t need to hold everything in all of the time.”

I gave her a weak smile. “So my secret’s out.”

“Mine too.”

“You can’t tell anyone, May.”

“And you can’t tell anyone either.”

“Deal.” I held out my hand.

“Deal.”

After shaking hands, May asked, “You coming to school tomorrow?”

“I don’t know.”

I walked to the window and stared up into the sky. The full moon would be gone after tonight. I always dreaded the day after. It’s when I felt the weakest.

“Does your ability have anything to do with the fact that you sometimes don’t feel good?”

“Sort of but it has more to do with the moon. When it’s gone I can’t feel Light anymore. All my energy is zapped. You don’t know how embarrassing it can be to fall asleep in the middle of class.”

“That sucks. Well, I hope you come. I feel better when you’re there.”

I turned around. “I’ll try.”

“Good, because we need to figure out if what happened with the rabbit was just a cruel prank or if it’s something more serious.”

“What if it is?” I whispered.

We shared a long, weighted glance, neither of us willing to answer the question, because if it was more serious, I’d be dead soon.

CHAPTER 22



I was studying math in the kitchen while Jake watched TV in the living room, when his cell phone rang. By the tone of his voice, it sounded like he was talking to someone from work so I tuned him out.

Math and even some of my other classes had grown increasingly difficult since the corn maze incident. Both May and I had kept our eyes open for anyone acting strange, especially Mike. I'd convinced May and even myself a little that it had been him who had tried to scare me, but he remained his obnoxious normal self, throwing out insults whenever we crossed paths. He didn't act like he had done anything as sadistic as killing a rabbit.

Christian, however, was acting strange. I would catch him lurking behind corners and staring at me from a distance. He didn't try talking to me, and I didn't try talking to him. I would've been fine with this arrangement if it hadn't been for all his stalker-like movements. I thought I was exaggerating them until both May and Tracey commented on his actions in the lunchroom. I tried not to notice until, finally, I didn't. As long as I wasn't looking for him or thinking about him, I was fine. It was as if I'd never liked him to begin with—almost.

I returned to solving a complex math problem, when I heard Jake say, "Sure, she's right here. One sec."

I looked up, confused.

Jake covered the telephone's receiver and whispered, "It's Sophie. She wants to talk to you."

I had planned on talking to her tomorrow, but she must've read my mind

somehow. I took the phone from Jake. "Hi, Aunt Sophie. How are you?"

"I'm good, Llona. How are you doing?"

I mostly told the truth. "Great. This has been one of my best years. I really like it here."

"That's nice."

"How's Lucent Academy?" I asked.

"We've added more classes I think you would really enjoy. Maybe you could join us when you graduate?"

I groaned internally. Not this conversation again. Sophie had been trying to get me to go to her clannish school since I was a freshman. The idea of being in a school with others like me sounded about as fun as walking on hot coals. "Probably not. I want to go to college out here somewhere."

"Oh really? And what do you want to major in?"

"I haven't gotten that far, but I was thinking maybe education, a PE teacher maybe."

She paused. "I'm not sure that would be appropriate, Llona."

"And why's that?"

"Because you would be teaching kids to be competitive."

"So?"

"You're teaching kids to be better than others. We are all equal, Llona. Light does not divide."

"You think we're all equal? When is the last time you lived in the real world, Aunt Sophie? The only way we are all equal is we are all human. Other than that we are very different. Some of us are lazy, others hard working. Some of us are good at sports, while others of us are really smart. Some are loud, some quiet, some fast, some slow. We are all different in amazing ways, and I want to help kids discover their unique abilities."

"That's very noble of you, but that's not your job."

"Then what is?"

She sighed long and deep. "I didn't call to argue."

"Then why did you call?"

"I want to come visit you for Thanksgiving. Jake said I had to ask you."

It was my turn to pause. This is not what I had expected. Sophie had only come to visit me once since my mother's death, and that had been when my father died.

"Why?"

"I think we have a lot to talk about. I'm sure you've experienced some strange things since you've moved further into your teenage years. I want to help you better understand what's going on."

I wanted to eagerly agree, but I was still mad. "Do you really think that's necessary?"

"Yes, I do."

"Fine."

"Wonderful. I'll be there in a few weeks. I'll see you soon." She hung up, leaving me staring into the receiver.

"What did she say?" Jake asked.

"She's coming for Thanksgiving."

Jake sat up. "You said yes?"

I shrugged.

"Just great. Just what I need."

Jake was still mumbling under his breath even after I left the room. Apparently, he felt the same way about her as I did. It wasn't that she was deliberately mean or anything, she just had this super ability to make you feel like you couldn't do anything right. She had Light in her, too, so you'd think she'd make you feel all warm and fuzzy like my mother had, but not her. She used Light to tell the truth exactly how she saw it. She had no desire to try and understand how Light could comfort others. Light was truth and should only be used for that, she'd always said. This is where she and my mother always disagreed.

* * *

IT WAS the day before Thanksgiving. Both Jake and I sat in the living room watching TV, but it was turned too low to hear. Neither of us noticed because we

were too busy watching the clock. In one hour we were supposed to pick up my aunt at the airport.

The last couple of weeks had flown by no matter how hard I tried to slow them down. I dreaded the day of my aunt's arrival more than the time I had to give a speech in front of the school board last year for missing too many school days. I'd been so worried about it that I'd barely noticed Christian or anyone else for that matter.

"You ready for this?" Jake asked, breaking the silence.

"About as ready as a cow is before it's branded."

The knot in his throat bobbed up and down. "I know the feeling."

"How's Heidi?" I asked to break the tension.

"I talked to her last night. She's having fun visiting her family."

"So she likes California?"

"Yup."

And then we were silent again. Jake's knee bounced up and down. He jumped to his feet. "I can't just wait here. Let's get something to eat."

"Right behind you."

I was putting my coat on when Jake opened the front door and made a choking sound, almost like a gasp, but more like the sound a chicken might make right before its head is cut off.

"Surprise!" a woman's voice said.

I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't help myself. Very slowly, I peeked onto our porch. Walking up the stairs, in what looked like a hundred pounds of flowing material, was my Aunt Sophie.

"I thought we were picking you up at the airport," Jake stuttered.

"You were, but I love to surprise people." She brushed by Jake and moved into the living room. "Llona! Look how you've grown."

I looked down at myself.

She threw her arms around me. "You are the spitting image of your mother, with your father's nose, of course."

I frowned, unsure if that was a good or bad thing. Very lightly, I returned the hug. She was almost the same as I remembered except older. Her long, wavy

brown hair smelled of cinnamon and nutmeg, and her face was still covered in way too much white powder.

Sophie was my mother's older sister by twelve years. There was such an age difference that they had very little in common. Where my mother was sensitive, full of life, and always willing to help others, Sophie tended to be blunt, reserved, and highly suspicious of others to the point where she seemed paranoid.

"It's good to see you, Aunt Sophie," I said.

"Please, call me Sophie." She tossed her bag onto the couch, removed her coat and sucked in a deep breath while looking around the house, her mouth turned down.

Jake closed the door.

"So this is where you've chosen to live?" It wasn't really a question but more of a statement. Her bright red lips tightened to match the lines on her white forehead.

"Llona chose it," Jake blurted.

I glared at him.

"Is that true, Llona?"

"I like this place. It's right next to a mountain."

"But with all the money your parents left you, couldn't you have found a nicer place?"

"I don't want a nicer place."

Sophie leaned toward me and whispered, "Has Jake been spending your money?"

"I can hear you," Jake said, as he walked into the kitchen.

"Sophie," I emphasized her name. "I like it here. I don't need anything big or fancy. Simple and plain is what I like."

She straightened. "Odd for a daughter of my sister. She never liked to keep Light hidden."

At the mention of Light, Jake said, "I have to go to the store. I'll leave you two alone."

"No," I blurted. "Stay. She just got here."

Sophie placed her bony hand on my arm. “Actually, I think that’s a good idea. It will give us some time to talk about things he wouldn’t understand.”

Sophie gracefully lowered onto the couch. It took several seconds for all the rainbow-colored material to settle against her thin frame. There was so much of it that I couldn’t tell if she was wearing a dress, or some sort of blouse/skirt combo.

Jake grabbed the car keys off the counter. “Right. Well, you girls have fun. See you, Tink.” He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “she’s your problem now.”

With Jake gone, I felt exposed. Sophie’s eyes were examining me up and down. I tried to think of something to say, but my mind drew a blank.

“You look so much like your mother,” Sophie said again.

I sat down next to her. “That’s what I hear.”

“You’re a little thin though. Are you eating enough?”

“Put food in front of me and I’ll eat.” I glanced up at the clock. This was going to be a long day.

“Do you have friends at school?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Sophie brushed hair away from her face. “You didn’t have any friends last year or any other year for that matter.”

“How would you know?”

“I make it a point to check up on you.”

I clenched my fist beneath a pillow on my lap and made a mental note to get after Jake later. He shouldn’t be telling Sophie anything. “I have friends.”

Sophie flicked her wrist as if swatting at a fly. “Maybe. But it seems that ever since your father died you’ve withdrawn yourself. It’s not healthy.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course I do, dear. I saw you at your father’s funeral. That was the day your wall came up. I saw it in your eyes.”

“This is not a conversation I want to have.”

“I know you don’t, but it’s time. It’s not safe for you out here without proper training.”

“I’ve made it this far, haven’t I?”

“Pure luck, but something tells me it won’t last.”

I swallowed hard, remembering the dead bunny and the murders.

Sophie shifted her position more toward me. “Vykens are always watching and waiting for one of us to make a mistake. I know you think you’ve been careful moving around as much as you have, and that’s probably what has kept you alive this long, but it’s been almost a year-and-a-half and you’re still here. It’s not safe for you anymore.”

“How do you know?” I wouldn’t admit she might be right.

She answered my question with a question. “Do you feel safe?”

I hesitated. “I like it here. For the first time since my dad died, I feel normal. I have friends, I’m in a book club, I’m on the basketball team—”

Sophie scowled. “You know how we feel about competitive sports.”

“But that’s just dumb. I’m not trying to be better than anyone. I’m just trying to work off Light’s energy. Sports help me do that. Plus, they make me feel good about myself.”

“That’s where we can help. Don’t you see? You don’t know how to control the energy yet, but you can learn this at Lucent and learn how important you are.”

I shook my head. “Not now. Maybe after I graduate.”

“What if that’s too late? You know your mother’s killer was never found. It could be stalking you right now.”

“Stalking?”

Sophie nodded. “Yes, stalking. That’s what Vykens do. It’s never a quick kill for them, especially the ones who have tasted Light and are no longer confined to the darkness. There’s a very good chance your mother’s killer can still walk in the day, and if he can, you’d never know who it was.”

“What do you mean *still* walk in the day? I thought once they tasted Light, they can always be out in the day.”

“That’s what we thought too, but years ago we found out the Light they steal

is eventually snuffed out by their darkness and the Vykens have to find someone new to feed on. If the Vyken who killed your mother knew she had a daughter, then it would be looking for you. You've made yourself an easy target, Llona."

"Would I recognize a Vyken if I saw one?"

"Unfortunately, no. They are masters of deception. That's why we fall victim to them so easily. We are, by nature, very trusting. It's what happened to your mother. The Vyken who killed your mother was your father's closest friend. He preyed upon your family for over a year before he finally took your mother's life. She trusted him completely."

My breathing hitched. "It was a friend?"

She nodded grimly. "I tried to warn your parents. I told them they shouldn't allow others into their lives so completely, but your mother wouldn't listen. I'm afraid to say that's what caused the rift between us. She thought I was being paranoid." Sophie's voice cracked. "I should've made her listen."

The sudden rush of emotion from Sophie, and the discovery of my mother's killer was not something I wanted to think about. At least not in front of Sophie. I cleared my throat and changed the subject. "So if there was a Vyken after me, most likely it would be an older male correct?"

Sophie sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "Not necessarily. Vykens have also learned to manipulate Light in ways Auras have never learned. They use it to mask their appearance. For all you know, it could be your best friend at school."

"That's impossible."

"Why?"

"Because I would sense it."

"How?"

I squirmed in my seat. "I don't know. I just would."

"Are you not listening? I admit you've done remarkably well with so little knowledge, but don't let it go to your head. You are not invincible. It was that attitude that cost your mother her life."

"So you're saying I can't have friends?"

"Not at all, but you have to choose the right ones: those who are like you. At Lucent, there are girls your age who are going through the same things you are."

“I doubt that,” I mumbled.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.” Sophie was the last person I wanted to share my woes with. “How are we supposed to help others if we are locked away in some school?”

“Right now we are just trying to preserve our kind. And you’re not locked away. The girls can come and go as they please.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she interrupted me. “We want our kind to help humanity, but not until they are properly trained. Eventually, you’ll be placed back into society where you can help the most.”

“Like serving on the boards of charities?” I mocked.

From what my father had told me, Auras were rarely allowed to have hands-on experience helping others. I’d never heard of an Aura who physically worked in a soup kitchen, but I’d heard of plenty who had established one. I remember my mom saying once (not too happily either) that our safety had become more important than our purpose.

“Exactly. You can still help without getting too close to others.” Sophie slapped the arm of the couch making me jump. “Enough serious talk. I’m only here for a couple of days. Do you want to do something fun?”

“Like what?” I didn’t think it was possible for her to have fun.

“First, let me ask you a question. What can you do with Light?”

“You mean how can I use it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I can turn lights on and off by just thinking about it. Once I made an entire gymnasium black out.” I waited for my Aunt’s eyes to widen with surprise, but she just stared. “And I can calm people down by touching them.”

“Like your mother.”

“I guess. And I think I’m really good at reading people, but I’m not sure if that’s Light or just me.”

“Could be a little of both. Anything else?”

“I have great hearing.”

For some reason this surprised her. “Really? How long have you had this gift?”

“For as long as I can remember.”

She stared right through me and whispered, “Mark.”

“What about my Dad?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to discuss your father right now. What else can you do?”

“Well, on full moons I’m really fast and I have great reflexes. I think I might be a little stronger too.” I almost told her about the balls of light I had started to create but stopped myself. She wouldn’t like the reason why I was making them. “What’s up with the full moon anyway?”

“It’s when the sun’s reflective light is at its strongest. This reflection makes it easier for you to take advantage of Light’s powers.”

“Are you saying I could have Light’s energy all of the time?”

She leaned toward me. “Absolutely. You just have to know how to call upon it. That’s why you need to come to Lucent. We can teach you all of this.” She paused. “But I’m getting distracted. We wanted to have fun. Let me show you what else Light can do.”

“Really?”

She stood and flashed a mischievous grin. “You might want to put on something warm.”

CHAPTER 23



Following Sophie's directions, I drove up the canyon as far as Jake's little car could go before the snow became too deep. Several recent storms had dumped snow on us the last several days. Only an inch or so remained in the valley but in the mountains? It was here to stay for several months, at least.

After parking off the side of the road, we traveled by foot into the white forest. It didn't seem like she was guiding me any particular direction. She'd stop frequently, look left to right, and then keep walking. I just wished she'd make up her mind because I was freezing.

The snow was at least a couple feet thick and every time I took a step, I broke through its hard crust and sunk low. Sophie, however, had no difficulties walking across its thin icy layer even though she had to have been at least twenty pounds heavier than me. Plus, she wore a heavy-looking white coat that hung well below her waist. Beneath it, her wispy, layered skirt floated behind her like a tailgating ghost.

I dropped to my bum and called, "Can we take a break?"

She turned around and gasped. "What are you doing sitting in the snow?"

"Apparently, I have elephant legs! I can't walk in this stuff."

I moved out of the hole and took another step, but once again the top layer couldn't support my weight, and I fell through.

Sophie laughed and walked back to me.

"How do you do that?" I asked, keeping a keen eye on her movements.

“Do what?”

“Not break through the snow. You walk on it like you’re a mouse.”

She tilted her head and smiled. “There is so much for you to learn. I’m using Light, dear.”

She reached a hand toward me. I grabbed onto it and let her pull me up. “How?”

“The best way to explain it,” she thought for a moment, “is it’s like holding your breath only you can breathe.”

“That’s the best way to explain it? Hold your breath but still breathe? Sounds like a low-budget ninja film: ‘go through the door that is not a door!’”

She wasn’t amused. “I’m trying to help.”

I mumbled an apology.

She inhaled a breath and on her exhale said, “Try and imagine there is a balloon inside you making you weightless.”

“Can I fly?”

She shook her head. “You’re still bound by the laws of gravity. Light is only making you lighter, almost as if you’re in water. Now close your eyes and call upon Light. Imagine it expanding inside you.”

“Seriously?”

“How else are you going to learn?”

“Fine.” I closed my eyes and concentrated. I did as she asked and pictured a balloon, but after a minute I felt like I was burning up. I opened my eyes and gasped for air.

Sophie laughed. “That’s one way of doing it.”

I lowered my gaze. All around me the snow had melted. “Not quite what you had in mind?”

“Not really but you’re learning. You just need to practice.” Sophie glanced around. “I guess we can stop here, but we need to wait a little longer for the sun to go down.”

“Why?”

“What I’m going to show you is much more impressive when it’s dark.” Sophie stepped into my hole with me. In seconds, she had warmed the area until

the ground was dry. "We can sit here and wait."

We sat in silence for several minutes, listening to winter's stillness, as the sun dipped behind the tops of the trees. My thoughts drifted to May and how difficult it would be to not know where your ability came from. I was about to ask Sophie but stopped. May should be the one asking, not me.

Sophie caught my eye. "What are you thinking about?"

"Huh? Oh nothing."

"You can tell me."

I glanced around while trying to think of something to say. "Just how strange it is to be here with you."

"We should've been doing things like this all along."

"Why?"

"You are so far behind other Auras. Normally it's the mothers who teach their daughters about Light, but where your mother isn't around, it should've been me."

"It's not a big deal."

"Llona," Sophie hesitated. "I need to ask your forgiveness."

"For what?" This had to be a first.

"Your mother's death was very hard on me," she explained. "In a lot of ways, I blamed myself. After she died, I knew I'd have to be the one to teach you about Light, but every time I saw you, I saw your mother's eyes staring back at me. It was just too difficult. I know that was selfish of me and not fair to you. You had already lost so much and here I was, not even able to be in the same room with you."

I flinched and glanced away. "That's harsh."

"I know. That's why I must beg your forgiveness. I was a coward. I see that now. I promise from here on out I will be there for you like I should've been all these years. Can you ever forgive me?"

Hurt rooted itself inside me. Why was it that everyone acted like my parent's death was the most devastating thing for them? Did anyone stop to consider how their death might affect their actual child? I wanted to get upset and ask her why she waited so long to finally "confess" but thought better of it.

Choosing to take the high road, even though I felt like storming away, I said, “It’s fine. It’s in the past.”

“Really? I’m so glad you said that. I feel much better now.” She reached over and gave me a hug. I forced myself to return it even though I was repulsed by her sudden affection.

Sophie stared up into the sky. “Just a little longer.”

While we waited, she told me more about Lucent Academy. It didn’t sound too bad of a place, but I still didn’t want to go there. I was so close to graduating, then the world would open up to me.

Sophie ended her sentence. “I think it’s dark enough now. Wait here.”

Finally! With the sun gone, nighttime had bathed us in darkness and wrapped me in a cold blanket. And although I had dressed warm, I still had to use my ability to heat my body and keep the freezing temperatures at bay.

Sophie stood and walked several feet away to the middle of a small clearing and bowed her head as if praying—concentrating was more like it. In a matter of seconds, bright lights ignited all around us. Several of them moved in slow patterns but most of the lights remained still. Some were bigger while others burst from the seams in the trees or glowed from beneath the snow.

With the stars above me, I felt like I was in the middle of space. “What is this?”

“I’ve lit up the life forces of all the creatures around us: bugs, squirrels, spiders—you name it. Most are immobile due to the cold, so you can only imagine how much more impressive this would be in warmer weather.”

“It’s amazing. I had no idea there were so many living things around us.” I stared in wonderment, my eyes big and mouth open.

“Most of us are ignorant to life. If one can become aware of the beings around us, they have a much better chance of fulfilling their destiny.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The future is never ours alone. Without others, our destiny could never be fulfilled. Could you imagine Superman trying to fulfill his purpose if there weren’t people to save? He could never do it. And so must we be aware of those around us and never shut the door on opportunities that help us to grow and

learn, no matter how difficult they seem. Only by doing this will we be able to live life to our full potential.”

I was speechless, to the point where my eyes filled with tears. Sophie’s words, combined with life’s glow against the darkness of the night, hit me hard. I’d missed out on many experiences simply because I chose to shut myself off from the world. I’d gotten better, thanks to Christian and May, but I was still holding back.

“Llona? Are you all right?”

“Huh?” I blinked. A single tear fell from my eye. I quickly cleared my throat. “I’m fine. This is just so impressive.”

“It’s one of many beautiful things you can do with your gift if you will allow yourself to be taught.”

Before I could think of how my next words might be received, I said, “Can we use Light as a weapon?”

The shock and repulsion on Sophie’s face felt like a slap. “Light should never be used as a weapon. It is only to be used to beautify, uplift, and to comfort. Your ignorance has given you a lack of respect for Light and its purpose.”

“I was just asking,” I mumbled.

Sophie’s nostrils flared, and as her brows drew together in frustration, the lights around us fizzled out. “Come on. Let’s get home.”

I followed her back to the car in silence. I knew she was majorly disappointed in me, but that only made me madder, especially after her apology. How was I supposed to know the exact rules and etiquette of Light?

When we returned to the house, Jake was waiting for us with pizza. Gratefully, Sophie acted like nothing had happened, and other than a few comments about Jake’s appearance, she was actually pretty decent. We ate dinner and played games until midnight before we finally called it quits.

The next day, Jake and I didn’t break from our normal Thanksgiving tradition, much to Sophie’s dismay. We left for the local all-you-can-eat buffet restaurant at eleven and didn’t return until two. Sophie looked bored the entire time, but Jake and I had a lot of fun trying to see who could eat the most. We

agreed I won, but only because I had avoided drinking anything. Jake had filled himself with milk way too early.

When we returned home, I phoned May and told her about my aunt. “Do you want me to ask her about your ability? She might know something.”

I could practically hear May thinking on the other end. “Let me do some digging first, see what I can find. If I come up empty, then I’ll ask her next time you talk to her. Did you tell her about me?”

“Not at all. I’ll let you do that when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Llona.”

I ended the call and walked back to the living room just in time to see Sophie putting on her coat. “Are you leaving already?”

“I’m afraid it’s that time. Will you please seriously consider coming to Lucent when you graduate?”

“I will, I promise.”

“Good. Now give me a hug. I don’t know when I’ll be able to visit again.”

I obeyed and embraced her lightly. Maybe in time we could grow closer. “It was good to see you.”

“You too.” She released me and turned to Jake who was eating in the kitchen. “You’re doing a great job. I mean it. Thank you for everything.”

Shocked, Jake quickly wiped milk from his upper lip. “No big deal. Have a safe trip. Are you sure you don’t want a ride to the airport?”

She shook her head. “I already have someone waiting for me.”

“Talk to you soon,” I said as she opened the door.

She froze and turned around. “One last thing. Don’t forget for a single second that you are safe out here on your own. Death could be just around the corner.”

CHAPTER 24



Monday morning I found Christian waiting for me at my locker. “How was your Thanksgiving?” he asked.

I thought of Sophie’s last words to me, how they’d filled me with dread the rest of the weekend. But maybe that had been her goal all along. Scare me enough that I go running to Lucent Academy. “Full of giving thanks. Yours?”

“Fine.”

I removed the books from my bag while trying not to look at him. His presence still pained my heart.

Christian seemed to be struggling to say something and kept shifting his weight back and forth.

Just before I had to go, he blurted, “Sorry we haven’t really talked lately. I’ve been pretty busy with football.”

“No problem.” I closed my locker. “I’ve been busy, too.”

“Are you going to the pep rally on Friday?”

“Out at Deer Lake?” I walked toward class.

Christian followed. “Yup. At eight.”

I swung my backpack over my shoulder. “I didn’t go last year, but I heard it was fun.”

“So are you going to go?” he pressed.

“Not sure.”

“It’s supposed to be really cold, possibly even snow again. I doubt a lot of people will be there.”

I was getting the distinct impression he didn't want me to come. "Are you going?"

"Coach is making us. It'll probably be lame though."

"Maybe I'll come to find out."

Christian's left eye twitched. "I'd stay home if I were you. I'll tell you all about how boring it is after. Maybe I could take you out to dinner on Saturday to fill you in?"

This was getting annoying. "We'll see. I have to go to class."

I walked off before he could stop me, refusing to think about the odd interaction, especially since we hadn't talked to each other in a long time. It was just Christian being Christian.

I'd been looking forward to trig class all weekend. At first it was unsettling going to Mr. Steele's class with Matt so close, but during the last several weeks, I managed to focus only on my teacher. His class was the one place where all my worries seemed to go away. And it wasn't because Mr. Steele treated me differently than the others. I didn't think anyway. He just had this way about him that put me at ease.

Today was no different.

The moment I stepped foot into the room, Mr. Steele became my focus. He greeted me warmly, his arm brushing past mine as he walked toward the front of the classroom. I concentrated on that brief contact, wishing it had been longer. While he spoke, I watched the way his body moved, the way words fell from his perfectly shaped lips and how his intense eyes would sometimes meet mine and pause.

Before I knew it, the bell rang.

Matt appeared in front of me, making me catch my breath. His eyes roamed my face before he asked, "Are you going to the pep rally this weekend?"

I frowned. That's twice now. To see how differently his answer would be from Christian's, I said, "Thinking about it. Should I?"

"Hell, yes. It's going to be awesome. I could even take you if you'd like."

I gathered my belongings. "Possibly. I'll let you know."

"I hope you do."

He stretched his hand forward like he was going to touch me or something but Mr. Steele interrupted him from the next row of desks over. “I need a moment with Llona, Matt. Could you give us a few minutes?”

“Sure thing.” Matt didn’t look at me as he exited the room.

My pulse began to race, and I licked my lips as I watched Mr. Steele sit on top of the desk next to me. I thought he caught the motion of my tongue, but he quickly looked up at me, meeting my eyes.

“How are things going?” he asked.

“They’re fine.”

“I know we spoke a few months back about your grade—“

“Am I failing again?”

“Not quite, but your grade has taken another turn for the worse. I’m worried about you, especially with what happened several weeks ago.”

“I’ll try harder.”

“You live with your uncle, right?”

The padding of his thumb ran across the smooth surface of several papers in his hand. I tried not to think about what that thumb would feel like sweeping across my lips, moving inside my mouth ...

“Llona?”

I startled. “Yes. My uncle. I’m with him. I mean, I live with him.”

I could feel heat rise in my cheeks.

“Until you graduate?”

“Yes, even though I turn eighteen in a few weeks.” I really wanted him to know I’d be an official adult soon.

“I’m glad you won’t be the only adult around.” He handed me the stack of papers. “Maybe your uncle can help you with all these extra credit assignments because they are the only thing that’s going to keep you from failing my class. You don’t have much time left before the end of the semester so work quickly.”

I nodded my head and stared down at the papers. There must’ve been at least twenty of them.

He stood and bent over, his mouth by my ear. “If you ever need to talk, I’m here. Life can be hard sometimes, even scary. Know that you’re not alone.”

Straightening, he squeezed my shoulder gently and walked away.

I sat there, stunned, my skin buzzing where he'd touched me.

"What are you still doing in here?" a familiar voice asked.

I glanced toward the entrance to the room.

May stood next to the door, her gaze darting from me to behind her. "It doesn't matter. We need to talk."

She came into the room and closed the door behind her.

"Can we do this over lunch?" I asked and began to gather my belongings. Mr. Steele probably said things like that to all his failing students. It didn't mean anything.

"No. It can't wait."

I lowered my backpack and looked up at her. May's eyes were full of worry, and she was scratching at her arm. "What's wrong?"

May dropped into a desk, the same one Mr. Steele had been sitting on, and drew in a long breath. "The last few weeks, Christian has been harassing me about that night at the maze."

My heart skipped a beat. "He has? Why?"

"I guess after we left, he inspected the area and found some bones in the remains of the fire. He said he knew we were lying. Just about every day he's been bugging me and so, when he came to my house yesterday—"

"On Sunday?"

"Yeah. Anyway, I guess I just cracked. He was really putting on the pressure. I didn't know what to do."

"So you told him?"

"All I told him was that someone played a prank on you and shaved your name into a dead bunny."

"How did you explain the fire?"

"I said I dropped a match on it. Of course he wanted to know why I'd done that, and I just told him you were embarrassed and didn't want anyone to see it."

Moaning, I dropped my head onto the desk. "Is that everything?"

"Almost. He wanted to know how you found the burning rabbit."

I lifted my head. "What did you tell him?"

She shrugged. "Nothing because I don't know."

"Neither do I," I mumbled.

"I'm really sorry I told him."

I sighed. "It's fine."

"So you're not mad?"

"Not at you."

"At Christian?"

I nodded. "He's been acting really strange lately and it's really starting to piss me off. This morning he was trying to convince me not to go to the pep rally on Friday."

"He was? Why?"

"Another one of the many things I don't know."

"But you have to come," she said. "It'll be so fun!"

"Oh, I'll be there. I'm not letting Christian ruin anything."

* * *

THE NIGHT of the big pep rally on Deer Lake had arrived. It had been the perfect day. The weather had been crappy, gray and overcast, but for me? Loved it. The full moon shined all its glory, making me feel invincible.

May picked me up as soon as it was dark and together we drove up the mountain, following several other cars all headed to the same destination.

As soon as May parked, she jumped out. "I'll be right back."

I looked in the direction she was heading: Adam. He was with his friends near the edge of a frozen lake or pond. I couldn't tell its size from this distance. I wanted May to come clean about liking him, but I doubted she ever would.

I turned the opposite direction toward a roaring fire, saying hello to several of my classmates on the way. Many of them had their faces painted and were talking about how we were going to take state. The mood in the air was one of excitement and elation. I inhaled it all.

"Pretty crazy, huh?"

I turned around.

Matt smiled big, his eyes twinkling. His disheveled hair was tucked beneath an oversized grey hoodie. Over it, he wore a heavy coat. Because of the full moon, I barely felt the cold.

I returned his smile and looked around. "Everyone seems to be having a good time."

He glanced down at my long sleeved shirt. "Aren't you freezing?"

Before I could answer, he opened his heavy coat, stepped toward me and practically swallowed me within its puffy contents. It smelled of fall leaves and aftershave.

He held me close, his arms embraced around me. "This helps, right?"

My head pressed against his massive pecs. I laughed out loud and pretended I didn't enjoy being this close to a guy, his strong arms around me. I just wished they were someone else's.

"I'm actually not cold." I untangled myself from him.

"You are an odd one, Llona Reese. I think that's why I like you so much." He nodded his head once toward the fire. "Let's at least go stand over there."

It didn't surprise me when he put his arm around my shoulders and guided me toward the roaring flames, which were taller than us both. I didn't mind but when we reached the bonfire, I casually stepped away from him.

Tracey jogged over to us. "Hey guys! What's up?"

"Just trying to get warm," Matt answered. He opened his coat to her. "Need a polar bear hug?"

Her face brightened. "I'd love one."

Matt drew her into his arms, but I noticed his eyes never left mine.

"There's hot chocolate and donuts on the other side of the fire," Tracey said, her voice partially muffled by Matt's coat.

"That's my cue. You guys want any?" I asked.

"I'm good," Matt said.

"Me too," added Tracey.

I rounded the bonfire and was almost to the crowded hot chocolate table when I heard, "What are you doing here?"

Christian stepped out from within the crowd almost as if he'd been waiting

for me.

"I'm trying to have a good time, and I'd like to keep it that way." I patted his chest twice and walked away.

"Llona, wait!" He jogged after me.

I whirled around. "What do you want?"

"You shouldn't be here."

"Why? Why can't I be here?" I demanded.

"Just trust me. You shouldn't be here." He took a step toward me, but I backed up.

His expression fell. "What's wrong? You used to trust me."

"That's before you became all Jekyll and Hyde-y on me."

"I have never been cruel to you."

"What's your definition of cruel?"

His eyes closed briefly and for a second it looked like he was in pain. "I didn't mean to hurt you. That has never been my intention."

"Then what is?"

Christian sighed and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "I never intended to —"

"To what, Christian?"

He lifted his head and stared directly into my eyes. "To have feelings for you."

This caught me off guard, but I didn't let myself swoon. Too much had happened. "So you say you want me to be safe, but you don't want to have feelings for me? Don't the two go hand-in-hand?"

"They shouldn't. Not for me at least."

"Why?"

He glanced away. "It's complicated."

"No, rocket science is complicated. This shouldn't be."

He glanced past me into the darkness.

"When you decide to uncomplicate it," I began, "let me know. Until then, I'm going to have fun tonight with my friends."

I whirled around and practically pushed my way to the front of the hot

chocolate line, but when I came face-to-face with Mr. Steele, who was serving the hot beverage, my anger quickly melted like an ice cube on fire.

“You look full of energy tonight,” Mr. Steele said to me in his usual velvet, sophisticated voice.

“Full of something,” I agreed.

He laughed. “Maybe you should join the football game over there, burn off whatever you’re full of.”

I glanced toward the lake. Several cars had parked in a big circle with their lights turned on, facing the center. The dark silhouettes of students moved within the light as they played with a glow-in-the-dark football.

“Go join them, Llona,” Mr. Steele encouraged. “You deserve some fun. Plus, they could use someone with your skills.”

“My skills?”

“I’ve watched you play basketball. You’re very good.”

My face reddened. Gratefully my back was turned to the fire so he didn’t notice.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Christian walking toward us. To avoid another lecture, I quickly said, “Thanks, Mr. Steele. I think I will.”

I hurried away, glancing back a few times to make sure Christian wasn’t following me. I walked between two parked trucks, and just before I had the chance to ask if I could join the game, Mike called out to me, “If you’re thinking of playing, don’t. We already have enough players.”

Adam moved out of a headlight next to me. “We could use one.”

“Yeah,” May added. “You can be on our team, the winning team.”

Mike tossed the ball to a teammate across the field. “Whatever. Your winning streak is over.”

Even though car headlights burned bright, darkness still swallowed most of their light before it could have a real impact on the game. But I didn’t care. Playing football in the dark was like nothing I’d ever done before. It gave me the ability to hide much of my speed and agility, which turned out to be very useful. Mike was the quarterback for the other team, and it was just too easy to intercept almost every throw he tossed. His frustration was my elation. By my sixth pick,

he became so upset he turned and tossed the football as hard as he could toward the lake. It landed on the ice and continued to slide away from us.

“Way to go, Mike!” someone yelled.

“Anyone bring another ball?” another asked.

I squinted my eyes into the darkness. The ball wasn’t too far away. I could see its glow partially concealed by a chunk of ice.

Behind me, another person said. “That’s all we had.”

“Nice, Mike. Way to ruin the game.”

I turned to the group and said, “I’ll get it.”

“I don’t think it’s safe,” May said.

“Sure it is,” Mike blurted. “The water’s frozen over. Let the show off get it.”

“If it’s so safe,” May snapped at him, “why don’t you get it?”

“It’s not a big deal. I got it.” I jogged to the edge of the lake and carefully stepped onto the ice. It groaned once but held. I stomped hard just to be sure. It remained solid.

I proceeded slowly, but after several steps and no more creaks or groans, I became more confident and ended up running and then sliding several times toward the ball, giggling all the way. Others laughed with me, and in a matter of seconds, I reached the ball. “Got it!”

Turning to go back, my foot pressed down, and at the same time I heard the sound of glasses clanking together. I glanced around to see where the noise was coming from, but after a few seconds, the clinking changed into sort of tearing. I wasn’t nervous until I felt the ice beneath me begin to tremble.

“You going to throw it back or what?” Mike yelled.

I held completely still, afraid of what was about to happen.

“What’s wrong?” May called.

“The ice,” I whispered back as loud as I could. “It’s cracking!”

“What?”

I glanced at my feet and slowly tried to slide one foot forward. Another ripping sound. My heart beat loudly in my ears and sweat pooled in my pits.

I immediately thought of what Sophie had taught me—think light-footed, think airy. I inhaled deeply and held my breath. I could do this.

But just like with Sophie, the ice beneath my feet melted, further weakening it. Water pooled around the soles of my shoes. *Shit.*

Maybe I could jump. I had enough Light coursing through me that I could probably make it. I crouched low.

As I did so, I spotted Christian running up the shore toward May. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but he looked frazzled.

Placing my hand on the cold ice, I prepared to spring forward. Just as I was about to push up on my legs, the ice gave way, and I no longer had any ground beneath me to push off on.

Instead of going up like I'd intended, I fell into the cold water and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

CHAPTER 25



When I was seven years old, I discovered roly poly bugs. I loved the fact that when I'd touch one, the bug would roll into a tight shell as a way to protect itself. I would find and gather as many of those bugs as I could until I'd have enough to play marbles with their hard, circular bodies. The instant one of the bugs began to relax from its shell, I'd touch it again and flick it into the other rolled-up bugs. I played this for almost an hour before my mom caught me and gave me a lecture about being kind to all creatures, especially those smaller than me.

I'd forgotten all about the bugs until the frigid ice water touched my skin. The Light within me retreated as quickly as a touched roly poly bug, leaving me to struggle on my own.

"Struggle" is too positive a word. I did manage to break the surface and gasp for air. I even managed to reach out to Christian, who I saw army-crawling on the ice toward me, but that was it. It was like the cold had seized up my body like an engine in water. And what little current there was sucked me under. The last thing I heard before my head dipped below the dark water's edge was Christian yelling my name.

My body drifted slowly beneath the ice, carried by the gentle flow of water. I attempted to claw at it, searching for any weaknesses, but my hand could barely open, let alone close down upon anything solid. The tips of my fingers simply grazed slippery ice.

I should've tried harder, but all I could focus on was the color of my nails.

They were rapidly changing to a grayish blue that looked eerily familiar. Then I remembered. They were the same color as my father's when I was asked to identify him at the morgue.

I'm dying. This sure was unexpected and not at all how I envisioned my death. I was supposed to die gardening in a flowerbed as a hundred-year-old woman, not as a seventeen-year-old trapped in a lake beneath inches of ice.

After a moment, my hands were no longer able to move, and I became like a statue, completely still, arms outstretched. I thought a death like this would be painful, but when my lungs began to burn, and I instinctively sucked in a breath, I suffered very little. There was only the initial terror of feeling the icy water slide into my lungs, but then all I felt was peace. Even my mind was completely calm. And, for the first time since coming into this watery prison, I realized how beautiful it was underwater.

The light from the full moon just barely lit up my liquid grave, giving the water a dark, mystical look. It wasn't such a bad place to die after all. The color was a starry, navy blue, reminding me of the comforter on my bed at home. And the occasional fish I passed seemed to be hanging from the ice like a mobile above a baby's crib. I tried to smile but my face was frozen.

I stopped drifting. Barely still able to move my head, I turned slightly to see a fallen tree on the bottom of the lake. Its branches had captured me in its grip. Just as well. It might be easier for them to find my body this way.

I waited patiently for my eyes to close and for darkness to claim me, but it didn't come as quickly as I expected. Why was it taking so long? I thought once water filled your lungs that was it. The end. Roll the credits. At least that's how the movies always portrayed it.

While I waited for death to overcome me, I hummed a song I'd listened to earlier that day. It seemed appropriate for the moment and also helped me to pass the time.

I was only a few bars into the song when two shadows appeared above me on the ice. One of them pounded hard against the frozen surface. Probably Christian, but I couldn't be sure. Just before my eyes closed, the second figure bent down and smashed through the ice with one impressive blow.

Moments later, I had the sensation of being lifted and then dragged, yet I couldn't feel anything. Several chaotic, muffled voices spoke all at once. I tried to make sense of their words, but my mind-numbing nausea made me feel like I'd been riding a roller coaster for hours on end. Maybe if I could throw up, I'd feel better, but I couldn't even open my eyes, let alone stimulate regurgitation.

This new sensation was worse than being underwater. At least when I was trapped in the water I could see. Extreme panic set in as I tried to see or feel anything. I half wondered if I was dead. Why else would I not be able to open my eyes or feel myself breathing? I attempted to quiet my mind so I could try and make sense of what everyone around me was saying, but that was like trying to calm a bull after he's had one of those tight rubber bands put around his most sensitive parts.

A bright, violent flash of red tore through my brain. This is it. I'm going mad. My body was gone and soon my mind would be too. I longed for the peace the underwater prison had given me, for I felt none of that now. Only chaos.

But then I heard it.

As clear as a town's siren at noon, Christian's voice somehow broke through the madness. "Llona! You've got to hold on. Do you understand?"

I wanted to tell him that I didn't understand, but I couldn't move or do much of anything.

"I can't find a pulse." That was May's voice.

Christen whispered in my ear, "Llona. I know you're in there. Just hang on."

"How soon until the ambulance arrives?" a female voice asked.

"Not soon enough. We need to take her to the hospital now!" This from the unmistakable Mr. Steele.

Again the female voice, "I don't think it's safe to move her. We should wait."

"She hasn't broken anything. She's only frozen," snapped Mr. Steele.

"He's right," Christian said, and my body was being lifted again. "Let's take my car. She can lie in the back."

"I'm coming with you!" May called.

"I'll drive," Mr. Steele added.

I heard the back door of Christian's truck open. My body was hoisted up and

then laid carefully down. The car started.

“I hope you don’t mind that I break any speed limits,” Mr. Steele said. I’d never heard his normally cool and confident voice so anxious before.

“I don’t care,” Christian said. “Just get us there fast.”

I still couldn’t feel anything. Shouldn’t I at least feel myself breathing? I heard what sounded like fabric tearing.

“What are you doing?” May cried.

“I’m taking off her wet clothes,” Christian growled. “I need to get her body warm.”

“At least leave her bra and underwear on,” May suggested, for which I was very grateful.

“I will. I’m just trying to save her life, May, not cop a feel.”

“Do you have to be undressed too?” May asked, again.

“She needs body heat. Now will you lay off?”

May sniffled.

“What are you doing?” Christian asked.

“I want to hold her hand,” May said.

“Hang on!” Mr. Steele yelled.

We must have swerved sharply because May grunted and something like metal crashed nearby.

Christian whispered again, “You’ve got to hold on, Llona. Please. You’re too strong to go out like this.” He paused when his voice began to quiver.

After a deep breath, he continued, “I never told you, but the first time I saw you, I thought I was looking at an angel. You were walking to school wearing a white t-shirt and jeans. You’d taken off your hat when you thought no one was looking and your hair fell down your back like wings unfolding. I think this was one of the rare times I saw you as your true self.”

If I could talk, I would’ve been speechless.

“Do you feel a pulse?” May asked.

“Um, I think so,” Christian said, but the way he said it made me nervous. His tone was that of a grown up telling a child a cut isn’t that bad when in actuality, a bone is sticking out their flesh.

“We’re almost there,” Mr. Steele called back.

“Come on, Llona, don’t let go of your Light,” Christian breathed into my ear.

I froze. Or I should say my mind froze; my body couldn’t have been more frozen. Christian had used the word Light. And he hadn’t said it in a weird spiritual sort of way either.

I heard the screeching of tires. “We’re here!”

This is when things really became crazy. Car doors opened and closed. My body was being jostled around and then Christian barked orders to hospital staff. There were lots of voices I didn’t recognize, asking all sorts of questions. I tried to listen to them all, to distinguish one voice from another, but something strange began to happen. The only way to describe it is I felt my body begin to separate, followed moments later by a bright light that slowly began to fill the dark space in my mind.

A slice of the conversation reached me: “She’s surprisingly warm for being pulled out of a frozen lake.”

“I agree, but I still can’t find a pulse. Ron, can you?”

“No. Is the defibrillator ready?”

“Almost.”

“Ready.”

“Clear!”

A strange humming sound, followed by a loud thump.

“Again,” someone shouted.

Someone cursed.

“Clear!” Thump sound again.

“Nothing, Doctor.”

Silence.

“What? No! She’s still alive,” Christian yelled. He sounded further away than the others.

“Get him out of here,” a deep voice said.

There were sounds of scuffling, and then the sound of something crashing into a wall.

“You have to believe me. She’s still alive!” Christian said again.

I wanted to scream that he was right, but even as I thought it, the Light in my darkness grew dimmer. That, coupled with the sudden feeling of floating, had me worried.

“I’m sorry son, but there’s nothing else we can do. By the looks of her, she’s been without oxygen for too long.”

“No!” Christian was furious. “Try again. She’s still alive!”

Then Mr. Steele, “How do you know, Christian?”

“Because there’s still Light,” he blurted. “She doesn’t have much longer. Please! We can save her.”

More scuffling followed by more shouting. It sounded like a fight had broken out. Someone yelled, “Call security!”

“Save her!” Mr. Steele yelled.

I tried to pay attention, but I began to drift away. The peaceful feeling had returned.

“Hang on, Llona,” Christian cried.

My body jerked and then I heard a sound like bones breaking. I think they were mine.

In a quieter voice, Christian said, “Don’t let go of the Light and you will live. Just stay with me.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by saying ‘hold on to the Light’ until I saw the light begin to fade away like a retreating sunset. I didn’t want this to be the end and something told me the moment Light disappeared, I would too. As peaceful as it was, I didn’t want to die.

“Don’t leave me,” I cried at the retreating light. “I want to live!”

“Come on, Llona. Open your eyes,” Christian demanded.

In my mind, I imagined my eyes opening. Not calmly, but violently. I pictured everything I could think of to pry them open: crow bar, knife, scissors, anything that would tear them open.

“Open your eyes,” I shouted at myself over and over until, finally, my eyes opened.

CHAPTER 26



“*A* man is not completely born until he is dead.”

I was dead, but now I am born again. I don’t think my experience is exactly what Benjamin Franklin meant when he wrote the words, but I was born again. Not in the spiritual, found God sort of way, but I felt different. A strange sort of excitement for life, and I knew I’d never be the same again.

I was going to fight.

I didn’t know how, didn’t even know if it was possible, but somehow I was going to find a way not to be vulnerable anymore. The Light inside me seemed to leap at my new determination as if it, too, was ready to fight.

“Llona?”

Christian came into focus. *Christian*. Christian knows. He knows about me.

“How?” I asked him.

“She’s alive,” someone called.

Within seconds, Christian was pushed away, and I was swarmed by doctors and nurses. They asked me all sorts of questions, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Christian. I kept having to move my head around to see him through the many people bombarding me. I had to know how he knew.

“Do what they ask,” Christian whispered from across the room, but I heard it as clear as if he were shouting. And then he was gone.

I collapsed into the bed, suddenly very aware of how badly my chest hurt. I cried out in pain.

“It’s your sternum,” a doctor said. “It’s going to be sore for a while. And you

probably have a few broken ribs, too. How does the rest of you feel?"

"Other than hurting, I'm cold." And very self-conscious. A sheet had been pulled up to my shoulders, but I still felt very exposed.

"Here's a gown," a nurse said. "I'll go get you another blanket."

The doctor stared down at a chart in his hands. "You are quite the miracle girl. We thought we'd lost you. If it wasn't for that determined young man, we probably would have."

"How long do I need to stay here?"

"At least overnight."

"I need to call my uncle."

"I believe someone already has. Are you ready to be moved?"

"Where to?"

"Fourth floor to your own room."

I nodded. A couple of nurses wheeled my bed into the hall and onto an elevator.

My new room was very simple, a mini version of the ER, but at least it was private. After the nurses situated me, May was the first person in the room. She gave me a big, but gentle, hug.

"How do you feel?" she asked with eyes red and swollen.

"I'm okay."

"I thought you were dead."

"That's what I keep hearing."

She sat at the foot of my bed. "What happened?"

"I went after the football and the ice cracked. I guess this is what I get for being cocky and trying to show Mike up."

"Kind of a severe punishment, don't you think?"

I sort of smiled. "Where's Christian?"

"Getting dressed."

"Huh?"

"He didn't have a shirt on."

"So what happened after I fell into the ice?" I wanted to put the sounds I'd heard with some sort of picture.

May shook her head. "It was crazy. We were all watching you on the ice when Christian came running up to me. He was totally freaking out, saying you shouldn't be out there when all of a sudden you fell. Everyone started screaming, but Christian ran after you. I thought he was going to get to you in time, but then you just disappeared. Christian looked so panicked I swore his head was going to pop off. He was staring down at the ice like he could see through it or something and then he started moving around. That's when Mr. Steele came to help."

"Mr. Steele?"

May kept talking. "And then Christian stopped moving and dropped to the ground. He started pounding on the ice as hard as he could. He was saying something, but I couldn't hear what from the shore. Then Mr. Steele did something that, now that it's over and I can think about it, makes me totally fall in love with him."

"What?"

"With one blow, he punched through the ice and grabbed you."

"That was Mr. Steele?"

"He pulled you out and Christian carried you to his car." May lifted her hands. "Now don't get mad but something happened."

"Like what?"

"To keep you warm, Christian undressed you. But I told him to keep your unmentionables on."

I laughed. "Good."

"I helped a little too," she said. "What do you mean?"

"I held your hand and warmed you up. At first, I was afraid I'd light you on fire but luckily that didn't happen."

"Yeah, lucky."

"I just focused really hard on not letting the full extent of my powers go. And I think it worked, because by the time we got to the hospital your skin didn't feel like ice anymore."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. So what happened in the hospital?"

"More craziness. I'm surprised nobody got arrested."

"What do you mean?"

“When they brought you in, you didn’t have a pulse. The doctors tried shocking you, but nothing worked. They finally said you were dead. When Mr. Steele heard this, he punched a hole in the wall.”

“He did?”

“And then Christian didn’t stop yelling that you were still alive. The doctors were trying to push him out of the room when all of a sudden Mr. Steele starting fighting everyone. He shoved a doctor across the room and punched another.”

My eyes grew big. So that was the scuffling I’d heard.

“And then he told Christian to go and save you and he did.”

I shook my head. “Bizarre.”

“I know, right?”

“Where’s Mr. Steele now?”

“I don’t know. Once they said you were alive, I didn’t pay attention to much else.”

There was a knock at the door. Both of us turned our heads.

“Come in,” I said.

Christian walked in wearing my favorite black shirt.

“I’m glad you’re alive,” May said and squeezed my hand. “I’ll leave you two alone. Can I come see you tomorrow?”

“Sure.” My eyes didn’t leave Christian’s. He moved to the side of my bed and pulled up a chair.

As soon as May was gone, I asked again, “How?”

“I can’t explain now, but I will. I promise. Your uncle’s on his way up. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.”

“How’s your chest? I’m sorry I hurt it.”

“Don’t apologize. You saved my life.”

Christian’s eyes moved to the dark window and then back to me. “It’s still a full moon. You should feel better tomorrow.”

I stared at him, mouth gaping. “How do you know all this?”

He placed his warm hand over mine. “Tomorrow. I promise.” He was silent for a moment, head bowed, and then, “This is going to kill me to leave you

tonight.”

“Then don’t.”

He frowned. “Jake will want to be with you.”

I sighed, knowing he was right. Jake was probably freaking out.

“I owe you an apology,” I told him.

“For what?” It was his turn to be surprised. “I should’ve listened to you and gone home.”

“No, it was selfish of me to ask you not to come. It’s just easier for me when I know you’re home, know what I mean?”

I shook my head. “Not at all.”

“You will, but it doesn’t matter anyway. I could never have predicted what happened tonight.”

“Were you expecting something to happen?”

“Yes.”

“What were you expecting?”

“Definitely not you falling through the ice.”

“Then what?”

The door flew open.

“Llona,” Jake cried. He rushed to my side. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Jake, just tired.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“What happened? The doctor said you fell through some ice, and they had to revive you.”

“That pretty much sums it up.”

“What were you doing on the ice?”

“It wasn’t her fault, Mr. Reese. She was just getting the football for everyone. They told her it was safe.”

Jake scowled at me. “Since when did you start trusting teenagers?” He turned to Christian. “And when did you start calling me Mr. Reese?”

“Sorry, Jake.”

Jake turned back to me. “I’m glad you’re okay. I would never have forgiven

myself if something happened to you.”

Christian stood. “I’ll leave you two alone. Llona, I’ll come see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Christian. For everything,” I said, wishing he didn’t have to go. He seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“Christian, do you mind if I have a word with you out in the hall?” Jake asked.

As soon as they left the room, I turned onto my side with great difficulty and drew in slow shallow breaths. A minute later, Jake returned.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“I just wanted to tell him thank you for saving you. I heard what he did. He’s one of a kind, you know that?”

“I do.”

“You know what’s really strange? He reminds me of your father.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I can’t put my finger on it, but he has this whole hero/protector thing about him.”

“I know what you mean.”

Jake stared at me, his eyes dripping with concern. “Are you comfortable? Can I get you anything?”

“I’m good. Super tired though.”

“I’ll let you get some sleep. Do you mind if I sleep in the chair? The nurse said it folds out into a bed.”

“I’d love the company.”

I don’t remember falling asleep or Jake getting his bed ready, but my eyes were suddenly wide open scanning the dark room. The lights just past the door had been turned down, and faint sounds of beeping came from down the hall. Jake slept next to me peacefully.

I rolled onto my back, surprised how much better I felt. I closed my eyes to go back to sleep, but the feeling in the room inexplicably changed. It grew thick, almost suffocating. I opened my eyes again only to find myself instantly paralyzed, unable to move any part of my body. Even my head remained trapped

by an invisible force.

My eyes circled what I could see of the room, searching for the source of my current predicament. I found the problem at the foot of my bed. For there stood the tall shadow of a man. I couldn't see his face, but by the hostile feeling in the room I knew whoever it was meant me harm.

I tried to scream, tried to move, but my body wouldn't respond. Fear gripped me, but it wasn't fear that had paralyzed me. It was something in the air, physically pressing down on me until I thought I might be crushed.

The figure moved closer. It was an unnatural jerky movement, much too fast for a human. It jerked again; this time moving only a foot away. The shadow made no sound. It was as quiet as the dead, and its presence was just as disturbing.

Its head cocked to the side as if analyzing me. I still couldn't see its face, but as the shadow began to lower itself to me, I could smell its sickly breath of rot and death.

I attempted to scream again, but nothing came out. I focused every ounce of strength I had on trying to make any sound, but my efforts were wasted. In that moment I knew I couldn't do it alone. I called upon Light, imagined its power filling my entirety. It responded instantly until my whole body tingled. I sat up, mentally flipped on the lights, and opened my mouth. A scream tore from my lungs.

Jake shot up from bed. "What is it? What's wrong?"

A nurse rushed into the room. "Is everything all right?"

My heart beat out of my chest and beads of sweat dotted my forehead. "There was someone in my room," I gasped.

Jake looked around. "Where?"

"Standing next to me. Just a second ago."

The nurse moved into the hallway. "I didn't see anyone come in, and I've been here all night."

Jake placed his hand over mine. "Do you think it was a nightmare?"

"No! It wasn't a nightmare. He was here."

"Who?"

“I don’t know, but someone—not nice.” I’d wanted to say a Vyken but didn’t want to scare Jake. For some reason, the very name terrified him more than it did me. How I knew it was a Vyken, I couldn’t be sure. I’d never met one before, but by its unnatural movements and the way it had affected me, what else could it have been?

“Would you like a sedative, Dear?” the nurse asked. Her tone reminded of the book *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

“No, I don’t need a sedative.” They didn’t believe me. I collapsed into bed. Christian would’ve believed me. I glanced over at the clock and sighed. 4:27 a.m.

“Try and go back to sleep, Llona,” Jake said, his voice soothing.

“I won’t be able to.”

“What if I promise to stay awake? I’ll watch TV or something.”

“Really?”

“Sure.”

With my pulse slowly returning to a normal level, I turned over, tucked the blanket under my chin, and closed my eyes. Before I fell asleep, I said a silent prayer, hoping that whatever Christian had to tell me would somehow help protect me. If Christian knew about Light then there was a good chance he knew about Vykens too.

Morning greeted me with an onslaught of different doctors who poked and prodded at me like I was some newly discovered jungle insect.

“It’s remarkable,” my excellent hearing heard one of them say from down the hall. “Dr. Adams said she must’ve been clinically dead for at least fifteen minutes.”

“Someone must’ve made a mistake. She’d be brain dead if that were true,” a female voice replied.

“Go ask him yourself, or better yet, read her chart. See if you can make sense of her lab results.”

Their voices trailed off, leaving me to wonder what was wrong with me. This was the first time I’d ever been to a hospital. In fact, it was my first time seeing a doctor. I never thought it would be a problem until now.

I needed to get out of here and quick before they decided to seal me off in some giant petri dish.

As soon as Jake returned from getting breakfast at the cafeteria, I blurted, "It's time for me to go."

His mouth gaped open. "You can't. The doctors are still running tests."

"No more tests. I'm fine."

"Llona, please. Let them make sure everything is normal before they release you."

"But I'm not normal. Did it ever occur to you that my tests might show something strange?"

"Why would they?"

"Why wouldn't they? I'm an Aura. I don't know how that changes my physical make up, but I already heard a couple of the doctors talking and something's not right. You need to get me out of here."

"All right. Do you want to wait until after breakfast? The cart is just down the hall."

"No. Let's just get out of here."

"Okay. I'll send a nurse in to get that thing out of your arm, and then I'll get the paperwork to get you released."

"Thanks, Jake."

After the nurse left the room, I dressed and tied my shoes. Christian was right. I did feel much better thanks to the moon. The only thing that didn't feel better was my sense of impending doom. I only hoped that whatever Christian had to tell me would ease my mind.

Several minutes later, Jake returned holding a stack of papers. "All clear to go."

I zipped up my coat. "Sorry to put you through all this."

"It was an accident, nothing more. I'm just glad you're okay."

I tried to smile and averted my eyes. Me falling into the lake had been an accident, but what had happened afterwards wasn't. A Vyken had tried to kill me, and I knew he wasn't going to stop until I lay as still as my mother had in her mahogany coffin.

CHAPTER 27



When we returned home, I walked straight to my bedroom and closed the door. The mirror on the opposite wall reflected my image, and I shook my head in disgust. I was an illusion. I kept myself hidden beneath a hat, I ran at the first sign of trouble, and most of all, I denied the power of Light. It was a strength that could protect me if I learned how to use it. And not the way Sophie wanted me to.

Surely Light could be used for more than creating beautiful things and making people feel good. I'd already sensed that and had practiced many times creating my balls of light in hopes they could be used for something more. Now was the time to find out.

I'd barely finished breakfast when the doorbell rang. I was hoping it would be Christian, but instead Heidi walked in. She gave me a hug and asked how I was. I gave the usual answer, then faked being tired and disappeared to my room again. It's not that I didn't want to see her, I just didn't feel like talking about what had happened, and I could tell she was dying to ask. I laid down in bed and put headphones on to drown out any sounds coming from the living room.

I thought about the Vyken being in my hospital room and couldn't help but shiver. I had almost been killed by a Vyken. I wondered if my mother had been as frightened and helpless as I had. I turned over, letting my mind ask questions it would never have answers to.

A gentle touch on my shoulder startled me. I opened my eyes and rolled over. Sitting on the bed next to me was Christian. I don't know why I did it, but all of

a sudden I burst into tears and threw myself into his chest. His arms came around me, holding me tight.

“It’s okay. Everything’s all right now,” he whispered as he stroked the back of my hair.

I cried for several minutes until I forced myself to sober up. I had so many questions that needed answering and blubbering wasn’t going to get me any closer to the truth. I pulled away and wiped my eyes.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“It’s okay. How do you feel?”

“My body feels great, but my head is a mess.”

“I’m sure you have a ton of questions.”

I nodded.

“Then ask.”

I sucked in a deep breath and let the air out slowly as I tried to decide which question to ask first. I began with what I thought would be the simplest one to answer. “Who are you?”

“I’m your assigned guardian.”

I opened my mouth to laugh, but he said it with such a serious expression that I quickly closed it again.

“My what?” I asked again, thinking maybe I’d heard wrong.

“Your guardian.”

“Like a godfather or something?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I was assigned to be your guardian by the Council, the same Council your aunt sits on.”

He stopped me when I started to ask another question. “Before you bombard me with more questions, let me explain. Every Aura, except for you of course, is assigned a guardian at age twenty when they leave Lucent Academy. The guardian’s duties are to protect their wards from Vykenes. We serve for three years, and then are transferred to a new Aura. I’ve been training to be one since the age of ten under the direction of my father who is also a guardian.”

“Is that why your father doesn’t like me, because he’s sick of Auras?” I asked.

“It’s not that he doesn’t like you. He’s just big on following the rules.”

“What rules?”

“I’ll get to that. But first, I want to tell you our history. The first guardians were an elite group of men, specifically chosen by Auras for their bravery. The Auras blessed these wise men with special abilities so that they could help protect them from Vyken.”

“What kind of abilities?”

“We’re faster and stronger than normal humans, but nothing too crazy. Just enough to put us on an equal playing field with a Vyken. It takes a lot of hard work to get to that level, but when we do, we get to teach the upcoming generation of guardians until we’re assigned to an Aura. When I turned eighteen, I was assigned to you.”

“Woah!” I interrupted. “You’re already eighteen?”

“My birthday was in the summer.”

“How did you get into school?”

He glanced away, embarrassed. “I told them I was held back in the first grade.” His eyes turned to mine. “It was the only way I could keep an eye you! No guardian has ever had a ward as young as you before.”

“Why?”

“Because at your age, they’re at Lucent where they can be protected. They don’t need a guardian until later.”

“Surely there are other girls out there who have chosen not to go to Lucent. I can’t be the only one.”

“As far as I know, you are. And if for some crazy reason there is a girl out there who doesn’t know she’s an Aura, the Council has ways of finding her. It takes little convincing to get them to go to Lucent, especially when they start feeling Light.”

“I don’t get why everyone makes such a big deal about Lucent,” I said.

“Don’t knock what you don’t know. Those girls learn a lot.”

“Like what? Like how to grow flowers and light up the dark?”

“There’s more to it than that. You have no idea how far behind you are.”

“I’m not behind,” I mumbled.

“Your mother went to Lucent.”

“What do you know of her?”

“Everyone knows, or has at least heard of, your mother.”

“Why’s that?”

“She went against the Council—the same Council her sister, your aunt, sat on. It was a big deal back then. In fact, people still talk about her. They use her as an example of what not to do.”

“But my mother was never anything but kind to everyone she met! What could she possibly have done that was so horrible?”

He paused before answering, and I noticed that when he did, he wouldn’t look at me. “She married her guardian.”

My jaw dropped. “My father was her guardian?”

He nodded. “It’s strictly forbidden for guardians to become involved with their wards, let alone marry them.”

“Why?”

“A guardian cannot effectively protect their ward if they’re in love with them. Their judgment becomes clouded.”

“Is that what happened to my father?”

“I don’t know. Just like your mother, no one knows the circumstances behind your father’s death. He was one of the best guardians so everyone was surprised when he died.”

I balled my hands into tight fists. “My father died in a car accident.”

“What?” His eyes widened. “You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“Your father was killed by a Vyken. The council suspects by the same Vyken who killed your mother.”

It took a moment for his words to sink in. “How could I have not known about this?”

“Your aunt was probably trying to protect you.”

“But why didn’t Jake tell me?”

“Maybe she convinced him not to. She can be very persuasive.”

“So my father was my mother’s guardian and they fell in love,” I repeated

slowly, my mind processing the words. I looked up at Christian. “That’s why you’ve been acting strange and staying away from me.”

“I was never away from you, just out of sight, but yes. I found myself—” he struggled to find the right words— “caring for you more than I should.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Everything made sense now: his constant yo-yo behavior, his stalker-like movements and our bizarre almost make-out session.

“I’m sorry for putting you through all my shi—crap,” Christian corrected quickly, as if I was too special to curse in front of. “I know it was hard on you. It just took me a while to convince myself that all we could ever be is friends.”

“You’ve convinced yourself? Now that’s a load of *shit*.” I emphasized the swear word so he’d know not to treat me differently.

“Point taken.” He rose from his chair. “I want you to know that this has been the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. Every time I look at you, I just want to—”

“Yes?”

He lowered his eyes and sighed. “Can we talk about something else?”

I was about to press the issue, when my eyes caught Christian’s reflection in the mirror. Specifically, I focused on his ear. “Do guardians have awesome hearing?”

His eyebrows lifted. “How did you know?”

“I think I inherited it from my dad.”

“But you’re a girl. No offense, but it’s always been a guy thing.”

“I guess I won the DNA lottery.”

He was about to say more but stopped. “What’s this?”

He picked up my mom’s old letter from my nightstand.

I forgot I’d left it out. I quickly snatched it away. “It’s nothing. Just a letter my mom left for me when she died.”

“Then why wasn’t it signed by her?”

In addition to fast reflexes, apparently Christian was also a speed-reader. “Okay, maybe it wasn’t from her, but I like to think it was. She was always doing strange things like this.”

“How did you get it?”

“It was left on my bed in the arms of my favorite teddy bear.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Let me see it again.” He held out his hand.

I reluctantly handed it to him. His eyes read over it several times.

“Llona,” he said. “What happened to you in the cornfield? Wait. Not just in the cornfield. Tell me everything strange that’s happened to you lately.”

I swallowed hard, trying to remember the first time I felt afraid. “Well, it started at the beginning of the school year. I thought I was being watched through my window. Was that you?”

He shook his head. “I never watched you close-up, only from a distance.”

“So you’re only a long-range Peeping Tom?” I smirked.

“Not funny. What else has happened?”

I sighed. I thought it’d be difficult to tell him everything, but once I started I couldn’t stop. I told him about the person in the woods calling my name the night I’d jumped into the river, the shadow in the tree, and my feelings about the shoe and the murder at my car. I explained my odd feeling in the cornfield before I found the rabbit. And finally I told him about last night, and the Vyken at the foot of my bed. “I was so scared, Christian. I couldn’t move. Why couldn’t I move?”

Christian’s reaction surprised me. He sat next to me and embraced me to his chest. I was pressed so tightly against him that I could hear his heartbeat racing.

“You have to leave. Tonight, Llona. Go to Lucent with your aunt. You’ll be safe there.”

I pushed him away. “What? No! I’m not leaving. That’s ridiculous. You’re my guardian. Can’t you protect me?”

“Obviously, I can’t. The Vyken has gotten too close and seems to know you too well.” He shook his head. “My first ward and I can’t even protect you.”

“How do any of the other guardians do it? They can’t watch their wards 24/7 either.”

“They don’t need to. Those other women are older and have been trained properly. They know how to make themselves almost invisible or run away if need be. And they’ve also learned to communicate telepathically with their guardians in case of an emergency. Our situation is very different from the

others, don't you see that? I can't keep you safe." He stood and paced the room in a tizzy.

"Can't you give me a crash course in how to do all that?"

He threw up his arms. "Come on, Llona! I can't teach you that stuff. My training was completely different from Auras."

I thought for a minute while Christian stopped and stared out the window. His skin was pale, and I thought he might throw up. Without warning, the solution came to me like Einstein's $E=MC^2$ formula. And the more I thought about it, the more I knew it was the right decision. I could feel Light burning my skin in agreement.

I jumped from the bed and approached Christian. "I know this might sound crazy, but I want you to teach me what you know. Teach me to fight."

CHAPTER 28



*H*is mouth gaped open. “You can’t be serious.”

“Really. I’m tired of running, and I’m tired of feeling like a victim. You’ve taught others to fight. Teach me.”

I glared at him when he started laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“The whole idea of it. Auras can’t fight. It’s not in their nature.”

“I think I’d know what’s in my nature and what’s not, and I’m telling you my nature wants to fight.”

He walked away from me. “This is crazy. Not only is the whole idea absurd, but I’m sure there’s a rule somewhere that says it’s forbidden.”

“Why?” I followed him across the room.

“Because! It’s not like there are a bunch of Auras out there. You need to be protected. You have no idea how important they are.” In a much quieter voice he said, “You have no idea how important you are.”

“Christian—”

“Please, Llona. Go to Lucent where you’ll be safe.” A knock at my bedroom door made him step away.

“Llona?” Jake asked. The door opened. “Some of your friends are here to see you.”

Behind him, May, Matt, and Tracey came in. Tracey gave me a hug followed by May.

“You don’t look like you almost died,” Matt said as he, too, wrapped his arms around me. When he let go, his arm remained on my shoulders, and his

eyes burned into mine. “You really scared us last night.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

He hugged me again. “I’m glad you’re okay. The world wouldn’t be the same without you, Llon Reese.”

Christian grimaced and turned away.

“You sure got here early,” May said to him. “Did you even leave her last night?”

“Of course. She needed rest.”

“Thanks for saving her,” Tracey told him.

“It was nothing.” He walked over to me, his brow furrowed. “I have to get going, but I’ll come back soon, okay?”

I nodded.

After Christian left, my friends insisted on ordering pizza and watching a movie. The movie, some low-budget comedy, turned out to be more entertaining than I thought it’d be. We laughed the entire way through, as we couldn’t help but make fun of the cheap filming and the inflated acting skills of the no-name actors. By the time they left, my spirits had been lifted, and I had this incredible feeling that everything was going to work out.

I wasn’t about to go to Lucent, not when I had only six months left of school, but I also didn’t want to make things more difficult on Christian. I meant what I said about learning to fight, and if he wasn’t going to teach me then I’d find someone who would. The training wouldn’t be near as good as it should be, but at least Christian would know I was serious.

When Jake returned home from lunch with Heidi, I told him my brilliant idea. He burst out laughing.

“I’m serious,” I cried.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Heidi agreed. “I took Taekwondo for three years when I was younger.”

“You did?” Jake asked, clearly impressed.

“Yup. My father wanted to make sure I could protect myself if I ever needed to. You should let her do it, Jake. That would be really cool of you.”

“I agree, Jake,” I said. “That would be really cool of you.”

He shook his head. "You know Sophie would never approve of it."

"She doesn't have to know," I said.

Jake rolled his shoulders back as if the idea made him uncomfortable. "I don't know, Llona."

"Not to be all defiant, but I am going to be eighteen soon, and then I can pretty much do whatever I want."

"Come on, Jake," Heidi said as she nestled up to him. "Let her do it."

"Fine. What harm could come from it?"

Heidi cheered. "You're going to love it. It's such a workout. I don't know if I'd do karate though. Do more of mixed martial arts, that way you learn everything. There's a place not far from here."

The doorbell rang. Christian was back.

"Hi, Jake, Heidi," he said when Jake opened the door.

Heidi turned to Christian. "Christian, I think you'd agree."

"With what?"

"That Llona should take a martial arts class."

"A what?"

Jake spoke first, "Llona suddenly has a desire to learn how to fight. Ridiculous, huh?"

Christian chuckled. "Sure is, but I'd let her do it. I bet she quits after two weeks."

I shoved him. "I will not!"

"Why do you think she'll quit?" Heidi asked.

"Because, Llona doesn't have fight in her."

"Apparently, you don't know me very well," I snapped.

"We'll see."

Heidi glanced down at her watch. "I have to go, but I'll come by tomorrow. Llona, I'm really glad you're okay. I care about you a lot." She gave me a quick hug.

When she left, Jake disappeared into his bedroom, leaving me and Christian alone. We both remained still, listening only to the steady tick of the clock until I asked, "So where did you go?"

Christian sat down at the kitchen table. "I was clearing my schedule for the next little while."

"Why?"

"You should know why."

"Because of me?"

"Of course because of you. I can't pretend like I'm a high school jock anymore. You are, and always have been my priority."

"Not for long. Once I learn how to fight, you won't have to protect me."

A mocking grin spread across his face. "We'll see."

* * *

I WAS DETERMINED to prove Christian wrong. When Monday came, I decided to go visit the dojo Heidi had told me about. I was more than ready for it, especially after the crazy day I'd had at school. I'd never had so much attention in all my life. First everyone was shocked that I was even there and then after the initial shock, they bombarded me with questions about what'd happened. Luckily, Christian and May protected me from most of it.

In Trig, I'd wanted to thank Mr. Steele for helping me, but a substitute was teaching instead. I was disappointed, but figured I could thank him the next day. I took advantage of his absence and learned as much as I could. With all the extra credit I'd completed, I almost had my grade up to a C.

As soon as the last bell rang, I was out of there. I didn't even bother saying goodbye to May or wait for Christian, who I knew would be upset. But I didn't worry too much. He knew where to find me.

The dojo was like I imagined: white walls, mirrors, red and black mats. I walked in on a children's class already in progress. They looked to be around eight years old. I watched the mini ninjas for a minute before I headed to the office to discuss classes.

A short, bald man with an egg-shaped head, and the body of a tree trunk explained that a coed class had started a few weeks ago, but he would let me join if I promised to work hard to get caught up. I easily agreed, but when he told me

the cost I almost choked.

“These aren’t your typical fighting classes,” he said in a deep voice. “Many of our students go on to fight professionally. I know the cost is steep, but I guarantee you will learn many different fighting techniques and will be able to hold your own against an opponent in a matter of months.”

“Is that a promise?”

He stuck his hand out for me to shake. “If you work hard, absolutely.”

Satisfied, I completed all the necessary paperwork.

“You can begin today if you’d like,” he said.

The moon was still partially full so I knew I had enough energy to start right away. “Today’s good.”

“Great. I’ll have a uniform ready for you. See you in an hour.”

I left feeling empowered, but my jubilation was short lived. Outside, Christian leaned against his car.

“So you’re serious,” he said.

“I told you I was.”

“I give it two weeks.”

“You’ve already said that. Thanks for the vote of confidence.” I unlocked my door.

“I have no doubts that you are physically capable of it but not emotionally. You’ll see. You won’t like fighting.”

My face grew hot. “Stop telling me what I’m capable of.”

“Be realistic. Fighting’s not for you.”

Before I could stop myself, I balled-up my fist and punched him in the gut. He doubled over, sputtering for air.

“If fighting’s not for me, then how come that felt so good?”

I jumped into my car and drove away before he could respond. I’d only made it a few blocks before I saw his truck appear in my rearview mirror following me home.

As soon as I pulled into the driveway, he was right behind me, jumping from his car. “Okay, you made your point. You do have some fight in you. How about we make a deal?”

I narrowed my eyes. "What kind of deal?"

"If you stick with your classes for three weeks, then I'll start teaching you what I know."

"Really?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Won't you get in trouble?" I asked.

"We'll deal with that later. This is about what makes you safe. If taking these classes makes you feel safer, then so be it. But in the meantime, I'm going to be with you as much as possible."

A few months ago, I would've loved to hear this, but now I found it annoying. Probably because I knew the only reason he wanted to be with me was because he was my guardian.

"You don't need to be with me all the time. I've made it this far in life. I'm pretty sure I can make it the rest." I was half kidding, but he didn't laugh.

"You're not taking this seriously."

I opened the front door. "Oh really? So I'm learning to fight only to better my physique?"

"Your physique hardly needs to be bettered," he said. Instead of leaving, he plopped down on the couch. "No, I think the real reason you're doing this is because you want to prove that you can handle everything on your own. Your whole life you've taken care of yourself, and now all of a sudden you find you're in a situation you can't control, and it's driving you crazy."

"You might be partially right, but I am serious about fighting. And I really believe it's what Light wants too."

"We'll see." He propped his legs up on the coffee table. "When does Jake come home?"

"Not for another hour, but I'll be gone when he gets back."

"Where are you going?"

"My class starts tonight."

"I'll take you and pick you up. We'll go out for ice cream afterwards."

"Deal."

My first martial arts lesson was a lot harder than I expected. The instructor

had a thick Asian accent, and many of the students already had several years of training. I was glad when the class finally ended. The instructor told me I did well, but I think he was just being kind.

“How did it go?” Christian asked when I walked out.

“Don’t ask,” I said.

“Already throwing in the towel?”

“Not in this lifetime.”

After ice cream, he drove me home. Just as we were pulling up to our house, I noticed a strange car parked in the driveway.

“Who’s that?” Christian asked.

“No idea. It’s not Heidi.” I jumped out of the car and made my way inside.

My heart stopped when I saw who was sitting on my favorite spot on our living room couch.

CHAPTER 29



“Llona,” Jake said, “Look who came by to see how you’re doing.”
I was already looking, like staring hard.

Mr. Steele came to his feet. “I hope it’s okay I dropped by. I couldn’t make it to school today. How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” I mumbled. *Pull yourself together.* I gathered my feet beneath me. “Thank you so much for saving me. I heard what you did.”

“We were really worried about you. It’s a good thing Christian was there. Everyone else had given up on you.” Mr. Steele glanced at Christian, and I swore something passed between them. “You making sure she takes it easy?”

“Yes sir, as best I can.”

“Llona just got back from fighting lessons,” Jake piped up.

I shot him an angry look.

Mr. Steele raised his eyebrows. “Is that so? So much for taking it easy. What are you learning?”

“Nothing yet.” I could feel my legs growing weak. Why did he have to be so good looking?

Mr. Steele smiled. “You will make a worthy opponent for someone one day.”

“Where were you today, Mr. Steele?” Christian asked, a strange edge to his voice.

“Remember the doctor I punched?”

Christian nodded.

“He wanted to press charges, but I convinced him otherwise.”

Christian scowled, an odd reaction to someone who'd helped save my life.

"I'm glad you punched him," I piped in.

He turned to me slowly, and his intense eyes burned through me. "I'd do it again if it meant saving your life."

Christian cleared his throat. "We are very appreciative for what you did."

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" Jake asked. "It's the least we could do."

"No, thank you though. I must be going." His eyes darted between me and Christian. "See you both in class."

Before he closed the door all the way, his gaze landed on Christian, and his expression darkened. I thought he was going to say something, but before he could, Christian finished closing the door.

"I've had enough of teachers to last me a lifetime," he blurted and laughed, but the sound was forced.

Jake scratched his head, obviously as confused as I was by Christian's strange behavior. "That one seemed nice."

"Maybe to the girls," he mumbled.

I snorted. "That's not true!"

"Speaking of women," Jake interrupted, "I have to go too. I'm meeting Heidi for dinner. You guys want me to bring you back anything?"

"We can just make something here," I said, eyeing Christian.

He nodded in agreement, but his thoughts seemed somewhere else.

I didn't like when he did that. It usually meant something bad was going to happen.

* * *

THE NEXT COUPLE of weeks blurred together. I continued training and actually began to feel like I knew what I was doing. My movements were more fluid and didn't seem to be so forced. Even Christian seemed impressed with my progress. I kept up with basketball, even though the coach told me she'd understand if I couldn't finish the last couple of games, given what had happened to me and all. But I insisted on finishing the season, especially since we were undefeated.

As for Christian and I, we became inseparable. Everyone at school thought we were a couple. At first I tried to tell them we were just friends, but after a while I realized it was easier to let them believe what they wanted. Christian didn't care one way or the other, but it sort of bothered me because we had the appearance of a relationship but none of the perks. It was as if Christian had lost all interest in me except to be my protective big brother. But I couldn't shake my feelings for him as easily as he had for me.

Because of this, I tried as best I could to find time away from him. It was simply too hard to be near him without longing for more. In addition to the dojo and basketball, I convinced Matt to change the book club to once a week instead of once a month. I knew Christian wouldn't ever join because of Matt. For some reason, Matt really bothered him though he'd never tell me why.

A week before Christmas break, we had our state basketball championship game. It was also my birthday. Other than Jake, no one knew the significance of the day. I preferred it that way and made sure he wouldn't tell anyone.

All my friends came to the game, including Jake and Heidi. I'd never been so nervous! The moon was only partially full, but it was enough to keep me from embarrassing myself.

We won by several points against the hardest team in the state. The elation of winning replaced the fear I'd felt the last several months. I was smiling so big that by the time we exited the gym, the muscles in my face hurt.

Christian and Jake were waiting for me just outside. The sun had gone down a couple of hours ago, and the moon smiled in the sky as if it was glad to finally be there.

"There's my mom," May said next to me and jogged off to join her in the parking lot. She called over her shoulder, "You did great, Llona!"

"So did you!" I yelled back just as Jake gathered me into a hug and spun me around.

"What a game!" He spun me around two more times before I managed to wriggle free.

Christian laughed. "You were fun to watch. I think you found your calling."

"Now we have two reasons to celebrate tonight," Jake said.

I pursed my lips at him. He knew I didn't want anyone to know it was my birthday. Besides, we had already celebrated earlier in the day.

Christian furrowed his brow. "Two?"

Before Jake could answer, a voice said, "Well done, Llona."

I turned around. Air caught in my chest at the site of Mr. Steele wearing a long and dark, form-fitting trench coat. With his dark hair and hooded eyes, he looked like he'd just stepped off the set from filming a spy movie.

"You watched the game?" I asked. My voice cracked making my face redden.

"I try not to miss any of the games." His gaze shifted

Jake stepped forward and shook his hand. "Good to see you again."

Mr. Steele smiled at him. "Always a pleasure. I didn't mean to interrupt your celebrating, but I had to come over and wish Llona a happy birthday." His gaze shifted to Christian. "I assume you did something special for Llona today?"

Christian's body tensed beside me, and he forced a smile. "The night is still young."

"Thank you for the birthday wishes," I said quickly. Then to Jake, "We should go. Reservations and all."

"Of course." Mr. Steele smiled at me. "Have a good night."

I watched him walk away stunned he had known about my birthday. But why wouldn't he? It was on my school records. Part of me was tempted to run after him to ... to what?

Christian turned to me. "Why didn't you tell me it was your birthday?"

"It's not a big deal."

He turned to Jake. "What's your excuse?"

Jake hooked a thumb in my direction. "I'm scared of her."

"I'm hungry." I headed toward the car, but Christian wasn't finished.

He caught up to me. "I'm sorry I didn't know."

"I didn't want you to know."

He huffed but didn't say anything else until we were saying goodnight to each other later that night. "One way or another, I'm going to make it up to you. I'm going to give you a present you'll never forget."

* * *

CHRISTMAS DAY BEGAN like every other Christmas. I woke up to the smell of bacon and pancakes, mingled with the sweet aroma of Jake's special hot chocolate. We always ate breakfast together before we opened our presents and this year was no different except for one thing: there was an unexpected knock at the door.

Jake tossed me an angry look. "Is that Christian?"

I shrugged. "If it is, I didn't invite him."

"Doesn't he have a home?"

I stood up to answer the door. Like we both thought, it was Christian. He held several packages in his arms.

"Merry Christmas," he bellowed in a pretend Santa voice. He walked by me into the living room. "I come bearing gifts."

Jake couldn't help but smile. "Whatcha got there?"

"Nothing big. Just my way of saying thank you for putting up with me the last several weeks."

"Sounds more like a payoff to me," I said.

"Don't be so grumpy. I've got something for you too." Christian handed a big box to Jake along with several small packages. "You first, Jake. You've had to put up with me the most."

"Debatable," I mumbled.

"Thanks, Christian." Jake slowly unwrapped the big present first. He was only halfway when he began to squeal. "You have got to be kidding. Tell me this isn't what is really in the box—no, wait—tell me this is what's in the box."

"What is it?" I asked.

Christian's grin couldn't have been bigger. Jake turned the box around to show me.

"What is it?" I asked again.

"It's a VGS! It's not supposed to be released for another few months. Who did you have to kill to get it?"

"A what?" I asked.

Christian laughed. "My dad pulled some strings."

Jake stared at the box. "I can't believe it."

"What's a VGS?" I asked again.

"Virtual Gaming System," Jake said, his mouth still hanging open.

Christian pointed to the other wrapped gifts. "Open the others."

He didn't have to ask twice. Jake tore into them and laughed every time he discovered a new game for the VGS.

"I'm going to set it up now." Jake darted off to his room.

"What about my present?" I called after him.

"I'll open it later," he yelled back.

"Great, Christian. You ruined Christmas." I stormed off to my room.

"Maybe this will make it better," he said from behind me.

"You can't buy me off so easily." I was about to shut my bedroom door, but he blocked it with his foot. "Come on, Llona. Just open your present. It's combined with your birthday present too. Please?"

This stopped me. "I told you to forget about my birthday."

"And I said that wasn't happening."

I let the door open a little. "If I do, will you promise to go afterwards? We were just starting to open our presents."

"Agreed." Christian handed me a small square box that wasn't wrapped. "Open the letter when you're alone."

"I really wished you wouldn't have," I said as I opened the box.

Inside rested a diamond pendant framed in silver. I gasped and looked at it more closely. Symbols or some kind of writing had been etched into the silver. I pulled out the necklace and tried to read the inscription. It read: Αντέξει μέχρι το τέλος.

"This is so beautiful. What does it say?"

"Endure to the end in Greek."

I examined it closer, emotions crowding my chest. The surface of the diamond fractured the light in the room, sending it a thousand different ways.

"Will you put it on me?" I turned around.

He took the ends of the necklace, and, after pushing my hair to the side of

my neck, fastened it.

“Why did you choose that inscription?” I asked, pretending his touch hadn’t ignited a heated chill within me.

His hands moved to my shoulders. “I know I don’t act like it, but you have no idea how much you mean to me.” He paused to suck in a breath. “I need you to endure, to do all that you can to live a good, long life. I couldn’t bear it if anything were to happen to you.”

His body moved close to mine until our clothes touched. In one swift motion, I turned around and stared into his eyes inches from his face. Any thoughts of him thinking I was like a sister were suddenly erased.

The way he was staring at me with such passion, such hunger, made me wonder how he had kept it hidden for so long. He leaned his forehead against mine and gripped my waist, his fingers digging in. My lips parted and air escaped in the sound of a desperate plea. I slid my hands around to his back and up and under his t-shirt. My fingers caressed upward across the hardened muscles on his back.

The motion must’ve startled him because he froze and closed his eyes. His jaw muscles bulged.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered and stepped back, pain etching the lines on his face. “I’m going to go set up a game or something.”

“Can it be Twister?” I called after him.

He didn’t answer.

The rest of the day passed without incident between me and Christian—much to my dismay. I felt stupid giving him my present after he’d given me such a considerate gift. All I gave him was a jersey from his favorite football team and a pink sugar cookie, his favorite snack food. We played games for a while, watched a movie, and ate way too much. Around six, Jake got called into work because of some computer glitch, leaving us alone.

I enjoyed it, but after twenty minutes, Christian began to pace and then inexplicably said he had to go too.

“Do you really have to?” I whined.

“Yeah.” He stood up and glanced around. “Where did I put my jacket?”

“Um, I think it’s in my room. I’ll get it.” I walked down the hallway, mumbling, “I wouldn’t want you to stay here any longer than you have to.”

“I heard that,” he called after me.

I ignored him and opened the door to my room. The light from the hallway let in just enough for me to see Christian’s jacket on top of my dresser. I moved in to grab it but noticed something on my bed. It was a box wrapped in black paper with a red ribbon on top. Christian must have left it as a surprise. I smiled. He wasn’t really leaving after all. The whole ‘where’s my jacket’ thing was just a ploy to get me to find another present.

I picked it up, removed the lid, and frowned as my brain tried to process what was lying in the box. At first, I thought it was a small stuffed animal—a teddy bear perhaps. I reached in to touch it, but when my fingers felt the coarse white hair, I knew there was nothing synthetic about it.

The box dropped from my hands and as it hit the floor, the limp body of a dead rat tumbled onto the carpet.

White mouse. White rabbit.

And now a white rat.

The Vyken had been with me since the very beginning.

Just then a dark figure appeared at my window. Instinctively, I screamed.

When I heard Christian rush down the hallway, I kicked the box and the dead rat under my bed.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” he said, the moment he entered the room.

I mentally flipped the lights on, my eyes darting to the window. The figure was gone.

“Nothing,” I stammered, trying quickly to gain control over my nerves. “I thought I saw a mouse.” That wasn’t too far from the truth.

“A mouse? It sounded like you just saw death.”

I swallowed and forced a smile. “Death, mouse, same thing.”

“Which way did it go?” Christian scanned my room, then moved to the window to peer into the darkness.

“Um, I think it ran into the closet.”

Christian opened the closet door and pushed aside several shoes. “I don’t see

it now.”

“It’s probably long gone. It was a fast little bugger.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

Inside I yelled yes, but I heard myself say, “No. I think I can handle a mouse.”

“Okay then.” He pulled his jacket on.

I followed him to the front door, all the while trying desperately to think of something that would get him to stay but came up empty. I knew the moment I saw the rat and the shadow at my window, I couldn’t tell Christian. He’d insist I go to Lucent. I couldn’t go to Lucent, especially now. I was finally learning to take control of my life by learning to defend myself. I’d never get this opportunity again, and the last thing I wanted was to be dependent upon a guardian to feel safe for the rest of my life.

At the door, I said, “It’s been three weeks, Christian. You said I’d quit fighting, but I haven’t. You owe me.”

He nodded and reached into his pocket. “I was wondering when you’d bring that up.”

“You’re not going to back out, are you?”

“No. A deal’s a deal.” He removed his hand from his pocket and revealed what looked like a watch. “Here’s your first lesson. Give me your arm.”

“This may surprise you, but I already know how to tell time.”

“This isn’t a watch. It’s a heart monitor.” He latched the black-looking device tightly to my wrist.

“I don’t get it.”

“For the next twenty-four hours, this monitor will determine your base heart rate. After that, it will automatically set itself to beep if your heartbeat goes over your base rate. The goal is to always remain calm and keep your heart rate normal. If you can do that, you’ll be able to think your way through tough situations, and this is what will save your life. Once you master this, then I will teach you what I’ve been taught.”

I examined the monitor. “How long did it take you to do this?”

“Months.”

I groaned. “Months?”

“It shouldn’t take you as long. Use your Light to help keep you calm. It should be easy. Light loves being at peace.”

“Then what’s wrong with me?”

“What do you mean?”

“How come I like to fight?”

He tilted his head, thinking. “I don’t think you like to. I just think life has put you in a position where you feel you have to fight to survive.”

Christian opened the front door but stopped before going through. “Do you want to go to a movie tomorrow or something?”

I searched the black sky for the moon. “We’ll see. I’m feeling pretty tired.”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow about it. Get some rest.”

Later that night, with glove in hand, I carefully dumped the rat in a white bag and stuffed it in the bottom of the kitchen garbage. I wasn’t about to trash it outside and risk the chance of coming face to face with a Vyken. I don’t know if that even mattered anymore.

A Vyken had entered my house. While I was home. And he knew where my room was.

That means whoever was stalking me was definitely an acquaintance and possibly a close one.

After washing my hands, I locked all the doors and windows and retreated to my room where I practiced shaping and moving my Light within my palms. I could reproduce little glowing balls easily enough, but they still didn’t feel firm enough. Maybe I could try something else.

Concentrating hard, I focused on their shape, the feel of them in my hands. They were warm and buzzed with comforting energy. I moved my palms together until the light joined, then, with my eyes closed, I imagined the light stretching.

I slowly made fists, still feeling the energy buzzing beneath my fingers, and tugged on the light outward. A burst of power filled the air, and I opened my eyes, gasping. My hands were a good two three feet apart and between them were steady, vibrating strings of light.

Giggling at the strange site, I tightened my right fist and whipped my hand to the side. Light followed the motion until it smacked against my wall leaving behind a small burn mark as if someone had put out the cigarette against the light blue paint.

I laughed out loud. That might cause some damage, but I was much too slow at it. I continued practicing until I grew too tired. Using my ability like this was exhausting!

Before I laid down for bed, I slipped a carving knife under my pillow. But this, along with my new skill, didn't make me feel any safer.

A Vyken was out there, and it wanted me dead.

CHAPTER 30



I'd like to say things became better the next several weeks, but they didn't. First there was the annoying sound of Christian's dumb heart monitor going off every time I breathed heavy. The teachers were constantly getting upset at me, but after I politely explained that I had to wear it per the doctor's orders, they left me alone.

It was a lot harder than I expected to keep a steady heartbeat. It would go off even when I wasn't stressed. Like a few times Matt had put his arm around me to walk me to class like he sometimes did, making my pulse race which would set off the annoying alarm. I couldn't figure out why. Sure, he was very good looking, but I didn't like him like that.

Whatever the reason, Matt became good practice for me to remain calm and keep my breathing slow and steady. I was beginning to get really good at it—during the day. Night was a whole other story.

Almost every night, I was visited by the same dark figure outside my window. He'd appear out of nowhere for just a few seconds and then be gone, but lately his visits were becoming more frequent. And it was like he knew when I was in my room no matter how quiet I was or how late the hour.

I didn't have blinds on my windows, nor did I want any until now. I loved having a view of the mountains. It made me feel like I was a part of them, but now the openness made me feel vulnerable.

The nightly visits by shadow man only made me train that much harder. Not only did I continue practicing with Light whenever I had a spare second, I also

asked my martial arts instructor if I could join the advanced class held just after mine. He said I could as long as I was able to keep up. I not only kept up but excelled in it, too. I found I could use Light to predict my opponent's moves, making my blows more effective. But even more amazing, I was able to fight and still maintain a normal heart rate. At night, however, the beeping sound of the monitor often woke me up, and I'd only have to look to the window to know the source of my anxiety.

"What do you want?" I whispered loudly one night, but even as I finished my sentence, he was gone.

After that, I started sleeping on the couch in the living room. This made all the difference in the world. In only a week's time of fighting hard and keeping my heart rate normal, I began to feel more confident. So when Jake told me he had to go away for the weekend on a business trip, I wasn't concerned at all. In fact, I was so confident, I decided to sleep in my own room again, just to prove I wasn't afraid.

My favorite late night talk show had just ended. I locked all the doors and mentally turned off the porch light. I tried not to be nervous as I made my way down the hall to my room, but with every step my anxiety grew. Before I even got there, I knew what I would face. It was as if I could feel his presence, waiting.

I stopped just before entering my room. No more. I was going to put an end to this once and for all. I rushed to the garage and flipped on the light. It took me several minutes to find what I was looking for. I found it buried behind several boxes: black paint. I grabbed the rest of the painting supplies and headed back to my room. This time I didn't feel the anxiety I'd felt before. Shadow man was gone.

I turned the light on in my room and worked quickly. In less than ten minutes, my entire window had been painted black. I stepped away from it, satisfied. And for the first time in weeks, I finally fell asleep peacefully in my own bed. That is until 2:21 a.m.

My eyes focused on the green, glowing light of the clock. It took me a moment to realize the heart monitor was beeping. Along with my heart racing,

came labored breathing. The air felt heavy, pressure mounting with every second. I sat up and tried to inhale. The feeling was so powerful, much like it'd been in the hospital, that I half expected to see a Vyken standing inside my room.

But I was alone.

I didn't want to, but my gaze turned slowly toward the window. My body followed until I was standing next to my bed facing the painted glass. He was behind it; I had no doubts. Count to ten and he'll be gone. I managed to get to eight before I involuntarily took a step toward the window.

I was losing control. I could feel it slipping away.

As much as my mind fought against the pull, my body moved again. The sound of my heart beating was louder than the beeping monitor. A cold sweat broke on my brow, and my hands became ice cold. When I was only inches from the window, I stopped and stared at the blackness. I could see nothing beyond it, but I could feel him as close as if he were standing next to me.

The paint directly before me began to peel back as if a claw were scraping it away—on the inside of the glass. I watched in horror as five thick stripes of black paint fell to the carpet. Again the invisible nails scraped at the glass leaving a clear slash mark in its wake. The screeching sound made a violent chill rock my whole body.

The invisible hand clawed at the paint again leaving a narrow view to the other side. And what I saw melted my insides. A bloodshot, yellowed eye peered in at me as if I were a mouse in a hole.

I begged myself to move, to do anything, but I could only stare and feel its power slither over me, coating me in suffocating darkness. The strap of my tank top began to slide down my shoulder by the monster's invisible touch. I stopped breathing, fear paralyzing me. *Do something!*

Just as he began to move my other strap off me, I used all the strength I could muster to call upon Light's energy. I could feel it trying to break through the blanket of darkness around me. I pressed harder until I heard an audible pop. Every light in the house flipped on, including the back porch's, taking with it my shadow man.

With shaky hands, I moved quickly, grabbing my coat, shoes, and keys, and

then bolted outside to my car and backed out of the driveway. I slammed my foot against the accelerator, propelling the car forward. The sound of tires squealing against pavement probably woke the neighbors, but I didn't care.

By the time I reached Christian's house, I was crying hysterically as I banged on the front door. This isn't how I wanted to react, but I'd never been touched by something so dark and evil. The unclean feeling lingered on me like a never-ending nightmare.

Gratefully it was Christian who answered the door. I threw myself into him without thinking. His arms came around me and he held me tightly making me feel safer than I'd felt in weeks.

He waited for me to calm down and catch my breath before he finally asked, "What happened?"

I opened my mouth to speak but then realized the heart monitor was still going off.

"Get this stupid thing off me," I cried as I tried to tear it from my wrist.

Very gently, Christian turned over my wrist and pushed a button on the side of the monitor, silencing it. "What happened?"

"I—" I began, but stopped. "You need to teach me to fight, and not the normal shit I've been doing. I need the upgraded version with all the perks." I stepped away from him.

Instead of answering, he took me by the hand and guided me into the living room.

"Before we do anything else, I want you to sit down and tell me what happened."

"You mean what's been happening." I sucked in a deep breath and collapsed into the sofa.

Christian sat opposite me. In a calm, but strained voice, he said, "Please explain."

I hesitated, but only for a moment. I thought I'd be able to handle everything. I thought I was stronger. Obviously, I wasn't.

I couldn't look him in the eyes as I told him all that had happened, beginning with the dead mouse in my back pack. In fact, I avoided looking at him all

together. His bare knee became my focal point. When I finished telling him what had happened tonight, his hands had clenched into fists.

“So you see, I have to learn what you know and fast,” I whispered. “I don’t want to be scared anymore.”

He was silent for several moments, then, “This is all my fault. It’s my job to protect you, and I’ve failed. I will call the Council in the morning and have someone else assigned to you.”

I looked up at him, aghast. “You can’t be serious! You haven’t failed.”

He shook his head. “But I have. I should’ve been watching your house longer. I should’ve set up a tighter security system. I shouldn’t have been such a moron!”

“You installed a security system?”

“Just on the doors and windows.”

“When?”

“Before you moved in.”

“I thought it was from the old owners. I didn’t know it actually worked.”

“Obviously it doesn’t—not how it should anyway. I had no idea a Vyken could get to you like that.” He visibly shuddered. “I’ll need to report this. Other guardians should know.”

“No. You can’t! If you do, Sophie will tell Jake, and they’ll all force me to leave. I’m not leaving. There’s only a few months left of school.”

“School isn’t important. Your life is.”

“This isn’t about school. It’s about not running. You said you’d teach me. I did what you asked and even wore your lame beeping machine. And I think I got pretty good at it.”

“Except for tonight.”

“Well, yeah. I was touched by something inhuman. Who wouldn’t freak out?”

“I’ll admit you’ve gotten better. And what you’ve been able to do with your fighting has far surpassed what I thought you were capable of, to the point where it’s a little unnerving.”

“Why?”

“Because Auras supposedly aren’t capable of fighting. And even if they were, the Council doesn’t allow it. If they found out, you and I would be in a lot of trouble.”

“What is so wrong with me trying to defend myself?”

“Because you weren’t meant to fight.”

“Who knows what I’m meant for? Is my destiny already written somewhere?”

His shoulders sagged. “Look, I’m not saying I agree with it. I’m just telling you what I’ve been taught.”

“If you don’t agree, then teach me.” I tried to keep from yelling, but I could hear my voice losing control.

After a moment, he said, “Fine. We’ll start tomorrow. You can stay here tonight.”

The dark cloud above me lifted. “Really? Won’t your dad care?”

“He’s at the same convention as Jake.” He stood. “Come on. I’ll show you to the guest bedroom.”

My legs felt like bricks as I made my way up the stairs. If it wasn’t for Christian’s hand on my back, encouraging me forward, I might not have made it. But no matter how tired I was, I was still afraid to be alone.

“Is something wrong?” Christian asked, when I remained in the doorway to the bedroom.

“I don’t mean anything by it, but could you stay with me?”

He smiled kindly. “I’d love to.”

After I changed and slid into bed, Christian shut off the lights and laid down next to me. His arm came around my shoulder, and I could feel his warm breath against the back of my neck. It was the most comforting feeling in the world.

My mind began to drift, but before I wandered too far into dreamland, Christian whispered to me, “I’ll get him, Llona. I promise.”

CHAPTER 31



“*A*ll of our lessons will start with a fifteen-minute yoga session,” Christian began.

“Really? Yoga?” We were in Christian’s basement, which had been converted into a miniature basketball court/training room. The giant room was every teenager’s dream, and I could tell by the worn mats that it was used frequently.

“Yoga will get you in the right frame of mind. Everything I teach you will require you to be calm and collected. Do you think you can handle that?”

“Bring it on, Master.” I crouched low into the eagle pose.

Christian was right about yoga. After just a few days of training, I was already more focused. Yoga helped me become more at one with Light giving me added strength and agility despite the moon’s cycle. This was a new feeling and gave me much-needed confidence.

Although I was learning a lot during the day, nighttime was still difficult. I was often anxious, almost to the point of hyperventilating. Christian had installed a more sophisticated security system surrounding the perimeter of our home. He also promised to watch our house throughout the night. I refused, as I couldn’t see how he could maintain school, too, but he assured me it was what he was trained to do.

My clock flipped to 3:00 a.m. I sat up straight, breathing hard from a lingering nightmare. I slipped out of bed and moved to the window, which had recently been stripped of the black paint. Christian thought it would help my

anxiety if I could see him outside not far away.

I looked out the window and smiled. Sitting in his usual spot, half way up the hill was Christian, a blanket wrapped around him. The light from the moon encased every part of his tensed body as he stared in the direction of my house. His eyebrows were pulled so tightly together, they shadowed his eyes.

I moved the curtain back until I found the recently installed security keypad. I pushed a few buttons and a green light appeared. As quietly as possible, I opened the window and began to climb out. Christian was by my side before my bare feet could touch the cold ground.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to see you.”

He shook his head. “You need to stay inside.” His face was pale making the dark circles under his eyes stand out like a raccoon’s.

“You can’t keep doing this,” I said.

“Doing what?”

“Watching my house like this. You’re going to collapse.”

He forced a grin. “I’ll be fine. The last thing you should worry about is me.”

I lifted my gaze to his. “Impossible.”

“Go back inside.”

“Give me your hand first.”

“What?”

“Just do it. Please?”

He held out his hand. I gently closed my palm over his, shut my eyes and concentrated. In a matter of seconds, warm light ignited between us. I transferred what I could without making myself too weak in the process.

I opened my eyes and dropped his hand from mine. “How do you feel?”

He searched my eyes with a look of wonderment. “Better.”

“Good. I’m not sure how long it will last though.”

“What did you do?”

“Gave you some of my Light.”

He creased his forehead. “But won’t that make you weak?”

“A little, but you needed it more than me.”

He stepped back—away from me. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“Christian?”

“Go back inside, Llona.”

“I was just trying to help.”

“I know, but I don’t need it.”

“Sure you don’t, Hercules,” I mumbled and turned around to climb back in the window. If he wouldn’t let me help my way then I’d find another way.

* * *

AS THE DAYS PASSED, the dark circles under Christian’s eyes became permanent. Something needed to be done about our current arrangement and there was only one person who could make it happen.

“Can we talk?” I asked Jake after breakfast.

“Sure. What is it?”

I swallowed through the tightness in my throat. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It is, sort of. I mean we have it taken care of.” I paused. “In a way.”

“Have what taken care of? And who is “we”?”

“You know Christian—”

He leaned forward. “Yes, I know him.”

“Well, there’s something you don’t know about him.” I tapped my hand nervously on the table. *Why am I so nervous?*

Jake waited patiently.

“You see, Christian and I are close. We’re bonded in a way that most other couples aren’t and our current arrangement is making it difficult on us.”

Jake’s eyes widened, and he began to shake his head. “No. Not me. This can’t be happening.”

“What?”

With a grim expression, he asked, “Are you planning on keeping it?”

“Keeping what?”

“You’ve already forgotten?”

“Forgotten what?” I was totally confused.

“The baby!”

“What baby?”

Jake scowled. “The baby that you and Christian are going to have.”

I laughed so hard I thought milk would come shooting from my nose.

“So, you’re not pregnant,” Jake guessed.

“Hardly. Christian and I haven’t even kissed.” Not in my book anyway. Christian had regretted it the moment it happened.

“Then what are you talking about?”

I decided to just blurt it out to prevent any more miscommunication.

“Christian’s my guardian.”

Jake grew quiet.

“Jake?”

His head lowered.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

When he finally lifted his head, his eyes were wet. “Your father was your mom’s guardian.”

“I know.”

“Did Christian tell you?”

I nodded. “How come you told me my father died in a car accident?”

“Do you know how he really died?”

“I know a Vyken killed him. That’s about it.”

Jake wiped at his eyes. He suddenly looked ten years older. “After your mother died, your father became obsessed with finding Lander.”

“Who?”

“Lander. He was Mark’s, your father’s, friend who turned out to be a Vyken. He was a manipulative bastard. Even I liked him.”

“How did they meet?”

Jake leaned back in his chair, remembering. “They met at the logging factory where your father worked in Oregon.”

“I remember living there, but I don’t remember a Lander.”

“Really?” Jake seemed genuinely surprised. “You spoke to him many times. You must’ve been what, four or five?”

I shrugged, thinking nothing of it. “What happened?”

“Your father wasn’t like your mother. He didn’t let people into your lives very easily, but after a long time he came to trust Lander. He befriended our family like a wolf in sheep’s clothing. All of us were fooled.” He inhaled deeply, the lines around his mouth tight.

“Then one early morning while your father was out of town, Lander called saying he had a flat tire. Your mother woke me up and told me she was leaving to go help him since Mark was gone. Instead of going back to sleep after she left, I got out of bed. The sun was just coming up, and I wanted to take advantage of being able to play video games unsupervised.”

I rolled my eyes.

Jake continued, “I had just barely started playing when you woke up screaming.” He swallowed. “I couldn’t get you to stop. You just kept screaming over and over for almost two hours. I finally called Mark to tell him what was going on. He could hear you screaming in the background. When he asked where your mother was and I told him, he completely freaked out. He knew something was wrong.

“He told me he was on his way home and to turn on your mother’s favorite music to calm you down. Luckily it worked.” He paused and sucked in another deep breath. “By the time your father came home, the police were already at our house. They found your mother’s body in the middle of the street. I tried to talk to Mark, but he went immediately to you.”

This was the first time I’d ever heard this story, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying. “And my father? What happened to him?”

“Like I said, he became obsessed with finding Lander. He quit his job and searched full time. He chased him all over the country.”

“That’s why we were moving all the time,” I said, remembering how horrible it was. We were never in a place longer than a few months.

“It was a rough time for both of us. I begged Mark to let me come with him, to help him, but he refused. He said I needed to be there for you. Besides, I

hardly had his abilities, but I would've given my life for him."

"Why couldn't he just let it go?" I asked. "Why did he have to leave us to avenge her death?"

Jake stared at me. "You think that's what he was doing?"

"Wasn't it?"

"He was doing it for you. Once your father found out that Lander was a Vyken and had killed your mother, he knew you'd be his next target. Not right away but eventually. He was trying to save your life."

My voice was so quiet I barely heard it. "I had no idea."

"I'm glad we had this talk then. I would've told you sooner had I known you were angry with him. You were always his priority."

My eyes met his. "How did he die?"

"We don't know for sure. My guess is he found Lander and they fought. He must've lost because his body was found in almost the exact same position as your mother—two puncture wounds in the neck."

"Do you think Lander will come back for me?" Deep down I already knew the answer, but I didn't want to associate a name to the faceless creature that haunted me at night.

He sighed. "It's a fear I have every day. I'm not like your father. I can't protect you like he could. These last several years I've trusted you to know when you don't feel safe. That's why I never argued with you when you said you wanted to move. I trust you know what's best. I also knew Sophie had people checking up on you occasionally, but I had no idea she had assigned you a guardian. And Christian? I just thought he was your boyfriend this whole time."

"Hardly," I said.

"Isn't he kind of young to be a guardian?"

"Sophie thought a guardian posing as a student would be best to keep an eye on me."

"How old is he?"

"Eighteen."

"Huh," Jake said as he tried to digest what I'd told him.

"Then why the dramatics? What's going on between you two?"

I inhaled and on my exhale, I said, “There’s more, but you have to promise not to tell Sophie.”

“I can’t do that.”

“But if I tell you and you tell her, she’ll make me go to Lucent early, and I don’t want to do that. For the first time in my life, I feel in control. I don’t want to leave.”

“How about I agree to listen and then we’ll work something out, but I can’t promise anything.”

I considered this. If I didn’t tell him, then Christian might pass out from exhaustion. There’s no way he could make it another few months at the rate he was going. As much as I didn’t want to leave, I couldn’t watch Christian suffer any longer.

With my mind made up, I told Jake about the Vyken coming to my window at night and how Christian had been guarding me ever since. “It’s killing him, Jake. I tried to get him to stop, but I think he feels responsible or something.”

Jake rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s how your father was. Look, Llona, this is serious. Have you seen the Vyken during the day?”

“Not that I know. Do you think it could be Lander?”

“It very well could be, but coming to your window doesn’t sound like his style. He would want to get to know you. Do you remember anything about his looks?”

“No, but it’s always been dark. And besides, that wouldn’t matter. Vyken can change their appearance, so Lander could pretty much be anyone I know.”

“Wait, what? Since when?”

I shrugged. “Since Sophie told me.”

“I had no idea. I’m not in the loop on all the Auran gossip. The rules in your world seem to change all the time. Knowing this, it’s probably best if you go to Lucent.”

I closed my eyes and flexed my jaw.

“That being said,” Jake continued. “You are different. You’re not like other Auras, not even like your mother.”

“Really?”

“Your mother was strong, but she was also careless. She lived her life with no regards to the future. That’s not how you are. You’re so much more careful, and you’re not afraid to fight. Maybe I won’t make you leave.” The hand that was rubbing the back of his neck moved to his temple. “Let me think about it.”

My face lit up. “You mean it?”

“We’ll see, but I am worried about Christian.”

“I think we can help him.”

“How?” Jake asked.

“First, you have to have an open mind. Second, you can’t freak out.”

“Just spit it out,” he said.

“Let him stay here at night. He can sleep on the couch, and I’ll be in my room. That way if there’s a problem, he’ll be right here. He can get his sleep and still be close enough to protect me.”

He groaned. “That may work, but I don’t want any unnecessary contact between the two of you, if you catch my meaning.”

“Not gonna happen. It’s against the rules.”

“Rules can be broken. Remember your father and mother?”

I shook my head. “But Christian’s not like that. He takes his position very seriously.”

“So did your father, but when it comes to matters of the heart, rules don’t matter.”

I placed my hands flat on the table. “I promise. It won’t be a problem. Besides, other than me leaving, this is the best way Christian can keep me safe without killing himself in the process.”

Jake stared into the distance while he tapped his fingers. I waited patiently for him to decide—for a second.

“Come on, Jake. I promise nothing will happen.”

He turned to me. “All right. He can sleep on the couch, but I’m going to come up with some strict rules.”

I threw my arms around him. “Thank you!”

I jumped up and opened the front door, but Christian’s car was already gone. He usually left at dawn to get ready for school, but sometimes, he’d come back. I

guess I'd have to tell him at school.

Christian wasn't in first period and when I couldn't find him in second, I began to worry. As far as I knew, he'd never missed a day of school. I tried calling him, but he didn't answer his cell phone. After third period, I faked sick and drove straight to Christian's house. His truck was parked in the driveway.

As soon as I jumped out of my car, I saw Mr. Stockett leaving the house. I was half tempted to dive behind my car and hide, but he had already spotted me and was walking toward me with an expression that said, "Wait until I get my hands on you!"

He moved so close I had to back into my car just to leave a little space between us. "Hello, Mr. Stockett. How—"

"This is your fault." He raised a finger at my chest. It might as well have been a gun.

"Excuse me?"

"You think you're more special than the rest of them? That you don't have to follow the rules?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't know what you're talking about."

His eyes twitched and his nostrils flared. "Christian got hurt protecting you last night."

CHAPTER 32



My heart sunk into my stomach. I placed my hand on my car to steady myself. “Is Christian okay?”

“If you would’ve gone to Lucent Academy like all the others, this would never have happened. I knew Christian should have declined a guardian position for someone so young and inexperienced.”

Spittle from his lips sprayed my face. I resisted the urge to wipe it away.

“Is Christian okay?” I asked again.

“He will be.”

“What happened?”

“He broke a rule. That’s what happens when you start feeling beyond what a guardian should feel for a charge.” He shook his head. “You are just like your mother, careless and thoughtless. And I don’t care what difficult circumstances the Council—or should I say your aunt—thinks you have. You are just like the rest of them and should have to follow the same rules. They made a mistake allowing your mother to do whatever she wanted, but they’re making a bigger mistake allowing you to do the same thing.”

My nostrils flared. “I don’t care what you think about me or my mother right now. I just want to see Christian.”

He stared at me for what seemed an eternity before he finally stepped out of the way.

As I walked off, he called after me, “Think about someone else for a change.”

I imagined myself giving him the bird.

I opened the front door without knocking. A maid or servant, or whatever the rich call them, asked, "Can I help you, Miss?"

"I'm looking for Christian."

"He's upstairs. Third door on the left."

I bounded up the stairs and threw open the door. The bedroom was so opposite from the rest of the house I wondered if I'd entered the wrong room. Other than a bed and dresser, there was no furniture. The walls were bare except for a shelf that held an encased, autographed football. I quickly forgot about the oddness of the room when my eyes found Christian lying in bed. My heart broke.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. It was difficult to understand him because he was trying to speak through two swollen lips.

I couldn't answer. I moved to his bedside and very carefully touched his swollen face. His chest was bare except for a white brace that wrapped itself around both of his shoulders making him look like he was wearing a cop's gun holster.

"Shouldn't you be at school," he mumbled and turned away from my touch.

"I am so sorry."

"For what? You didn't do anything. I was the moron who got hurt." He grimaced as he shoved an extra pillow behind his back. "It looks worse than it is. I'll be fine in a couple of days." He paused. "Will you say something? You're making me feel like Frankenstein."

"What happened?"

He attempted to sigh, but his breath caught in his chest and he gasped for air. "Stupid ribs."

I reached out and took his hand.

With his head down, staring at our entwined fingers, he began, "Last night at around three, the Vyken came. He was on the mountain ridge above your house just standing there, watching. When I stood, I caught his attention. I thought he'd run, but he just kept staring. And then the strangest thing happened. His body began to shift and his figure changed until it was you I saw standing on the

ridge. I knew it was you because of your long, white hair. It was blowing all crazy in the wind.”

“How could it have been me?”

“Not you, of course, but he’d made himself look like you.”

“How’s that possible?”

“It’s the first time I’ve heard of it. I mean, I know Vykens can change their appearance after drinking an Aura’s blood, but I didn’t know they could do it multiple times.” He shook his head. “It’s crazy.”

“Then what happened?” I asked.

His eyes met mine. “If you were anyone else, I wouldn’t tell you this, but I think you can handle it.”

“What?”

“After a minute, your blonde hair became blood red. And then your face . . . you had no eyes, only black holes.” He moved his hand out from under mine, and grasped my arm tightly. “And then your head fell off.”

“Wow,” I said, taking in what he’d just told me. “So what did I do next, you know, without a head and all?”

“That’s what you want know? I knew you’d be able to handle it, but I didn’t think you’d act so nonchalant about it.”

I took hold of my head and moved it around. “Works just fine. What you saw was just an illusion. What’s the point of getting upset over something that didn’t happen?”

“Because the Vyken was showing me what he’s going to do to you.”

I shrugged. “I already know he wants me dead. Now I know how. Maybe I’ll start wearing a metal neck brace or something.”

“This isn’t funny. Why aren’t you taking this seriously?”

I pursed my lips. “You’re right. It’s not funny, but if I start thinking about how a Vyken wants to chop my head off, I’ll become a raving lunatic. I need to have a clear mind about this, stay unemotional. Isn’t that what you have been trying to teach me?”

“Maybe I need to stop being such a good teacher.”

“So finish your story. How did you get hurt?” I needed him to get my mind

off the image he'd planted. The truth was—I was terrified.

Christian continued, "After his psychotic transformation, I lost it. I charged after him, determined to kill him. I chased him through the mountains for almost an hour. I was so intent on getting to him that I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings. I lost my footing and fell down a steep ravine and ended up looking like this. It was one of the dumbest things I've ever done."

"What rule did you break?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Your father. He said you broke a rule."

He puffs air out his mouth. "It's a dumb rule to begin with. You see, we're not supposed to pursue a Vyken. We are always supposed to stay with our charge."

"And wait like sitting ducks?"

"Like I said, it's a dumb rule, but a rule nevertheless."

"Actually, it's a good rule." I twisted my hands together. "Your father's right. This is my fault."

"No, it's not. I just made a bad decision."

"As much as I don't want to, I think it's time I went to Lucent. At least if I was there you'll be safe. It's selfish for me to stay."

"No. Things are different now." The lines in his face pulled tightly together. "I have to tell you something. When you first started learning to fight, I really believed you wouldn't be able to do it. It isn't that Auras are weak or anything, they're just," he struggled to find the right word, "too pure or something. Fighting is supposed to be a conflict of their nature, but then you came along and destroyed that whole theory. You have learned more these past months than a guardian does in five years. You're fast, strong, logical, unemotional; well, most of the time."

I smiled. "I am still a girl."

"I'm very aware of that. Too aware."

Heat rose in my face, and I averted my gaze.

"I don't want you to go yet, Llona. There's so much more I want to teach you, to see what you're capable of. Maybe we could change things for the

better.”

“How?”

He leaned toward me, wincing. “I’ve never liked the idea of sending Auras to a private school where they learn to blend in and mask their gift just so they can stay hidden. I think we need to have people out there hunting and killing Vykens, making it possible for Auras to really make a difference in this world. Can you imagine what Auras could do if they weren’t afraid to be who they really are?”

I considered this. It would be an amazing world to have Auras like my mother around who knew how to defend themselves. I remembered the tale my mother used to tell me about how wonderful the world was when Light didn’t have to hide.

Christian chuckled. “Wouldn’t it be great if Auras could just use their powers and hunt Vykens?”

My head snapped up. “But they did!”

“What?”

I spoke fast. “The story my mom used to tell me, like every night. She said Auras,” I lifted my hands and made the air quote gesture, “used Light’s power to fight against the Vykens. Used their abilities, Christian. I’d always get mad at my mom for telling me the same story over and over, but now I can see why she did. She wanted me to know the truth! She wanted me to know what Light’s capable of!”

Christian bit at his swollen lip. “I don’t know. The Council’s rules are strict, and they’ve been around for hundreds of years.”

“But surely there are others who think the rules are lame.”

“Some, but they are very careful who they voice their opinions to. Years and years ago, like in the thirties or something, there was a strong movement to hunt Vykens. They even had an Aura fighting with them.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I guess she was pretty amazing and even managed to kill some Vykens.”

“What happened?”

“She was eventually killed. When this happened, anyone who followed her was brought to trial before the Council. The group was quickly disbanded, and they all faced harsh punishment.”

“Like what? It’s not like the Council are police or anything. They can’t put you in jail.”

“No, but they have other ways. Like they can ostracize you from your own. Basically make you a leper. Not very many Auras go against the Council. Take your mother for example. She didn’t have any Auran friends. Your father, too. They were completely cut off.”

I laughed out loud. “Like they cared, especially my mother. She had more friends than anyone I’ve ever known. I highly doubt this bothered her in the least.”

“It probably didn’t, but for most Auras this can be very frightening. If you don’t obey the rules of the Council, then there’s no one to teach you, no one to protect you. Your mother was lucky her husband was a guardian, otherwise she would’ve been left defenseless.”

“How come I have one then?”

He paused. “Not to make you feel bad or anything, but the only reason you were assigned a guardian is because your aunt is on the Council.”

“So your dad was right,” I whispered.

“You may have gotten special treatment, but I can promise you no other Aura has been through what you’ve gone through. I think you deserve it.”

“I don’t deserve anything.”

His hand gripped mine. “You deserve to be happy and feel safe. I’m sorry I haven’t done a better job of making that happen.”

“You’ve done great, but it has got to stop.”

He feigned a smile, showing the dimple in his cheek. “It’s just the way it is.”

“Not any more. If I’m going to stay here until the end of school, and you’re going to stay my guardian, then our arrangement needs to change.”

“And what would you suggest?”

“Jake said you could sleep at our house. On the couch.”

“Really?”

“It’s a great idea. You’ll be close enough to know if there’s a problem, and you’ll be able to get a lot more sleep.”

I expected him to give some kind of resistance, but instead, he surprised me by saying, “That would make things easier.”

“Do you think your dad will care?”

“Not at all. It will probably be easier on him, knowing I’m indoors instead of out. You sure Jake’s okay with this?”

“Totally, but only as long as you promise to keep your perverted hands off me.” I grinned.

He smiled back, a twinkle in his eye. “I’ll try, but it’ll be hard.”

I touched his face again. “Is there anything I can get you?”

“Not now, but after school you can bring me back one of those fat sugar cookies with pink frosting and a glass of milk.”

“Deal.” I rose from the bed and turned to leave.

“Wait! One more thing, Llona.”

“Yes?”

“If what I’m about to ask you makes you feel the least bit uncomfortable, then I want you to pretend I didn’t say anything, okay?”

His serious expression made me nervous. “Okay.”

He took a deep breath before he said, “I want you to start using Light as a weapon.”

Use Light as a weapon.

I didn’t want to tell him that I’d already been training myself, not necessarily to use it as a weapon, but to use Light defensively. I didn’t think he’d care, but to hear him say this was shocking. It went against Aura’s number one rule.

But I was glad he’d said it. The moment I heard the words, something snapped inside me, and I felt this rush of adrenaline at the thought. Use Light offensively instead of defensively. I was so ready.

It was late, later than I wanted it to be, but I had to wait until Christian fell asleep before I could experiment. Every night I waited for the inevitable sounds of sleep to fill the house before I tried manipulating light. I felt self-conscious doing it in front of him. Even the thought of showing him my Light made me

feel like I was undressing.

I opened my bedroom door quietly and listened for any sounds coming from the living room. All the lights were off and everything was quiet. Jake had gone to sleep hours ago. There was a chance Christian wasn't quite asleep, but by how silent everything was he would be close. He had a tendency to toss and turn if he wasn't asleep, and I heard none of those movements now.

Like Christian had promised, he had recovered from his wounds more quickly than a normal person, a perk to having great genetics. Within a couple of days, he began sleeping on our couch. He'd come over around eleven p.m. and leave at sunrise. Most of the time I pretended to be asleep when he showed up. I thought it would be easier on everyone, especially Jake. I could tell he still questioned his decision, but I never did. The improvement in Christian was worth it.

I quietly closed the door and drew the curtains. Lying down in bed, I stretched out my hands. With all my practice the last few months, I could summon Light easily. It burst into my palms, and in a matter of seconds, I had it formed into a ball I could maneuver around the room. It had taken me weeks to get to this point.

For several minutes, I used my hands to tighten the light into a hard ball. I found if I didn't do this, the moment the ball crashed into anything it would dissipate like fog. The night before, I'd gotten it to ricochet off the walls in my room like a pinball machine. It was sort of fun, but still nothing that would frighten, let alone hurt, an attacker.

With the ball finally tight enough to manipulate, I raised it up and let it hover in the air. What could I do to make it fearsome? I thought about stretching it and using it like a whip again, but since that night, I hadn't been able to duplicate the same results. After ten minutes of me doing nothing, the ball dissipated. Frustrated, I started over.

I concentrated again and lifted a newly formed Light-ball into the air. Instead of focusing on how to use it as a weapon, I let my thoughts wander to the dark shadows of my mind. It was a place I normally didn't dwell in, but tonight I lingered within the anger I'd kept hidden for so long. I let my desire to hurt and

mangle the Vyken fill my whole being until every nerve ending hummed with violence. It was the cruelest I'd ever felt in my life.

Before I realized what I was doing, the Light-ball flew from my hands and crashed into the wall opposite me. I gasped and moved to examine it, but before I could, Christian flung open my door and snapped on the light.

"What's wrong? What happened?" He looked shockingly alert, like a hunting tiger.

"Congratulations," I blurted. "You win the lightest sleeper award."

"Huh?"

"I just tripped, very quietly I might add." Christian stared at me with a blank look so I continued. "I was on my way to the bathroom, but I tripped on that shoe." I pointed to a turned over shoe near my bed.

Christian picked it up and examined it.

"It's not going to tell you anything, Christian. Shoes are funny like that. Can I get by you?" I actually did need to use the bathroom now.

"Um, sure."

I did my business and returned to the room.

"Can I go back to bed now?" I asked and mentally turned off the light when Christian drew closer to the hole in the wall.

"You sure everything's okay?" he asked.

"Daisies and bunnies." I climbed into bed.

He waited a second before he said, "If you need anything, you know where I am."

I faked a yawn and mumbled, "Uh-huh."

I waited ten minutes before I dared slide out of bed again. I recreated a Light-ball, but this time it was purely for vision sake. I held it up to the hole in the wall. The dry wall was caved in where the ball had struck. I stuck my finger into the depression. It didn't go in as far as I would've liked, but at least it did damage. I was finally on to something.

CHAPTER 33



It was a cold, wet morning. An unexpected spring storm had rolled in overnight, drenching everything. With it came warmer temperatures. I stared outside and watched the rain slowly disintegrate a pile of plowed snow in the school parking lot.

“Llona? Earth to Llona.”

I glanced over, blank-faced. The English teacher was staring down at me. Several students snickered.

Her thin lips twisted open. “When you are done daydreaming could you please go to the office?” She waved a yellow slip in her hand.

“Right. Sure.” I quickly stuffed my book into my backpack and stood. I kept my head down as I made my way out of the classroom.

As soon as I was free from my teacher’s stare, I picked up my pace. I’d never been called to the office before and it made me nervous. But my nervousness quickly changed to anxiety when the secretary behind the desk told me my uncle was waiting for me outside.

Jake should be at work. Why would he be here? I wrapped my arms around my light jacket and stepped into the rain. I was glad I’d decided to wear a beanie to school today. The rain was coming down even harder.

I glanced around for Jake’s car. Nothing. I was about to walk through the parking lot to see if I could find him when Christian’s black truck pulled up. He rolled down his window. “Hop in.”

“What are you doing?”

“Skipping school and taking you with me.”

My eyebrows lifted. “So there is no Jake?”

“Nope.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Get in and I’ll tell you.”

My heart leapt, thinking maybe we were going on date. I’d loved spending so much time with him lately, but very little had progressed in the romantic department. He cared too much about the rules, something I didn’t care about.

After I had slid into the passenger seat and closed the door, he said, “I think you’re ready for our next training exercise.”

“Can’t it wait till school is over?”

“Nope.”

“How come?”

“You’ll see. Be patient.”

“Yes, Master.”

Christian turned toward his house and drove up the hill. “There are clothes for you in the back.”

“Can’t I change at your house?”

“We’re not going to my house.”

“Then where are we going?”

“We’re training outside today.”

I glanced out the rain-streaked window. “In this weather?”

Christian motioned his head toward the back of the truck. “Hurry and get changed. I don’t want to waste any time. And you can’t wear your beanie.” He turned up the radio before I could protest.

I sighed and climbed in the backseat, deliberately bumping the rearview mirror toward the ceiling.

“I wasn’t going to peek,” he said over the loud music.

“Yeah right, pervert,” I joked. I couldn’t see his expression to tell if he knew I was kidding or not. Sometimes he took me way too seriously.

Just when I finished changing, Christian turned onto a dirt road and into a canyon. It was not one I recognized. “I’ve never been here before.”

“It’s not that popular.” He shut the car off in the middle of the road. “Now as soon as we get out, I’m going to move fast, and I want you to keep up. It’s going to be cold and because of the rain you won’t have much footing.”

I peered out the window and up to the dark, cloudy sky. “Not to be a party-pooper or anything, but the moon just barely came out last night. I don’t think I have the energy for this.” Fighting was one thing but even thinking about a hard run made me tired.

“It doesn’t matter what cycle the moon is in. You still have Light in you regardless of what time of the month it is. You just have to learn to access it.”

“Easier said than done.”

He grabbed me by the arms and bore his gaze into mine. “Llona, you are the most competitive person I’ve met. Do you really want me to waste you?”

He knew me too well.

“I didn’t say you would waste me,” I back-peddled. “I just said it would be harder than usual.”

That was the understatement of the year, but I wasn’t about to tell him that.

“Just follow me and concentrate. Ignore all outside stimuli. Sometimes it helps me if I play a song in my head.” He placed his hand on the door handle. “You think you can keep up?”

I wanted to adamantly say no, but instead I said, “Bring it on!”

He bolted out the door. I moved to join him but fell as my foot slipped on wet mud. I looked up just in time to see Christian disappear into the woods. I groaned and stood up. Here goes nothing.

I took off after him, slowly at first. I could barely see him in front of me, sprinting up a steep trail. The cold wasn’t as distracting as I thought it’d be, but the rain was horrible. It drenched my hair in a matter of seconds, and I kept getting distracted from having to wipe it out of my face. Only when I started humming the same song that had been playing in the car earlier, did I start to focus.

Once I eliminated the cold and the rain as a distraction, I concentrated on finding the dormant Light inside me, which proved to be very difficult while sprinting. I was running fast but not nearly fast enough to keep up with

Christian. Already I couldn't see him anymore.

"Not on my watch," I whispered to no one.

I forced my legs to push faster with longer strides until I thought they'd collapse from exertion. It wasn't until I reached complete exhaustion that I felt a burst of Light explode throughout my body. My muscles filled with its energy; the same energy I felt on a full moon, if not more. Air moved more freely into my lungs and my vision became clear. Even my hearing became more focused. I could hear Christian's footsteps not far off. I was not as behind as I thought.

I raced after him, fully sprinting now. Soon, I was right on his tail. He turned around, grinned, and then started running faster. He'd been holding back.

I adjusted my speed to keep up with him making me a little winded but not much. Without warning, he darted off the trail and straight into thick underbrush, still traveling at the same speed. I followed, but quickly found I had to adjust the way I'd been running. Not only did I have to concentrate on blocking out the cold and rain, but now I had to concentrate on where I stepped and moved. The uneven ground was never the same and at every turn, branches reached out as if to grab me.

At first I was really nervous as I ran through the forest, trying to avoid disaster with every step, but without being aware of it, my mind began to take visual snapshots of the surroundings. This gave me the ability to know exactly where I was going to step next. Several steps ahead, in fact. It was as if I was able to see into the future just enough to know my next move. The moment I realized this, I started having fun. I felt like a free runner again, but this time I didn't have to worry about who may be watching.

I caught up to Christian quickly and beamed when I saw the surprise in his face. This time it was my turn to grin. I kept pace with him even though I felt I could pass him if I really wanted to.

I continued to follow him up the mountain. The closer we came to the top, rocky terrain and huge boulders replaced the once dense forest. I was completely soaked by this time and every time I turned sharply, my wet hair slapped me in the face, stinging my cold skin.

"Just up ahead," he called.

I couldn't imagine where he was taking me. All I could see were more rocks and what looked like a steep drop off up ahead.

Christian stopped abruptly on a flat slate-like rock formation just before the edge of a cliff. "We're here."

I came to a stop next to him. "Where exactly is here?"

"The place where we're training today." Lightning cracked overhead. I looked up into the rain. "I'm glad I wore rubber shoes."

"I've been waiting for a day like this for a long time," he said while stretching his legs.

"One that can kill you?" I walked over to the cliff's edge and stared down. It must've been at least a hundred feet to the bottom.

"You've been fighting really well, but you need a more realistic environment. Where I've been teaching you is too easy and too safe. It's not like the real world."

I turned around. "And this is?"

He ignored my question. "You did well keeping up with me. I thought it would take a lot longer for you to figure out how to work Light on your off days."

I pushed the hair away from my face again. "Me too. I wish I would've known about that sooner. It sure would've saved me a ton of embarrassing moments."

"But you needed those moments."

"For what? To feel even more like an outcast?"

"It's through hardship that greatness is born. You don't know how different you are from other Auras. Most of them have lived a privileged life, never knowing how to work hard or sacrifice for others. They've been surrounded by a wall at Lucent, pampered and treated like royalty. I used to think that's where they belonged because of their sacred nature, but after meeting you and seeing what you're capable of, I realize there's a whole other side to Auras that's being ignored. You guys could do so much good if given the opportunity. Of course, if I were to ever mention any of this to anyone, it would be considered blasphemy."

"Maybe we could change their minds?" I offered.

Christian stared into the distance. His face and eyes looked strangely dark beneath the shadows of the storm clouds. "Maybe."

"You ready to fight?"

I rolled back my shoulders and cocked my head side to side. "I'll go easy on you."

I was going to trash talk more, but before I could, Christian swung his right fist at my jaw. I easily ducked and returned the blow. He sidestepped it and did a backwards kick to my head. I caught the kick midair and flipped him hard backwards, forcing him into a somersaulting flip. He landed expertly into a crouched position.

"Good," he said, voice low. "Now faster."

We fought against each other: two warriors pushing each other faster and harder with every step. Neither one of us could overcome the other. That is until thunder exploded, shaking the whole mountain. For a split second, I became distracted, giving him just enough time to swipe my legs out from under me. I fell hard against the rock beneath us.

In a mock pro wrestling move, Christian slapped his elbow and fell down upon me with a huge grin. "You're mine!"

"Now what are you going to do with me?" I teased.

"Nothing I want to." He stood and helped me up. "Let's cool down."

Following his lead, I maintained various yoga positions, while the storm above gradually subsided. It was oddly empowering being on top of a mountain in the middle of a storm. My heart beat from within my chest, yet my mind was as clear as the sky on a cloudless day. I felt at one with the world.

After our bizarre, yet invigorating meditation session, I sat down on the ledge, my legs dangling over.

"Do you have to sit so close?" Christian asked

I stared down into the gully below. "I guess not."

I slid back several feet. Christian sat next to me and stared into the overcast sky. I decided this was the perfect time to ask him about May, indiscreetly of course.

"Can I ask you a question?"

“Sure.”

“Have you ever heard of a human who has the ability to use fire?”

I expected him to give me a strange look, but he didn’t. Instead, he said, “They’re called Furies. How do you know of them?”

“Something I heard once,” I said, telling a half-truth. “Where do they come from?”

“I don’t know their history too well, but like Light, fire has become a part of certain humans. Furies aren’t too popular among the Auras, though.”

“Why?”

“It’s the fire within them. It craves power and domination. Eventually the lust becomes too great to control and their hearts turn black like Vykens.”

“So they’re bad?”

“Not all of them. In fact, there’s a Fury who sits on the Council with your aunt. He’s a mean sucker, but he knows the line between right and wrong.”

The rain had finally stopped, and in the distance the sun began to push through the clouds. I could feel its warmth against my skin.

“I was going to tell you that night,” Christian blurted.

“Huh?”

“That night I was late. I was going to tell you everything about me.”

“What happened?”

“When you left your house, I followed you up the trail, but we weren’t alone. There was someone else there that night. I turned directions and pursued them to make sure whoever it was, wasn’t a threat. At the time, I didn’t think it was a Vyken.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Honestly, when the Council assigned me to you, they said it was ‘for precautionary measures only’ and it was also at your aunt’s insistence. They said Vykens don’t prey on young Auras. They like the blood of a stronger, more experienced, Aura. Supposedly it gives Vykens more power.” He paused. “I’m telling you this because I’m beginning to doubt a lot of what the Council has taught me.”

“Why?”

He stared off into the horizon. The deep lines in his forehead told me how conflicted he was. “I’ve been taught all my life that Auras couldn’t fight, but you proved that wrong. I was told Vykens can’t change their appearance multiple times but obviously they can. I was told Vykens are super strong and fast and that’s it—no other abilities, but that isn’t the case. One touched you from a distance and somehow took control of you. It’s like they’re getting stronger. And all this after they told me the chances of a Vyken coming for you were slim, but now one is hunting you, torturing you. I feel like I’ve been lied to. And there’s something else.”

“What?”

“After the second murder, I spoke to the head of the Auran Council. I told him about what was happening and he said not to worry. He said the murders were a coincidence. A coincidence? If the same thing were to happen to an older Aura, they would’ve moved her far away. This whole thing just doesn’t feel right.”

Because I didn’t know what to say, I asked, “So when you asked me to meet you in the woods that night, why didn’t you tell me the next day who you were?”

“I was going to, but when I showed up at your house the next morning, you were mad or sad—I couldn’t be sure which.”

“Right,” I said, remembering.

“I was afraid if I told you, you’d move away. I realized then that I’d have to earn your complete trust.”

“Good call.” I shifted positions. Something he had said nagged at me. “Christian?”

“Yes?”

“If you don’t trust the Council, maybe I shouldn’t go to Lucent this summer.”

He shook his head. “No, you should. There may be some inconsistencies in what they’re teaching, but I can’t be sure. I need to do more research before I accuse them of anything. You definitely need to go. You’ll learn a lot there. You’ve been too sheltered out here.”

“Won’t I be sheltered there?”

“Only from a life you already know. You need to go learn about the life you

know nothing about, like Furies. In a way you're lucky. It's not always good to know what's really out there. Some of them will terrify you."

"Like what? Wait. Never mind, I don't want to know yet."

"You'll learn soon enough. Once you go to Lucent in the summer everything you know will change."

I turned to him. "Including you."

He stared off into the distance. "I guess so."

I wanted to talk more of the future and hopefully find something positive in it, but before I could, he said, "I'd better get you back."

That night I focused more on my Light bullets, and with the moon's cycle no longer affecting my strength, thanks to Christian's very dangerous, yet highly effective training on the mountain, it came much easier. In a matter of days, I had them piercing through just about anything. And it couldn't have come at a better time, because I couldn't shake the feeling that something big was coming. The tick-tock of death's clock was growing louder.

CHAPTER 34



“*I* have to ask you something,” Christian said as he swung a balled fist in my direction.

I ducked and countered it with a high kick to his face. “Is it personal?”

He caught my foot. “I don’t think so.” He flipped me backwards.

I plopped down on a blue mat. I loved sparring at Christian’s house. There was a ton of room and it smelled a lot better than the dojo. “Go for it.”

He sat next to me and pretended to tie his shoe even though it was already tied. “Prom is coming up, and I know you’re going to be asked by a bunch of guys, but it just wouldn’t make sense for you to be on a date and have me stalking you the whole time.” He inhaled a big breath. “I think it will be a lot easier if—”

“Are you asking me to prom?” I teased.

“Yeah, but I understand if that would be too weird for you.”

I didn’t hesitate. “I couldn’t imagine going with anyone else.”

His eyes met mine, and he smiled. “Good. Then it’s a date, a protection date, I mean.”

“That sounds so romantic.”

“I wish it could be more, really I do.”

I accepted his hand and followed him out of the room. I guess I could eliminate any chance for romance at Prom. It would be just me and my friend Christian. *Yippee.*

In May’s car the next day, May swallowed a bite of her sub sandwich. “That

doesn't surprise me Christian asked you. I knew he would. I'm just surprised he didn't do it months ago."

"Why's that?" I crumpled up my garbage and stuffed it into the fast food bag. Instead of going inside the crowded restaurant, we had decided to eat in May's car.

"Because it would drive him crazy to see you with anyone else. You've seen how he gets when you're with Matt."

"But it's not because he's jealous or anything. Christian doesn't like me like that. He's just overly protective."

May shook her head. "I don't buy it. I see how he looks at you. I'd give anything to have Adam look at me that way."

May had liked Adam for a long time, but other than a few casual dates, he didn't seem too interested in her. "Why don't you ask Adam to prom? We could double."

"I can't ask him. That's going against tradition." May tilted the rearview mirror to inspect her makeup.

"Since when do you care about tradition?"

She held still, staring at herself in the mirror. "You're right. I don't. I think I will ask him. What's the worst that could happen?"

"That's the May I know. We should see if we can get Matt and Tracey to come too," I suggested.

"Oh that girl has it bad for Matt. What a perfect idea."

And so the ball was in motion for the perfect prom setup.

True to her word, May asked Adam that very day. He accepted so easily that I began to wonder if maybe he did like her.

Matt was another story. He had no desire to go to prom with Tracey.

"Llona," he told me the next day at lunch. "Tracey's great, but she's not who I want to go with."

I didn't dare ask him who he had his heart set on.

"Can't you go as friends?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "I guess but promise me you'll save me a dance."

I chuckled uncomfortably. "Sure. Why not?"

After school, a beaming Tracey found me at my locker. “You’ll never guess what just happened.”

By her smile I knew exactly what had happened. “What?”

“Matt just asked me to prom.”

“That’s wonderful.” I gave her a hug. “We should make it a triple date: me and Christian, you and Matt, and May and Adam.”

“Absolutely.”

* * *

TWO WEEKENDS BEFORE PROM, all of us girls decided to go dress shopping. When I found out the theme for prom was “once upon a dream,” the image of a perfect dress came to mind. The problem was, it was only in my imagination. It was a light blue, almost white, lacy dress with a hint of sparkles. It’s what I imagined a fairy to be wearing if I ever saw one.

By the third store I finally found a dress I thought I could modify. May and Tracey were surprised I picked it because it didn’t look that great, but I saw its potential. One of the lessons my mother had taught me was a person could find potential in anything—or anyone—if they were looking for it.

May had found a long, elegant red gown that made her look like Scarlett O’Hara, and Tracey had bought a green dress that flattered her eyes. We had an amazing time, laughing and sharing as only friends do. I knew our trip together would go down as one of my most memorable high school moments.

I was determined to focus on the exciting upcoming festivities, instead of the fact that I hadn’t seen or heard of the Vyken for several weeks. It’s like he was waiting for something, but what?

On the day of prom, all six of us loaded into Christian’s truck and headed to the Paint Gun Exploratorium where we played paintball for hours. I had so much fun that I considered shooting guns as my next hobby. Christian quickly shot down my idea, no pun intended.

When we finished messing around, Christian drove us girls back to my house. He waited for them to pile out before he stopped me.

"I'll be back in about an hour to pick you up," he said.

"We can just meet at the dance like everyone else."

"No. I'd feel better picking you up, if that's okay."

I nodded, smiling. "You know, I think I'm going to make it."

"Make what?"

"The end of the school year. Not to be a rain cloud on this perfect day, but I kind of thought I'd end up dead."

His expression darkened. "Don't say that."

"But things are better now and I don't feel that way anymore. Maybe the Vyken knows I could kick its butt and it ran away scared."

"I don't think so." He averted his gaze over my shoulder, staring into the distance as if he could see the future. "I have a feeling it's waiting."

I wanted to disagree with him, to scold him for being a pessimist, but the truth was deep down I felt the same way. Instead of voicing my feelings, I said, "Everything is going to be fine. You'll see."

His gaze returned to mine. "I hope you're right."

After Christian left, we headed into my room to do hair and make-up.

"I don't think my dress will cover it," Tracey said while looking down at her thigh. A bright purple paintball bruise the size of a baseball peeked out from beneath her shorts.

"It should. I don't think the slit goes that high," May told her.

"Do you want some ice on it?" I asked her. I felt pretty lucky ending up with only a couple of bruises. Poor Tracey had several.

"No, I can barely feel it." She paused. "This dance better be good. I want Matt to have fun."

"He will," I assured her as I pinned up her hair.

"Do you have any mousse, Llona?" May asked. "I forgot to bring mine."

"I don't, but Jake has some," I said and left the room to get it.

"What do you use for your hair then?" May called after me.

"Nothing."

"You will tonight," Tracey called. May laughed, and I had to wonder what they were up to.

I didn't have to wait long. Within twenty minutes my hair looked like a princess's right out of a Disney movie, tiara and all. It looked incredible, but they'd used so much hair product that it felt like a brick was sitting on top of my head.

"Wow. Thanks guys. It looks really good. I just hope I don't sprain my neck," I said while turning my head back and forth.

"You'll get used to it," May said, fluffing her hair. We had put May's hair in curlers. It made her look different, beautifully so. I couldn't wait to see her in the dress she'd chosen.

"So I'll see you guys in a couple of hours?" Tracey asked.

"Sure thing. Don't be late," I answered.

Tracey disappeared, followed shortly by May who gave me a hug before she left.

I couldn't have been happier. I had awesome friends, a great relationship with my uncle, and sort of a boyfriend—well okay, I'm stretching the truth. Christian and I couldn't have a relationship, but when he looked at me I knew there was something more.

I carefully pulled my silver-blue dress over my stiff hair and looked at myself in the mirror. The dress hung off my shoulders by an almost invisible strap. The material was so sheer it looked like a spider had spun a web all around me. The dress flowed outward from my waist mimicking a waterfall from a melting glacier.

In a matter of months, I'd completely transformed myself. I wished Jake could be here to see me, but he wouldn't be back for a couple of days. He and Heidi went away for a long weekend together. Jake had seemed nervous, and I wondered if maybe he was going to propose.

A knock at the door tore my gaze from the stranger in the mirror. Before I could get to the front door, Christian walked in and froze.

"You look—" He breathed a heavy sigh.

"I know, I know, my hair looks like the top of an ice cream cone."

He stepped toward me. "No, it's beautiful. You're beautiful."

"You don't look so bad yourself," I said. He really did look amazing dressed

in a black tux and his hair slicked back. He reminded me of a movie star, minus the strange, almost painful expression on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He moved one more step until he was standing right in front of me. “I thought this would be easier.”

“Easier than what?”

“Than watching you from afar with someone else. I shouldn’t be your date.” His eyes met mine.

“What’s the big deal? We hang out all the time together and you’re always Mr. I-don’t-even-know-you’re-a-girl. Just keep playing that role. You’re good at it.”

“I’m tired of that role.”

“You’re the one that created it.”

“It’s the rules, Llona.”

“Right, the rules.” I placed my hand on his chest and gave him my most encouraging smile. “You can do this, Christian. I’m leaving soon and then you’ll never have to see me again. You won’t have to be tortured anymore.”

He glanced away. “I guess you’re right.”

I wanted to scream at him that, no, I wasn’t right. The thought of not seeing Christian again was enough to make me double over in pain, but he acted so cavalier about the whole thing that I forced myself to think of something else.

“Let’s have fun tonight,” I said. “It’s been such a perfect day. I don’t want anything or anyone to ruin it, okay?”

He smiled. “It has been perfect, hasn’t it?”

“The best. Now let’s go before I throw a beanie over my princess-do.”

Christian held my hand as he led me into the magically transformed high school gym. At least I think it was the gym. The walls were covered in black material; bright lights peeked from holes like stars in the night sky. More lights covered the ceiling and in the corner of the room, a single bright light had been made to look like a full moon. Navy blue and white sheer material draped gracefully across parts of the gym and clusters of real pine trees were spread sporadically throughout. It was like walking through a setting of Shakespeare’s

Midsummer Night's Dream.

"And the award for the best prom decorations goes to Highland," I breathed.

"Someone sure went all out," Christian agreed. "This is a hundred times better than my last prom."

"You went to prom?"

His cheeks reddened. "Yeah."

I attempted a shrug. "Who'd you go with?"

He grinned. "Jealousy doesn't become you."

"I'm not jealous, just curious."

"Right." We stood in silence for a minute, looking around the gym, until I couldn't stand it anymore.

"What did she look like?" I said. "Again, just curious."

He laughed hard. When he finally stopped, he held his hand to my face. "No one compares to you."

This satisfied me, for the time being anyway. It wasn't until just now that I realized how much I didn't know about his past. He could've been with lots of girls before me. I closed my eyes tight to shove the image from my mind.

"Let's dance," he said and pulled me onto the dance floor.

"Shouldn't we wait for the others?"

"They'll find us."

The song playing was a fast pop song by a female singer I didn't recognize, but that didn't surprise me. This wasn't my type of music, but it was much easier to dance to than my twisted, dark favorites.

When the song ended and another began, a much slower one, Christian didn't ask, he just pulled me close to his chest and wrapped his arms around me. Together our bodies swayed as one to the beat of the music, our hearts beating as one. I raised my head until our cheeks touched. His five o'clock shadow scraped against my skin sending a pleasurable chill up my spine. A sigh slipped past my lips. The sound made his fingers dig into my hips with unspoken need.

"Please," I begged, not knowing exactly what it was I wanted. All I knew was I wanted him.

He tilted his head and grazed his lips across my neck, while pressing my

body even tighter against his.

This is what we wanted—to be together, without feeling guilty, without having to worry about the rules, without having to worry about the consequences. Whether we'd admit it or not, we were two teenagers in love.

My head lifted until our eyes met. He leaned his head toward mine, and his lips parted just barely. I lifted on my toes to meet him halfway and closed my eyes.

“Hey guys!”

The words were like the sound of two trains crashing together forcing Christian and I apart. We both opened our eyes and stared at each other. He gave me a weak smile. I didn't return it.

Christian turned away from me but kept his hand on my back. To Matt and Adam he said, “Where are the girls?”

Adam shrugged. “Late, I guess.”

“You look,” Matt said to me with a sly grin, “good enough to—”

Christian shot him a dark look cutting off Matt's words.

“—be very jealous of Christian,” Matt finished.

I laughed and so did he. “You look good too.”

Matt was the type of man who was born to wear a tux. It looked natural on him, like a second skin.

Matt turned to Christian. “Could I have one dance with Llona?”

Christian visibly tensed but ever the gentleman, he said, “If it's all right with her.”

“Sure”

Matt took hold of my hand and tugged me away from Christian.

Adam playfully shoved Christian forward to get his eyes off me. “Come on, Christian. Let's raid the dessert table.”

Matt stopped us on the opposite side of the gym and circled his arms around my waist. Even though a song played with a quick beat, he pretended it was a slow dance and swayed his hips with mine. Occasionally, he'd spin me out and bring me back to his chest, laughing. His movements were graceful, yet strong.

His expression grew serious. “If only things could've been different.”

I looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

He shook his head and glanced over his shoulder. “It doesn’t matter. Christian’s watching us.”

I groaned, wishing Christian could give it a rest just once in a while. “Ignore him. So where are you going to school after this?”

“The university in Rouen. They have a great political science program.”

“I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“You are free to visit me any time.” He smiled and expelled a long breath.

Without warning, my head began to spin but not in a sickly way. I closed my eyes and relaxed more fully into Matt.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

His voice sounded miles away. Before I had a chance to answer, he stopped moving, reached into his pocket and pulled out a vibrating cell phone.

“It’s from Tracey.” He read the text message silently. “Odd.”

“What?”

“She says she’s at your house. And who’s Angel?”

“Huh?” I took the phone from him and read the message out loud. “At Llona’s house. With Angel.” I read it over and over until I thought my legs might give out. *My Angel. The letter. My mother’s letter.* No—not my mother’s letter. Her killer’s letter.

And now he was back for me.

“Llona?” Matt asked.

“I have to go,” I said barely above a whisper.

“Where?” I heard Christian say behind me.

“Tracey’s at her house,” Matt told him.

“Is May with her?” Adam asked.

Matt shrugged.

Because I was about to fall, I forced my legs to move— away from them.

Christian caught up to me. “I’ll drive.”

I didn’t respond, not because I didn’t want to, but because I couldn’t. I was afraid if I opened my mouth, I’d throw up.

This was it. This was really happening. Somehow I’d convinced myself that

nothing was going to happen, that I was finally safe. But the Vyken was just waiting for the perfect day. And it had been the perfect day up until now.

I quickened my pace. Tracey was with him. Tracey was with that monster. I whimpered.

Christian stopped me. "What's wrong?"

"I don't have time to explain. We have to hurry!" I kept walking. Why was I walking? As soon as I stepped into the night, I began to run. Stupid high-heeled shoes. I quickly abandoned them in the parking lot.

Christian caught up to me. "Llona, stop!"

"Open the door," I said when I reached his car. He quickly unlocked it and hopped in the driver's seat.

"What's going on?" he asked.

I told him about the message. "It's him, Christian. He has Tracey."

Christian stepped on the gas. "It's going to be okay."

"No, it's not." The sinking feeling in my gut told me my life would never be the same.

A few minutes later, Christian pulled into my driveway. "Stay here."

"Not a chance. She's my friend." I jumped out of the car and rushed through an already open front door.

Christian grabbed me roughly and whispered, "Wait! You can't rush in there. Keep your mind clear so you don't end up dead."

I searched his eyes, realizing he was right. I sucked in a deep breath and tried to focus.

"I'll go in first," he said, stepping in front of me.

He moved slowly into the darkened living room. I heard him feel for the light switch. When the lights wouldn't turn on, he said, "Can you turn them on?"

Mentally I tried, but it felt as if I was being blocked. "I can't."

"Stay close."

The house was completely black except for a faint light glowing from my bedroom. We slowly made our way toward it.

"Do you feel anything?" Christian asked.

"Actually I don't. I don't think he's here."

Christian pushed open my door and froze. I peered over his shoulder and tried to discern what I was looking at it.

On my bed, sitting with crossed legs, was Tracey in her green prom dress, her head cocked to the side. A single lit candle on my nightstand cast dancing shadows across the room. They were the shadows of the dead. I recognized them immediately and stepped forward.

Christian grabbed me. “Don’t!”

I pushed his hand away. “Tracey?”

There was something around her neck. A red scarf? I reached to touch her.

“Llona, no!” Christian cried.

As soon as my hand touched her shoulder, Tracey fell backwards onto my bed.

Not a scarf.

A slit throat.

CHAPTER 35



Somewhere between the living and the dead existed a world for those who belonged in neither. It was a dark and lonely place, not meant for hope, love, or joy. It was a place I'd been to before when I'd lost my parents. I didn't think I'd be back so soon.

"Llona! Get up. We have to call the police." Christian was tugging at me.

In a daze, I rose onto my feet. Tracey was with the dead now. And her wide-open, accusatory eyes told me it was my fault.

Christian was speaking into his phone. My address. He was telling someone my address.

His hand pressed against my back. "Llona," he said as gentle as a summer breeze. "The police will be here in a few minutes. Let's go wait in the garage."

I turned to follow until I saw a letter resting between Tracey's crossed legs. I picked it up.

"What is it?" Christian asked.

I opened it and read quietly: "I've come back for you, Little One. I told you I would."

I crumpled the paper and walked out. Christian followed behind.

Inside the garage, Christian gently took hold of my shoulders. "I wish I could comfort you right now, but we don't have much time. The police are going to be here in a minute. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I stared out into the cool night.

"As far as you know this was a random killing. There was a

miscommunication and Tracey thought we were meeting here. She just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Are you listening to me?”

I must have nodded because he didn't say anything else. He just stared with me while holding my hand.

When a police car arrived, Christian walked out to meet them. I watched from the dark garage as he told them what had happened. His body was stiff and his expression emotionless. I couldn't understand how he could speak about it without shutting down.

When he led them into the house, I followed, but stopped at the doorway while he showed them to my room. A beeping sound on the kitchen counter drew my attention. My cell phone. One new message lighting up the screen.

In bold letters it read: “All the world's a stage and May's about to fall off.”

I calmly placed the phone back down. I could hear Christian still talking in my room, while a second policeman moved into the hallway to make a phone call. No more people were going to die because of me.

This ends tonight.

I turned to sneak outside, but a second patrol car pulled into our driveway. I moved back into the house and, while the cop in the hall had his back to me, darted into Jake's room. After removing the screen from his window, I jumped out. I didn't care about the silent alarm that was probably going off in Christian's pocket. By the time he got here, I'd be long gone, propelled forward by years of anger and pain.

I let Light guide me. It seemed to know exactly where to go quicker than my brain. When I realized I was headed in the direction of the high school, I knew exactly where the Vyken held May.

I circled around the school away from the boisterous prom scene several buildings over and threw open the doors to a pitch-black auditorium. They shut behind me like the lid on a coffin.

A bright spotlight flipped on; its stream of light raced to center stage capturing a tied-up May in its beam. I scanned the area. There was no one else, but by the spinning sensation beginning in my head, the same feeling I had in the cornstalks, I knew a Vyken lurked nearby.

The only way this was going to end, for better or worse, was to face him. The moment I was born, my life had been set on this path. It didn't matter if I was ready or not, it would all be over soon. My only goal was to help May escape it alive.

I began the long walk down the slanted decline to the stage. I was surprisingly calm. I didn't even try to be quiet when I walked up the steps to May. There was no point.

May's head was slumped forward, but not in an unnatural way like Tracey's had been. I breathed a sigh of relief when her chest rose and fell.

I stepped to untie her when all of a sudden the spinning in my head reached a whole new level, and I stumbled. It was like I'd been hit with a poisonous dart, but it was a familiar poison. I tried to remember Christian's training with the heart monitor.

"You are a vision," I heard a familiar, smooth accent say.

I fell to my knees. *Relax!* I inhaled deeply.

Behind me, Mr. Steele laughed. "It's remarkable the effect I have on you. It's as strong as it was when you were a child. I had to be so careful around you, withholding my full power. Your mother was the same."

My mother. I had to clear my mind. All this time, I'd mistaken my extreme, almost dream-like, attraction toward him for silly puppy love when in actuality he was a Vyken in disguise. How many more mistakes would I make?

Mr. Steele moved in front of me blocking May. Dressed in an old-fashioned tuxedo, his normally slick black hair was messy and lay partly in his eyes. He would've looked perfect, except part of his right sleeve had been burned. My eyes moved to May.

"Of all the Auras I've hunted and killed," he began. "You've been the most fun. Your lack of training has made you reckless and unpredictable. I've found it so refreshing."

Struggling to stand, I concentrated on getting rid of the nauseating effect he had on me.

"It was wonderful playing games with you—the shoe, the nightly visits, the feel of your skin." He paused and licked his lips. "Actually, I rather enjoyed

killing the mother of the boy who painted you. He tarnished what's mine to destroy, so I tainted his heart."

He walked behind May and stroked her hair. "But you had your own surprises, didn't you? What a rare treat it was to find your best friend is an undiscovered Fury."

I stood up, legs finally straight. Behind my back, I concentrated on creating the tightest ball of light I could, each the size of a bullet. With each one, I focused on a memory of my mother. It helped the process, and I made as many as my hands could hold while he continued to talk.

"I remember the first time I saw you so innocent and full of life as most children are. You were with your mother when I discovered you. It was merely by accident. Ella had no idea you two were being watched."

At the sound of my mother's name I froze.

"She was taking you for a walk through the Redwoods, and I remember thinking how strange it was that a mother would be with a child all alone in the dark woods. But then she did something remarkable. Would you like to know what she did?"

I searched for my voice but had none.

"She became transparent, invisible. I watched as you walked right through her. I knew then how extraordinary my find was. Only a powerful Aura would be able to do something like that."

Invisible? Was that even possible?

He sauntered across the stage, arms behind his back as if he were strolling through Central Park. "It didn't take much to maneuver my way into her life. She was so naïve and trusting, making for an easy kill." He turned to me. "I could've done the same to you—become your best friend. Imagine all the fun we could've had: sleepovers, sharing secrets, silly boy talk. And just when you're feeling warm and fuzzy, wham!" He smacked his hands together, making me jump. "I rip your head off. But my desires were overruled, hence all the scare tactics. I had to force your Light to develop early."

I hadn't heard most of what he'd said. I was still stuck on the part about my mother. Anger raged through me, burned through my veins. It was the spark that

lit my Light. It surged through me, overwhelming all my senses.

Finally, I could think past his influence.

“You killed my parents,” I said. My voice didn’t waver.

He tsked me. “Control your temper, Little One. I only did what comes natural to me. If drinking milk was forbidden, would you be angry at a babe sucking at its mother’s tit? And as for killing your parents? I only killed your mother. I did taste your father, but I did not kill him.”

“If not you, then who?” I demanded.

He stared at me thoughtfully, then said, “The shadow that always watches but can never be seen. He saved me the night your father caught up to me. You should’ve seen Mark’s face when he thought he was finally going to avenge your mother’s death and save the future life of his precious Llona. But Mark failed to see the shadow from behind until it was too late. The shadow snapped his neck as easily as one snaps their fingers.” Mr. Steele snapped his fingers. The sound echoed in the large auditorium.

“Show me your true self,” I demanded, wanting desperately for him to shut up.

He tilted his head. “And why would you want that?”

“So I can see the true face of the demon I’m going to kill.”

CHAPTER 36



The Vyken's deformed lips twisted upward into a cruel smile while I formed three more tight balls behind my back.

"I can see I no longer have an effect on you. You are right. There is no need to keep up this illusion." He waved his hand in front of his face. His perfectly clear complexion cracked revealing a black interior.

"But are you sure you want to see the true face of evil? I was one of the first created. We were made from the darkest parts of man's mind where greed, lust, and murder wait in ambush for that one small moment when man becomes weak."

A chunk of skin and tissue peeled away from his cheek and fell, slapping against the stage floor.

He stepped toward me. "We let this darkness turn our hearts and minds black by the sins of those who claimed to be righteous."

Another strip of skin, as if a razor had cut it, slid from his forehead to his chin, then flopped onto the lapel of his jacket.

"We would not exist but for these hidden secrets."

He reached up and tore off the remaining flesh on his skin. It stretched and tore beneath his boney fingers, long tendrils snapping at the bone. Beneath was a black face, if you could call it that. Where there should've been a nose was an empty hole, but when he turned his head, pieces of bloodied flesh still clung to the inside of his skull. His leathery skin pulled tight over abnormally high cheekbones, but around his mouth, the wrinkled skin bunched up into black

nodules, forming a lumpy, grotesque bottom lip.

All this was horrible enough, but it was his eyes that were the most frightening. Seeing them directly, without Mr. Steele's mask, filled me with the worst kind of dread and horror I could imagine.

Images appeared in my mind of twisted, broken, dead bodies; murderers killing for the sheer joy of it. I closed my eyes to block the disturbing, soul-sucking images from my mind.

The Vyken laughed. "Evil will not be ignored."

I collapsed to my knees, trying all I could to mentally block the gruesome images. I gulped for air several times, clutching at my heart that felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. The pain was excruciating. Murders, rapists, thieves. I saw it all in vivid detail. It was more than any person should have to endure.

To combat it, and to save my soul, I focused on the good in my life. I thought of my friends, of Christian and Jake. I thought of my devoted father, remembered him: the time he took me fishing and had hooked his finger, or when he bought me an Easter dress, but it was two sizes too small. I easily forgave him because of his smile. My mother used to say he stole his smile from a sunray. Slowly, the barrage of toxic images began to fade.

My mother. I thought of her now, of what she must have endured. She'd gone against everything she'd been taught to follow her heart. Friends surely had been lost and her name ruined, but she did what she thought was right. She was someone I wanted to be like.

It didn't take long for the image of my mother to completely take over the Vyken's disturbing images. The same creature that had taken my mother's precious life now thought he was going to destroy mine. *Never.*

I clenched my fists, head down, almost touching my bent knee, and then summoned all of Light's power to the front of my subconsciousness. It came so willing, I gasped for air.

"Mmmm," he moaned. "I felt that delicious wave of power over every part of me."

I rolled up into a standing position and stared the Vyken directly in the eyes.

In one swift motion, I tossed each individual light bullet in his direction with an amazing force. He dodged the first few but was not quick enough to avoid them all. One grazed his cheek and cut through his calloused skin. Another tore through his arm.

The smirk on his face disappeared when he touched exposed flesh. He brought down his blood-tinged fingers and examined them. “You are full of surprises. I may have underestimated your abilities, but no matter. Let’s get to it, shall we?”

He appeared in front of me and swung a fist. I tried to duck, but part of his hand connected with my head. I flew back several feet. I wasn’t sure what was worse: the pain or the shock of being hit in the face. I never knew how degrading it was to have your face smacked before. It made me feel small and insignificant.

I jumped to my feet, despite the pain, to show he couldn’t have power over me.

He attacked me again, but this time I was ready. Remembering everything Christian had taught me, I ducked beneath his blow, spun around and kicked him hard in the back. I moved to kick him again, but he caught my mid-air kick and twisted my foot hard. My body followed until the cold wooden floor of the stage stopped it. I gasped for air.

“You are truly unique, Llona,” he said, as he walked around me. “An Aura who fights? Ignores the Auran Council? Rare, indeed! Vyken should be grateful you are a rarity. I can only imagine how our kind would dwindle if Auras ever realized their true powers.”

I created another light bullet, bigger this time. While he was still speaking, I rolled onto my back and tossed it at him. He attempted to move out of the way, but the bullet tore through his other arm. This time he cried out.

I jumped up and punched him in the face. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he felt as disgraced as I’d been only moments ago. Now we were on a level playing field. I had the ability to hurt him, and he knew it.

My confidence was short-lived, however, when his fist flew up faster than I thought possible and connected with my jaw. My eyes rolled to the back of my head, and I felt my body complete an almost perfect back flip.

Gratefully, Light's power helped me to remain conscious, enabling me to land on my feet. I continued to fight with a ferocity that, if I could have foreseen, would've frightened me.

Together we became an angry mosh pit of fists and kicks, twisting to a tune heard only by enemies who wish to destroy one another. Its beat was loud in my head and it pushed me on, harder and faster to destroy the creature that had taken all that I loved.

I became oblivious to everything else in the room. My only focus was the Vyken in front of me who fought for an entirely different reason. His determination stemmed from greed, corruption, and a desire for insatiable power. Mine was for the love of my family and friends.

The more I hurt him, the more I was spurred on, until I began to feel something foreign and dark take hold of my mind. This new feeling gave me pause, and I hesitated in both wonder and fear.

The Vyken took advantage of the moment and struck me hard across the back of my head. With his second blow, I fell to the ground. I pushed myself up on all fours, but my movements were too slow. He kicked me in the stomach forcing me to flip onto my back. In a fraction of a second, he was on top of me, straddling my body.

He breathed heavily a few times before asking, "I do have one question. However did you get away from Christian? I really hoped he could be a part of this."

I was too busy trying to get my vision back to answer him. When I didn't respond, he continued, "Like May here, Christian, too, was a surprise. I never thought the Council would assign someone so young to be a guardian, but I guess it shouldn't have surprised me. They never were good at making smart decisions."

"How did you know?" I finally gasped.

He leaned toward me, inches from my face. "That night at the hospital when he kept insisting you were alive. I thought Christian was crazy for trying to save you when you looked like death himself, but then he'd said the word "Light" and that's when I knew. He was your guardian. Only a guardian would be able to

sense their ward's Light. After that, I did all I could to make sure he'd save you."

He smoothed back my hair with his cold hand. "I was going to take you that night, you know. The discovery of a guardian protecting you shook me up a bit, but looking back, I'm glad I didn't. Having him teach you to fight has been well worth it. Your Light-blood smells so sweet. So ripe." He leaned in closer until his putrid breath warmed my cheek. "When I'm done with you, he will be next."

The thought of him harming Christian spurred me into action. I grabbed his head between my palms and commanded Light into my fingertips. Instantly, his flesh melted beneath my burning hands, and he fell over screaming. I rolled on top of him and repeatedly punch him in the face.

"You will never hurt me or anyone I love ever again!" I yelled.

I managed to hit him several times before he caught my fist and squeezed hard. I stifled a cry.

"Enough of this." Lightning quick, he stood up from beneath me, taking me with him. His calloused fingers gripped my neck, stopping air from passing to my lungs. In my face, he hissed, "This fight is over. Do you understand? You have lost and now your blood will become mine."

His hand jerked my head to the side exposing my neck. All attempts to free myself were useless, and I could see now he had only been toying with me before.

My struggling body reminded me of a gazelle after it's been captured by a cheetah. It always made me mad to see how easily the gazelle would give up after struggling for just a short time, as if it knew it didn't have a chance. I didn't think I had a chance either, but I wasn't about to stop fighting.

"Hold still, Little One, it will hurt less." He lowered his head to my flesh, then paused. "Never mind, struggle. I want you to feel pain."

His head struck forward like a viper and his teeth pierced the skin of my neck. The pain was terrible, far worse than I could've ever imagined. And every attempt to push him away only made his cold teeth drive further into my flesh.

Was this what my mother had endured? A painful death? All the good she'd done, all the people she'd helped and then to be killed by this evil monster. Was I really going to let my parent's legacy be destroyed? I was all that was left. My

mother used to tell me I was destined for great things—finally, I believed her.

Blood flowed down my arms and dripped to the floor. Beyond the blood, I knew Light was next to be drained, and after that there'd be nothing left. Already I could feel Light struggling to contend with death's darkness.

I opened my eyes and squinted into the stage's bright lights. Its warmth whispered against my skin as if it were trying to tell me something. I blinked slowly and in that second had a moment of clarity. I could expel light, but could I draw it into me just as easily?

Using the last of my strength, I began to suck the light from the room and into myself, hoping it would fortify my weakening Light. The stage lights flickered until they went out entirely. I reached further, mentally draining the surrounding area of power: the school, the neighborhood, all of it until I could contain no more. I was so full of Light that my skin felt like it would burst from my frame.

That's when I released it. My body stiffened, and my head snapped back as Light spilled from my eyes and mouth.

The Vyken stiffened against me, and his eyes opened wide. Fear and horror painted them a terrible color. He squirmed and tried to push away from my neck, but Light's grip was tighter. It snuffed out his darkness and as more Light flowed from me, I felt him grow weak.

A loud tearing sound bounced throughout the auditorium as the body of the Vyken came apart. First his arm disintegrated, followed by his other one. The back of his head collapsed within itself, then his chest. He continued to crack and peel until his whole body became a pile of silver ash.

What once was a vessel for absolute evil was now nothing more than a pile of dirt at my feet.

CHAPTER 37



I remember it was freezing the day my mother died, but that didn't stop me from going into our backyard to swing on our rusted metal swing set. The chilly fall weather nipped at my face; it was a welcome distraction from the somber mood in the house. Something had happened, something bad, and I had a strong feeling I didn't want to know what.

I saw my father when he came home that morning. His eyes were red and puffy and so when he called my name, I ran. My father never cried.

I jumped on the swing and pumped my legs as hard and fast as they'd go. I didn't even slow down when my father came outside, hands stuffed in his pockets.

"I need to talk to you, Llona. Can you stop?"

I pushed harder. My body lifted a few inches off the seat of the swing when it was at its highest point. A little further, and I could touch the sky.

"Llona, please stop. I need to talk to you about your mother."

"Mom will be here soon. She's taking me to the park." I reached my hand to the sky.

"No, Llona."

I blocked the empty sadness I heard in his voice and raised my other hand to the clouds. With neither hand on the ropes, I lost my balance and fell from the swing. I expected to hit the ground, but my always-quick father caught me in his arms and cradled me to his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Llona," he cried, tears spilling on top of my hair. "I couldn't

protect her. I lost her. I'm so sorry!"

Over and over he apologized while he rocked me back and forth.

It seemed I'd stared an eternity into the sky while lying in his arms. One single moment in time lasts an eternity when you realize you've lost someone you love more than life. I'd had too many of these moments to all of a sudden be experiencing another one.

But this moment was different from the others. This time something inside me had died. I felt whatever it was flow through my blood like a poisonous virus, and I wondered if I was dying.

I used the last of the borrowed light to lighten the auditorium, and then I collapsed to the stage, the dust of the Vyken only inches from my face.

The doors of the auditorium flew open and Christian rushed in.

"Llona!" he called. He was at my side before I could raise my head. "Llona?"

"Get May," I managed to say.

He moved away from me and untied May. Very carefully he laid her down and examined her. I slowly moved into a sitting position.

"I'm calling an ambulance," he said and pulled out his phone.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"I think so, but we need to be sure."

While he called 911 and explained our location to the operator, I swept my long hair to the side of my neck, covering the two puncture wounds from the Vyken. For some reason, they made me feel dirty, and I didn't want Christian to see them.

As soon as he closed his phone, he returned to my side. "You look like you got the crap kicked out of you."

"You should see the other guy," I mumbled.

Christian tensed and glanced around. "Where is the Vyken?"

"You mean Mr. Steele?"

Christian was silent, then, "Mr. Steele was the Vyken?"

I nodded.

"I knew something was wrong about him," he said.

“How?”

Christian ignored me and clenched his jaw. “Where is he?”

“You’re standing on him.”

“What?” He glanced down and stepped to the side of the silver ash.

“You killed him? But how?”

“Long story.”

He shook his head. “That’s impossible.”

“I was well trained, I guess.”

He knelt down, his expression granite. “Do you know how dangerous that was? Why did you leave me back there?”

“This was my problem. I wasn’t about to get anyone else killed.” The thought of Tracey, dead on my bed, filled me with great sorrow. I slumped my shoulders.

“I got her killed,” I whispered.

“It wasn’t your fault. It was the Vyken that did this, no one else. Do you understand?”

I nodded my head because I knew that would make him feel better, but deep down I would always blame myself. Everything that had happened tonight could’ve been prevented if only I would have left. My selfishness had caused her death.

Christian’s arm came around me. “Everything will be all right, trust me, okay?”

I nodded again.

“I hate to do this now, but the police and ambulance will be here any second. You have to know what to say.”

“What do you want me to say?”

Christian glanced around the room. “Tell them the truth except for the part where Mr. Steele is a Vyken and you killed him. Since we can’t produce a body, we need them to think he got away.”

“What about May?”

“She probably doesn’t know much. I’ll try and talk to her as soon as she’s awake.”

“She knows everything.”

Christian’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean everything?”

“I told her what I was.”

“Why would you do that?”

I wished I could get angry, but there was no more fight left. “I needed a friend and so did she. She knows what it’s like to be different.”

“Different as in a social outcast or different as in “special” different?”

I raised my eyes to meet his. “Like me different. She’s a Fury.”

Christian stared at May. “A Fury? This whole time and no one knew?”

“She didn’t know who she was, still doesn’t really.”

A deep voice echoed from the hallway, “Hello?”

“We’re in here,” Christian called.

Two EMTs and one police officer rushed in. Christian bent his head and whispered in my ear. “This will all be over soon.”

* * *

IT WAS the day of graduation. It was supposed to be a day filled with hope for the future, but as I looked around I saw only grief and sadness on the faces of my classmates. Tracey was dead. She had been one of them and had been murdered by someone we had all trusted. Mr. Steele had not only taken Tracey, he’d killed a part of our innocence.

I glanced back at May sitting two rows behind me. She gave me a weak smile and nodded her head. The big purple bruise on the side of her face had finally faded, but I could see in her eyes that what happened on prom night effected more than just her face.

That night Mr. Steele had sent May a text from Tracey’s phone telling her to meet Tracey at the auditorium. When May showed up and saw Mr. Steele and not Tracey, she didn’t think anything was wrong. She assumed Tracey was late. But as their conversation progressed, and Mr. Steele’s behavior changed from being a teacher to more of an obsessed stalker (she said he was asking all sorts of personal questions about me), she decided to leave. That didn’t sit well with Mr.

Steele who then threw her into a wall.

Using the only way she knew to protect herself, May tried to set him on fire by just thinking about it, but instead, nearby chairs burst into flames, burning the sleeve of his suit. Mr. Steele had been so shocked, that he paused, giving her an opportunity to run, which she didn't waste. However, it was only a short moment before he'd caught up to her. He had planned on killing her that night, but because she used her ability he had spared her for some future use we would never know.

One positive thing to come out of all this was it had spurred May into finding out more about herself. The very next day she had called Sophie and told her everything. And although Sophie lacked the compassion that was probably needed for that conversation, she was completely honest in telling May the history of Furies, how she could learn to control fire, and what the future may hold for her.

When Sophie extended her an invitation to attend Lucent with me where she could study under an elder Fury, May readily accepted.

I couldn't have been happier May was coming with me. The last thing I wanted right now was to be in a new place all alone.

I glanced up into the bleachers, way in the back to where Jake sat with Heidi. Next to him, I spotted Christian wearing a baseball cap and a heavy jacket despite the warm weather. He was supposed to be incognito, but for me at least, he was all I saw.

Since the Vyken had been discovered and killed, the Council no longer felt Christian needed to be my guardian, nor pretend to be a senior anymore. That's what Sophie told me anyway, but the next day, a man four times my age showed up and said he would be my "escort" until I left for Lucent.

Personally, I think Christian was removed from being my guardian because the Council thought he'd failed somehow. He was the one that should've killed the Vyken, not me. That's exactly what Sophie had said anyway.

I wouldn't realize the consequences of what I'd done until much later, but for now I was glad I had killed the Vyken. Maybe too glad.

There was a dark part of me, hidden deep within, I felt growing like the

stretched shadows of night when the sun sets across the horizon. It frightened me, but I reasoned it had something to do with what I'd endured, and given enough time it would go away. I hoped.

Graduation seemed to last forever, and I could tell by the looks of those around me they agreed too, especially Matt who was sitting a few rows in front of me. A couple of times his head dropped back like he had fallen asleep. I felt particularly sorry for him. He took Tracey's death pretty hard as he blamed himself. He should've picked her up like a normal date, he had told me. I tried to convince him it wasn't his fault, but when a person feels both guilt and grief, only on their own can they find their way out of the suffocating black hole of depression. Believe me, I know.

Finally, the last speaker finished and the principal asked us to stand while he gave us some final words of wisdom. When it came time to throw our hats into the air, some of us did, but most of us just quietly took them off.

And just as quietly, we left the gymnasium and high school behind.

Outside, Jake gave me a dozen roses.

"I'm so proud of you," he said, giving me a hug. "Your parents would be proud, too."

"Thanks. Is Christian still here?" My escort wanted to take May and I to the airport as soon as possible.

"He said he'd see you back at the house," Jake answered.

"Llona?" a familiar voice asked.

I turned around. "Matt. How are you doing?"

He had already changed out of his graduation gown. He had dark circles under his eyes, and I wondered how much sleep he was getting.

"I'm okay. I just wanted to say goodbye and wish you well." He pulled me in for a tight hug.

"So you're off to Rouen now, right?" I said when he finally let go.

"Looks that way. You know it all seemed so important before, but now ... I don't know."

I grabbed his hand. "It is important. You are important. You are going to do some amazing things in life."

He searched my eyes. "So will you. Maybe one day in the future, we can try doing them together."

I chuckled lightly. "Maybe."

"Take care of yourself, Llona. There's no one else like you."

After we said our goodbyes, I jumped into the car. May was waiting for me in the back.

"You sure you want to do this?" I asked her.

"Absolutely. Finally we won't feel like freaks any more. It's going to be great."

I wished I could agree with her, but something told me where we were going wasn't going to be as wonderful as May wanted to believe.

After the elderly escort from Lucent Academy dropped May off to finish packing, we approached my house. Christian's car was parked in the driveway.

The old man swiveled around in his seat. "You're all packed, yes?" He dabbed at his face with a perfectly white, ironed handkerchief.

"Pretty much. Give me ten minutes."

He blew his nose. "We're on a time table."

"I know. I'll hurry." I jumped out of the car.

The moment I walked into the house I knew it was empty. I looked out my bedroom window to find Christian standing outside, his back to me. By his rigid stance I could tell he was upset.

I joined him. "Christian?"

He turned around and forced a smile. "Happy graduation!"

"Right. What are you doing out here?"

"Just thinking."

"What about?"

Christian nodded his head back toward the house. "You ready for Lucent?"

"I guess. I still wish it were you taking us. The old guy is creeping me out."

"He's not that bad."

"He carries a hanky."

Christian smiled but couldn't laugh.

"So where are you headed?" I asked.

“Not sure yet. They’ll probably send me back to Oregon to train younger guardians again. I doubt I’ll get another ward assigned to me for a while after the way I screwed up.”

“Screwed up? You saved my life. More than a few times, if I remember correctly.”

He was silent for a moment. “Your escort's probably waiting for you, huh?”

“He can wait.” I didn’t want our goodbye to be rushed.

“I’m glad May’s going with you. It makes me feel better knowing you won’t be alone.”

“Me too, but it will be weird not seeing you. I’ve gotten used to having you around.”

“I know what you mean.” The sadness in his eyes reflected my own.

“I wish you could come with me,” I complained again.

“Against the rules.”

“Pesky rules.”

“Yeah.”

Silence again.

“You can at least call me, right?” I asked.

“It’s frowned upon.”

I let out an exaggerated sigh.

Christian slid his hand into mine. “Don’t worry. I’ll call and you can call me. We just can’t be too open about it.”

He wrapped his arms around me. I inhaled deeply, wanting to always remember his spicy scent.

“You have no idea how much I’m going to miss you,” he whispered.

“Not as much as I’m going to miss you,” I whispered back. I closed my eyes and tried not to think of the pain growing in my gut. A hook ripping open my insides would’ve felt better than having to say goodbye to him.

He created space between us and stared down at me with stormy blue eyes. “Take care of yourself. And trust your instincts. If something doesn’t feel right, it isn’t.” He let go of my arms and stepped back. “Call me when you get there, if you can.”

“I will.”

He turned back toward the house. Was he really just going to leave? As he moved further from me, air caught in my chest and I didn’t think I’d be able to breathe. I wanted to cry out to him, beg him to stay. My eyes burned with fresh tears.

Christian made it to the screen door before he stopped. My heart skipped a beat. His white knuckles gripped the handle and his muscles tightened.

“Screw the rules,” he said. He turned around and in about three steps was across the lawn and taking me into his arms. His lips pressed upon mine with such passion, my legs weakened.

Finally, the kiss I had dreamed of. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him even closer. The kiss lasted less than a minute, but in those seconds I knew exactly how Christian felt about me.

When he released me, he breathed, “I don’t know how I’m ever going to let you go.”

“It’s just temporary,” I said, more to convince myself. “We’ll see each other again. We have to.”

“We will. I’ll make sure it happens.” He smiled down at me.

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He kissed me again, lightly.

This time when Christian left, my heart didn’t feel as heavy. He had made me a promise, and he wasn’t the type to break it. I would see him again.

I returned to my room and moved to grab the suitcases off my bed but stopped in front of the mirror. After glancing around to make sure I was alone, I moved the side braid away from my neck.

Very faintly, beneath heavy foundation, two red marks stared back at me accusingly. The bite marks hadn’t healed. They remained a permanent fixture on my body reminding me daily of what had happened.

I wish it were just the bite marks that remained. The Vyken’s poison had left a darkness inside me that couldn’t be concealed by foundation. I’d tried to ignore its presence, pretend it didn’t exist, but very subtly I felt it changing me despite my best efforts.

At the sound of a knock on my door, I quickly moved my braid back into place.

“Are you ready?” the elder escort asked at the door.

I looked at myself one more time in the mirror.

Ready? How could I be ready for a future I didn’t know? One thing was certain, however.

I had survived.

THE END

READY FOR MORE? Grab your copy of Bitter Magic, book two in the Born of Light series! Read chapter one below.



PEOPLE TOLD me life would return to normal, but how could it after you'd killed someone? Or something. Life would never be the same again, apparently starting with my new dorm room at Lucent Academy.

"Why does it smell like blood in here?" I dropped my duffle bag on the perfectly made bed. The pink floral bedspread wrinkled its way out of perfection.

"What a silly thing to say," my aunt Sophie said. "This room is practically brand new."

"I don't think so." I glanced under the bed. Where was that smell coming from? "Did a butcher live in here?"

May, my best friend, walked through the door. "What butcher?"

“The butcher who killed a cow in my room.” I looked all around for its source. My dorm room was twice the size of my bedroom back home but not nearly as comfortable. The wild rose-colored walls and heavy wooden chests screamed pretentious. So not my style.

May wrinkled her nose. “There was a cow?”

Sophie groaned. “Really, Llona. You have such an imagination.” She turned to May; her long and ruffled blue skirt followed. “Did you find your room satisfactory?”

“I did. And thanks again for inviting me here.”

Sophie placed a hand on her shoulder. “Lucent’s glad to have you. We always look forward to having new Furies.”

“When’s dinner?” I asked. May and I had been traveling for a week since leaving Utah. Sophie thought it would be fun to let us sightsee before we started school again. At first, I thought it was a great idea, but by our third museum and our tenth fast-food restaurant, all I wanted was a good meal and a place to call home.

“In about twenty minutes.” She swiped her finger along the edge of the chair rail, obviously inspecting for dust. “Why don’t you get settled, and then come on down when you hear the chimes. Do you remember where to find the dining room?”

“Um, first floor, all the way at the end,” I answered. Sophie had given us a quick tour on the way up. There were so many rooms, I was surprised I’d remembered.

“Good. I’ll see you girls down there. Oh, and by the way, Llona, even though Auras aren’t normally unkind, just remember that they’re still teenagers trying to discover who they are. Sometimes they say things that surprise even me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She paused. “You’ve been on the outside your whole life. They may view you as different.”

“Fantastic. So I was a freak before and now you’re saying I’m a freak here too?”

“No, it will just take a while for the girls to get to know you. I’m sure once

they do, they will love you just like I do.”

Uh-huh, sure. 'Cause that's how girls are.

“I wish Christian was here,” I mumbled and turned my attention to my bag so she wouldn't see me scowling. It was amazing how easily adults forgot what it's like to be young and on the outside.

“What did you say?” Sophie asked.

I looked up, surprised she'd heard me. “Nothing.”

Sophie pursed her lips like she wanted to say more but thought better of it. “Try not to be late, girls.”

The door closed.

May jumped onto my bed. “Can you believe this place? It's like right out of a fairy tale. I feel like a princess!”

I forced a smile and shoved my clothes into the nearest dresser.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing I can't get over.” I crinkled my nose. “Except for this awful smell.”

“What smell?”

“You really don't smell it?” I opened the closet doors and with just a thought turned on the light. The walk-in closet was bare except for a thin layer of dust covering the wooden floor.

“It might smell a little musty,” May offered. “Do you really think the other girls will be mean to us?”

I shrugged. “Probably not to you. From what I hear, Furies are a rare find. I'm sure they'll treat you like the diamond you are!”

I grinned and sat down next to her, but I secretly wondered how things would be different if I were a Fury instead of an Aura. May's ability to create and control fire were pretty cool. Not only that, but Furies, especially good ones, were rare. That's why Auras were always excited to have one around. Then again, being an Aura had its perks too, if I could use it the way I wanted to, as a weapon. At Lucent, however, Light was only to be used to edify and beautify the world around us. Ugh.

May laughed. “You sound just like your aunt.”

I sighed. “This place is going to take some getting used to.”

May nodded, her fingers tugging at a loose string on my bed.

“How are you doing?” I asked. She had been quiet on the drive over from New York City, but I didn’t dare ask her what was wrong in front of the man who had escorted us to Lucent Academy, a school over a hundred miles north of Coast City.

“For some reason, I thought I’d feel better putting all this space between us and high school, but I almost feel worse. It’s like I’ve run away or something.” May looked up at me, searching for understanding. “Does that make sense?”

“It does. It feels like we’re betraying Tracey by being here. We get to live our lives while she’s six feet under.” Beneath the pillow on my lap, I dug my nails into my palm, remembering how Mr. Steele, a Vyken posing as my math teacher, had sliced my friend’s throat. And even worse, it was my fault. My selfishness had left Tracey dead, May injured, and many others traumatized. If only I would’ve left for Lucent sooner.

“Are you going to call Christian tonight?” May asked, like she thought mentioning the name of the guy I loved would help me forget about what happened.

I forced another smile. “I have to call my uncle Jake first to let him know I’m finally here, and if I don’t have someone standing over me, I’ll call Christian next.”

“I can’t believe they won’t let you talk to him,” May said.

“Oh, I can talk to him, but it’s,” I made air quotes, “really frowned upon.”

Christian wasn’t my official Guardian anymore, but it still wasn’t considered proper for us to speak informally to each other.

May chuckled and stood. “I better finish unpacking before we have to go downstairs. Come grab me when you’re ready.”

After May shut the door, I opened the window to let in fresh air. I was looking forward to the cooler New York weather. I didn’t think I could’ve handled sunny and warm at this point in my life. There was nothing bright about it. Every night for the last week, I’d been having nightmares like nothing I’d ever experienced before. I kept dreaming of death; vivid pictures of people drowning, burning, being strangled.

I inhaled deeply and shook my head, shaking the images from my mind.

A window screen prevented me from seeing the full extent of Lucent. I traced its edges until I found the latch. I popped out the screen, slid it under my bed, and then returned to the window. Leaning out as far as I could, I scanned the area.

My room was located in the right wing of Chadni Hall. I was on the third of four floors, which was for sixteen-year-olds and upperclassmen. When we had first arrived, I was in awe at the size of the school, but now looking at everything from this high in the air, Lucent seemed so much bigger.

The sun was setting, taking the shadows of trees and buildings with it. They stretched long and thin, crossing into each other until they blurred into the forest just beyond a tall rock wall surrounding the school.

Behind the main building were three more buildings almost as big as Chadni Hall. If I remembered correctly, the square, three-story building to my left was Denelle Hall where all the classes were held. To the right of it was a circular, red brick building with tall, white columns. Sophie had called it Risen Auditorium. That's where the theatre and the music rooms were. And in between these two buildings was the tallest structure of all: a gray stone clock tower. Finally, toward the rear of the school grounds, the square shape of Lambert House stood, which Sophie said were living quarters. She didn't say for whom though.

From Denelle Hall, a steady line of people headed toward my building. I sucked in a deep breath. That was a lot of teenagers, most younger than me but still imitating.

Lucent wasn't like a normal high school. Girls stayed her INSERT

Just then, one of the girls' faces turned up in my direction. I quickly ducked back in my room and away from the window.

Already the fresh air was making a difference on the smell. Either that or I was getting used to it. I sat down at the vanity and ran a brush through my hair. Maybe someone at Lucent could show me how to change it, I hoped. I was tired of its blonde, almost white, color. I always thought I'd look better with brown hair, like May's, but dye never worked on my hair.

A tinkling sound, as if someone had waved a magic wand, chimed. I assumed

it was the dinner bell Sophie had talked about.

I swept my long hair to the side of my neck and examined the two small holes where Mr. Steele had bitten me. They were still there, as if it had happened yesterday. The red, swollen edges around the wounds made them look like eyes. I quickly applied concealer. I hated the way the marks stared at me, accusingly.

I leaned back in my chair, thinking. How could I have not recognized that something was wrong with Mr. Steele? At the time I'd thought it was because of some weird attraction, but, looking back, I could see how stupid that was. For months Mr. Steele had secretly terrorized me, forcing the Light within me to mature early just so he could steal it from me like he did when he'd killed my mother.

The Light in an Aura's blood was the one thing Vykens wanted most because it gave them many powers, including the ability to change their appearance. But Mr. Steele had underestimated my abilities. With the help of Christian, I had learned to use my ability over Light as a weapon—a weapon that ultimately saved my life.

However, my victory came with a price.

Mr. Steele had bit me, and ever since then I felt something growing inside me. It was dark and contentious, and its evil pressed on me from the inside out. I'd never felt dirtier, like I'd been touched by the worst kind of monster imaginable.

I turned away from the mirror and pulled a pink beanie over my head. Enough of the past.

I stood and was about to open my door to get May when I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. I glanced to my left, to the corner of the room where it was the darkest. There was nothing there, only an old dresser. I waited a second longer but nothing happened. *Strange.*

May opened my door, startling me. "What's with the weird chimes?"

"I don't know, but if I have to hear that every day, I think I'll go crazy."

"I know, right?" May turned to the mirror and adjusted her hair. She was wearing a different outfit—it looked brand new—and she had reapplied her makeup. She must be nervous. I never considered how hard this must be for her.

She had guarded her secret of being a Fury for so long that to all of a sudden be surrounded by people who knew the truth might be overwhelming.

“Everyone is going to love you, and I’m not just saying that.” I wrapped my arm around her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go be the new kids.”

May, with her easy-going personality, would fit right in, but I wouldn’t, nor did I care to. I was here for one reason only: to learn as much as I could about my ability, then I was out of here. I didn’t want to be a part of the Auras’ strange culture that didn’t allow us to reach our full potential. I wanted more.

We were almost to the end of the hall when a door opened and four laughing girls appeared, but when they saw us they stopped.

“Hi, guys,” May said in passing and smiled.

They said nothing, just stared like we were a new zoo exhibit. But before we turned the corner, my sensitive ears, which I’d inherited from my Guardian father, heard one of them whisper, “I can’t believe they put her in that room. I bet she’s dead by the end of the month.”

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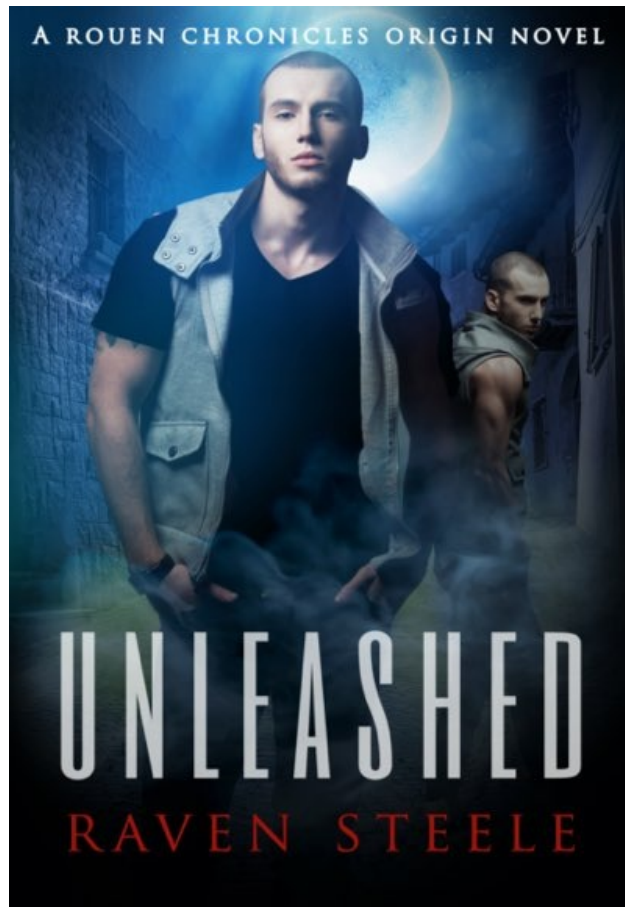


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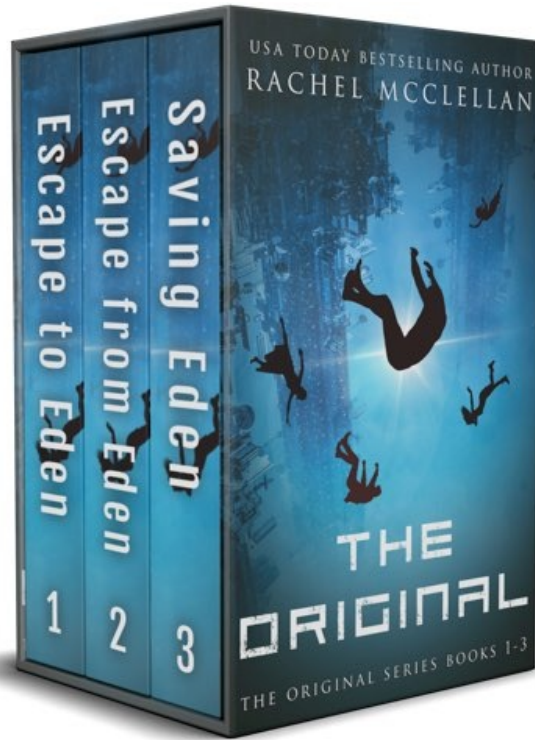


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