



QUICKSILVER DREAMS

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Quicksilver Dreams

By Danube Adele

My name is Taylor, and damn but my life changed overnight. One moment I was just a regular girl working two jobs to pay my bills, and next thing you know, I'm uncovering secret metal disks at my boss's house. Now I'm reading minds, dreamwalking and being saved from bad guys by Mr. Dark and Brooding.

That would be Ryder Langston, my new next-door neighbor. He's sex on legs but

he's also a secret agent from another world—no joke. I believe him now because he dragged me back here “for my protection” after he discovered someone was trying to assassinate me on Earth. It isn't working out so well.

There's a war going on, one that's been fought for generations. Ryder's having trust issues (not that it's stopping us from falling into bed), and it turns out I'm *connected* here, if you know what I mean. The target on my back finally makes sense, but there's nowhere left to hide...

132,000 words

Dear Reader,

Happy 2014! You know, I love futuristic romance, and I swear it wasn't that long ago that I was reading books in the genre that used years like 2014 and 2015 to indicate a time that seemed really far out. Of course, I suppose I'll be saying something similar twenty years from now, when it's 2035. (And isn't *that* a weird thought?) As it happens, in the lineup this month we have both a futuristic romance and a hero who travels *from* the future, and both give a unique look into a future that's actually a little further out.

I love the premise of Libby Drew's

time-travel male/male romance, *Paradox Lost*, in which a time-travel guide who takes clients to “whenever” must travel *back* to 2020 and enlist the aid of a PI to find a missing client. And in PJ Schnyder’s *Fighting Kat*, Kat and Rygard go deep undercover, posing as gladiators. In the interstellar arena, it’s all about who’s the strongest predator...

I mentioned futuristic romance, but how about a trip to the past in Jeannie Ruesch’s historical romantic suspense, *Cloaked in Danger*. Aria Whitney’s life has taken her from the sands of Egypt to the ballrooms of London, but when her father goes missing, can the handsome earl with a dark secret help her find him,

or will a dangerous scandal threaten both their lives?

In *Mistress by Magick*, Laura Navarre concludes her fallen angel Magick Trilogy, a riveting historical fantasy romance trilogy set in Tudor times. Also wrapping up a trilogy this month is Fiona Lowe. In *Runaway Groom*, the third book in the Wedding Fever trilogy, can a Harley-riding Aussie guy on the road trip of his life allow an uptight and disgraced lawyer to steal his heart? The first two books, *Saved by the Bride* and *Picture Perfect Wedding*, are now available, as well.

Debut author Anna Richland delivers

First to Burn, the first book in her Immortal Vikings series with a hero straight from the time of Beowulf. Wulf Wardsen is an elite soldier whose very existence breaks all the rules—and he's deep in the military zone of Afghanistan with an army doctor determined to do everything by the book.. Meanwhile, Cindy Spencer Pape brings back her very popular steampunk romance series, The Gaslight Chronicles, with the latest installment, *Ashes & Alchemy*.

This January, Heather Long delivers the start of a new series of contemporary romances. If you like your romance a little on the crazy, cracktastic side, this book is sure to please. Cinderella had

her fairy godmother and Princess Mia had her grandmother, but Alyx—she gets a software magnate who knows that in his world, *Some Like It Royal*. And speaking of cracktastic, Kelsey Browning has another installment in her steamy Texas Nights series. Roxanne Eberly wants nothing more than to make her lingerie store a success. Enter up-and-coming attorney Jamie Wright, who's all tangled up in Roxanne's life...and her lingerie...in *Running the Red Light*. If you want to start from the beginning, pick up *Personal Assets*!

Mystery fans will be glad to welcome another installment from Jean Harrington in her Murders by Design series. In

Rooms to Die For, when interior designer Deva Dunne finds a body hanging from a balcony in the gorgeous Naples Design Mall, she soon learns she's caught up in a mall drug bust gone viral.

We're thrilled to offer a large lineup of debut authors this month, in addition to Anna Richland. Joining us with books in the new-adult, erotic romance and contemporary genres are a new group of incredibly talented authors we're proud to welcome to Carina Press. Elia Winters debuts with erotic romance *Purely Professional*. When a journalist explores the submissive side of her sexuality with her Dominant neighbor,

she must confront what these encounters mean for her own sexual identity, her career and her budding relationship.

Three debut authors bring new-adult offerings to Carina Press. Danube Adele proves the new-adult genre is more than just contemporary romance in

Quicksilver Dreams. One moment Taylor was just a regular girl working two jobs to pay her bills, and the next, she was reading minds, dreamwalking and being saved from bad guys by her sexy neighbor, Ryder Langston. In *Tell Me When* by Stina Lindenblatt, college freshman Amber Scott begrudgingly lets Marcus Reid into her life, but she didn't expect the king of hookups would share

his painful past. And Kristine Wyllys brings us the first of two steamy, dark-edged stories full of action, vivid storytelling and emotional intensity. Don't miss *Wild Ones*.

Our last debut author, Rhonda Shaw, caught me by surprise with her book, *The Changeup*. People who know my sports tastes know I don't normally go in for baseball. And those who know my reading tastes know I don't usually go for an older heroine/younger man set-up. But Rhonda's story hooked me from the start and I'm pleased to be releasing her first book this month. I hope you enjoy this contemporary sports romance as much as I did, and perhaps find a new

book boyfriend in sweet and sexy
pitching phenom Chase Patton!

I'm not one for making New Year's resolutions, but I will make one—we'll continue to strive to bring you a variety of fantastic books from authors who deliver stories that you'll want to talk about. Thank you for joining us for another year of publishing at Carina Press—we'll do our absolute best to make it an amazing one!

We love to hear from readers, and you can email us your thoughts, comments and questions to generalinquiries@carinapress.com. You can also interact with Carina Press staff

and authors on our blog, Twitter stream and Facebook fan page.

Happy reading!

~Angela James

Executive Editor, Carina Press

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Dedication

For John

Acknowledgments

There are several lovely people I want to thank, beginning with Kiese Hill, my good friend and wonderful critique partner, Courtney, my wonderful agent, for being so supportive when I didn't know what to do in this new world I found myself in and Jeff Seymour, for making me look good. Most of all, I want to thank my family: my boys, Wolfe and Bjorn, for being so patient while Mom was millions of light years away, though it looked like I was sitting on the couch, and my biggest fan, toughest coach, and dearest love, my husband. You knew it was my dream, and you drill-sarged me when I needed it. Thank

you.

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Prologue

Was this a dream?

Had I ever felt this lucid in a dream before?

I could feel the silky material around my eyes, on my wrists and ankles, softly sliding against my skin. With my body waking to sensual heat seeping through my veins, I only wanted to concentrate on what was happening in the moment, appreciate the swirl of masculine energy twining through the feminine threads of my own.

So good...

My dreams usually had a surreal,

nondistinct, floating quality to them. This time, I actually felt a large, rough hand feathering over the skin on my rib cage, my flat stomach, agonizingly slow, avoiding obvious erogenous zones.

It was a hot, searing touch. It was like someone was actually there. Someone I wanted...

More... Like that... So good...

I could scent spicy soap that was subtle, yet distinctly male, arousing, and couldn't help the feverish whispers of encouragement.

Oh, my God... Yes...

My sex dreams *usually* made me struggle with the frustration of a roller-coaster experience that never finished. I would ride a buildup of desire and a

cool down, over and over, my imagination acting as a careless lover with wonderful intent but clumsy execution. This time there was no such neglect. The burn was exquisite, building and teasing, ebbing and flowing, but never forgetful and creating a fever that made me writhe with need.

Please!

Never had I ever felt this way before, chanting my demand, desperately wanting to reach the end of the ride.

Yes! Like that! Yes!

Sudden sensation poured over and through me, powerfully enough that I woke myself and sat up. My breath was short and gasping. My body was quivery

and oversensitized. I was covered with a fine sheen of sweat, and my sheet was twisted in carefree abandon around my naked body.

I half expected to find a man in front of me.

Rubbing my wrists as though the soft bindings were still tied to me, I glanced around my sparsely furnished bedroom and felt my body quake with a small, faint aftershock. I was alone. Nothing was disturbed. At the same time that I drew comfort from seeing that everything in my world was still in its place, a faint echo of grief, or disappointment, took the edge off my contentment, like I was missing something. I was solo after such an

erotic experience.

What about the hand? Who was it attached to?

A part of me had to give a mental headshake of exasperation.

No men for you. At least not yet.

The inevitable weight of responsibility, like a bucket of ice water, reminded me that I needed to work and pay the bills. I had to make ends meet. There was no one who was going to help me.

Usually, I accepted this with a matter-of-factness, but this night, a spike of resentment reared its head.

What would it be like to be a normal girl who had time for frivolity?

I quashed the thought immediately, too tired to let it take root.

Why fight the wave? I just had to ride it.

Settling back on my pillow, I once again closed my eyes and let the languorous effects of postorgasmic lassitude steal over me. Strangely, as my mind once again stretched fingers toward my deep subconscious, the whisper of a gentle caress down my cheek didn't frighten me.

Chapter One

Hearing Aretha Franklin belt out “Respect” from my alarm clock was enough to rudely jerk me awake. I blindly slapped the alarm button off, appreciating the silence for several moments and fighting my brain’s most sincere desire to slide back into comforting nothingness.

At least it was Friday.

It was while I was pulling the sheet off my body that “the experience,” my sex dream, came back to me, which absolutely snapped me wide-awake. I looked around the bed, but there were no

binding materials, and I was left feeling strangely let down, which made no sense. Of course I was alone. This was my room in the apartment I share, and I'd simply had an erotic dream last night.

But it had seemed so real! REAL. What the hell was that last night? Why had it happened? There had to be a reason.

Could women have wet dreams too?

It was definitely worth asking Cynthia, my roommate, about. Of course, she was truly a morning person who went to the gym at the absurd hour of I'm-still-dead-to-the-world 5:00 a.m. before going to work, but luckily we worked together. Come lunchtime, it was *on* for some juicy chitchat.

I already knew what she was going to say. She would say that I, Taylor Lane, was sexually frustrated, which would be accurate, because I was twenty-four years old and hadn't had a really good orgasm until last night *in a dream*. As it stood, I was going to have to wait until lunchtime to dish, and if I didn't get a move on, I was going to be late for work.

I went to my shit job as an assistant to one of the most successful literary agents for feature film in Hollywood. But hey, if you can do your time at a shit job in Hollywood, you can get in, which is like manna from heaven for a girl like me. If you work hard and can handle the verbal

and emotional abuse that's going to get dumped on you, then you can write your ticket.

“Dammit, Taylor! Get the goddamn phone. Do I have to do every fucking thing myself?” Reggie Mason, my boss, was screaming from inside his office. I'd let a call slide while answering two other lines, because I was a few seconds too slow and hadn't picked up before it went to voice mail. Shit.

“Sorry, Reggie.”

“Am I supposed to pick up my fucking calls now? Isn't that part of your fucking job? Do I need to remind you that I fucking pay you to answer the fucking phone?”

“No, Reggie.”

“I can get someone better to do your job tomorrow, Taylor. Fucking take your head out of the clouds and do your job!”

I’d found that redirection was usually the best antidote for his freakish tantrums. “Simon is on line one. Stokely is on line two, and I’ll retrieve the message from voice mail.”

“Tell Simon we’re on for lunch. I’ll get Stokely. And don’t fucking let it happen again!”

And like that, the situation was defused.

I’ve worked for Reggie for nearly a year and a half, and I don’t worry about his firing threats anymore. I know he’s damn lucky that I haven’t gone AWOL

on him like every other assistant. He'd have to start fresh and retrain a newbie, which he absolutely loathes having to do. Before me, the turnover rate on his assistant's desk was about three months due to his daily mantrums.

Me, I've got staying power and a thick skin.

Lunch was slow in approaching, especially since I felt driven to find Cynthia so she could help me make sense of what I'd experienced. Sadly, when lunch finally arrived, Reggie stepped out of his office with his "we're going to get a lot of shit done" expression in place. My heart sank just a little, but I bit back my disappointment with a deep breath and a steady gaze.

“Taylor, I need to roll calls from the car on my way to lunch. Take notes. Adam’s trying to fuck with me on this deal we made for him. He’s got a fucking diva complex, and he’s going to blow the whole fucking thing if he doesn’t quit his pansy-ass whining.”

Reggie was absolutely inconsistent and made no apologies for it. On the one hand, he was hugely muscular and fierce looking, maybe Samoan in origin, with short dark hair and a goatee. But then, he had a love of these delicate figurines that he kept wholly pristine in display cases. His entire office was downright precious, the furnishings delicate in shades of violet. He was rude,

disrespectful and belittling to most everyone he encountered who wasn't a client, but he had this sweet, lovey-dovey, shmoopy-as-hell voice he used when his boyfriend called.

I was used to him.

I read through his freshly updated call log. "By the way, Frank called. He said he was going to have to cancel dinner tonight. He's got some kind of emergency and needs to pack for a flight out tomorrow." Frank was the lovey-dovey partner who rocked Reggie's world, but his smooth British tones always gave me a strange itchy tingle in the middle of my back. No reason why, since I hadn't actually met the guy. He'd always been what other people would

think of as perfectly lovely and charming over the phone, but one person's friendliness is another person's nosiness. I just don't like personal questions, and he always seemed to have some for me.

“Frank called?” Reggie's face flushed a violent red. “Frank called and you didn't tell me? How many times do I have to fucking tell you to put him through no matter what? Jesus fuck! When he calls, put him through. Put. Him. Through!”

I took a deep breath and did my best not to breathe fire. “Frank told me he didn't have time to talk and said to just pass the message along. He said he'd

order in and meet you at home.”

Reggie continued to scowl for a moment. “Oh,” he muttered, and he started out the door of our small suite. Long ago, I stopped looking for any form of apology or remorse from him when he blew up at me inappropriately.

“Do you want me to get Adam on the line for you?”

“No. Forget calls. I need to call Frank. Go to lunch.” He waved a hand dismissively as he left.

And so I was able to put my calls to voice mail, grab my purse and run downstairs to share my juicy tidbit with Cynthia.

“Sure, women can have wet dreams. I’ve had orgasms in my sleep. They

aren't strong, but the feeling is there if it's a good enough sex dream." Cynthia, her platinum hair twisted into an elegant knot on top of her head, was chowing down on a tuna-fish sandwich that smelled god-awful. I kept my opinion to myself and focused on the subject at hand.

"Really? This is a first for me." I took a healthy bite of my apple.

"Tied down, huh?" Her toffee eyes smiled into mine. She sat back, looking dreamily up at the ceiling, her patrician features as perfectly made up as usual. You can see why I thought she was a total bitch at first. Effortless. And she always says the right things too. "I don't

think I've ever been tied down. My ex was not an adventurous kind of guy. You know. He was a geologist. Bloodless. So how was it?"

"I can't even tell you how amazing it was. It was like I was so *awake* and *aware* through the whole thing! But I wasn't..."

"You've been working too much and not relaxing enough. You really need to cut back on your hours at the club."

"I wish I could. I need the money. Maybe after I get my next raise I'll quit. Besides, it's just on Fridays and Saturdays."

"Which tells me that you aren't getting any time to be social. You are this beautiful, healthy young woman, and it's

part of our genetic drive to seek a mate.”

“Ha! You sound like *Wild Kingdom* or something. Say it again with a British accent.”

“I’m not kidding. Look at you! You have these gorgeous, big blue eyes that half the chicks working here hate you for and a killer body that most of the guys here love you for.”

“And a pixielike face, I know. You’re making me blush.” I grinned, having heard all this before. She’d been on a campaign to hook me up with someone since she’d known me.

Cynthia was the polar opposite of me, being a tall glass of lemonade. While I barely topped five feet three inches,

Cynthia was willowy, wearing clothes the way models on the runway made them look. Lucky duck. We all have pluses and minuses, right?

“No, seriously.” Cynthia warmed to her topic. “Since I’ve known you, you haven’t had a serious guy in your life, and I’ve known you more than a year. You have never talked about anyone that mattered to you, past or present. I’ve also never seen you go out on dates or even show an interest. I would think you were going lesbian, except you don’t show an interest in women, either. It’s no wonder you’re starting to have side effects.”

“I can’t help it if no one around me is interesting enough to get my attention.”

“I think you’re just hiding out. I think you experienced betrayal from your mother, your grandmother, your aunt, and now you don’t take chances.”

I had a moment of pause. First as I tried to absorb the *pow* feeling to my gut without showing how it hurt, and second trying to remember when I’d discussed my childhood with Cynthia. I didn’t mind that she knew, but I hadn’t been bodily prepared for the emotional hit. I mean, of course I must have told her, but I didn’t want to think of how my mom took off in a drug haze and left me with Cruella, my sociopathic aunt who could barely take care of herself, in a rundown trailer park in Pomona, California.

Fighting back the burn in my eyes, because for some reason her evaluation really stung, I replied, “I’m trying to pay the bills, Dr. Ruth. If I don’t succeed, I have no one, and I choose those words deliberately, *no one* to fall back on. I don’t have the lovely family that you were blessed with, and I’m not trying to start a fight here by saying that. You do have a lovely family that cares about what happens to you. Just let me share this with you without getting all analytical on me.”

Cynthia’s eyes narrowed, and her pink, heart-shaped lips pursed slightly. Finally she smiled. “Okay. So what did he look like?”

Back on track. I gave a smile of relief. “I was blindfolded! I couldn’t see, but he definitely had amazing fingers.”

“Blindfolded and tied down while a guy gives you an orgasm. I wouldn’t mind having a dream like that one.”

“Well, if you’re hoping for the real thing soon, I know a certain guy playing at the club tonight.”

“Really? Who?”

“Shep’s band is starting at ten.”

“Shep.” Cynthia closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. “He’s scruffy, dirty, unkempt and broke most of the time, but there’s something about him. Isn’t there? It’s in the eyes. They’re soulful. It’s a shame he got evicted from our apartment

complex. I enjoyed knowing he was an apartment away.”

“I thought it would happen sooner, truthfully.” I tossed my apple core into her wastepaper basket. “That guy was always getting fired from jobs and driving his roommates nuts.”

“Who were his roommates again? I don’t think I ever noticed who they were.”

“Nondescript. One guy was average height, had gut protrusion and seemed to work at the video store that just shut down.”

“Talk about an anachronism.”

“Yeah, well, that’s probably why it shut down. Anyway, the other guy was a waiter trying to be an actor or

something. Annoying, weasely pretty boy who was too good for mere mortals.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember him. He asked me out.”

“You guys would have been a beautiful Barbie and Ken set.”

“Thanks.” Her tone was dry. “I didn’t realize he’d been in that apartment. I tried not to notice where he was coming from so he wouldn’t think I was interested. Anyway, I mention the apartment because I saw movers there last night and wondered who our neighbor was going to be.”

“Did you see?” I was just making conversation with this question. Dating an apartment neighbor was probably

about as smart as dating a coworker.

“No. Can’t tell you if they’re male or female.”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough. So how’s the day going for you? Are you putting in overtime tonight?”

“Not on a Friday, hon. I’ll catch you at home before you go off to work. How’s old Reggie doing today?”

“Same old. I need to get back and clear my list of things to do while I still have a moment of peace.”

Reggie was late coming back from lunch, making it in to the office at four, which was totally novel. Stranger still was his mood. It was not only much improved from before, but there was a smile on his face and high color on his

cheeks. I suspected I knew what he'd been up to—going home to Frank for some nookie, maybe—but didn't want to dwell on it. Reggie getting hot with anyone was not an image I wanted haunting my brain. I decided to stick to business.

“Call log's on your desk. Letter for Jerry Whitmore is ready for you to look at, and I finished reading the scripts you gave me yesterday.”

“Any good?”

“One is great. I left notes in two of them. They're also on your desk.”

“Excellent.” He continued to smile down at me in what was becoming an uncomfortable moment.

“Are you okay?” I asked hesitantly, not sure of what was going on. I’d never seen Reggie act so strangely. He was actually being nice. It was creeping me out.

“Taylor, I don’t think I’ve ever told you this, but you do good work.”

“Thank you...Reggie.”

“Keep this up and at your next evaluation, you’ll get a big surprise.”

“Great.” Was he on something? His eyes were clear. He didn’t look flushed or feverish. “Did you have a good meeting with Simon?” *Did he slip something into your drink?*

“It went as expected. You know how Simon is. He’s needy. Needs me to tell

him everything's okay, needs me to tell him that it's normal for studios to make you wait. You know. He needs me to hold his hand some. Hey, listen. Why don't you take off early? It's Friday. No one's going to call at this time, at least no one important." He threw back his head, laughing at his own joke.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Just do me a favor. Frank loves chocolate, and he asked me to send some over. He wanted to meet you, actually. He said you've been very kind to him on the phone, which I appreciate, by the way. Will you go by that new bakery on Sunset, Cacao, and pick up a half-dozen chocolate croissants and take them over to my place? The chocolate

that woman uses is just to die for. It's dark and rich, like me." He chuckled again.

"Okay. Sure." I looked at the clock. It was only four-thirty, and I was leaving work. I would normally be here until at least seven. What the hell was I going to do with my free time?

"Here's a fifty." Reggie handed me a bill from his wallet. "Keep the change."

"Are you sure?"

"Get going! I'll see you on Monday."

Okay. So, Frank was living with him now. This was the first that I'd heard this bit of news, not that I was Reggie's confidante or anything. I was just required to make regular trips,

completely thankless errands, for Reggie that involved either dropping off or picking up some object or other from his home. I couldn't help but know more of his personal business than I really wanted to know. Maybe with Frank living in, Reggie would get his rocks off more regularly and be kinder in general.

I could hope.

The streets through town were already congested with traffic, making the one-mile drive down Sunset Boulevard take two or three times as long as it needed to. The line at the bakery was nearly out the door, attesting to the popularity of the place, and I played with my smartphone while I stood in line, wishing the people in front of me *away*. I noticed a guy

checking me out from across the room and immediately turned away, pretending to be texting, so he'd be less likely to approach.

That's when I realized how right Cynthia was. I do hide. It was something I needed to consider if I wanted a real sex partner and not just my very real fantasies. Though after last night, I really couldn't complain. The thought made me giggle.

By the time I pulled up in front of Reggie's elegant home in the hills above Hollywood, my irritability had skyrocketed because nearly forty-five minutes had gone by, and I figured I might as well have remained at work. At

least then I could have enjoyed the air-conditioning, something my old clunker had trouble producing, on this bitch of a hot summer day, and I could have avoided the stress of nasty traffic.

At the front door I rang the bell, but I got no response. There was no sound for several minutes. I knocked, thinking maybe the doorbell wasn't working properly, but still, nothing. Now what? I knew where the key was hidden because I'd had to enter the residence a number of times, but now Reggie had a live-in guest. I didn't want to scare him, if he was in the middle of a shower or a bathroom run, but the darn chocolates were going to melt in this summer heat, and dammit, I was ready to get home and

rest for once before having to get my clothes on for my second job.

“He’s just going to have to deal with it,” I muttered as I got the key from the potted plant by the door, thinking of this faceless Frank guy who was maybe home and maybe not. For all I knew, he could have been out at the gym or getting an espresso somewhere.

A blast of cold air hit me when I stepped through the front door, and a sigh of pure pleasure purred from between my lips. Yes. The A/C was on full blast. I recovered quickly enough to glance around. No one was in the foyer. I didn’t want to startle anyone, so I called out, but I only heard my voice

echo off the white marble flooring.

The living room was straight ahead and showcased an amazing view of the hillside homes through an enormous window that stretched from ceiling to floor and wall to wall. On a good day, you could see celebrities frolicking in several modes of undress. Being on the hillside, with a huge picture window, allowed you to see any number of naughty behaviors going on, but I wasn't interested just now.

Bypassing the view, I made my way through to the kitchen and figured the house *was* being kept at arctic temperatures, so the chocolate would likely be okay if I just left it on the counter. Deciding to leave a note, I

grabbed a sheet of paper from the magnetized notepad on the side of the fridge. The pen was missing from its holder, which wasn't unusual, so I dove into the junk drawer, shoving the random items out of the way.

That's when I encountered the piece of metal that curled around my fingers upon being touched. I gasped, jerking my hand out of the drawer, but it clung.

It was cool looking. Shiny. It was as if the metal had turned to liquid and dripped around my fingertips. Then it conformed and stuck to me. Without thinking about it, I picked it off to get a closer look, and much to my surprise, it seemed to be warm. It conformed to my

hand no matter how I touched it, making an immediate imprint of my fingers, which was weird and amazing at the same time. It left me wondering what kind of metal could do this.

But I was here for a reason. I had to remember that.

“Find the pen,” I told myself, and I absently slid the drawer shut with my hip as I meandered back through the living room. I went to see if the pen was next to the notepad by the phone in there, still playing with the piece of metal, pleased to see it form a ring as I pushed my finger through the middle of it. It was almost like the blue play putty I got to play with as a kid in elementary school when we studied solids, liquids and

gases, only this substance was in the form of metal.

I spotted a man down by the pool through the living room window.

Was this Frank?

He had an amazing mane of long, pure silver hair, which stood out because of the deeply bronzed skin he had. Dressed in light-colored linen trousers and a silk shirt, he looked coolly composed, sitting comfortably in a deck chair under the umbrella.

What he was doing mesmerized me.

A strange device created a small projection of a person in his hand, sort of popping off the screen in 3-D with absolute clarity, which blew my mind.

Was this some kind of new technology? It was totally *Star Trek*—or *Star Wars*—level stuff. To be able to project your image across a network and have a conversation with someone seemed otherworldly. I broke out in goose bumps at the thought. It would mean having to look good at all times. Damn. Just thinking about that was stressful.

As though sensing he was being watched, the man looked up, and I saw he wasn't as old as I had first perceived him to be. He was prematurely silver, was likely in his early fifties at most.

I caught sight of his eyes and stiffened with surprise. They looked angry, like

I'd caught him at something he wasn't supposed to be doing. They blazed up at me, and I swear his lips seemed to curl into a snarl.

My smile died on my lips, and my hand froze midwave.

He cut off the projection by fisting his hand around the device and surged out of his chair, starting for the house with a determined look on his face.

*Damn the spirits, she's early.
Where's the gun?*

The words stabbed through my mind with sharp ripples of promised violence. Dark, sinister feelings of pleasure, the image of fear reflected in someone's eyes, the beauty of deliverance blanketed my mind.

What was that?

My heart jackhammered against my chest. I jerked my head, negating the feelings. They weren't mine.

What was this?

The hair on the back of my neck rose with alarm. A cold sweat popped out around my neck, and the *familiar* voice in my head cried *RUN!* which was more than enough for me to spin around and go from zero to sixty.

I sprinted across the floor, my heels clicking sharply on the marble while I sought purchase on the slippery surface, and threw myself out the front door. The scorching heat of the afternoon slapped at me, but I hardly felt it. My ears picked

up the heavy pounding of footsteps that would bring Frank into the living room, fueling the spike of adrenaline that raced through my bloodstream.

I slammed into my car, fingers shaking as I tried to pick out the right key on my key chain and stab it into the ignition. Praying that the car wouldn't take this opportunity to protest being overworked, I whispered, "Please, please, please," as I turned the key.

It started, if a little roughly.

The car was in gear when I saw the front door bang open, showing the full, muscular size of the angry man, and I was already disappearing around the bend in the road when he hurled himself out onto the street with the agility of a

professional athlete. He still only caught sight of my tailpipe disappearing down the hill, from what I could tell, watching in the rearview mirror.

“Ohmygod,” I whispered shakily. Breathing rapidly, I took the winding curves much too quickly, almost losing control on one of the hairpin turns, and eased off the gas. Suffering through another minute of anxious driving, my eyes searched the mirrors to make sure I wasn’t being followed.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I smacked the steering wheel, punctuating each word, and still felt my heart racing madly against my chest. At the light on Sunset, I stopped and rested my head on the

wheel, wondering what the hell had just happened and trying to calm my fluttering heart. Why the hell had I run out of the house?

It had seemed like my boss's boyfriend wanted to kill me. But how did I know that? Voice in my head? No. Yeah? Totally crazy. And what was the proper response in this situation? Call Reggie? Call the police? Call Cynthia and ask her what she thought I should do?

A car honked behind me. Heart in my throat once again, I scanned the rearview mirror but only saw an annoyed driver in a low-slung red sports car. The light had turned green. Easing off the brake, I made my turn.

But what would I tell Reggie? Or the cops? *I was standing there in the house. The silver-haired guy was coming in with a mad look, and he was going to kill me. How do I know this? I don't know. I can't tell you. Intuition? I heard a voice?* Yeah, that would go over really well.

A more absurd thought, considering I was sure my life had been in jeopardy, was would I still have a job on Monday? Maybe Reggie would even call me over the weekend to tell me not to bother showing up. But what the hell? What else was I supposed to do? The guy had looked like he was about to kill me!

The lights seemed to be working in

my favor. I made my way back to the shadier side of town feeling my anxiety lessen. Familiar stores, junk-food restaurants spewing the smell of grilled onions, and familiar street people lying under newspaper blankets seemed to bring back normality. I could breathe easier.

About halfway home, my heart quit thundering, and though I'd replayed the scene a thousand times in my head, I still wasn't sure what had happened. First, there was the...oooookay, could I admit it? I heard a voice. In my head. But did I really? Just thinking it felt cuckoo. Maybe I was just tired and overly stressed. That could be the case. Maybe Cynthia was right about the side effects

of overworking myself and needing to cut back on hours to relax some, but I truly needed both jobs.

Could I have heard a voice?

In less than a second, my own mind scoffed at me. My inner adolescent smirked rudely, and I was forced to admit that it was just too crazy to be believed.

Pulling up in front of my apartment complex, I managed to convince myself that I'd probably imagined the whole "he's going to kill me" moment, because really, who does that? Things like that only happen in movies, right? The real situation was more likely that he thought I was an intruder because Reggie didn't

call in advance and warn him that I was coming over right away. I should have stayed and introduced myself so the guy wouldn't think I was a thief. End of story.

At this point, I was feeling pretty stupid. Here was another episode to chalk up to my extremely overactive imagination, which was seriously starting to worry me. Added to that, the glint of metal caught my eye, and I realized I was still wearing the ring on my finger.

Figures. I really had stolen something from the house.

“Damn.” The word was muttered with no small degree of self-disgust. Yanking the ring off my finger, I set the piece of

metal in the unused ashtray and flipped it shut with a snap.

What's done is done.

I shoved my way out of the car, slinging my purse over my shoulder gracelessly.

I just needed the day to end. I needed sleep. I needed food. I needed weird and strange to leave me the hell alone, so I could hit the reset button and let my life go back to its normal, predictable schedule. I liked normal. I wasn't adventurous. I didn't like surprises.

In a reassuring voice as I made my way to the gate, I told myself, "Everything's fine. I'll just return it on Monday, and next time Reggie needs an

errand, I'll stay at work and send one of the interns. I'll just make sure I apologize profusely and throw myself on his mercy."

Hearing my voice speaking calmly was comforting, though I couldn't fool myself. I've never known Reggie to be merciful. I would likely need to start looking for a new job immediately, since I'd probably managed to freak his boyfriend out. The security gate was propped open again, and I was sure it was the guys from downstairs just being lazy about buzzing their friends in, so I shoved the brick that was holding it open out of the way. Just the act of doing something so normal led me to feeling marginally better. No way should the

rest of us be in danger because of those beer-guzzling wannabe frat boys whose train long ago left the station of age-appropriate behavior.

I've had my fill of being smirked at and ogled by the gut-growing, hair-receding juvenile thirty-five-year-olds that live in the apartment under me (and trust me when I tell you they've made many jokes about the positioning of our apartments). I gain a secret source of pleasure in thwarting their joys.

Just as the gate was closing with a satisfying clang, I turned to head for my apartment and ran smack into a hard, muscular, T-shirt-clad chest with a sound that was something like "Oomph."

Large rough hands gripped my arms, as though to steady me, and I looked *all* the way up into the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Veins of gold jumped out from their depths, and I found myself mesmerized.

Wow. Such beautiful eyes.

It was all I could think until I realized I was staring. At the same time, I also realized he was still holding my arms, and that my hands had come to rest on his hard pecs during our mild collision. And they were nice pecs. Really, really nice. His eyes did a sharp inventory south of my neck, and I was suddenly glad I had some decent cleavage. Then they lingered on my lips a brief moment before returning to my face. Desire

teased me delicately, spreading warm tingles through my stomach, before I came to my senses.

“Jeez. I’m sorry,” I sputtered, pushing back a few steps, though at this point I still couldn’t look away from his compelling, pale green eyes. They jumped out at me, set off by his black hair and sun-bronzed skin.

He had one of those square jaws that razor commercials love to use for advertising. Tough. Masculine. Definitely not a pretty boy, but super sexy. And he smelled good too. His scent baited me, but I was locked on the shock value of his eyes. Talk about a commanding presence.

“You okay?” his deep voice rumbled, not even a trace of a smile evident. If anything, he was giving me this sort of steely-eyed gaze. His eyes were lasered in on me like they were analyzing me, able to hear what I was thinking. I felt myself blush at the thought. Silly. Of course he couldn’t hear me.

I realized he was waiting for me to say something, which flustered me because I couldn’t think of what he’d asked. Christ, I needed to stop staring at his eyes and keep up with the program. What was wrong with me?

Instead, I took a deep breath and asked my own question. “Are you moving in to 8D?”

“I did. Day before yesterday.”

“Then we’ll be neighbors.” I smiled, sticking my hand out. “My name’s Taylor Lane.”

“Ryder,” he replied, and he shook my hand with his rough, calloused one.

My hand disappeared inside his, and I swear a ripple of sensation went up my arm, giving me goose bumps the moment we touched. No kidding. It was so surprising, I sort of gasped. I went with my first instinct and snatched my hand back with an overly bright smile to cover my discomfort at feeling out of control. I couldn’t hide the flush that crept up my neck.

He scowled. I didn’t pay attention.

Today had been just too weird already. For my own sanity, I needed the comfort of my sofa, some bad reality TV and maybe even a short nap. Everything always felt better after a nap.

“See you around, neighbor. Let me know if you need anything.” I did a quick retreat and made it to my apartment without encountering anyone else.

Chapter Two

“You ran? A gorgeous, muscular guy that gets you all hot and bothered is talking to you, and your next move is to run? Why do I bother?” Cynthia scowled at me and grabbed a bottle of water from our fridge. Taking the cap off, she took a deep swish, having just come across town through the hot sludge of traffic.

“Maybe *you* should go for him. He’s tall.”

“Yeah, right. My best friend tells me how he makes her heart flutter and then tells me with this martyred look that I should go for him? Get real.”

“No, really...”

“I’m waiting for Shep, remember?”

“Mr. Grunge. You’re too classy for him.”

“So maybe I’ll lower my standards for a night.”

“You’ll regret it in the morning.”

“You’re probably right. You look ready for work.” She gave me a once-over.

I’d exchanged my pastel blue pencil skirt and cute, sleeveless fitted blouse with tiny ruffles at the neck (cost me more than I like to remember, but it was worth it) for my standard-issue black mini and black tank, with a cheap, fitted cotton button-up that I tie the tails of

around my waist. I wear black strappy heels that have a slight platform, giving me added height and making my legs look miles long.

I'm a bartender, not a waitress. I've been working at the club, Johnny's Spot, long enough that I finally got off the floor and behind the bar. It has saved me some black-and-blue pinch marks on my ass, I can tell you that.

"You coming to the club?"

"Maybe for a little while."

"I'll tell Charlie to expect you." He was the doorman. I'm pretty sure he had a crush on Cynthia, a side effect of which is that he goes from being this total tough-looking brute to being a stuttering dolt when she's around, though

he won't admit it. Not even to me, and we're pretty tight. He probably knows it's never going to happen, so in the long run, he's saving himself a lot of grief.

He's a good guy, though. I can count on him to look out for me and eject the drunken rowdies that ruin everyone's good buzz.

"You kind of brushed off the whole Frank episode. Are you sure you were just imagining things? I haven't known you to be jumpy or paranoid."

"Yeah. I think I probably freaked him out more than anything. Imagine if you thought you were alone in the house and you heard noises or saw someone moving around who didn't belong there.

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I feel stupid for running, so I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"All right, then."

I didn't have to leave for work for a little while and managed to watch some bad reality TV with Cyn at the same time that I kept an ear tuned for movement next door. I was getting a charge thinking that the wall we shared with Ryder was my bedroom wall. And if the layout of his apartment was at all like ours, then the other side of my bedroom wall was his bedroom. Maybe. Like it mattered.

I could already feel myself withdrawing, because honestly, I'm really uncomfortable with anyone who could maybe potentially fuck me up. I

joke about needing therapy, but the truth is, I know what's wrong with me. Every adult who was supposed to take care of me blew me off like I didn't matter and it hurt a lot, the result of which was that I learned that I just needed to take care of myself. What that means, to me, is making sure not to be emotionally invested in anyone because they get power over me that way. Period. I stopped giving up my power a long time ago.

Johnny's Spot was quiet when I arrived, and I began working my chores behind the bar. Lemons needed to be sliced and various bottled and canned fruits—cherries and pineapples,

specifically—needed to be stocked in the easy-access dispenser behind the bar for the more froufrou drinks that customers liked to order. I made sure menus were clean and the bar was wiped down. I did a quick sweepup behind the bar and wiped down visible bottles and shelves with a moist rag. I checked levels on the bottles of alcohol and the different mixes I would need, reporting what was low to Johnny himself.

He was a quirky little guy, about my height, not much more than my weight, with unremarkable features: gray hair, lots of wrinkles and squinty eyes that he swore could still see twenty-twenty.

What *was* remarkable about him was

that he was thin and wiry, yet spooky strong and tough sounding, like he'd smoked several packs a day his whole life. His deep, raspy voice did not match his slight appearance, kind of like Popeye. He also had the energy level of a twenty-year-old, not that any of us really knew his age. There was actually a bet among the employees about this. It was open-ended, because Johnny knew about it and was not forthcoming with the information. Some were guessing he was in his fifties, while others had racked up the span of years to his nineties, which I thought was a little over-the-top. I assumed he was in his late sixties or so.

Johnny's Spot was an extremely successful club, but Johnny still liked being in on all the day-to-day transactions. "I don't trust no one to handle my money, doll," he answered when I asked him about taking the time for himself that he'd so richly earned. "I put all my cash into this place, and when you do something like that, you keep a good eye. I don't trust any of you, and that's not personal, it's flat-out smart. It ain't *your* money holding the place up. If you ever get a place o' your own, don't let no one else manage it, or they'll manage you right into the can!" He'd given this piece of advice so many times, I'm sure we all had it memorized.

I started my shift expecting the usual uneventful chaos, and I wasn't disappointed.

“Two margaritas, a stout and a Jamaican lager.”

“Two Mexican beers, sex on the beach, fuzzy navel and a Seven and Seven.”

“Three shots of tequila, two more Mexican beers and an apple martini.”

I fell into the rhythm of a typical Friday night. I kept the alcohol flowing, sidestepped drunken come-ons and kept the chips and pretzel baskets full at my end of the bar.

The music got louder, the dance floor had a steady stream of participants and

people had to yell to be heard above the music, making intelligent conversation impossible. Not that people were here for anything other than hooking up. It was a meat market at its lowest, though it kept from being a dive bar by playing live music on Friday and Saturday nights and by running sports of all kinds on the different TV screens around the bar.

At a distance, I caught sight of Cynthia making her way through the sea of people. She looked predictably gorgeous in a sexy slip of a pale blue dress that reached midthigh and outlined her shapely bod. Her blond hair was long and straight, reaching the middle of her back, and it was like she was the new swimsuit cover model the way eyes

were watching her progress across the room, but then I saw the look on her face.

She was pissed off.

I noticed a big blond Adonis wearing a nice white button-up shirt following behind her, grabbing at her arm to stop her from walking away. She spun around to confront the guy, and then I couldn't see any more because a large body cut off my view.

“Marry me, Taylor.” I recognized the Mr. Vodka–Cranberry Juice slur that was coming across the bar as I did a quick swipe with my moist towel and tried to see around him to whom Cynthia was talking to. I was sure I'd never seen

him before, because I would definitely have remembered that guy, as hot as he was. She was standing there, listening to the guy, with body language that told me quite clearly she knew him.

Wasn't this an interesting development? We were going to have a lot to talk about later on, when we got home.

“Be careful, Chuck,” I finally responded, and I washed some of the glasses that were piling up in my station. “I just might take you up on that offer one of these days.” He was wasted and it wasn't even ten o'clock, his brown hair looking as though he'd been running his fingers through it, his teddy-bear eyes looking squinty. He usually didn't

propose until well after midnight on nights he came to the club. It made me wonder if something bad had happened.

“Taylor, honey, I would be so good to you. You could be my queen.” To accompany his slow speech, he gave me a little-boy grin that likely worked way back in his day on coeds in college, but now only emphasized the beginning of his double chin. Week after week, he reeked of desperation, unable to maintain his fit body with the amount of alcohol he consumed. He was finding it harder and harder to attract the same girls who used to vie for his attention when he was twenty pounds lighter on his college football team. I know all of

this because during his various drinking binges (yes, he's an ex-frat boy turned alcoholic—surprised?), he shared his stories. More than once.

“Be good to yourself, Chuck.” I stacked the newly washed glasses on a rack to dry. “Drink some water.”

“Ouch.” He clasped his chest, pretending to be in pain. “You’re a cold-hearted woman, Taylor.”

“Back off, Chuck. She’s my property,” Cynthia growled mockingly, pushing her way up to the bar. I automatically poured a glass of water, popped a lemon wedge in it and slid it across the wood bar to her.

Cynthia doesn’t drink. She’s never told me the specifics, other than to say

she's allergic.

With a quick nod of thanks, she took the glass and sipped it, trying not to look like she was watching for someone, though I could see that she was definitely watching for someone. The blond stud muffin, perhaps? Now didn't seem like a good time to ask. She was doing a two-faced thing where she was trying to look all casual, but at the same time seemed to be fuming about something.

"You guys are a couple?" Chuck was enjoying that little fantasy. "Oh, God. Two hot chicks. I'd love to see that."

"You'll have to use your imagination." I smirked.

"All right, all right. Goin' home."

While I still got one,” he muttered.

“Can I call you a cab, Chuck?”

“Naw. Just gonna walk. Not far.” He dumped a wad of cash into the tip jar and made his way unsteadily toward the front door.

While following his progress across the crowded bar, I caught sight of Ryder and froze. Our eyes met and held. Instantly, my breathing went shallow, and my heart pounded faster. I felt the familiar flash of heat curling through my abdomen.

He was leaning back against the wall with his thick, muscular arms crossed over his broad chest, half-immersed in shadow. He was watching me with that fierce look, and it was like his energy

reached out to me. Seemingly half-wild, with a lock of black hair falling across his forehead, he was in beat-up jeans and a black T-shirt that stretched across impressive pecs, which I absolutely remembered.

His eyes blazed a path across the room that felt like a physical touch.

That man was dangerous.

Moving bodies cut off my view of him, and I strained to look around them, but by the time I could see that piece of wall again, he was gone. I looked around the club and didn't see him. I figured he must have left, since I couldn't find a trace of him, but I still felt like he was watching me.

It took a while for my body to normalize again.

Shep was getting ready to go on the small platform stage by the dance floor, but he spotted us at the bar and came over to say hi. He'd always been a ladies' man, but he had a thing for Cynthia in particular when he was sober and discriminating. Cynthia was sitting there looking like the next best thing to an ice-cream cone, so he put an arm around her shoulder and asked how she'd been doing. Here's how that went:

"I've been great, but I've missed seeing you around," she purred in this ultrasexy voice, her eyes looking all smiley and sleepy at the same time, and

Shep's cheeks went flush instantly. I could almost hear his erection ping to attention. (I'd never seen her turn on this vamp side. It was totally lethal. I would kill for a cheat sheet.)

"I'm so glad." Shep squeezed her shoulder, his face looking warm, his soulful, half-baked eyes trying to look deeply into hers, though it was hard to take someone seriously when they were dressed like a grungy teenager and smelled just a little on the far side of ripe.

"You're going to play tonight?" She ran a hand over his chest, leaving it there as he tried to breathe normally.

"Yeah. We're starting in just a few."

"I just love watching you play." And

that's when I saw the sneaky side look she gave. If I'd blinked, I would have missed it. She was that quick and seamless, but I turned my head to follow her gaze and saw that Adonis had somehow made his way to a bar stool just a short distance away and was gritting his teeth, watching the scene play out between Shep and Cyn. He did not like what he was seeing, if the muscle ticking in his cheek was anything to go by.

“Can I buy you a drink before I go on?” Shep asked.

“Sure. I'd love one.” She turned to me, and I'm sure my mouth was hanging open at this point. “I'd like a Corona,

Tay.”

I recovered myself enough to utter, “Really? I thought you were allergic or something.”

“Not that allergic.” She smiled.

“Well, if you’re sure.” I frowned and grabbed a cold one from the fridge behind me, but as I put it on the bar with a cocktail napkin, a large male hand took the bottle from me.

“She doesn’t drink,” Adonis stated, sort of in a Terminator voice.

“Back off,” Cynthia snarled at him.

“What’s going on, Cyn?” Shep frowned, having to look up a few inches to see Adonis clearly. “You know this guy?”

“No, I don’t,” Cynthia growled, and I

have to say, I was absolutely speechless. I'd never seen Cynthia break a sweat on a hot day, much less get downright angry. She was always the blonde who was cool and in control no matter what crisis happened to be playing out.

“Leave her alone.” Shep, poor guy, did his best to stand up for Cynthia, though it was clear he was nervous and scared to be facing a guy who looked like a powerhouse. I appreciated that Adonis seemed to be a blond version of Ryder, all big and hulking.

There seemed to be a sudden surplus of big and hulking...

“Make him go away, Cyn,” Adonis said in a quiet voice. He displayed an

absolute lack of concern for what Shep thought he could do in a fight. “He’s got nothing to do with this.”

Cynthia glared up at the man’s face as seconds ticked by, and I could almost hear Shep gulp. Then she plastered a smile on her face and turned to Shep. “No worries.” She leaned over and kissed Shep’s cheek. “He’s an old friend. I think your band is ready to start.”

“Are you sure? ’Cuz if you need me to, I’ll kick this guy’s ass.”

“No, really,” Cynthia insisted. “It’s cool.”

I almost laughed seeing the look of relief that crossed Shep’s face. “Okay, then. If you’re sure.” But he couldn’t get

away quickly enough. He moved toward the stage at a fast pace and didn't look back.

Adonis tossed bills my way for the beer he was leaving behind. "Let's go."

"No," Cynthia snapped, getting comfortable on one of the bar stools. "I'm here for a good time."

"You want to do this here?"

"I want you to leave me alone. We have nothing to talk about."

"Can't do that."

"Cynthia, do you need help?" I lowered my voice. "Charlie and Bill can handle this for you."

"I'm fine." This was a Cynthia I didn't know. Her face was composed in

unusually hard lines, and though she was definitely angry, I thought there was a hurt look to her eyes. Had this guy hurt her in the past? Was he the lying, cheating bastard from long ago?

“Let me know if that changes.”

“I will. I’m just going to sit here and listen to the band.” She turned to Adonis. “You want to talk, do it here. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“We’ll see about that,” he muttered.

“Tay, I need help.” Sally, one of the servers, was grabbing up a dozen beers from the fridge and trying to grab as many frosted mugs from the freezer.

“Got a large party crammed around three of the tables, watching the screen over there. Can you grab that tray?”

“Sure.” I turned to Cynthia. “Be right back.”

“No worries. I’m not going anywhere.”

An old pro at this, I hefted a tray carefully and made my way across the room, expertly anticipating and sidestepping customers who suddenly stepped in my way because they were a little toasted and not paying attention.

But here’s what really sucks about being a server, and why I was so determined to get behind the bar and off the floor:

When your arms are loaded and you can’t protect yourself, drunken guys try to get away with shit. I was able to

ignore the carefree pat on my ass as I followed Sally around the large group of men seated and standing at the tall, round bar tables and stools that Johnny had scattered around the outskirts of the dance floor, but then I felt a hand on the bare skin of my thigh, and it was moving up.

“Hey! Cut it out!” I scowled, trying to dislodge the guy’s hand with an elbow to his chest. It was the best I could do while carrying this stupid tray. Didn’t work. He’d had a few too many to be thinking clearly. His eyes looked bleary and empty, and a goofy grin was spreading across his fleshy cheeks.

“You sure are pretty,” he mumbled. His hand started climbing toward my ass

cheek!

I set the tray down, but it turned out I didn't have to. One second the guy was in his chair, and the next he was kneeling and crying out, holding his fingers. It was a blur, some simple maneuver involving twisting the fingers of his offending hand, which totally incapacitated him.

And who was towering over him at approximately six feet two inches with muscles bulging, ready for action, murder in his eyes? Who was my dark knight to the rescue? Ryder. My heart quivered. I was breathless. I couldn't seem to stop staring at his face. It was so beautifully masculine; his scruffy square

jaw was clenched, a sneer curling his top lip, his eyes looking stone cold at the guy on the floor.

He raised them to meet mine, and they narrowed and heated as they did a body scan. They sent a shiver through me before he looked back down at the guy on the floor nursing his fingers.

“Leave her the fuck alone.” His voice came out all low and deadly sounding. Tingles went up my spine.

“Ryder,” I whispered, forgetting where I was for just a fraction of a second.

But the rest of the world wouldn't let me forget. Some of the guy's buddies stood up, looking like they wanted a piece of whatever was going on, and I

knew what that could mean. I wanted to get ahead of it.

“You all want to get tossed?” I used my meanest, loudest voice. “Tell your friend here to keep his hands to himself, or next time he’s getting booted!”

Understanding the situation now, they all sat down and turned their attention back to what they’d been doing with mumbled comments about their friend like “What an ass” and “Why did you bring him?”

When I looked back to thank Ryder for helping me, he was gone.

Disappointment sat heavily on my shoulder. After quickly emptying my tray and tossing it back behind the bar, I got back to my station, but Cynthia was gone

and a quick note on a napkin told me she was going home. At that point, my curiosity got the better of me, and I took a fifteen-minute break, hoping to spot Ryder. No luck.

The rest of the night progressed uneventfully, but with closing and cleanup, I wasn't able to get home until close to three-thirty in the morning. As always, I jumped in the shower for a quick rinse, wanting to get the smell of the club off me. Then I could climb into my nice, sweet-smelling bed with a heartfelt groan for my sore feet, though I still couldn't fall asleep right away.

My bill-paying ability was weighing on me. My early attempts to soothe myself had been a temporary panacea,

and I couldn't help but wonder if Reggie was going to can my ass. I wondered if Johnny had any extra hours to tide me over between jobs if it came to that, and I pondered buying another industry magazine from the newsstand to see if there were any other positions available. Then I figured I was jumping the gun and needed to calm myself, because really, I'm the best damn assistant Reggie was ever going to have who would actually put up with his mania.

With that final thought in place, I turned out the light and drifted off and back into my erotic dream...

I felt the soft binding on my wrists and ankles, and the large, rough hand was

already caressing my rib cage. I couldn't help a tremulous sigh as butterfly wings carried heat to my thighs.

Is this another dream? I questioned faintly, wanting it to go on and on. It was just like last night—the clarity, the structure, the detail—but was even more amplified. I could feel the weight shift on the mattress between my legs and the same spicy soap reach my nose.

Rough-textured whiskers scraped my breast, and I gasped, arching my back, silently begging for more. Heat sizzled through my body, and I couldn't get enough. The whiskers rubbed back and forth before firm lips caught my nipple and strong teeth took nibbling bites.

Oh, my God. I can't... I want to touch

you... I moaned.

The torture went on. Heat spiraled out of control, so I was whimpering and straining against the bindings. I wanted to touch this male body that was in my dream with me, but I was frustrated and helpless, which only served to get me hotter, because my will was being controlled by another force. I was helpless against whatever my phantom lover wanted to do to me, and it was getting me completely, desperately aroused. It was all out of my control. There was nothing I could do but feel the pleasure rippling through my body, losing all my inhibitions for my faceless lover.

Chapter Three

It was noon by the time I woke up, and while it took a few minutes to fully appreciate my conscious state, it didn't take me long to remember that I'd had another...what would I call that...a waking dream? Sleepwalking? But no...I hadn't actually gone anywhere during the dream.

Whatever it had been, it was leaving me feeling relaxed, if nothing else. I was feeling so good, I decided to head over to the gym, but first I wanted to find Cynthia. There was some girl talk that needed to happen, specifically about the

blond Adonis she'd been talking to at the club last night.

After throwing on a pair of short spandex shorts and a sports-bra shirt, I brushed my hair into a ponytail. Spying the can in the door of the refrigerator, I went for the energy drink that could give me wings, wanting the caffeine hit before my workout. Taking a healthy swig, I knocked on Cynthia's door, ready for an earful on the titillating subject of what the hell happened last night. At the muffled "Come in," I entered into the most bizarre of situations: Cynthia, in a flustered state of indecision, and her bedroom, in a whirlwind of clothes and chaos.

Whoa, Nelly.

She was attempting to pack a large suitcase, and there was evidence of crying all over her face. I'd only seen her cry, sort of, once. Ever. Her eyes looked puffy and her cheeks were pale despite the heat of the day.

Absolutely distressing.

This was so far out of character for her, I was speechless for several seconds. I could see she was trying to put on her cool-as-a-cucumber face for me, but I wasn't buying it. For Cyn to look so upset, someone must have died. A feeling of dread came over me.

"What's going on?"

"I need to leave. I'm not sure how long I'll be gone, but don't worry about

rent. I arranged for a money transfer to deposit funds into your account. I hope you don't mind, but I needed to act on this quickly, so I got the number off your checkbook."

"Cynthia, it's all fine, but what happened? Why are you upset? Why do you need to leave?"

"My brother went missing."

"Missing? What do you mean? Like abduction, or gone walkabout?"

"He's been studying a section of land out in the desert by Las Vegas and hasn't reported in for a couple of weeks."

"Is that what Adonis came to tell you?"

"Adonis?" She gave me a look of confusion and continued moving

between her closet and her suitcase, folding items in a somewhat haphazard fashion, which was also strange for her. She was usually totally anal about clothes, more so than I am, and I can be pretty anal.

“The blond guy from last night.”

“Adonis,” she muttered through tight lips. She shook her head, seeming to reject the tag I’d given him. “His name’s Nick. He found my brother’s campsite still with all his stuff there, but no trace of him. I told him my brother would probably turn up soon. He’s gone off on his own before, sometimes for longer than two weeks, without telling anyone.”

I relaxed a bit. “Then what else is

going on? You look wrecked.”

“Thanks a lot.” She scowled at me and continued packing. “I’m fine. Nothing’s going on. Just tired.” Total blow-off response. I gave a mental eye roll.

“Okay. So what do you plan to do?”

“I don’t know, but I’m meeting the rest of my family in Vegas. We’ll figure it out then.”

“Is there anything I can do? Do you need me to call work, help you pack, or anything?”

“Not right now,” came her sharp reply, “but I’ll let you know if something comes up.”

Figuring I knew what was really pushing her buttons and because I was

totally worried about her emotional health and *not at all nosy*, I asked, “Hey, is there something going on with you and Nick? You guys seemed pretty intense yesterday at the club. Almost like you were fighting?”

“Me and Nick?” There was a look of alarm on her face (bingo!) that she quickly wiped into an innocently neutral don’t-know-what-you’re-talking-about look. *Damn*. “Not at all. He’s just been a friend of my brother’s since they were kids. That’s a funny question to ask me.” Though she wasn’t smiling when she said it, and again, she swept by me without making eye contact. Like I was some kind of annoyance!

Okay, then. There was more going on here than she was telling me, and I had to admit, that kinda hurt. It was like she didn't trust me with her secrets, when the good lord knew she'd heard all, and I mean *all*, of mine. And it wasn't like she *had* to tell me anything at all. If she didn't feel like talking, then she could *say* that. I mean really. I come in here, she's frantically packing, she's obviously been crying, her brother's missing and I saw her arguing in a seemingly intimate tone with the blond guy last night. Don't tell me everything's fine.

There was a knock on the door.

“That should be Nick,” Cynthia

muttered. “He’s driving us there.”

“Do you want me to get that?”

“Yeah. Tell him I’ll be ready in five minutes.”

I tried to ignore the feeling that I was getting shut out by the very best friend I’ve ever had, my first real friend, and did my best to focus on the seriousness of the situation. I took another swig of the energy drink and reminded myself not to pout as I opened the front door.

“You must be Nick.” I forced a smile and even used my friendly voice. “My name’s Taylor.”

“Hi. Nice to meet you.” His lips curled briefly, but his gray eyes remained somber, his body language impatient. It seemed we were all putting

on faces this morning.

“Come on in. Cynthia said she’ll be ready in just a few minutes. Can I get you some coffee? Water? Red Bull?” I flashed my can commercial style.

“I’m fine, thanks. I’ll just see if I can get her to hurry.” Without pausing, he headed accurately down the short hall that led to her bedroom. All I could do was stare after him, wondering if there was something wrong with letting him just walk through the apartment like he owned the place. Then I gave an actual shrug. *She knows him better than she knows me anyway*, sulked my uncharitable thoughts.

Hearing my whiny inner voice was

making me cringe (I'm not a morning person on a normal day), and I knew I needed to get out of there. I could feel my insecurities coming to the surface, and they're not pretty.

"I'm taking off, Cyn," I called down the hall. "Call me when you can." I grabbed my keys and gym bag and was already heading down to the courtyard when she came jogging out.

"Tay! Wait!" She looked distressed as she caught up with me. "You weren't going to say bye?"

"You seemed busy," I muttered, barely meeting her gaze because I knew I was being stupid but couldn't seem to stop myself. "I don't like to get in the way of family."

She stared into my eyes searchingly for several seconds (really weird) before looking down at the ground with a sigh. “Okay. There’s more going on with Nick than I was letting on, but the truth is, I just can’t think about it right now. I’m not trying to shut you out. I wasn’t expecting to see him yesterday, and now my brother could be missing. My feelings are all over the map, and I don’t have the luxury of time to sort through them, much less share them. Please tell me you understand.”

Her golden eyes were sincere. There was even a shimmer of tears. Without even thinking, I gave her a warm hug. “Of course I understand.”

“You mean a lot to me, Tay, and I don’t ever want you to think otherwise.”

“I’m just a big baby.” I shook my head. Here I was throwing a tantrum, when Cynthia faced possibly losing a brother. “Do what you need to do, and call me when you can.”

“You’re the very best friend I’ve ever had too. There’s never been anyone else I could trust the way I’ve trusted you. Really.”

“Cynthia, we’ve got to go. Now.” Nick’s tone of voice was more commanding than friendly as he came down the stairs with her suitcase. “Make sure you have everything you need.”

“I told you I wasn’t finished packing!”

She raised her voice at him, which made my eyes round in shock. Powerful mischief was running amok! I even took a quick look around to see if anyone was witnessing this strange, unusual occurrence, but no one else in the apartment complex seemed to be braving L.A.'s midday summer heat.

“Half your closet is in here already. Whatever you don't have we'll buy on the road.” Nick's tone brooked no argument, and I waited for the counter Cyn explosion to bust out.

It didn't come, though I could almost hear the mental growl Cynthia was trying to breathe her way through in order to regain her infamous self-control. I wondered if she was going to make it

without unloading all over this guy. It also made me wonder what had happened between them. The mystery loomed in my brain, because I'd never seen Cynthia as off-kilter as she'd been the last twenty-four hours. Was this Nick a good guy? Should I worry about her?

And strangely enough, as though he heard my question, Nick paused as he walked by us and gave me a real smile that showed off his absolute gorgeousness. "I'll take care of her. She'll be in good hands. I promise." He did one of those quick two-finger salutes and continued on while Cynthia watched him walk out through the security gate with a wistful expression that sort of

told me all. She gave me another hug and ran back up to the apartment with a parting wave.

“We’ll talk soon!”

“Okay! Good luck! Keep me updated.”

I knew there was something weird about all of the exchanges I’d participated in this morning, but with so much going on that was out of the norm, I forgot to think about it.

Besides, the gym called to me, and I arrived in time to take the kickboxing class that always gives me a feeling of empowerment. I wasn’t just getting exercise, I was learning how to kick and punch really effectively. I could, potentially, *kick some ass* if the need

arose, which made me feel large and in charge. Very important when you've felt helpless and at the mercy of others your whole life.

At least that's what Rico says to me every time I show up, that I'm learning how to defend myself. I think he's got a little crush, so I imagine he'll say whatever he thinks will get me coming back to his class. It must work though, because there I was, sweating like a pig, huffing and puffing and doing my best to use proper form while doing a roundhouse kick to the heavy bag.

“Back to combinations: left jab, right cross, left hook. Left, right, hook! Left, right, hook! Now add an uppercut! Left

jab, right cross, left hook, right uppercut!”

“I can’t do this much longer,” an older lady who was seriously sucking air said from the heavy bag next to mine.

“Hang in there!” I managed to spit out, still taking it out on the innocent bag.

She was someone I recognized by face from the class. Though I never got her name, she was really inspiring to watch and cheer on. She had game.

Of course, now too much time had gone by for me to ask her name without feeling totally stupid.

“I’m trying to hang in there,” she gasped.

“Ten more minutes,” I panted with burning lungs, but our talking brought

Rico's attention to us.

“Keep your gloves up,” he barked at me over the sound of the music, and I tried, really, but my shoulder muscles were burning from the last forty minutes of class. Who knew you needed shoulder muscles to keep your arms working?

“One more addition! Add the backhand! You have to step into it with your left foot! Left jab, right cross, left hook, right uppercut, right backhand! Left, right, hook, uppercut, backhand! Left, right, hook, uppercut, backhand!”

With my last bit of energy, I attacked the bag for the next two minutes, and when the song finally ended and Rico called “Enough!” I was absolutely

noodled. I could do little more than rest my hands on my knees in a bent position and concentrate on forcing air into my lungs quickly enough to keep myself from passing out.

“Good work, Taylor. You’ve got heart.” Rico held up his hand, and I just barely managed to high-five it, feeling proud of the compliment. He turned back to the class and called, “Time to cool down!” I found that a little affirmation went a long way as I discovered the energy to do some stomach crunches and stretches with the class to finish things out without actually passing out entirely.

Rico turned off the music and thanked everyone for a good class as they made their ways out. I was feeling quite

accomplished and full of bravado, thinking, *Just let someone try to accost me on the street and see what I do. I'll wale on their ass!*

I smiled, imagining it from my position on the floor, completely out of energy, which I recognized as being completely ironic. The need for water drove me to stand—that and the fact that people scheduled for the next class were beginning to arrive. I got up and grabbed the water from my bag, where it was tossed alongside the back wall of the room, and downed it in great gulps.

“So what are you up to tonight?” Rico was pulling the strap to his athletic bag over his shoulder as he approached me.

“Work.” I downed more water and capped it, popping it back into my gym bag.

“Ever have time for fun?” He was smiling flirtatiously, and he was definitely a handsome guy. But though I would have considered going out with him even a week ago, somehow his chin seemed weak and his eyes weren’t green, and he was only average height (which was still taller than me). It was silly, but there you have it.

“The world is an expensive place, Rico. I work six days a week and rest on the seventh.”

“Yeah, well, let me know if you ever have free time. I think we could have

some fun.” His dark eyes smiled playfully into mine, and somehow they just didn’t seem serious enough, intense enough.

Just shoot me, right? This was probably yet another manifestation of my need to stay away from emotional entanglements and come up with reasons why I couldn’t be with someone, even when I’d been attracted to them before. One of the main reasons I’d started taking this class was because I thought Rico was a hot guy. Over time, I’d realized it was a good class and it was helping me live my life like a badass. One of my needs in this life I lived was to be able to take care of myself no matter what. I could never rely on

anyone else for anything, ever again.
Ever.

“I’ll see you next week,” I offered, and he walked on with a parting shrug, like a you-can’t-blame-me-for-trying gesture.

“It hurts while I’m doing it, but I just feel great when I’m done.” The older woman came up to me with a wide-open smile. “Besides, with my new body, I was able to shop for lingerie for the first time in years. I got this really cute nightgown that I might wear tonight.” She was blushing like a schoolgirl, which was absolutely lovely to see.

“Ken’s the lucky guy?” I wiped the drips of sweat on my gym towel as they

rolled down my temples and remembered how she'd mentioned this guy the last several weeks that I'd talked with her after class. It was funny that I knew her guy's name, but not hers.

“Yeah. I'm going to cook for him tonight. I make the best pasta sauce, if I do say so myself. What about you? Rico's handsome. Are you two going out tonight?”

“Naw, I've got work. The bills don't pay themselves.”

“You work every weekend, honey. Don't waste your youth. You only get it once.”

“Yeah, well, life gets complicated.”

“That it does. It can teach you things that aren't healthy to learn, if you're not

careful. I know that one. I better go. I need to make a trip to the grocery store.”

It was an interesting way to leave things, and I was sure the cryptic comment was deliberately left to my interpretation, but critical thinking was not going to happen right after a hard-core workout. Still, her comment stuck with me as I walked all the way out to my car...and saw that the passenger-side window was smashed in.

“No,” I whispered, rushing to it in the parking lot. “Are you kidding me? Why? It’s a piece of junk!”

But it was my piece of junk. I’d managed to save for it, buy it used, pay for insurance and gas every month, take

care of maintenance and repairs. There was nothing of value in it to steal. Even the radio was old and broken, but that was okay with me. It was my little junker that I'd been able to afford and rely on. And while I know cars get broken into all the time, it just didn't make sense that mine was targeted.

Peering through the window, I tried to think if I'd left anything out on the seat, but the only thing I had that I considered to be valuable was my phone, and that had been safely tucked away in my bag inside the gym with me. So it just didn't make sense. Glass shards spread across the passenger seat, the floor mats were tossed around haphazardly, and the map book I usually kept under my driver's

seat was ripped up. It was almost like someone was mad and just trying to do damage for some reason.

God, what a weird day this was turning into.

There didn't seem to be anything missing. I shoved the pieces of map book out of the way, practically threw myself onto the driver's seat in a huff, and drove home with the car as it was. What could I do about it in the parking lot? If I stared at it any longer, I was going to cry, and that was something I just didn't do in public. Not a good badass image to project. What sounded good was a lukewarm shower, some time to cry on my pillow and a nap

before work. I needed some cooling-off time before dealing with the problem.

An image of Ryder, my knight in shining armor from last night, came to mind. His intense green eyes and tough, not-to-be-fucked-with deadly silent demeanor somehow inspired confidence, and I felt better.

As though my thoughts manifested the man, I saw him sitting at one of the common-area tables by the pool in the courtyard, and my heart kicked up a beat. It was both exciting and disconcerting that he was just as devastating to my senses as I remembered.

He was reading the paper, with a bottle of water sitting in front of him. Black hair damp and wearing swim

trunks, he looked like he'd just taken a swim. Unfortunately, he'd already put on a white logoed T-shirt, which was stretched across his muscular chest oh, so deliciously.

The view was letting me forget about my problems for the moment and just enjoy.

Disappointingly, as I came through the security gate, he didn't even look up. I was deliberately making a lot of clanging noise, you know?

Hmm.

I thought about bypassing the courtyard completely and just going up the side stairs to my apartment. However, there seemed to be an

invisible rope strongly wrapped around my sense of free will, commandeering it, and I found my feet carrying me toward him anyway. He sighted me over the rim of his paper and lowered it, startling me with his darkly grim expression. He did a split-second inventory of my clothing and gym bag before returning to my eyes. It was like he was mad at me. It gave me pause. I wasn't sure what to make of his mood and questioned whether to continue toward him. Maybe he wanted to be alone? Not be bothered?

In for a penny... I proceeded with caution.

“I—I just wanted to thank you for your help last night,” I offered hesitantly. “That could have gotten really ugly.”

At first I thought he wasn't going to say anything. He was just looking at me with a firm scowl and those commanding green eyes, but then he tossed out "Yeah."

It was a noncommittal reply, and I couldn't gauge what his general feeling was about the encounter last night or his feelings about me standing there in front of him. I suddenly wished I had Cynthia's femme-fatale moves from the night before. I wished I could glide over with sophistication and confidence and be able to sling some clever conversation that would get his attention. But on a good day I'd have trouble meeting that order, much less on a day

where I felt out of the norm, where too many unpredictable events were presenting themselves. I decided the best course of action was retreat.

“Well, um, I think I’ve interrupted your...reading.”

“Yeah.”

Damn that word.

I stepped back, ready to save face. “I’m sorry for interrupting. I just wanted to say thank you. It’s one of the hazards of the job, I guess. Guys like that get drunk and think they can just grab what they want—”

“Can’t say I blame him.” He leaned back in his chair, folded the paper very deliberately and set it down, never breaking eye contact.

For a moment I thought I'd misheard him. Stepping toward the table again, I said, "Excuse me?"

"I can't say I blame him," he repeated very deliberately. "You advertise, you should expect guys to take you up on it."

Holy hell. He did not just say that.
"You're saying I asked for it?" My tone was all disbelief.

"You wear a skirt that barely covers your ass and then wonder why some guy tries to grab it." His voice was more of a rumbling growl as he scowled up at me.

What the...! He was no knight in shining armor! A demon, if anything.

"I never signed on to be a knight in

shining armor.” He curled a lip with disdain.

“Good thing,” I sputtered angrily.

He continued. “I’m just telling it like it is. I wouldn’t have had to do anything if you’d been watching out for yourself. You have no idea...”

I heard the faint resentment in his statement and attributed it to him having to help me out last night, and I was embarrassed all over again. I could feel my cheeks blazing. “Then thanks for nothing. Next time just stay out of it! I can take care of myself.”

“Next time, don’t advertise.”

Them’s fighting words! It’s on! “You think a guy has the right to do as he pleases when he feels like it?”

“No. But if I walk in a dangerous neighborhood flashing wads of cash, I should expect to get robbed.”

“Are you kidding me? I should be able to walk around *naked* and not have to worry about any guy grabbing me!” My anger was bubbling.

“Yeah.” He looked me over with a mocking expression. “Good luck with that. Let me have an invite when that little event’s about to take place.”

“Classic! Absolutely classic! Because I’m wearing something that gives a guy a boner, I’m an evil bitch who deserves what she gets?”

“I’m saying you’re naive, and it’s going to get you hurt.”

“Oh, that’s better! Thanks for that clarification. I’m just too stupid to know how to take care of myself! I’ll remember that from now on!”

“Dammit, that’s not what I said and not what I meant.” He stood suddenly, the chair scraping back on the cement in a single powerful motion. He towered over me, clearly agitated, but I was no longer going to listen. I didn’t have it in me to do *this*, whatever *this* was.

Screw you, pal!

“Whatever. I’m out of here.” At this point, it was just all too much. At most any other time, I could have coped better, but here was Ryder thinking so poorly of me while I’d been all turned

on by him, which left me with a painful case of humiliation. On top of my car being broken into (which was a horrible invasion of my private self) when I couldn't afford to fix it, there was Cynthia being all weird with me and leaving indefinitely, and I could feel the crumbling begin. My world as I knew it was changing radically (something I don't handle well), and I needed to get home so I could break down alone in the privacy of my shower.

“Now hold on...”

“For your information—” I spun back around, eyes blazing, though I *hated* that I could feel my throat clogging with emotion, “—my skirt more than covered my ass, and you're as much of an

asshole as that guy last night, if you think I somehow invited his attention.”

Jerk! I spun around to beat a retreat before I fully broke down. Normally, I avoided situations that could make me feel small and stupid, so why had I invited this? Coming through the gate, I knew I should have gone straight up. Why had I ignored my good sense? As it was, I could feel the hot tears spilling over onto my cheeks. I just didn’t need this today.

He grabbed my arm before I made it three steps.

“Leave me alone.” I tried to jerk free, keeping my head down so he wouldn’t see my face, because I was already

horribly embarrassed that he thought I dressed cheaply, which to my mind equals trailer trash (one of my sensitive buttons). I've worked so hard to drag myself up from those painful roots to remake myself, knowing I came from what most would term *white trash*. Added to that, now I was being all stupid and girly with tears.

His grip was like a steel shackle. I couldn't break free.

"Hold on," he commanded roughly.

"I don't want you touching me—"

"Just wait a damn minute. You're bleeding."

"Bleeding?" That got my attention, and I peered over my shoulder to see what he was referring to.

Ryder knelt down to where my spandex shorts ended, and sure enough, there were a number of small pieces of glass embedded in the back of my thigh. And now that I could see them and know they were there, they started to sting.

“Ow.” I hissed as he pulled one out. Bright droplets pooled and dripped down my leg at the spot where the small glass piece had been sticking in.

“You have a first-aid kit?”

“I think so. Cynthia, my roommate, does at least.”

“I’ll help you clean up.” His voice and touch were suddenly gentle, and that was somehow making things worse. I had been ready to start hating him, and

now he was going to be all nice to me? No way. I was done. I needed desperately to be alone so I could cry and truly have a good pity party.

“Thanks, but I’ll handle it.” I pulled away quickly and made for the stairs, trying to wipe the tears from my face. Again, I didn’t get far.

“Don’t be a baby.” His gruff voice in my ear gave me shivers. I was suddenly airborne as he lifted me in his strong arms, gym bag and all, like I didn’t weigh much.

“I don’t need you to carry me!” I struggled in his grasp, trying to stretch my legs down.

“You’re going to hurt your leg.”

“Not if I walk.”

“I’m going to help you,” he said sternly.

“You don’t even like me! Why are you trying to help me? I don’t get you!” And the tears continued to trail down my cheeks, so I did my best to hide my face over his shoulder.

He didn’t respond, and I quickly grabbed on to his thick shoulder muscles as he jogged up the stairs to the second floor. I absolutely refused to acknowledge that I enjoyed feeling feminine and fragile in his arms. Refused! And I absolutely remembered that he’d just been *mean* to me! No, really, I did. But I still didn’t know how to resolve the situation I found myself in.

The door was locked, and he had to put me down so I could fish out my keys. Of course, they were way at the bottom of my bag, but it gave me a moment to breathe and figure out how I wanted to handle this, even with his large, hulking form waiting right in front of me.

Let him in or send him away. What was the best thing to do?

I located my keys and looked up into his jade eyes, ready to politely dismiss him, and saw they were frowning down at me with a hint of self-reproach, like he was doing something he didn't agree with. If I could read into his expression a bit, he even seemed somewhat unsure, like he didn't quite know what to do

with me.

“Taylor,” he started, but he paused, disarming me with a gentle swipe of a tear from my face, and glared at the floor a moment. His face set in hard lines, he looked at me briefly, and in that moment I could see his expression seemed tortured. There was an internal struggle going on, like he was debating what he was going to say. “I don’t think you’re inviting sexual harassment, and I didn’t think you were asking for anything to happen to you...any more than my sister was.”

“Oh.” The soft exclamation deflated my upset.

I saw from his closed-off expression that that was all he planned to say,

leaving me to wonder with horror about what had happened to his sister. Had men sexually abused her? Was she okay? It had to have been bad, if he was unwilling to talk about it. Was this his way of apologizing or trying to make peace? If something terrible had happened to his sister in a sexual way, I could understand his having strong feelings about protecting a female from unwelcome sexual attention.

“You’re going to need someone with tweezers to pull out all the little pieces of glass,” he said in a businesslike manner. “Let me help you.”

“Okay.” And there I was, feeling all gooey about him once again.

It felt very intimate being in Cynthia's tiny bathroom with him. There wasn't much room, and I couldn't help but feel self-conscious as I bumped him with every move I made.

My breathing suddenly did that shallow thing again. There was a washrag hanging on a towel rack behind him, so I leaned around him to retrieve that. It gave me a chance to smell his clean, spicy-soapy scent, as I was nearly body to body with him while doing that. Then I reached for the kit under the sink, and my butt bumped his hip. A naughty voice made her presence known in my head, wanting me to rub on him, which came out of nowhere. Who was that? It

wasn't me. I wasn't a sexual person.
Was I?

I turned to give him the surprisingly heavy rectangular metal kit, and the back of his hand grazed my breast.

That one made me suck in air with the sudden flash of pleasure that zinged my sex with heat. Our gazes held. I could feel the sexual awareness wrapping wispy tendrils around us, working its magic. The room was feeling hotter. His eyes seemed to deepen into a darker green and they dipped to the breast he'd accidentally touched. The nipple was peaked, as though looking for attention, and I could tell he wanted to respond to that invitation by the way his hands tightened on the metal box. My heart

kicked up a notch, wondering what that would feel like. I had a feeling it would feel pretty damn good.

Ryder reluctantly, but decisively, turned his attention to the kit, ending the moment, though it remained uncomfortably quiet for several seconds. I was glad to note that he needed to *adjust* his stance and take a deep breath as he dug through the metal container, so it wasn't just me who was affected by that highly charged moment. I was dying to look down for some visual confirmation, but I didn't want to be too obvious or embarrass him. Instead, I leaned a hip on the counter and watched him select and discard various items.

Before long, there were a few things pulled out and stacked on the counter. He found tweezers, some antiseptic spray, gauze and Band-Aid strips. He appeared to be very comfortable with cleaning up wounds, as he laid the medical supplies out in an organized fashion. Then he washed his hands, all very quickly and with little fuss. So thorough. Wow. I would have just started the cleanup.

“Always need to beware of infection,” he muttered in his deep voice, as though explaining why he was being thorough.

“Right. Thanks.”

“Now turn around. Bend over.”

I merely raised an eyebrow at Ryder's commands before complying, though I couldn't shake the Skinematic feel of the moment, which made me blush. Then he got to work.

The glass cuts stung, and I couldn't believe I hadn't felt them when I sat on the glass initially. Of course, they were pretty small. I should have checked the driver's seat before sitting, but I was upset and the adrenaline was pumping at the time. Each one that came free made a light clinking sound as he set it next to me on the sink.

Luckily, there were only a few, and before I knew it, he was spraying the canned stuff on me. And get this. The

moment I hissed with discomfort, he blew lightly on my skin to ease the burn. And through it all, I'd been absolutely conscious of his big hand resting gently on my thigh while the other removed the small shards. In spite of the discomfort of the glass, I felt suspended in a haze of growing arousal, confused that my body was reacting so strongly.

Why now? Why hadn't this happened with any other guy before? Ronny had been a nice, handsome college boyfriend with a good, fit body, but I'd never experienced such a strong bodily reaction to him. Now I was feeling shaky and needy. I didn't know what to do with this.

"So what happened?" Ryder had just

finished putting gauze and tape on the affected areas. His hand gave a final lingering squeeze to the back of my thigh when he stood up. He towered over me once again, which I was absolutely coming to be turned on by. No more average-height guys for me. The poor Ricos of the world would have a harder time getting a date with me in the future.

Ryder suddenly glared at me and stepped back to lean against the wall.

“You asked what happened?” I wasn’t sure why he was giving me that look.

“My car was broken into.”

“Your car?”

“I know, right? I have this lousy little compact, but it’s *my* lousy little

compact, and someone smashed the window. I was so upset, I must not have noticed that there was glass on my seat too.”

“When did this happen?”

“When I was at the gym just now. I was only there for like an hour, doing my kickboxing class, but then I went out to my car and saw the window busted in.”

He stared into my eyes with sudden intensity, searching, kind of like what Cynthia was doing earlier, which had also been really weird. As though satisfied by what he saw, he nodded almost to himself.

Okay, then.

“Did you call the police?”

“No. What was the point? There was

nothing stolen. People's cars get broken into all the time, and mine's a junker anyway."

"Are you sure nothing was taken? Absolutely?" Again, he watched me searchingly.

"I'm certain. I never keep anything in my car. It just bummed me out because it's something else I'm going to need to pay for. Busted window."

With a sigh, I leaned my butt against the counter and crossed my arms. In the sudden silence, I saw that the movement had drawn his eyes like a magnet. Following his line of sight, I saw that my cleavage was pushed up enticingly against my sports-bra shirt. When I

looked back at Ryder, his pale eyes had, again, gone heavy lidded with heat. Quickly, I dropped my arms, not wanting him to think I was trying to be a tease, but it was too late. The damage was done. And if I were being totally honest, I would admit that maybe I was excited to see what he would do next.

Anticipation is an amazing aphrodisiac.

He took a step forward, which brought him close enough to me in this tiny space that I could feel the heat radiating off his body. What to do? What did I want to do? Desire swamped my senses. Nerves had me feeling quivery. I was alone with this big, strong man whom I was attracted to. What was I supposed to do next? I wasn't really

sure... Can anyone say “in over my head?”

Ryder took the final step, and his arms boxed me in against the sink, the length of his body inches from mine. I could feel his anger, as though he didn't want to be attracted, which gave me a hit of power. I thrust my chin up in defiance, some of which was bravado, and just stared at him, daring him to try something, without feeling any fear. I could make this large, imposing male want *me*.

My heart pumped with a mixture of lust and some anxiety, not knowing what was about to happen. I could feel my pulse in my throat and found my eyes

feasting hungrily on his sensual lips.

“You don’t get it, do you?” This was said in a soft, gravelly tone that made tingles spread through my body.

“Get what?” My voice was all breathy Marilyn Monroe.

“Your impact.” His voice sounded deep and foreboding.

“My impact?”

His eyes narrowed on me. He kept his silence for a moment, and I could only stare helplessly up into his eyes, not knowing what to say or do. He raised his hand and traced a gentle finger down my cheek, but wore an accusatory glare as he looked down at me. Even his voice sounded frustrated. “You’re actually so innocent. How did you get to be this age,

living on your own, and still know so little about men?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” My words came out breathlessly. Truthfully, I wasn’t even really listening to what he was saying, my heart was thundering so loudly.

“If you knew what was going on in the minds of half the men around you, you wouldn’t be so quick to prance around with this beautiful body.” His large hand dropped to my waist where the shirt had ridden up, making contact skin to skin. I quivered. His hand was like a brand, heating my flesh. His thumb rubbed a small circle by my belly button, and goose bumps fanned out over my

stomach. I was completely under his spell.

“Dammit...” he muttered, and his forearm snaked around my waist, pulling me firmly against his steely body. His lips captured mine, and I swear I saw stars. Heat exploded. I whimpered, wanting more of his taste and feel, and I found my arms reaching around his neck of their own accord. Fire was building from the inside, and all I could do was run my hands through his thick, soft hair, grabbing it in handfuls so I could have him right where I wanted him.

He growled in response, shoving against me, pushing me back against the counter with his hips, grinding into me.

It was rough and wild. His strong lips

slanted against mine, deepening the kiss. His teeth nipped my lower lip, and when I gasped with the pleasure and pain, his tongue swept my mouth, tasting me, rubbing velvet on velvet.

Yes!

I moaned as the fire spread through my breasts, my thighs, clear down to my toes. I couldn't get enough. I went to taste him back, and when my tongue tangled with his, he sucked it in, a groan rumbling in his throat, which only excited me more. Moist heat rushed between my thighs in achy waves.

His hands dragged over my back, my hips and my ass, pulling me against his erection, and naturally, my hips and

tummy cradled it and rubbed against it, loving the feel of it. Then his hand went over the back of my thigh, pulling it up to his waist and...I felt the sharp sting from my glass puncture wounds.

“Damn.” He pulled away, feeling my sudden cry of discomfort, though he kept his hands gripping my ass, which just felt right.

“It’s all right.” I rested my head on his chest and could hear his heart pumping wildly. Then reality interceded. I didn’t even know this guy, and here I was throwing myself at him. No wonder he thought I was asking for it.

“Stop it,” he murmured harshly.

“What?” I asked warily.

“Second-guessing everything.” He

rested his forehead on mine. “We can’t do this now.”

“You’re right. We can’t.”

“You don’t have all the facts.”

“No, I don’t know you.”

“You don’t understand, but you will.”

He took a deep breath and almost to himself repeated, “You will. Soon.”

“Yeah, well—”

“Take your shower. We can talk later.”

I was beginning to feel embarrassed at my wanton behavior! OMG, right? I don’t know his name, where he’s from, what he does for a living, but here I am swapping DNA samples with him because my brain decided to go AWOL

from my body, and my body was totally turned on by his scrumptious masculinity.

Feeling self-conscious, I plastered a smile on my face and tried to think of something appropriate to say to get out of what was starting to be a weird situation, but then he tilted my head up by putting his fingers under my chin and gave me another hot, stirring kiss that left me senseless. Just as I was getting the feel for it again, he left. I forgot what my concerns were momentarily and stared after him, feeling bewildered by the events I'd experienced in so short a time.

He left a void with his absence, and for a moment, all I could do was stare at

myself in the mirror and try to see what Ryder was seeing when he looked at me. With my hair pulled back in a ponytail, my bone structure was more pronounced, and I had to say that I did look hot, even though my looks come from my mother. It was a thought that brought along its own brand of depression.

I usually shelve thoughts of my mother *immediately* as a survival strategy.

My pale blue eyes, almond shaped, were set above a pert, small nose, and my high cheekbones curved above full lips that looked even fuller because they were swollen and pink from ravishment. It was a good look for me.

Life is so weird. You just never know

what the next day is going to bring.

A smile brought the twinkle back to my eyes.

Ryder couldn't resist me.

On that note, I made a quick detour to slide the front-door lock before going to the bathroom in my room and, whistling, taking a nice long shower. Regretfully, all of Ryder's handiwork with the gauze had to be redone, and an impish voice in my head tried to convince me to go to his apartment and have a repeat performance, but the more sane voice called a halt to that idea.

This thing with Ryder was sudden and overwhelming. I couldn't just go jumping off the deep end here when I didn't know the guy. I needed time to

think and consider. I needed to find my balance. I needed to remember that I was a self-sufficient woman who could stand on her own and didn't need to rely on men to be sugar daddies, like my mother did.

But the apartment felt large and quiet as I rambled around the rooms in a large T-shirt. Turning on the TV, I grabbed a bagel, some peanut butter and an apple, making a meal out of the simple fare while watching a bad reality show. I must have fallen asleep, because I found myself in a recurring nightmare that I've had since "the incident," when I was five years old.

I'm at the L.A. County Fair with my

mother and so happy, because for once she is spending time with just me. The two of us. So often, she has to “go to work” or “meet someone,” and I get stuck with my grandmother in her house, with her smoke-stained air that makes my throat sore. But not today. Today, she says she wants to spend time with her little girl.

We set out at lunchtime and gorge ourselves on hot dogs, soda and ice cream. We go on the kiddy rides, play games and have someone take a picture of us with our camera, behind one of the silly cutouts. There are so many emotions: excitement mixed with love and happiness. There’s a loud din of white noise. People talking and laughing,

the music from various rides intertwining and creating chaotic sound, and bright colors flashing here and there make up the background.

Then it suddenly turns to night. It's dark. My mother leaves me alone. She tells me to wait for her on the wall while she goes into the wine-drinking place to say hi to a friend. I'm a good girl and wait. Strangers loom out of the dark with concern, asking if I'm okay. Am I lost? But I say no. I'm waiting. My mother told me to wait. I don't know how long I'm waiting. No, I won't go with them and get help. They're strangers, and my mommy always told me to never talk to strangers.

Panic sets in. I question myself. Have I got her instructions right? She's always telling me it's my fault that I'm left behind so often, because I don't listen. Didn't my mother tell me to wait here? It seems like it's been a long time. I'm getting cold. It's dinnertime again, and I'm getting hungry. Where is she?

A glowing white flower winks at me, kind of like magic. It was just lying next to me on the wall, and I pick it up. It's soft and pretty, like my mommy. I could go give it to her, and then we could go home and have some dinner. That seems like a good plan.

I go to the wine-drinking place and peek through the door, but I can't see

her, and a big man meanly tells me I can't come in. Where is she? I look around and around and all I see are tall strangers. I move from one exhibit to another. I can't find her. I start crying and running and the lights are getting too bright and the music from the rides is getting too loud and my shirt is suddenly snagged by a stranger's hand that takes on the dimensions of a horrid claw, and I scream and scream.

It's okay Taylor. The deep, warm voice stops me.

I look up with my five-year-old eyes and see Ryder, large and protective, his intense green eyes full of concern, which is very addicting to be around. People don't usually show concern for me.

Anger? Yes. Disappointment? Yes. But not this concern that makes me feel warm inside.

No one's going to get you here. Look around.

And I do. The fair is bright and colorful once again. It has lost the frightening dimensions. Families with kids are walking by, talking and smiling at each other. Ryder bends down and picks me up, so I ride his hip, and he shields me from the whirlwind of bodies and motion. We walk around the different booths. He grabs a cotton candy and hands it to me.

Don't we have to pay for that?

It's just a dream. Can you see that?

A dream? Happily, I take bites of it, not really paying attention to what he says, but he stops walking, forcing me to listen.

Does it still look scary? His deep voice has a surprising softness and patience to it that draws me in, allows me to trust him to help. I look around and see nothing amiss. No one is out to hurt me.

No. It's just people.

So why are you so scared?

I can't find my mom. She's going to be mad and tell me what a bad girl I am for not listening to her and staying right there on the wall. Then she's going to make me live with Grandma,

*and I don't want to live with Grandma.
She's mean, I confided.*

*In dreams, we can do whatever we
want, Taylor.*

We can?

*Are you really five years old right
now?*

I think about it and suddenly
remember that I'm not five. I'm nearly
twenty-five.

No. I'm not.

When I look down at myself, I'm
magically standing on my own two feet
with my adult body. It's amazing. I look
around, in control of my dream fear for
the first time ever.

Wow.

So what really happened?

I stare at the wall, the beginning of the real-life nightmare I experienced that day, and shake my head. I'm not sure I'm ready to share yet.

It was a misunderstanding.

What happened to you?

Miscommunication, I reply, though the truth of what really happened flashes through my brain.

Eventually, the fair closed at ten o'clock, and the security guard took me to the police, who then tried to call my mother and grandmother. My grandmother picked me up, and when my mother got home, my grandmother tore into her. Here's the kicker: my mother told my grandmother that I ran off and

that she couldn't find me.

So this dream is about being lost and abandoned?

Yeah. I'll never forget that fear that I was never going to be found again.

I found you.

Thanks Ryder.

He looks down at my hand, the one still holding the flower, with an expression of confusion. *Where did you get that?*

This? I look down at the beautiful, iridescent bloom. It still has a glowing sheen to it. *It was there next to me. Actually, it's the first time I've seen it. It's never been part of the dream in the past.*

Strange. It's almost like he says this

to himself.

What is?

*Nothing. If you don't wake up now,
you'll be late for work.*

Chapter Four

I sat up on the sofa with a gasp, looking around my apartment with frantic head swivels. After a few moments, I came back to my senses enough to recognize that I was home, safe and sound, and I was alone.

How fucking weird was that?

I took a deep, shaky breath and fell back on the overstuffed pillow on the sofa. The dream had felt so real, just like the sexual ones. My twisted psyche had dragged Ryder into this dream and made him a savior of some kind—therapeutically, that is. At least I hadn't

woken up from this particular dream crying, as I usually did.

A glance at the clock on the wall in the kitchen had me scrambling. I'd been sleeping for hours! Shit, shit, shit. And I still hadn't cleaned up the glass in my car!

With barely any time to lose, I dragged on the black skirt from the previous night and grabbed a cap-sleeved white button-up that looked cute and complemented my figure. I had no time to blow-dry my hair, so it did this wavy, curly thing around my face. Quick eyeliner, mascara and lip gloss did the trick before I was out the door barefoot, carrying my heels by their straps.

I also brought along a dustpan and a

plastic bag, but as it turned out, I didn't need either. The glass was already swept out and a plastic sheet had been taped over the area where the broken window had been.

Awwww. How sweet. The door in my heart creaked open wider.

Thanks, Ryder, I thought to myself.

You're welcome.

I was getting in the car when I heard that, or thought I heard that, and stopped midmotion. Standing back up, I took a look around, frowning as I tried to imagine if I'd actually heard something or if my brain was acting up again. Because really, if I'd actually heard something when someone wasn't even

there, that would mean I was hearing voices, right? Not good. Or that would imply that someone had access to my mind somehow, which is totally sci-fi and impossible, right? Probably, I was just imagining things, wanting Ryder to be there because he was a gorgeous, rugged mountain of tall, muscular and handsome, and I really liked kissing him. A lot.

Geesh. Imagine if he actually had access to my mind, with all the squirrely stuff I had going on in there. I could barely stand to be in my own head without going tear-your-hair-out bonkers myself. Silently amused with the idea, I slid back into my car and motivated.

I got to work on time, thanks to Ryder

saving me a step with my car. I was going to have to thank him for that. And it probably wouldn't hurt to actually find out what his last name was, since he was living in the neighborhood, so to speak, and we'd already locked lips. *Awkward.* Hate that feeling! Experienced it in spades with my last, and only real, serious boyfriend back during my freshman year of college. I never got to have an orgasm with him the few times we tried, which just made it uncomfortable on so many levels. Only after we broke up did I do some physical self-exploration and realize that I could have an orgasm on my own.

The ride to the club was uneventful,

and as I was about to exit my car I remembered something that had me diving into the ashtray by the radio. That special little piece of liquid metal clay stuff! The one I'd accidentally taken from Reggie's house. I hoped it was still there, and that someone hadn't taken it during the initial break-in. Upon first glance, I couldn't see it, and I was heartbroken, thinking I would have to explain to Reggie that not only did I freak out his lover, but I stole something from his house that in turn was stolen from me! Upon closer inspection, however, I could see that it was simply camouflaged against the metal of the ashtray. It had conformed to the bottom, looking like it was part of the car.

Again, I was struck with how amazing a thing it was. It was like metal clay, changing shape, stretching out, contorting to whatever form I gave it, and when I laid it out on my palm, it began to simply puddle. I felt like there was a buzzing kind of energy that surrounded the metal, the way two magnets with the same poles will interact with a particular force. You can't see it, but when you try to put them together, you feel the resistance. It was like magic, except not, because there's an actual scientific explanation for the reaction of the magnets. There was no scientific explanation that I could think of to explain this liquid metal stuff, which

didn't mean there wasn't one. I was not a science major in college. Could it be dangerous?

My brain immediately nixed the thought. There was no way Reggie would have any hazardous materials lying around in his kitchen.

But I knew I needed to get inside so I wouldn't have Johnny hollering at me about values and responsibility and how the only way to succeed in life is to work hard and be on time.

"Where do I put this?" I asked myself, not wanting to risk leaving it in an unsecured car any longer. My brain had been so freaked about the break-in that I'd completely forgotten about it. I supposed I could stick my finger through

it and make it a ring. But my hands were usually busy as a bartender, and I wouldn't want it slipping off, maybe going down the drain. Toe ring?

With that thought in mind, I pushed the liquidy metal bit over my third toe and it conformed perfectly, creating a center hole and hugging my digit like it was a second skin. It actually looked sexy. I stuck my strappy heels on, which held the ring more securely in place, the energy of it humming against my skin, almost tickling me. Then I made my way into the club.

Johnny's Spot was even busier on Saturday nights. Young singles in their twenties had had time to rest, get all

hoochie-mamaed out and meet up with all their friends who were looking for an equally good time. I was up to my neck mixing drinks, grabbing beers, cleaning up bar spills and trying to maintain clever repartee with customers who were getting progressively more plastered. I knew that if I could get them to laugh, though, the tip jar would fill faster, which is good for all of us.

For the first part of the night, I developed a headache that I tried to ignore and just push through. It started out strongly enough, but I noticed that over the course of three hours, it dwindled. Eventually, it was gone, though a feeling of lightheadedness presented itself. But that was okay

because it was a kind-of-cool feeling and didn't hurt. I also thought I caught glimpses of Ryder in the crowd, which kept my heart jumping, but I could never get a clear view because of the constant movement of bodies. Disappointing. I also figured I could be imagining things, because wouldn't he come up to me if he was there? We had shared some very intimate moments.

God, I want to grab your tits.

I heard the statement and looked around sharply to see which of the guys around me had said it. There were three guys looking up at the TV screen located behind the bar, watching a soccer game; there were two women flirting with

Barry, waiting for him to finish pouring them drinks at his end of the bar; there was a lone woman who looked like she was waiting for someone; and there was a couple not too far diagonally from me. The guy was looking at the woman as though mesmerized by whatever she was saying. I thought the statement came from him.

And she didn't belt him for saying that to her?

But no. She was smiling, gesticulating with her hands, and with every move, her overly endowed, surgically enhanced breasts jiggled in her low-cut blouse. Had she not heard him say it? She had to have heard it. I heard it, and I wasn't nearly as close to him as she

was. Whatever. Why should I judge, right? It took all kinds.

“Can you bring that tray for me?”

Brenda was looking stressed trying to get drinks and food out to some of her tables quickly.

“Sure thing.”

I did a quick balancing job and meandered through the crowd with a load of beers and frosted mugs, following Brenda. We served the tables, and I handed her the empty tray, since she was going back to the kitchen, and headed back to my station.

Man, I'd like to tap that.

“Excuse me?” I frowned at the starting-a-beer-gut-backward-hat-

wearing-still-living-in-the-glory-days (which had clearly been back in high school) guy I'd just passed, sure that he'd been the one to make the rude statement.

“What?” He looked defensive.

“What did you just say?”

“I didn't say anything.”

I stared at him a moment longer, shook my head in disgust and moved on. Guys these days were real assholes. The bar was a stage, and I was the one-person Greek chorus, reporting on what I was watching, maybe even predicting things that would come as they played out before my eyes. There was just such a lack of respect toward fellow humans in general. It was no wonder we were so

polarized politically, and going broke financially, as a nation.

After that guy's comment, it was like a dam broke, and I was hearing all kinds of rude comments like I'd never heard before in my life. These comments were from men and women alike, and I was having trouble containing myself and being the professional I'm paid to be. I continued taking drink orders and washing up glasses during lulls in service, all the while wondering why the hell people were all deciding to take off the gloves at once.

I'd like to ride you, cowboy.

I bet you're wearing a thong.

Can I be your Mr. Tonight?

He has pretty eyes. I like his smile.
That was a nice one.

Sweetheart, quit acting so desperate and keep your girls caged in a shirt that actually fits. That raised my eyebrows, but I didn't see anyone looking upset.

What do I need to do to fuck you tonight?

This guy reeks. I chuckled because I knew who the stinky guy in question was. I'd caught a whiff of him myself.

You're not that cute, but I'd fuck you for a ride in your car, Dr. Tim. Don't be obvious or anything.

Get your fake tits away from my man, bitch. I thought that one was going to

cause a fight between some women, and I was already looking for Charlie and Billy to warn them, but all I saw was two women and a man, standing together and laughing over some joke, just having a nice conversation.

The random comments grew to a dull roar until I had trouble distinguishing one comment from another, yet I looked around and no one was actually saying what I was hearing.

Yeah, right. Of course you're an actress.

Gross. He has dried spit in the corner of his mouth.

So funny. I wonder where he's from.

Leave me alone! I don't care about the stupid beer-coaster collection

you've got.

Should I ask for her number? I think she likes me.

My blood went cold as the din of noise from the room and the din of noise in my head became overwhelming. It was so loud. I couldn't hear any one thing anymore. I was hearing everything and unable to discriminate between sounds I wanted to pay attention to and sounds I didn't want to hear, sounds that were actual, and sounds that were coming from...I didn't know where.

“Jesus Christ! Are you deaf? I said I want a Guinness.”

I looked helplessly at the man at the bar facing me, wondering if he'd

actually said that, and realized that his lips had moved, so he must have. I grabbed a bottle and took his money, ready to run from the room with my hands over my ears. Instead, I turned away from the customers and faced the brick wall that housed shelves of liquor behind me.

The voices wouldn't stop, and somehow the brick wall drew my eyes. It was a comfort for some reason, maybe because it was still and cool in a noisy room. I imagined that brick wall in my mind, thick and tall, containing the wild cacophony of voices, and suddenly...the voices went silent. The only noise I was hearing was the club noise again. Music was pumping through the club's system,

and there was a general din of conversational noise with random roars of approval and anger over whatever sports game was currently playing on the screens.

With a sigh of relief, I turned back around, shaky and sweating. I didn't know what was happening, but I was scared and still had another two hours of customers and one hour of behind-the-bar cleanup. And then what? What was wrong with me? I'd have made a joke about needing to be committed, but I was too afraid that it was true. I didn't even know how to *explain* what was happening to me, much less whom to talk to about it. Maybe I needed to call my

aunt and ask if there was any history of mental illness in the family.

“You okay?” Barry, my fellow bartender, came over to me with a look of concern. He was a guy in his forties, had kind of a Hawaiian visage with long black hair tied in a ponytail, dark, happy eyes, you know? Smile lines around his eyes and mouth. He was a guy who liked to laugh. He also liked to eat. He had a slight paunch in his midregion. “You sick or something?”

“I’m okay.” I ran a hand over my forehead. “Just a headache.”

“Need to go home? Johnny could fill in for you.”

Which was true about Johnny. He jumped in whenever one of us had a

crisis. “I’ll be okay.”

“All right. Let me know if you start feeling worse. Don’t be a tough guy.”

“I promise.” Such a sweetheart of a guy.

The rest of the evening went by in a blur as I did my best to keep up with the orders coming in, though half my brain was preoccupied with trying to figure out and find an explanation for what was happening to me. By the time it was last call, Barry said he’d cover me and told me to go home and get some rest. He said he’d handle the cleanup on his own, and I wasn’t going to argue with him. I was anxious to get home and start worrying some more about what was

wrong with my brain. I figured I could look up my symptoms online and see what came up. Probably schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder.

I had to park a couple of blocks away from the apartment. It was a short hike back to the security gate, and though I was feeling pretty freaked out about what I was starting to think of as my medical condition, I still kept my wits about me. It was two in the morning, time for the weirdos to be out and about. I had a moment when I wanted to chuckle, thinking I fit the description better than anyone else around. I seemed to be the only one hearing voices.

All was quiet as I made my way up to my apartment building. Lights were out

in all of the apartment units except for a few that had the eerie blue glow of TV lights flickering here and there against darkened windows. I made as little noise as I could coming through the security gate, making sure it closed softly. I went upstairs to my apartment and thought about Ryder living next door. I wondered if he was already asleep.

I realized as I went upstairs that I was coming home to an empty apartment for the first time in over a year. Cynthia was always home, and she always left a light on for me on nights I had to work so late. Tonight, the apartment was dark, which gave me a moment of pause. I should

have left a light on. Oh, well. I'd have to remember that for next time.

I touched key to lock, but the door just pushed open a crack, as though I'd never closed it. I stilled.

The hair rose on the back of my neck. A chill chased down my spine. You know that feeling when something really bad either could happen or did happen, but you aren't sure which yet?

I knew I hadn't forgotten to close my apartment door, so I wasn't imagining things. I was sure it was locked when I left.

Goose bumps rose on my arms.

I backed away slowly, trying not to make a sound, and turned to hurry away, almost stumbling over my own feet in my

quiet panic to find help. I quickly snuck along the outer corridor, ducking under Cynthia's windowsill. Continuing around the corner, I knocked gently on Ryder's door, not wanting to alert my possible intruder that I was around.

No answer.

My heart pounded. I knocked again.

C'mon, please!

Still no response.

I broke into a sweat as I thought frantically about what to do. *Should I call the police?*

Footsteps echoed along the outer corridor, just out of sight. I spun around, looking in the direction I'd just come. My breath turned ragged with mounting

anxiety. Someone was coming from my apartment. Where I'd just been standing. Had someone been behind me?

Following me through the security gate?

Loud. Heavy. Deliberate footsteps had my heart jumping into my throat. I raised my keys, ready to stab someone with them.

“Who’s there?” Ryder’s cold, menacing voice made me think of the Dirty Harry movies, when Clint Eastwood was just about to shoot someone, and he’d taunt them in his raspy voice. Relief poured through me. I was so glad to hear his voice. “It’s me,” I squeaked.

Ryder loomed out of the shadows. He looked dark and dangerous, his jaw

clenched and his eyes narrowed as he tried to see who was standing in the dark outside his door. Confirming who I was, he took a visibly deep breath, sticking something into the back waistband of his pants.

“Shit.” He tilted his head up to the sky, his eyes closed as though in silent prayer, then frowned at me and said, “Are you okay? It’s late. I wasn’t expecting you.”

My breath came out in a whoosh. I hadn’t even realized I was holding it in. “Ryder, I need help.”

“You’re shaking.” With growing concern, he reached out and rubbed the sides of my arms gently. “What’s

wrong?”

In a low voice, I said, “I think someone’s in my apartment! I tried to unlock the door, but it was already open, and I tried to come get you, and I thought maybe I should call the police or something.” I said all this in a rush of relief that I wasn’t dealing with this alone.

He frowned, looking in the direction of my apartment, and pulled out his keys. “Come inside,” he instructed firmly as he unlocked the door. I followed him in. “Wait here,” he ordered. As he turned to leave, I saw what looked like a gun in that same waistband he’d shoved something into a moment ago.

Had he had a gun pointed at me in the

dark? Holy shit! Who was this guy?

Before I could fully think through this new information, I found myself staring at his closed door as he stepped out and left me behind. I tried to listen but could hear nothing. He was being stealthy.

After a few minutes, there still wasn't any great ruckus, so I figured whoever had broken in hadn't stayed. Was anything stolen? I'm not rich, and I don't get help from family members, so everything in my apartment is hard earned.

Imagining that someone had gone in and just helped themselves to whatever they wanted was making me queasy and giving me a sense of despair. Knowing

someone had been there felt, again, like being violated, and within a few moments, anger overrode my despair and displaced my fear. Twice in a day. First my car. Then my apartment. What. The. Hell.

Just when I was ready to go storming over to see what had happened, Ryder came back, looking grim. “They’re gone. You’ll have to see if anything’s missing.”

I started for the door determinedly, but he stopped me with a hand on my arm and a cautionary look.

“It’s a real mess, Taylor. It’s all tossed. It’s like they were looking for something.”

With that warning, I went to my

apartment. Ryder had turned on the lights, so I saw immediately the wreck that had been my living room. Cushions from the sofa were overturned and ripped open, with stuffing strewn everywhere. The sofa had been the first piece of furniture I'd saved for and purchased that wasn't a thrift-store buy. Ruined.

Horror washed over me as I looked over the rest of the living room.

The small potted plants that I had lovingly nurtured, because I'm not allowed to have animals in the apartment, were smashed on the floor. Shards of colorful pottery mixed with dirt were ground into the rug. DVDs

were tossed here and there. Framed prints that had once added warmth and touches of bold color to the walls now had splintered, spiderwebbed glass frames and were askew or even knocked on the floor.

“My bedroom...” I whispered, looking down the hallway. The sound of my breathing was heavy in the stillness of the room. My lungs burned with emotion.

“More of the same.”

“How could this happen? How could no one have seen or heard anything?” It was such a surreal moment. I never would have thought this would happen to me.

“I was out,” he said curtly, “but believe me, I wish I’d been here.”

Ryder's face looked cut from stone. He was angry on my behalf, and that allowed me to take a deep breath, steeling myself for what I was about to find. Somehow I knew he'd been looking out for me at the club again.

The closet and its contents had been thoroughly, rudely, disrespectfully tossed. Clothes were strewn about; my expensive shoes that I leave in boxes for added protection were dumped haphazardly. My most prized drawings, completed on a variety of textured papers, which I'd saved in a cardboard moving box under my bed over many years, were upturned and scattered about the room. Some were even ripped and

crumpled, which brought a hot lump of sorrow to my throat. There wasn't much I was truly proud of, but these fell into that category. I knelt down with shaking hands and tried to gently gather up and stack the pages, placing them back in the moving boxes they had come in.

Most were salvageable, but there was one that was in pieces. As soon as I saw the colors of the ripped bits, my heart hurt. I knew which it was. It was one I kept telling myself I'd one day frame. I'd completed an impressionist image of my mother holding me as a baby in her arms, using watercolors. It was my best work, inspired by one of the only photos my aunt had where my mother actually seemed to be looking at me lovingly,

like we were normal. It had taken so long to complete. Would my aunt still have that photograph? Did I have the heart to do it again?

No. I didn't. It was lost to me forever.

"Why?" I couldn't help asking in pained disbelief. Tears spilled shamelessly down my cheeks in hot rivulets. "I have nothing worth taking."

"I'm sorry, Taylor," Ryder said gruffly, on a knee beside me. He added darkly, "I'm sorry I didn't walk in on the motherfucker." He picked up a charcoal drawing I'd done of a big oak tree, a high school art-class assignment I'd kept. Carefully, he placed it in the box with the others I'd saved.

I looked around the rest of my room. My nightstand had been swept clean as though by an angry swipe of a hand across its surface, leaving my alarm clock, books, notes and any jewelry I hadn't put away smashed against the wall.

My jewelry box!

I tried to find it in the mess, not because I had any valuable jewelry, but because I had some items of sentimental value. After a frantic scan around the floor, I spotted it. Like everything else, it lay damaged, its contents spread like confetti. I started sifting through the debris, picking up and discarding necklaces and bracelets, searching and

searching frantically.

I didn't even know I was murmuring "Where is it, where is it?" until Ryder cupped my arm and gently turned me to face him. His intense, pale gaze caught me, stilling me. I don't know how he did it, but everything in me paused as his...energy surrounded me. I couldn't look away. I felt a surge of power that raced through my veins to my mind, and somehow I could feel his need to help me. It struck me as completely strange, but I was feeling too distraught to question.

"Tell me what you're looking for. Let me help you."

I nodded, swiping a hand over my cheek. "A picture. A charm bracelet." It

didn't have valuable stones, so no one could be interested in it.

His eyes caught on something protruding from under a filmy, floral scarf and he picked it up. "Is this the picture?"

I couldn't help the smile that trembled on my lips or the fresh tears of relief that bubbled over my cheeks once again. It was old and faded. The colors had washed out a great deal, which was why I kept it out of the sun in a special place.

"Yes," I breathed, and my heart slowed. It was the picture in which my mom and I were at the fair, standing behind one of those goofy mock-up boards where you stick your head in the

hole. She was a cow with large milk udders, and I was a fuzzy baby chick. “My mom. It’s my only picture of her.”

I stared at the familiar picture, absently running my finger over the lines of her face. “You look like her.” Ryder studied it impassively. “Where is she?”

I remembered the moment the picture was taken. “I don’t know where she is. Now I just need to find the bracelet. It’s her charm bracelet.”

“Is this it?” He had reached over and flipped the jewelry box right side up to unveil the bracelet. Being heavier than my other jewelry, it hadn’t been flung out.

I hadn’t even looked. I’d been so busy looking through the piles on the floor, I’d

missed the most obvious place it could still be. It was tarnished from being set aside so long, but with a good polishing, the silver would shine again. Each charm had a meaning, and my mother had explained each to me patiently that day, that one special day at the fair. I never forgot. It had been, simultaneously, the best and worst day ever.

With a quick survey of the room and glance at his wristwatch, Ryder said, “Taylor, you can’t stay here. Why don’t you come back to my place? Tomorrow we can do what we need to do in here. Do you have renter’s insurance or something like that?”

With a self-deprecating snort, I shook

my head. “I figured it was a waste of money, believing it was a long shot that anything like this would happen in a gated building. I thought the money would be put to better use on my day-to-day stuff.”

“It doesn’t look like anything was broken. The lock was picked, not stripped. They were probably trying to keep quiet. We can take a look at replacing it with something stronger in the morning. Maybe call the landlord?”

“I guess I’m supposed to call the police too, but you’re right. Tomorrow is soon enough. I’m too tired right now. Listen, I really want to thank you for helping me out. This has been a nightmare, but having you here has kept

me from really flipping out.” It truly had. I could feel myself calming, my tears drying up. This would have been so much worse to go through alone. Added to that, my mom’s stuff was safe.

“I’m glad I was here. We also need to talk, but it’s late.”

“About what?” I put the bracelet on my wrist, carefully, figuring it was the safest place for it.

“Tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? About me staying over? I don’t want to impose.” Our eyes met and held. Whispers of sexual energy suddenly kissed the air.

“I want to make sure you’re safe. You have somewhere else to go?” he asked

brusquely.

I thought about the other tenants, and while I was friendly with many of them, I wasn't wake-them-up-at-three-in-the-morning kind of friendly. Looking around the junk piles that some faceless thug had created in my room, I knew I didn't want to sleep in my bed. "No."

"C'mon. It's not pretty, but it's safe."

I locked up (like it really did that much good, right?) and trailed him over to his place. This time around, I noticed more of his furnishings. Either he hadn't finished moving in or he didn't own much. He was worse off than I was, if this room was anything to go by. He had a couple of stuffed chairs that looked like the ones Shep had used to have.

Shep had probably left them behind, unable to afford moving them or housing them. An old wooden table—small, bistro size—was next to the kitchen with two beat-up wooden chairs, and the walls were empty of anything.

“You can sleep in here,” he said, and he led the way down the hall that mirrored the hall in my apartment. He pushed open the door, and I saw that his bedroom wasn’t any more furnished than the rest of his place. There was a mattress made up with a set of clean-looking sheets pushed up to the wall on the dingy, gray carpet. It was the same nondescript, need-to-end-its-tragic-existence carpet as I had in my room, on

the opposite side of the wall.

There was no other furniture, though a built-in closet on an adjacent wall was open. It housed clothing folded in an organized fashion within a somewhat-dilapidated plywood shelving unit, making me suddenly wake up and question who this guy was and whether it was really a good idea to be spending the night here. Alone. What did I really know about him except that he was...freaking hot. And an amazing kisser. And, like, eye candy in his rough-looking boots and jeans, which outlined his muscular thighs just right.

Cut it out, Taylor! I gave myself a mental shake. But really, I couldn't fault myself for feeling punch-drunk and

vulnerable after such a long, emotional roller coaster of a day.

“Where are you going to sleep?” I asked, striving for casual, though I was beginning to feel nervous and fluttery.

He gave me a long, slow look with his green-gold eyes, a look that we held in silence. I think we were both remembering the passionate exchange from earlier, which created a whole new tension that I don’t think either one of us was ready to deal with.

“I’ll sleep on the floor in the second bedroom. Help yourself to a shirt if you need one,” he answered quietly. After another quiet moment, his lips firmed up into a tight line, and he briefly closed his

eyes, like he needed to break our connection, and stepped out of the room, closing the door firmly behind him.

I released a shaky breath.

Was this attraction normal? I didn't even know the guy, but my body was doing its best to convince my brain it didn't matter. Did that make me a slut? Who the hell was I becoming? It was like suddenly I didn't recognize myself. In the last several years, I might have thought someone was attractive, but I didn't get tingles just thinking about them. How could I be feeling all hot and bothered with this guy in the face of having had such a tragic day? Then again, at three in the morning, did anything have to make sense?

Absently, I wandered to the closet, trying to find my equilibrium again, and let my fingers feather along a few of Ryder's T-shirts, thinking it strange that he had so little clothing, even for a guy. Grabbing one off the top, I shook it out. It said Señor Frog across the top and had a beer-drinking green critter grinning broadly on the front. It seemed that every guy owned this shirt in Southern California.

Though my usual preference would have been to sleep naked, I was feeling profoundly out of my comfort zone and out of control in general, what with everything that had happened in the last few days. I needed some form of

protection. Not that a T-shirt would repel bullets or anything, but it did give me some measure of ease. I hated feeling vulnerable.

The sheets were cool and refreshing, with just a hint of his masculine scent still clinging to them. Shoving my face in the pillow didn't help me capture any more of his essence, yet somehow it seemed I could sense him in the next room over, nothing specific or anything. His thoughts felt heavy and frustrated, which made my lips curl with a random thought.

Did guys really get achy balls?

Though it was probably fanciful and a trick of my imagination, covered in his shirt and with his sheets wrapped around

me, I felt like I was surrounded by him. I felt safe.

With his sinewy, rugged image in mind, I dropped into sleep quickly and easily.

Chapter Five

I jogged through the forest feeling light, exhilarated, carefree and energized, like I could just keep going forever. The wind was cool, crisp and sweet smelling against my face, and I could hear the sounds of birds chirping and bugs buzzing about their business. It also seemed like I could take these superbig steps that carried me far quickly, which was fun to experiment with. One leap easily took me five feet and another took me twice that, making me laugh with my foolishness. Clear blue sky framed tall redwood trees, and dappled sunlight

warmed my skin. Then there was that iridescent bloom that caught my eye. Hadn't I seen one before? I couldn't remember. The flower was lying innocently, pristinely, in the middle of the path, I paused to pick it up, already knowing it was going to be soft to the touch.

Energy hummed through the petals, giving off a feeling of warmth and comfort. A heavenly smell drifted teasingly toward my nose, and I couldn't help but put my face to the bloom and inhale. A sudden image of a field full of these blooms flashed through my mind, a warm smile, soft blue eyes. *Yesssss...* whispered gently through my mind, and there was a feeling like a puzzle piece

suddenly falling into place. A foreign feeling—contentment—touched me.

We all serve a purpose, Taylor. The words seemed to float on the wind, here and gone, but they left behind a warmth and security I could embrace. I had a purpose.

How lovely.

Still holding the treasured flower, I skipped with all lightheartedness along the path. I was going somewhere, so there had been a purpose to my running, though I wasn't sure what it was just yet. I was getting close, though. I could sense it. I felt the pull of a familiar energy source.

The woods opened up on a lake that

was glassy and tranquil and nearly a mile wide. Tufts of springy clouds dotted the blue sky here and there. The most beautiful part of the picture was the reflection on the surface of the water; there was a mirror image of the forest and mountain on the opposite side of the lake from where I was standing. An amazing detail I caught? There was a reflection of a large moon and a smaller moon in the water, which seemed eerie and otherworldly because it was a beautiful, bright sunny day. I looked up and there they were, right beside the sun.

All I could do was stare in awe.

There was the sound of a large splash, and the glassy water suddenly rippled. I became aware of young men laughing

and turned to see a pair of older teenagers swinging from a homemade rope swing over the lake, about twenty yards down the embankment. In a stand of trees that were old, large and bent like grizzled men, fat limbs sprang up, and it was to one of these that the swing was tied.

She wants you, Rye. And she's got a nice round pair. Maybe she'll let you play with them a little. The blond boy doing the teasing was swinging back and forth, building up momentum and height.

Shut up, Nick. The dark-haired boy grinned good naturedly. I could see his features and was momentarily transfixed, trying to figure out how I knew him. He

was tall, with wiry muscles and a face that hadn't yet filled into manhood. His skin was sun bronzed, and only a few black chest hairs were scattered across his pectorals.

Oh, Ryder, you're so strong. Oh, Ryder, you're so handsome. Kiss me!
The blond boy, Nick, used a horrid, high-pitched voice to mimic a female and dove off the swing into the water.

All right! That's it!

The dark-haired boy caught the swing and immediately swung into the water, trying to retaliate against his friend, a look of spirited determination on his face.

Ryder! I realized this was little baby Ryder. Awww.

Nick, aka baby Adonis (yes the Adonis that stole Cynthia away the other day), managed to get out of the lake and yell truce as Ryder surfaced out in the water. Nick grabbed a towel and wrapped up. He tossed one out to Ryder, who caught it as he came out of the water, shaking his dark hair out like a dog.

Any word yet? Ryder flung the towel around his neck as he asked his friend the question.

Going light-years away. It's official. Nick's youthful face had a mile-wide grin. *What about you?*

Ryder's face took on a grim look. *Yeah. I'm going.*

I take it your dad's mad?

Hands braced on his hips, Ryder nodded grimly. *We got into an argument.*

You knew that was coming. He doesn't want to see you go.

I've been looking into being one of the high-court investigators, which I can do while getting my judiciary merit. He finally agreed to let me go because he thinks I'll follow in his footsteps, from high-court council, like my mother, to high-court representative. And my mom convinced him it would be good for me.

After a thoughtful pause, Ryder continued, *I'm still surprised he agreed.*

It was really strange. I've never seen my dad get this emotional. I mean, when Asily...you know, he went into a rage and punished the ones who killed her. Ryder stopped, as though he couldn't talk about it anymore. He's always so serious, holding it all in. He can face down a murderer in high court and not show any kind of emotion, but the thought of me completing higher studies elsewhere is troubling him.

You're going far, Ryder, not just a few hundred miles.

I know. And my grandfather was one of "the lost." It's as though our family is being targeted.

He could be right.

I don't think so. It's her ghost.

Aily's. It's like she's always there, but we can't talk about her. It's like we have to pretend she never existed.

She died, Ryder, in this forsaken war. She was his child, your sister.

The spirits know I'm aware.

It was the fault of the Brausa.

Brutish animals. Abominations. Scorn creased Nick's fair features, disdain staining his voice as he said the name.

We must remember who is at fault. Always.

There are times I question that.

Ryder looked bleak as he stared down at the ground, his youthful face seeming to carry the weight of the world.

Rye—

Ryder ran a hand through his dark hair, seeming to shake off the somber tone of the conversation. He put on a friendly face. *So I'll be joining you on Earth.*

It took a moment for Nick to switch gears, but seeing the resolute look on Ryder's visage, Nick spontaneously gave a mischievous grin. He took on that high-pitched voice again. *Please don't go, Rye. I haven't shown you my very round breasts yet!*

You're getting it this time. Ryder dumped his towel and the race was on. Nick took off up the slope and grabbed the rope swing.

Just as he jumped on it to swing, it

snapped and broke. He went plunging down the hillside, crashing through the brush to smash against a tree. His shout was suddenly cut off, and Ryder, fear pouring over his face, called to his friend in a panicked voice. He rushed to where Nick lay gasping with pain near the water's edge.

Oh, my God! I exclaimed and ran down the embankment. Ryder looked up as I came crashing through the bushes, and his young green eyes looked confused for a moment, as though he recognized me and was trying to place who I was. I could almost see his memory catching up, and then baby Adonis (Nick) faded away into mist, like a projection that was turned off, which

was absolutely the most astounding thing I'd ever seen. One moment he was there, writhing in pain and holding his obviously broken leg, and the next he was gone. How the hell had that happened?

I looked to Ryder, unsure whether to be horrified or confused by the sight, either way hoping to be reassured. But then Ryder transformed before my eyes. If I'd blinked, I would have missed it. One moment he was his teenage self, his face youthful and more slender, and the next, he was the man I'd come to know. He grew tall, over six feet, and broad, with thick, ropey man muscles that ran through his torso and legs. His square

jaw filled in, a few lines fanned out from his forest green eyes and across his forehead, and all I could do was stare in awe, until I looked up at his eyes.

They were frighteningly cold. Menacing. If I'd thought he looked untamed before, it was nothing compared to how savagely angry he looked now. Enraged, even. It was a look no one had ever leveled at me before. It was a killing look. Fear engulfed me. I gasped for air like a fish out of water. My heart beat a quick, frantic warning to escape. *You have mylunate.* His voice rumbled across the space between us, amplifying, enveloping me in its deep vibration until I felt it shake through my bones.

What's that? I barely managed the whispered words. It was hard to think through gut-wrenching panic, especially as he started walking toward me. Stalking me. I stumbled back a few steps in reaction.

Don't play fucking stupid with me. You're dreamwalking. You can't dreamwalk without continuous exposure to mylunate. What the fuck kind of game are you playing? His voice was a powerful, raspy growl that pounded the air between us.

I saw a merciless warrior looking at his enemy, not the tender, sensual man I'd locked lips with earlier that day. I barely kept a whimper of terror from

slipping out. I backed away, one step at a time up the embankment, my legs feeling wobbly as rocks and gravel gave way, forcing me to catch myself.

I don't know what dreamwalking is. I tried harder to scramble up the embankment. I needed space! More space between us, dammit! But the ground refused to give me purchase.

His eyes narrowed on my movements. His lip curled disdainfully.

How long have you been working for Grayson? Ryder moved deliberately, one step at a time, closing the distance between us. His eyes drilled holes into mine, and his steps ate up the space separating us. He had no trouble stepping through the soil, as though it

were an even trail. He was catching up to me without having to work at it, and somehow that made my hair stand on end more than anything else.

Who's Grayson? I—I work for Alliance, in Hollywood.

He ignored what I said. *What's in it for you? Were you offered money? Got tired of being trailer trash?* He looked over me scornfully, as though he found me wanting. *We could have offered you a better deal. You should have come to us first.*

I gasped, feeling like a shard of glass had pierced my heart.

Trailer trash.

He'd recognized my classless

beginnings, even with all that I'd tried to accomplish in my life to overcome that handicap. Raw pain mixed with powerful fear clogged the back of my throat, and I could hardly respond. I was as invalid to him as I had been to all the people in my life. He could kill me with no remorse, and no one would protest or find injustice in it.

The thought brought a silent protest and a renewed fight from the depths of my soul.

I don't know what you're talking about, Ryder.

Don't you?

No!

I didn't have you pegged for a murderer. Thousands of my people

have died to protect our nation, and here you are working to revitalize a war that was all but over. Twenty fucking years gone to shit. Grayson was smart to pick you. Somehow he just knew, didn't he? The statement was bitter and served to make him even angrier.

A murderer? I haven't done anything!

I won't play this game with you. You fooled me with your big blue eyes and innocent look. Fuck! His eyes blazed with fury into mine. *It ends now.*

Ryder suddenly stretched to gigantic proportions. He was ten, fifteen, twenty feet tall. His teeth became sharp fangs,

and his eyes glowed an evil, piercing green. He issued a roar that shook the very ground where I stood.

My blood turned cold. The flower dropped from my fingers. I froze. A ball of energy surged powerfully from my gut, and the sound of a shrill, terrorized scream tore from my throat. The sound broke my paralysis.

I ran for all I was worth. It did no good.

The soil beneath my feet instantly, magically turned into the finest sand. I scrambled on all fours to get up the embankment, but it kept slipping under me. Instead of surging forward, I kept sliding back. A large hand grabbed my heel, and I shook it off frantically,

pulling my foot out of my tennis shoe.

Free again, I tried to get to my feet and run, but the air around me developed the density of molasses. I couldn't move through it.

He was coming! He was going to kill me!

All I heard was the ferocious pounding of my heart in my ears. It roared a freight train through my skull until all I was aware of was the sound of my own screams.

"Wake up." A hand shook my shoulder roughly. I came to in a fetal position and sat up with a gasp to see Ryder's angry face inches from my own.

"No!" I scuttled back, stopping only

when I hit the wall behind me, clutching the sheet to my body as though for protection. I looked around, not recognizing where I was. There were no furnishings, the walls were bare and the closet was open, with men's clothing folded inside. I squinted my eyes against the early-morning light that fell through the window. Ryder stood up, looked down at me with impatience.

A dream? Yeah. A dream. Okay. I released pent-up breath slowly, still breathing roughly, trying to get my bearings. Pretty fucked-up dream. The fear started to fade, and my breath grew less tremulous. Pushing the hair off my forehead, I noticed my hands were trembling and had the absurd urge to

giggle. If he only knew what I'd just dreamed. Shit. He made for a scary monster.

Ryder was wearing his pants from the previous night, but they weren't completely buttoned and hung precariously on his lean hips. They hung open just enough to leave an interesting V shape over his exposed skin. He obviously worked out to get the hard ridge of muscles. Lord. Even as my heart calmed and my breathing became more even, I couldn't help but be intrigued by the sight. The man was out and out too sexy by far.

“You're at my place.”

“I am.” I agreed, somewhat foggily.

“Why?”

“Your place was robbed.”

“It was?” It was. Now I remembered. He saw the resignation on my face and must have correctly interpreted it, because he didn’t respond to my question. Shoving my face into my hands, I groaned. “This has been a creepy couple of days.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.” His expression was unreadable. “So who do you work for?”

I looked up at him, wide-eyed, trying to comprehend what he was saying with a suddenly eerie tingling over my body. Wasn’t I awake? Was this going to be one of those screwy you-thought-you-were-awake-but-you’re-not dreams?

“What did you say?”

“I’m taking up where I left off. Who do you work for?”

Fear swamped my body like a heavy blanket. “But that’s impossible.”

“You dreamwalked.”

“What *is* that? You keep *saying* that!” I could hear my voice getting louder as, once again, alarm set in. I stood quickly, my back to the wall, dragging the sheet with me like armor.

“Where’s the fucking mylunate, Taylor? You have no idea the power you hold!”

“Oh, my God. You were really in my dream. You had those demon eyes.” I watched him at the same time I wrapped

the sheet around me, tucking the ends in front of me. I could feel my panic mounting.

“Correction,” he snapped. “*You* were in *my* dream.”

“That’s not possible! People can’t just do that! And you became a *monster*! You were going to *kill* me!” I could feel myself losing it. Horror was setting in. My eyes whipped around the room looking for a weapon, a window, anything. I started edging along the wall toward the door. Only quick breaths were coming in and going out. My body was screaming for flight.

“You can do anything in dreams.” He flared his nostrils, his face set in fierce lines.

“I don’t understand this! Any of it. I don’t know who you are or what you want, but I’m going home!”

I dashed for the door.

Ryder caught me around my ribs. His powerful arms halted my forward motion midstride, my breath exiting in a sudden hiss. He pulled me back against the rock wall of his chest, and then it was on! I fought for my life. I elbowed his gut and heard a deep grunt. I reached backward to scratch at his eyes, but his arms repositioned to bind mine to my sides. I tried to head-butt him in the chin and kicked at his shins, which had him growling deep in his chest but did little if any damage, because the damn sheet

hampered me!

“You’re going to hurt yourself,” he snarled in my ear. He was just too big and too strong. He was nearly wrapped around me, and I could feel him overpowering me with sheer strength.

“Let me go.” I bent over and tried to bite his arm.

“Dammit!” he thundered, and he loosened his grip. I stomped his bare toes with my heel and lunged for the door as he hollered, but he was standing on my sheet, which thwarted me again. During my moment of hesitation, he tackled me to the bed and pinned me with his body.

“Get off me. You are absolutely crazy. This is kidnapping. You’re holding me

against my will.” The weight of his chest alone had me pinned helplessly to the mattress, but I still tried to kick him off.

“Hush up.”

“I want to go home.” We were both breathing heavily as he wrestled my legs between his own, binding them tightly so I couldn’t move.

“Not until we settle this.”

“Settle what? What is there to settle? You’re some weird superhuman freak, and I want you to leave me alone.” But he wasn’t even listening. He was talking to himself.

“A ring, piercing... I need to find it,” he muttered. Putting both of my wrists into one of his large hands, he held them

down above my head with little effort, though I struggled to get them free.

With his free hand he gently checked my lobes, my fingers, my neck, my wrists, but found nothing. He even went so far as to check my mother's charm bracelet carefully. Then he pulled the sheet aside and in a single motion yanked my T-shirt up and away from my breasts. I gasped, shocked motionless, staring down at them, bare to the sunlight slanting through the window.

“What the hell are you doing? You goddamn perv!” My nipples puckered with sudden exposure, but missing whatever he was looking for, his eyes continued south. Mortified, I snarled, “Is this how you get your kicks? Get off me!

Let me go!”

“It has to be here,” he said in a steely voice.

He looked down at my belly button, just above my floral cotton thong. I was lacking whatever item was on his scavenger-hunt list and his eyes traveled back up.

“Where is it?” he growled.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” I yanked on my wrists angrily, which only made my breasts sway under his sharp eyes.

That’s when things changed.

Caught by the movement of my breasts, his eyes dropped to them. They lingered reluctantly. Heated against his

will. He wanted to fight his attraction to me but couldn't, which suddenly had that absurd heat curling in my lower abdomen again. What was that? Was that my own heart fluttering in response? Was he going to touch me?

The thought was making my blood thicken, which was really confusing, considering I thought he'd been trying to kill me in my dream. My sense of helplessness and naïveté infused the strange energy swirling between us. Reluctantly, Ryder pulled the T-shirt back down over my breasts and took a deep breath.

As I thought about it, he'd only been trying to contain me in this physical scuffle. He'd been trying *not* to hurt me.

His eyes turned angrily impatient, as though he'd caught himself doing something he wasn't supposed to. He looked into my eyes searchingly and snarled, "Open your mind."

"What? What does that even mean?"

"You built a wall in your mind. A brick wall. Tear it down."

"A wall?" I flashed back to the previous night, when I'd been at the club with all the voices swarming in my brain. I'd looked at the wall and imagined it containing the noise. I could see the wall in my mind when I shut my eyes. Holy cow! That was some serious *Twilight Zone* shit. But how could he see it?

“Make it go away,” he commanded. “I need to trust you again.”

“Trust me? Really? Why should I care if you trust me?” I was untrustworthy? Why? What had I ever done but work my ass off just to stay afloat? The insults were just adding up to one big hurt, and I glared up at him, fighting tears. I couldn’t find a guy who was normal. Noooo. I had to find a guy who could read minds or go into people’s dreams or some shit like that. I had to find the guy who thought I was some kind of...I didn’t even know. I had really liked him too. It hurt to feel stupid. I had no idea who he thought I was or what he thought I was doing, except that it was somehow

really bad.

“Do it!” he said harshly, his lips set in a severe line.

I stared at him a moment, wondering when my world was going to right itself again. Then I closed my eyes, feeling deep sadness, and imagined a stick of dynamite in the wall. Might as well break it down in style, right? It went off and the bricks blew satisfyingly into smithereens. I opened my eyes again and met his intense green stare. He looked searchingly at me, and I suddenly thought about how Cynthia had done that every so often over the last year. Was she able to read minds too?

That cold feeling of dread poured through me. I suddenly just...knew. She'd

had access to my mind and never said anything to me. Did she think I was a criminal of some sort too? Why had she become my “friend”? What the hell was going on here? Nick, Cynthia and Ryder were all in this together.

I felt like such a fool: embarrassed that perfect, straight-as-an-arrow Cynthia had possibly been rolling her eyes at my naïveté when I had truly considered her my friend, sorrowful that my insulated world was cracked and no longer a place of comfort and well-being, hurt that I’d been so dumb as to believe things could all work out for a girl like me with a guy like Ryder. Not that I was picking out china patterns or

anything, but just some normal dating kind of stuff with a guy I was attracted to would've been nice. Stupid, stupid, stupid. When could I go lick my wounds?

She had probably been pretending, just like lover boy here. Boy, I could really pick the people in my life, couldn't I? Were they some hidden sect of society that was all secretive that we regular, stupid humans weren't even aware of? Were they the all-powerful mind-reading sect who would one day take over the world?

"No, we aren't going to take over the world," Ryder said. He sounded tired. His body seemed drained of energy, and he rested his head on my forehead with

his eyes closed, as though the act of delving into my mind had sapped some of his energy. “I had to know.”

“Am I in the clear?” I asked sarcastically.

“I still don’t know how you did it, but you’re in the clear.”

“I’ve never even heard of that stuff, of course, being from the trailer park. We don’t get no book learnin’ ’bout no scientific stuff.”

“I’m so tired of this war,” he murmured, more to himself. “Mylunate has been the source of our growth as a culture, but it’s also been the cause of so many of my people dying in war.”

“Yeah. Whatever. I don’t even know

what you're talking about. Next you're going to tell me you're from another planet." I tugged at my wrists. He still wouldn't let them loose.

"Taylor—" His deep voice was like sandpaper. Remorse and confusion tinged his proud features, along with lines of strain around his eyes and by his mouth. "I thought you were one of them. Betrayal and treason have become part of the water I swim in. You don't understand what's going on, but in time I'll be able to explain."

His eyes were suddenly so soulful and...sad. No, no, no. I couldn't let him do this to me. I wanted to stay mad. I couldn't be vulnerable to him. I needed to strengthen my resolve.

“Just, please...trust me? There are lives at stake. Please know that there are reasons beyond what you understand. This isn't about you.” He watched for my reaction as though it somehow mattered. I squeezed my eyes shut, frustration washing over me. Against my will, my brain latched on to his request.

Trust. He wanted me to trust him. Was he trustworthy? He'd helped me at the club the other night with the guy and the roving hand, and he'd gone into my apartment for me, not even knowing if he was going into a dangerous situation. When I really looked up into his eyes, there was pain there. It wasn't just that I saw the pain, but somehow I could feel

it, and it was deep and dark. He seemed lost.

There it went. Done. My heart softened. I released a quivery breath and looked at him again.

Just like that, I felt the need to soothe those lines of worry, kiss them away and tell him I wasn't one of the ones who would betray him. The sigh came from deep within my soul, filled with resignation.

And so began the stupid melting process.

Anyone can do anything to me, and if they're sorry for it, I let them have another go at hurting me some more. Pretty sick, isn't it? Always looking for approval from someone. It's part of what

makes me so dysfunctional and pathetic.

“It’s part of what makes you beautiful,” he said in his deep, growly voice, reading my surrender. My startled eyes flew to his.

Oh, yeah. He could read my mind now.

And it was kind of sexy how he just did that.

An awareness of his body pressed against mine started the butterflies in my lower regions. The sweetest desire settled over me with gentle shivers and a slow simmer in private places. I breathed in the newness of it, unable to break from his pale eyes. The veins of gold that braided through the green grew

darker. They flared with heat. They turned hungry as he inhaled sharply, his nostrils flaring.

Gone was the evil, frightening man, and in his place, with a sexy morning shadow across his cheeks and chin, was Ryder the predator, looking as though he was going to devour me. Tingling warmth rushed through my veins in anticipation.

“Ryder,” I whispered, feeling helpless against my physical reactions. My body was at odds with itself. I wanted to be angry, but I also wanted to rub naked against him, like a cat in heat, taste his skin and lose myself in sensations I’d never before experienced.

He bent to my neck and took a

nibbling bite that had me gasping as his rough whiskers moved gently against my skin, setting off little bombs of sensation as he went.

“Smell so good,” he rasped softly.

“Ryder...” I whispered, having trouble speaking.

“So soft,” he murmured in his deep voice. “I often dream of this.” His whiskers tickled my neck more, sending shivers down to my breasts. My nipples were suddenly stiff and aching to be touched. *Touch me.*

“*Lin’de,*” he murmured thickly, running his hand down the underside of my arm. He neared my breasts. *Yes!* His hand stopped, and I moaned in protest.

So close. Not close enough.

“Please...” I whimpered, wanting to feel his hands on me.

The sheet had loosened during his inspection and his large, muscular leg fit between mine, settling against my heated center.

Who knew that could feel so right?

His lips worked their way to my ear, making me shiver with heat. I wanted to touch, but my wrists were shackled.

Frustration spiked. I found his neck with open mouth, taking a nibble of his skin before soothing it over with my tongue. He moaned deep and low, making me feel feminine and desirable that I could make this tough guy want me.

Pulling my tank up smoothly, his rough

palm enveloped my naked breast, and I couldn't help a cry of pleasure as hot sparks shot to my feminine core and a rush of liquid heat gathered. His fingers plucked my hardened nipple and plumped the flesh to his lips, where he scraped the beaded nipple with his teeth before suckling it, hard. Drowning in pleasure, I moaned and panted, wanting to rub against his hot steel length.

The smell of his spicy soap filled my senses as I writhed against him, unable to control what was happening to me...and I took a deep breath again. That soap was delicious. His smell addicting. I'd smelled that scent before. Being unable to move my wrists gave me a

sense of déjà vu. Being tied up.
Mindwalking. Oh, my God!

“That was you!” I gasped, pulling my face away and looking into his eyes, searching.

I wondered when you'd figure it out.
Though his face was still flushed with desire, his eyes were somber. A sense of acutely painful embarrassment washed over me. The sex dreams, the dream about my mother—and how many others that I just didn't remember had he been in? A hurt the size of the ocean stabbed a hole through the center of my body, and I didn't know what to do, what to say or how to feel.

“You wondered, did you?”

I pulled my wrists free and stood up,

pulling the sheet as cover as I moved across the room.

“Taylor—”

“And you question your ability to trust me? Fuck you! Fuck you! You asshole! You dreamwalked into my sexual fantasy and played with me. You invaded my deepest, most secret places and manipulated me. Oh, God.” I covered my face, thinking shamefully of the things I’d done with him and the pleasure I’d experienced. He must have laughed his ass off at my stupid female fantasies.

“It wasn’t like that.” He shot up and approached me.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” I choked on the well of emotions that were clawing

at my throat. Everything, every fear, every secret, every flaw was there. In the open. He'd seen it. He'd analyzed it. He'd picked at it. Then he'd used it against me. What didn't he know about me?

Somehow, I'd conveniently forgotten that he called me trailer trash in my dream. He'd really said it. Tears filled my eyes and trickled down my cheeks, that shame burning brightest. I was that scruffy little girl again with everyone looking down at me, feeling sorry for me, pitying me. It was my dirty secret come to light. And worse, he knew I had really begun to like him, and I was just some stupid trailer-trash girl looking puppy eyes at him. God damn it!

“Stop it!” He said harshly. “I had to do it. It was about national security.”

“Fucking me was about national security? I see. Well, tell your boss you did a great job.” I smirked and fresh tears coursed hotly over my cheeks, which only served to piss me off more. I never cried, particularly not in front of others, yet here I was, again, crying in front of him. “Just stay the hell away from me!”

My last glimpse of him as I walked out of his bedroom was of frustrated confusion marring his features. The need to come after me was written all over his face, but instead, his hands were on his hips. He looked so much like his

younger self, which was somehow giving me an achy feeling in my heart.

I needed to leave.

Grabbing the knob and giving him a final, scornful look, I slammed the bedroom door shut with a satisfying *crack*. With nothing left to say, I walked out, hoping to keep my dignity, or as much of it as possible, on the short trek back to my apartment. Only the party boys from the apartment under mine were out to witness my walk of shame, and at one of their catcalls, I delivered the finger, which only made them laugh and made me feel worse. This was a new low. I had Ryder to thank for it.

The only question I had left was why? Why was he doing this to me?

Crawling under the blankets on my bed and just shutting out the world for the rest of the day and night seemed like a fabulous idea, until I entered the apartment and saw the mess again. Something else to have to deal with. Great. The world was just out to get me. Why? What had I ever done to anyone to deserve any of this?

So do I call the police? Was anything even stolen? And how many different fingerprints from previous tenants were they going to find that would prove to be absolutely worthless if I did call for them to investigate? How much wasted time? Emotion? Energy? No one cared about people like me. Ultimately, I

decided that calling would prove to be a hassle with useless paperwork that would go nowhere. Nothing would be accomplished, except that all of the neighbors would know all my personal business. Definitely didn't need to call.

I spent the day alternately moping and crying as I cleaned up the apartment. I swept up shards and dirt from the living room floor. I restacked DVDs and CDs, picked up magazines and tried to restuff the cushions of the couch. That was going to require some sewing, but luckily, I knew how to do that and figured on spending quality time with some bad reality TV and my sewing kit later.

I left a message for Cynthia about the

break-in and was only that much more depressed when she didn't even pick up. For some reason, her room hadn't even been touched. Maybe the person had gotten spooked and run off before completing the job.

But I still had questions for her. I was confused. She probably wasn't even a real friend, I thought morosely, and I cringed at the sophomoric tone of my whining. Jesus, I was sounding so goddamn high school I was making myself sick, and still I felt like a walking wound, all achy and sad. It just proved to me that you couldn't trust anyone.

Maybe it was time to move on. I could find another apartment and just lose

myself. But with that thought came a pang of undiluted hurt and loneliness. Hadn't I spent my whole life alone? But I seemed to lack the skills to change that. After all, whom did I ever have as a role model for healthy affection, cooperation, care and wanting to get along well with others? I didn't even know what healthy looked like.

Unsure of how far ranging Ryder's mind-reading skills were, I erected the thickest, most solid cement wall I could picture in my mind to make sure that my secret thoughts and feelings would now be protected.

With the living room as picked up as I could make it, I noted that I would have to replace the broken glass frames and

find other little plants to adopt. I moved down the hall to tackle my bedroom.

Feeling like I was sinking into a great big pit of fabulous depression, I reminded myself I wasn't that trailer-park, street-urchin kid whom everyone scorned and pitied anymore. From the time that I first got a job, I started collecting good pieces of quality clothing, because I didn't want to be looked down on ever again. I picked classic pieces that could mix and match and that wouldn't go out of style. I picked items made of good materials. I was even able to sew some of my clothes using designer patterns from the best fashion mags.

Taking utmost care, I rehung, repackaged in plastic and refolded all of the clothing items that were so disrespectfully dumped on the floor. I picked up stray jewelry and got my shoes back in order. I reshelved my books, double-checked that my laptop was still working (because strangely, it hadn't been taken), gathered all clothing that needed cleaning and filled a laundry bag for another day. I took a shower, letting the hot water run over me until the bathroom became fogged, and put on my comfiest PJ bottoms and tank. Yeah, it was summer in L.A., but I just hadn't been able to feel warm and secure since my car was broken into.

The show about teen moms was on, so I grabbed my sewing kit and got to work repairing the couch cushions while the tedious drama unfolded on the small screen. I could be thankful the robbers hadn't busted the TV. Otherwise, I would have had nothing to keep my brain comfortably numb and away from painful thoughts. It took a few hours to sew the sofa cushions, but even I had to say that it was done pretty well. The day had dragged by, and it was early yet, only seven, but I decided to crawl into bed.

The front door lock wasn't broken, but the fact that it had been picked so easily was just frightening. I grabbed

one of the kitchen chairs and propped it under the knob, thinking that a good dead bolt and a couple of chains might be something worth investing in. I could probably go to the local home-improvement store.

I'd only eaten a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich all day, but I wasn't hungry. I was horribly tired and wanted to just check out into la-la land for the next bunch of hours. I made sure my clock was set, so I could be to work on time, and I stripped to my skivvies. Just as I went to turn down my sheet, I saw my clothes neatly folded on my bed. They were the clothes I'd left at Ryder's house earlier. How in the hell...
Renewed anger sucker punched my gut,

and before I fully thought about it, I marched to the wall I had in common with Ryder and pounded on it.

“Goddammit! Stop with the freaky shit already. I have had enough!”

Though I hadn’t wanted a reaction, not getting one still deflated me. I turned back to my bed with a heavy heart, needing to just check out for a few hours.

I’d put clean sheets on my bed, which felt wonderful to slide into, and while I’d pretty much managed to put everything away, I could still feel the essence of the person who’d been in here trashing my place. It made me feel afraid, like someone could come at any moment, but what else could I do? I

didn't have enough money for a hotel, and there was no one I could go to for help.

That thought alone—*I don't have anyone to turn to*—made me want to cry. Grandma had died a while ago, not that she was much the nurturing type. My aunt wouldn't give a shit. I had no idea where my mother was, I'd never known my father, and my cousin was more a rival than a friend. In any case, she lived out in Malibu with a boyfriend. Not that I wanted to have to ask her for help, even if, hypothetically, I was 100 percent sure someone was going to come into my place and kill me, because we just didn't have that kind of relationship. Don't want to have to owe anyone

anymore for my life.

I shut my eyes and concentrated on finding a peaceful place in my brain to reside. If I could just sleep...check out for a while.

The wind was rushing over my face, but those cool black shades protected my eyes, and a silk scarf that was tied under my chin covered my hair and kept it from flapping around wildly about my face. It was a total '50s—'60s look. I even had a red-with-white, polka-dot halter dress ruffling with the breeze as I practically flew down the hill in an old convertible black Karmann Ghia. I don't know how I got the car, but somehow, it wasn't weird that it was mine. I've always

wanted one.

To the right and down the bluffs was the azure blue of the ocean, the waves crashing against the rocks, sending frothy droplets of foam up into the air. It was an absolutely gorgeous day, without a cloud in the sky.

Don't you look sophisticated...?

Thanks, Ryder. I grinned at him in the passenger seat. He was so handsome in a pair of khaki cargos with a brilliantly white T-shirt setting off the bronze tones of his skin. His black hair was wind ruffled, and his green eyes seemed to stand out under his dark eyebrows and lashes. They were so vibrant. I had trouble looking away.

Where are we going?

I got this postcard from my mom on my twelfth birthday. It was a picture of a woman driving this really cool car along the coast, and big letters spelled out Key West. Anyway, I thought I'd take this drive down to Key West, just to see where the road might lead. I'm always so curious to see where my mom was living and what she was doing that was so important.

You want to find out why she couldn't spend time with you?

Something like that.

So you've done this before?

Yeah. Every so often.

Where does the road take you?

Actually, it's never the same place.

As I thought about it, the other trips along this road were fuzzy. I couldn't remember where I ended up. *I think I end up in a different spot every time.*

So it's a dream of frustration.

A dream? Am I dreaming? Hmm. I guess so. Anyway, my question is never answered. I looked over at him and shrugged plaintively.

The dream I have with Nick when we're kids is a dream of panic. I needed to complete a unit transfer to get him to the medic ward, but neither one of us brought mylunate. The lake is one of the few places that doesn't have a natural deposit of mylunate anywhere nearby, so I ended up carrying him about two miles or so. His femur was

snapped, and he was in extreme pain, but I couldn't get him there any faster.

Wait a minute. You're talking about the dream I was in? I suddenly realized I was dreaming and he was in my dream, by his choice instead of mine. Here he was forcing his will on me yet again.

This is my dream. I don't want you here. How did you get into my dream, if I put up a wall against you?

We're more relaxed in sleep. More susceptible to suggestion, energy, particularly if it's energy that we recognize. It's how you were able to get into my dream last night. Ryder looked somber as he explained.

Yeah? Well, get out. I didn't invite

you in.

Just listen to me a moment, Taylor.

I've had enough of listening to you.

I'm too trailer trash to listen, anyway.

Remembering that I could do anything in my dreams, I jumped out of the car, letting it dissolve in midair, and ran for the side of the road, diving off the cliff before I heard him say anything else. I quickly floated hundreds of feet down the bluffs to the beach with the pounding surf, enjoying the exhilaration of a modified free fall. In spite of the wet rocks, I felt secure standing there, the spray refreshing against my face.

I also didn't want to feel the pain of his earlier rejection and wanted to just shut off any thoughts or images of him.

I was angry, believing you weren't who I thought you were, and I wanted to hurt you. He was floating in front of me, not quite standing on the rocks. He'd followed me down to the water.

Congratulations. It worked.

Don't you want to know what all this is about?

Not really. Though I kinda did.

Regardless, I need to tell you. I don't believe the break-ins are a coincidence. You're in danger, and until I eliminate the danger to you, you're stuck with me.

The hell I am. You aren't going to know where I am. I've already got plans to move. I'm leaving the

apartment and finding someplace where I can be left alone.

I jumped and imagined soaring like a bird along the top of the water. Ryder had been right when he said you could do anything in a dream. I was skimming along the top, faster and faster. I did sharp turns, twirls, flips and caught an updraft back to the car I'd started my dream in. It was waiting for me at the top of the bluffs, sunlight shining off the glossy black paint.

Ryder was leaning against it, looking scrumptiously hot and wickedly male with a pair of shades. My body still responded to him against my will, but I couldn't outrun my hurt feelings. I couldn't forget that he saw me as lesser.

He needed to leave me alone, so I could get on with my life.

I can't leave you alone. His deep voice was a soft rumble. *I...* He frowned. His eyes seemed to be trying to tell me something that wouldn't pass over his lips.

What? I snapped.

His expression turned to stone. He tightened his lips in a grim line. *I need to take care of you.*

Gee, thanks for all that care. Even my dream voice was shaky with emotion. I got in my car. With as much sarcasm as I could muster, I said, *Do me a favor and stop caring so much, okay? Stay away from me.*

Taylor, listen to me! Will you quit being so stubborn? I'm trying to protect you! His deep voice gently rolled over my spirit, making me want to melt, but I had to take a stand at some point, didn't I? I couldn't always be a walking target.

You have a funny way of doing it. I'm going to go look for my mom. You aren't invited.

Leaving Ryder by the side of the bluffs, I continued down the long, lonely road by the ocean with the wind in my hair, the sun on my skin and tears on my cheeks. Maybe I could find that place of contentment in Key West that had allowed her to forget her worries.

Maybe then I'd be okay. Where was she? Why did she leave me? I just wanted to be able to ask that question. What could I have done to make her stay?

The road was long and continuous. It never ended, even though I always felt like I could see a destination in the distance. Like a mirage, a glint of sunlight glaring off something metal, some kind of city or town just ahead, prolonged my hope and kept me driving. I never seemed to get there though. The road just continued. Alone. Me and the road.

A seagull swooped along lazily, catching updrafts and gliding without having to flap its wings, following me on

this fruitless drive, and I silently thanked it for not giving up on me. It was the first time that a living creature had traveled with me in this dream.

I couldn't help but wish with all my heart that someone in the world would think I was special, but maybe there was the lesson. Maybe I needed to learn that I was special. And if I really learned it, maybe it would be enough.

Chapter Six

My dreams were not restful.

I kept looking for Ryder to crop up, still sensing that he was in my dream. I refused to look at whether I was satisfied or disappointed that I didn't see him again. By the time my alarm went off, playing "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," I was exhausted and tempted to call in sick. I've never called in sick. My attendance in school and at work was, and continues to be, flawless, which is what kept me from drowsing under the covers morosely.

"Act as if," I muttered, thinking of a

Dr. Phil-ism, a useful tool from my TV watching, which was likely the only positive thing I got from TV. If I acted on the outside as if everything was great, maybe I'd start feeling that way on the inside. And maybe Dr. Phil wasn't referring to a situation where one was robbed, used and abused, but it helped me pull myself out of bed and find my slinky, sexy but perfectly professional office dress. The one that was guaranteed to make the men take notice, which I figured would give my ego a boost.

It was fitted, from the V-shaped neckline that hinted at my cleavage, and was long enough to reach just below my knees. It was a summery olive-green

linen, with short sleeves and a hidden zipper up the side. I added a dark brown, wide leather belt and matching strappy platforms, eyeing the effect in the mirror with approval. I looked hot. It made me feel better.

I clipped my hair up, with tendrils loose about my face. My hair isn't long enough to be in a real bun, and the style I adapted makes me look a bit wild and sexy. Expertly, I applied makeup and perfume. In no way did I want even remotely to feel trailer. I wanted to look sophisticated. Elegant. Satisfied that no one would know what a crazy, flipped-out weekend I'd had, I grabbed my bag and keys.

As an afterthought, I grabbed my mother's charm bracelet from my nightstand, somehow needing the comfort of it—though why it comforted me, I don't know. She herself had never been a source of comfort even once in my entire life. But just looking at the bracelet infused me with warmth. Go figure, right? Maybe I kept hoping. Pretty stupid, really.

It was seven in the morning, and like clockwork, Mrs. Myrtle, the elderly woman who lives with her daughter across the street, came out for her walk. She couldn't see well and her hearing was off, but she insisted on crossing the busy boulevard two blocks down during

rush-hour traffic to get to her granddaughter's school early. She was a volunteer and thrived on tutoring the younger children, reading to them, whatever the teacher needed. Her hair was short and snow-white, shaped in a bob around her face, and she usually wore loafers with slacks and a button-down shirt, every inch the proper lady.

“Good morning, Mrs. Myrtle. How are you today?” I couldn't let her cross alone. I always made sure to be out by seven because I knew that her daughter and granddaughter somehow didn't have the time. Ever. Didn't they know how lucky they were to have her? She was so fragile looking; a fall could do her in. Why didn't they think of that?

“Taylor, I’m doing very well, thank you.” She had a genteel way of speaking that was at once kind and respectful, though she seemed a bit distracted as she gave me her usual warm smile. “And don’t you look wonderful, dear.”

“Thanks. I put some effort into it this morning.”

I hope Sara grows out of her tantrums. It’s how her mother started, and I wasn’t strict with her like I should have been. It’s really my fault Karen couldn’t get along in her marriage, and now Sara suffers for it.

I heard this quite clearly and looked up at Mrs. Myrtle questioningly, but it was obvious she hadn’t actually spoken.

She was looking down at the uneven concrete driveway, trying to concentrate on maneuvering safely. It left me with a moment to ponder whether or not I was now capable of reading minds. Hearing my own thoughts made me want to laugh.

Read someone's mind. Yeah, right. This wasn't some kind of fiction fun house or anything. It was real life. My life. And still, some little part of my brain insisted that I determine if this was actually happening to me. At the club the other night, I'd been overloaded with the number of people surrounding me, their drunken blatherings pouring too much stimulation into me at once, but just one-to-one was a good experiment.

I did a quick mental check. Was my

fortified, cemented brick wall still up in my mind? I closed my eyes briefly and saw it. Yep. It was there. And still, I'd maybe been able to hear her thoughts. It wouldn't hurt to try.

“How's Sara today?” Sara was her granddaughter.

“She's finishing up a project this morning. You know how it goes. She had all weekend to finish it, but now it's the last minute, and she has the house in an uproar. Her mother is not happy with her. It is an end-of-the-year project. Their last day of school before the summer break is on Friday.”

“How is Karen doing with her work? I know you said she was feeling

particularly stressed the last few months.”

“Now that tax season is over, she’s able to relax a bit.” Her daughter was a CPA, and a single parent as of a year ago.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it.” I fell into step beside her and offered her my arm, which she readily took. I kept her balanced as we made our way across the quiet intersection first, and then the busy one, under the pretense of walking to my car. It’s true that the first time I encountered Mrs. Myrtle on the sidewalk, I was walking out to my car after having to park it a few blocks up and across the main street. That was almost six months ago.

After that, I just pretended my car was always out there, so I could know she arrived to the elementary school safe and sound. My car is usually not out across the boulevard, and I'm pretty sure she knows it, but we continue to play our parts.

I have to admit that part of this is entirely selfish. She was just so generous with her attention that I found myself wanting to talk with her about things. Over time, she got me to open up a *little* about family, work and past dreams of being an artist.

On one occasion, she saw me walking with a cream-colored canvas bag on which, when I'd had free time and the

inspiration of a beautiful spring day, I'd drawn a floral pattern and painted it right on the material. She really seemed to love it, so I made her one. She used it pretty regularly, which I have to say made me proud. She was always so encouraging and just...motherly or grandmotherly, the way I always imagined someone in that role was supposed to be.

With concentration, I was able to get some impressions of what she was feeling, rather than actual words being articulated, which explained why I had "felt" Ryder's grief so clearly the day before. I could feel she was glad to see me and that she had a sense of comfort, affection and familiarity with me. I could

feel her disappointment and worry over whatever was happening at home, and I could feel a low level of excitement surrounding the elementary school. We reached the gates of the school, and I stopped walking, ready to part ways. Mrs. Myrtle, however, had something on her mind and turned to me with purpose. She looked me straight in the eyes.

“Taylor, dear, have you given any more thought to that project I talked with you about last week? Remember the art project? I was hoping to have it done as a birthday surprise for Sara.”

I hadn't thought she was serious about that.

The seed of excitement, watered with

droplets of uncertainty, infused my gut. “I’m not a professional, Mrs. Myrtle. You know you could get someone from one of the local colleges to paint a mural on Sara’s wall for a song. I am absolutely inexperienced...I mean...I’ve never done work on such a large scale.”

“There’s a first time for everything, Taylor. You have to start somewhere. And what’s the worst that can happen?”

“I could make a mess of it all.”

“Then you can paint it white and start over.”

“I know, but...”

“Taylor Lane.” Mrs. Myrtle’s tone became just a bit more firm and motherly. “You need to have confidence in yourself. You do some lovely

artwork. Now tell me true if you aren't really interested, and I'll find someone else, but if you're really interested, I want you to talk with Sara about what she'd like on her wall and maybe come up with a few sample drawings for her to choose from."

"Well...I am interested...but—"

"Then it's settled. I'll pay for the materials and for your time." Her tone of voice held firm.

"You don't have to pay me, Mrs. Myrtle."

"Nonsense, dear. One of the most important lessons in life is to know your worth, and don't let anyone talk you out of it. Now, I know you need to get on to

work and your car is back down the block, so you better hurry. I don't want you to be late." She winked and gave me that warm smile that was so addictive.

Such a lovely girl. I hope she learns to trust in herself. That I heard clearly in my mind, and it made me glow at the same time I got goose bumps. First, I really was hearing her thoughts, and second, if this was the encouragement that most people got to experience growing up, then I had truly missed out.

"Thanks, Mrs. Myrtle. I'll be glad to do this art project."

"Excellent. You're a kind girl, Taylor. Thank you, dear, for walking with me. We'll talk later."

"You're welcome. I'll see you

tomorrow.”

Though I had plenty to think about that was new and exciting, my thoughts circled back round to Ryder and what had happened to me the last few days. I could picture his brooding green eyes and his sexy lips whose taste I was already craving. Somehow he'd managed to imprint himself on me. Easily, I could bring his masculine image to mind, and it was almost like he was there with me, which was equal parts bitter and sweet.

Sharply, I turned my thoughts to the break-in at my car and the break-in at my apartment, which successfully turned my amorous musings sour, but posed a valid

question. Who in the hell was trying to cause me grief? I didn't have anything valuable. I lived a fairly normal life of work and more work with a little exercise and play in there. I mean, really. What was all this about?

At the same time, I find out that this hot guy has been coming to me in my dreams (still not ready to go there), that Cynthia isn't all of who she says she is, and I'm also starting to be able to read minds, if that's the right way to phrase it. The world I grew up in was fading away to be replaced by this bizarre, surreal place where I had no idea what was going to happen next.

I walked into the office at my usual time. Reggie wasn't there. I suddenly

remembered my gaffe with his boyfriend/partner and wondered what torment that was going to bring me. I so needed more pain in my day, right?

When Reggie did arrive some twenty minutes later, dressed in an impressive dark gray pinstripe suit, with his dark goatee looking trimmed and fashionable, I opened my mind, so I could “hear” if there was a problem with Frank. If Frank had been upset with me, maybe I’d get a heads-up on it, which might give me just enough of an advantage that I would be able to keep my job.

“Mail.” I followed Reggie to his desk, the view of Sunset Boulevard from his tenth-floor office window spectacular as

usual. I placed the envelopes in front of him.

“Right.”

“Peter left a long message. Wanted to thank you for dealing with the studio so efficiently. He’s sending you a box of chocolates.”

“Fine.” *Good. Taylor got the money for Peter. She’s a fucking godsend. He’s such a prick. If he weren’t such a fucking amazing writer I’d tell him to go fuck himself, the fucking diva. No room for this shit in business.* His thoughts came to me as clear as a bell, and I was warmed by them, thinking that he really appreciated me.

“Updated call log.” I handed him our traveling clipboard. He usually spent the

morning returning calls. Throughout the day, I collected and updated his call log. Just one of the many pleasurable (sarcasm here) duties I performed.

I continued to stand there, trying to get a quick imprint of his baseline mood, see if there were any wayward thoughts about Frank, but general impressions were coming back to me instead of specifics. Low-level stress, which no one needed special powers to see in him, a sense of excitement over a new client he was going to take on who he thought would be successful and a growing irritation that he wasn't alone in his office. At that point, he looked up at me impatiently. I'd been standing there

staring at him too long.

“Was there something else?”

“No. That’s it.”

“Then go do what I fucking pay you to do. I’ll let you know if I need anything else.” I sensed an immediate guilt over the explosion. His thoughts followed.

Maybe Frank’s right. If I keep acting like an animal, Taylor might leave.

She’s got the connections now. I need to bump up her responsibilities. Make sure to give her a raise at her next review. Can’t afford to lose her.

I caught this as I turned to leave the room and felt like I’d hit pay dirt. Frank wasn’t after my head. Cool. He was batting in my corner or something. Who knew? People usually had their own

agendas, which were nearly always self-serving. I didn't know why he was sticking up for me and didn't care. What was important here was that Frank wasn't going to be a prick about the whole Friday episode. I'd exaggerated the event in my mind, clearly, as he didn't seem to be looking to do me in. Beyond that, it just didn't matter.

The day felt a bit off, unreal, even as I went through my to-do lists and marked off completed tasks, feeling only some of the usual satisfaction of accomplishment. I didn't really know what was going on with Cyn. I had no idea where she was, what she was doing or why she'd needed to leave, really. Somehow she

was connected to Ryder, that much was certain. She knew Nick, who knew Ryder, and I just don't believe in coincidences.

And what in the world did Ryder want with me? Who were his goddamn people that he kept mentioning were being somehow warred against?

I put in copy requests to the mail room, looked through a few inquiry letters, made calls to various movie studios looking for open writing projects and answered calls with my usual efficiency. And still, intense, pale green eyes kept popping into my mind. My insane voice in my head wondered where he was and what he was doing and whether or not I would have a

chance to be naked with him again. It was hard to acknowledge what a sick little puppy I was turning out to be.

“Got a lunch meeting with a new client. Need you to come and take notes.” Reggie came out of his office ready to leave. I could only stare at him and wonder what was going on. I never went to his lunch meetings. I could feel impatience rolling off of him, and I caught disjointed thoughts like *need to look at tiles with Frank, why did we have to do that today and not the weekend? Get a workout in later, do dinner with Steve at Warner Studios about this new guy, fucking amazing, why the fuck is she looking at me like*

that?

“You want me to do a conference call?”

“No,” he said with exaggerated patience, which was another way of saying “Are you fucking stupid?” in Reggie talk. “You are coming with me, but bring your own car. Frank’s meeting us there, and we have some things to do after.”

“All right. I just need a few minutes.”

“Going to the Ivy. Meet us there.” He walked off with his cell phone already at his ear.

I grabbed a small yellow pad and a pen, shoving them both into my purse, and did a quick shutdown of my laptop, wondering if I was supposed to bring it

along. I figured it likely wasn't going to be necessary.

Just as I was about to head out the door, my cell phone rang. The number was unfamiliar, and though I considered ignoring it, I thought it might be Cynthia.

“Hello?”

“Have lunch with me.” It was the deep, dark voice belonging to the man whose image had been tormenting me since I first set eyes on him.

“Ryder.” My heart pinged and warmth involuntarily entered my soul.

“I know you get an hour. Meet me.”

“Can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t. I’m still pondering won’t.”

“Why can’t you?” His tone was softly demanding.

“Reggie wants me to come to this lunch meeting with a new client.”

“Where?”

“Why do you need to know?”

“It’s not usual for him to ask this of you. Why today?” The suspicion in his voice was sudden and sharp, like a blast of icy wind, dampening the secret flutterings of my heart. It reminded me that he had secrets, a few of which surrounded me. He was an unknown quantity. He was getting entirely too comfortable injecting himself without invitation into the different facets of my life.

“How would you know this isn’t usual?”

There was a brief pause. I filled in the gap with my sudden intuition.

“You’ve been watching me, haven’t you?” Christ, one humiliation after another. Was I a job? Were all of his romantic maneuverings of me just further manipulations? How much of a stupid female was I being?

“I’ve been watching you,” he confirmed.

“For how long?”

“A while. Where are you guys going?” His tone was hard, all business.

“It’s none of your damn business.”

I hung up in his ear, but the

satisfaction from that action lasted only a few seconds at most. Then I was back to feeling heart heavy and stupid. He'd been assigned to watch me for whatever ridiculous reason. I didn't know what I'd done to deserve this, and while it needed further thought and analysis at some point—because, shit, someone was assigned to watch me, which was totally creepy and made me out to be a criminal—I just couldn't analyze it yet. I needed to get through lunch without losing it. I deliberately shut down my thoughts with the promise that later I would give in to a good cry and figure out what my problem was and why I would be attracted to someone who could so coldly manipulate me, and I went down

to my car.

The Ivy in Los Angeles was expensive and picturesque, with a quaint, white picket fence surrounding outdoor tables, which was a complete contrast to the actual attitude of the place. It gave the impression of being friendly and welcoming, when in reality, only the stars were seated on the patio, and anyone who was an unknown was seated inside and virtually ignored. I was just glad to be appropriately dressed for the occasion, since it was a high-end restaurant.

I decided to park a few blocks away though, because my car is such a piece of junk. Don't get me wrong. I absolutely

love and appreciate my car, but Reggie would pitch a fit if he saw me driving up in it around a new potential client, so I parked two blocks away around the corner and walked.

It was hot and uncomfortable, but I took my time so I wouldn't be too flushed or sweaty when I got to the restaurant. My thoughtful actions delayed me, and that made Reggie frustrated regardless. I didn't need my mind-reading powers to see that. From a distance, I could see he was speaking companionably with a guy I assumed was the new potential client, but when he caught sight of me, his lips thinned and his eyes narrowed. Thankfully, he was trying to put on a good face for his

new client, which meant I wasn't going to catch hell just yet. I had no doubt he would say something to me later, though.

“Here she is. My assistant, Taylor Lane.” Reggie forced a smile to his face as I walked up, though his thoughts spoke for themselves. *Jesus, fuck. She took fucking long enough, and we're sweating our asses off here.*

“Sorry for the delay.” I walked up and held out my hand to the attractive man standing beside Reggie. He was medium height and build, though a little on the lean side, and probably a few years older than me. He looked like he'd just rolled out of bed and thrown on some jeans and a T-shirt with casual leather

hiking sandals. Not exactly the height of fashion, yet in a strange way, the absolute height of fashion for the young Hollywood elite.

He had grayish-blue eyes peering out from under his overlong, dark blond locks, which were fashionably swept across his forehead in a slightly adult-modified Bieberesque fashion.

Appreciation lit his eyes, as they did a quick and involuntary sweep of my body. Though his thoughts weren't fully articulated, I could sense the surge of interest and his desire to see my breasts naked, which made me want to smirk. Guys were so easy. Still, it was flattering. I appreciated the complimentary reaction.

“Absolutely worth the wait. Paul.” He introduced himself with a charismatic grin, holding my hand longer than was absolutely necessary. *Gorgeous* purred through his mind.

Reggie noticed the lingering touch, and his anger drained away as though by magic. I could already see his brain scheming to see if he could work this to his advantage, and I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

“We should sit,” Reggie interjected smoothly. “Our table is ready.”

“After you,” Paul said to me, and I preceded him, knowing he was going to watch my ass as I walked ahead. That was okay with me. I do have a fine ass

I've worked hard to shape. However, I wasn't expecting to "feel" Paul's strong desire to cup my ass and "see" how well he imagined it fitting in his hands, which made me blush. I like to pretend nothing shakes me, but with sex and intimacy I can definitely be embarrassed. It made it difficult for me to look him in the eye as he held my chair out for me. Maybe this whole mind-reading thing just wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

We were shown to one of the patio tables, which was a testament to Reggie's power in Hollywood. I recognized a few famous faces, though really, I've worked in Hollywood long enough to have lost my awe of celebrity.

Over fancy mineral water, we

discussed stars and movies in general, agreeing that there was a strong need for more meaningful, meat-and-potato movies and not just the cotton-candy fluff that was coming out. We also discussed Paul's first screen sensation, which was the reason he was suddenly thrust into the limelight, needing representation.

"It was a fluke thing. I went to law school after graduating with this sort-of-useless degree in economics," Paul started.

"You're a lawyer?" I asked, I couldn't help my somewhat surprised tone of voice. Paul looked like he was one with Seattle grunge fashion, which

seemed the opposite of lawyerly attire.

“Was,” Paul corrected with a chuckle. He leaned toward me with interest glinting from expressive eyes. “I discovered I prefer the lifestyle of a screenwriter. I can ditch the suit and tie and choose my hours of work. I never was a morning person.” When I glanced over to see if Reggie was paying attention to us, I saw he’d sat back and was suddenly texting with a frown of bewilderment.

“Sorry. I’ll be with you guys in a minute,” Reggie murmured.

“Something’s come up.”

“Take your time,” Paul insisted with a friendly smile. In a warm tone, he added, “I’ll talk with your lovely assistant

while I have her undivided attention.”

He was definitely a charmer, used to having success in life and with women. I could sense that he liked being a peacemaker and creative thinker who didn't look for confrontation and just wanted everyone to get along, which was why it was so weird that he went into law. What did that journey look like?

“How does one go from law to screenwriting?” I arched a bit of a comical eyebrow.

“Courage or stupidity. I'll let you know which in a few years,” he said as an understatement, though I could definitely see a twinkle in his eye. He

was proud. He was happy.

“Clearly, this has been a success, don’t you think?”

“It has. Far more than writing legal briefs. As I read through cases and studied tax codes, I found myself playing with an idea that involved money and espionage, which was way more interesting to me than the job itself. The rest is history.”

“Wow. Then you hit it the first time through, and it’s maybe like the universe is giving you feedback that you made the right move. I imagine you have more ideas cooking?”

“Matter of fact, I have a million ideas. They’re all up here.” Paul tapped his head with two fingers, grinning with

genuine eagerness. He really was an attractive guy, and if I hadn't already met Ryder, he would have appealed to me.

Damn him! I needed to get him out of my head.

And somehow he'd gotten my cell-phone number, which I needed to question him about. There was an exciting man in front of me who was attractive and, it seemed, interested in me, but my psyche was rejecting him for not being Ryder, which had also been my reaction to Rico. Not that I was ever going to date a client, because really, that would be very uncool and the quickest way to lose my job, but still. I'm thinking of the principle of the

matter. Here I was thinking about Ryder, getting all distracted and distanced from what was happening right in front of me.

Let's get back to our current programming. And just as I thought that, Reggie finished his business on his cell phone and rejoined us.

“I read the script you had Frank give me. Excellent.” Reggie nodded, sounding all business.

Frank was the one who gave us the script to look at? Wasn't he just a do-gooder helping out others? What was his deal? How did this whole incestuous relationship start? Paul was connected to Frank who was connected to Reggie?

I didn't have time to ponder, because I needed to keep up with the conversation.

It had suddenly become more formal. It was why I was here, after all. I pulled out my notepad and began doing shorthand to keep up with points being discussed.

Our food showed up, stopping the flow of conversation, and it took all of Reggie's willpower not to snap at the waiter. Reggie had been under the impression that he was about to close a deal, but I sensed Paul was still on the fence. I could "feel" he was tired of doing meetings (ours, apparently, wasn't his first), tired of feeling worked by Hollywood types and just wanted to be home working on his computer. Meetings weren't his thing. Glitz and

glam weren't his thing. He was a T-shirt-and-jeans kind of guy who just enjoyed being a homebody and doing normal, everyday activities. He was feeling exasperated by the formalities and wished it was just the two of us having this meal so he could get to know me better.

I flushed.

I had a Caesar salad, Paul had a burger and Reggie had crab cakes. Conversation remained light and topical while we were eating, but toward the end of the meal, Reggie took a call from Frank and stepped away. When Reggie returned, Paul got right down to business.

“What can you do for me that one of

the other agencies can't?"

"At one of the large agencies, you will not be given the attention your work deserves, because they're too busy catering to their high-profile clients. We are never too busy to serve your needs." Reggie wiped his mouth with his white cloth napkin and tossed it lightly by his plate as he sat back in his chair. "I'm a partner in this firm, and we made a conscious choice not to overbuild our business in order to make sure our clients get full customer care. And still, if you look at our client list, which you've had a chance to do, you'll see that we represent very successful people. We're a boutique agency by

choice, not necessity.”

Paul looked over at Reggie. “I’ve had a few other meetings this week with the Charles Louis Company, Adams Group and Morris Entertainment, which all have high-profile clients. They were all trying to be my good buddy, get me free tickets here or there, do me some favors, buy me a great lunch, et cetera, which is total bullshit. Their client lists are in the hundreds, which gives me the feeling of being part of a mill instead of a human enterprise. I have to say that this has been more real. So what’s next? What’s the next step if I sign with you?”

“Your work will get out to all the major studios when I think it’s good enough. Taylor and I read all scripts and

take meetings on them before we send them out. We want to make sure we're sending out the best product we can. In the end, it's what makes this a winning situation for all of us. Your movie gets made, and it's not just another piece of crap being thrown out to the public. Four of my writers have had major motion picture award nominations, and two took them home in the last five years. I'm looking for quality here. I don't believe in making shit movies."

"All right. I'm in."

"Let's draw up the contracts and meet later this week." Reggie grinned.

"All right. Sounds good."

"Taylor will take care of you. Ah,

there's Frank.”

I looked up in time to see the silver-haired man who'd been sitting by Reggie's pool last Friday come through the picket fence in a casual summer suit. He was taller than Reggie by an inch or two.

Of course, my heart was pounding, wondering how he was going to handle our “misunderstanding,” which I was still confused about. But as it turned out, I didn't have to worry. As we all stood to greet him, his eyes caught mine and he winked, which immediately worked to alleviate some of my residual stress from the other day. I'd actually believed he was going to kill me. Ludicrous, right? Here he was, hugging Reggie and

shaking hands with Paul. He was the reason Paul had been able to get his work looked at. Connections. Pure Hollywood. Idly, I wondered what favors were owed and what this connection entailed, but there was nothing unusual about doing business this way. It was, after all, how things got done in Hollywood most of the time.

“How’s your dad, Paul? Haven’t seen him in some time.” Frank’s voice was jovial, with his slight British accent.

“Stuck in a stuffy office. He’s been working lots of overtime lately. I hardly see him anymore.” Paul shrugged with an engaging grin. “Hoping to take a trip with him somewhere this summer.”

“Counting your lucky stars, young man? You could be right with him in that stuffy office.”

“Absolutely.” Paul gave a firm nod. “I didn’t know you were dating Reggie when you offered to pass it on. Maybe I could have gotten my work looked at sooner.”

“It wouldn’t have done any good. Reggie is a tight ass when it comes to his work. He doesn’t like interference from anyone. Even me.”

“Damn right,” Reggie interjected with a grin. “Only the best.

Frank finally turned to me with a twinkle in his silvery-gray eyes. I fully expected to be charmed. He seemed so

well liked and was being so amiable.

“The chocolate was delightful, Taylor.” He grasped my hand, and though he was smiling and being charming, and though it was a freaking hot summer day, a chill went up my arm. I sensed menace. Danger. Death. It swamped me, and I couldn’t get my breath for a moment. He’d taken life without remorse and was going to do so again. I could feel his intentions! It took all I had not to immediately snatch my hand away and run.

Shit. Holy shit. Who was this guy?

My heart pounded in my throat, and a cold sweat broke out down my spine. My mind was momentarily blank with panic. He kept looking at me, almost

knowingly, and I wondered if he could read my thoughts. No, because my fortified shield was up. I quickly slammed a wall into place mentally against his thoughts, but not before I caught a final promise. *She won't be a problem for much longer. Finally, I will fulfill my contract.*

The quiet certainty of the words moving through Frank's mind made my skin crawl. I experienced a feeling of dread like never before. It made me shiver. I hadn't been wrong on Friday. He did mean to hurt me.

"Reggie wanted to surprise you," I finally managed with a false, bright smile. I was referring to the chocolate.

“He did.” Frank’s smile was oily and suggestive. It added just another layer of sick to the situation.

“I hope you had a good trip,” I offered hesitantly.

“Trip?” Frank’s eyes narrowed on me analytically. “Yes, of course. I was interested in some investment property.”

“Have you talked with Dad about it?” Paul inquired.

“Soon enough,” Frank replied vaguely. He turned to Reggie. “Are you ready?”

“We’re set.”

“Shall we get this dreadful task accomplished? I can’t wait to be done and home where the air is so nicely

conditioned.” Frank smiled, only this time, instead of looking charming when his gaze met mine, he looked calculating and cold. Reptilian.

“Take your time, Taylor. I won’t need you back at the office today.” Reggie threw several hundreds down on the table, more than enough to cover our meals and then some. “Just make sure to set up a time for a contracts meeting.”

“Okay.” I watched them leave, not knowing what to do with the information I’d unwittingly retrieved from Frank’s thoughts. I could just see the look on Paul’s face if I told him Frank was a killer. He’d probably think I was batty. “”Course, Paul’s father was friends with Frank, so who was Paul in all this?

How did he fit in with the bigger picture? Were he and his family as dangerous as Frank, and here I was being left alone with him?

Reggie and Frank got into the black luxury sedan that was parked just across the street. The valet chased around the car to open both doors, accepting a tip from the killer Good Samaritan, Frank.

“They have great chocolate-chip cookies. Can I tempt you with one? Maybe some coffee?”

“Sure.” I smiled and sat back down at our table, partly because I needed to ground myself again. I was still feeling shaky. Quivery. It isn’t every day that you find out someone is trying to kill

you. Now what was I supposed to do? That is...if I believed in this whole mind-reading thing...and if I felt like I'd really read his mind...and if I'd done it accurately. He could have been thinking about his contractor or his designer, right? Mind reading. What a hoot. How silly. Ha-ha-ha.

But the humor was missing from this mental exchange I was having with myself. In truth, I was afraid.

"I'm glad you aren't one of those waifs where never a carb, a sugar or a fat will pass your lips. Though I was worried when I saw you'd ordered a salad." Paul's eyes twinkled as he gave me a crooked smile.

"Truthfully, I didn't know if I was

paying or if Reggie was paying,” I said with a smile. “They don’t pay assistants all that much, you know. The price of this meal is what my monthly grocery bill costs.”

“Ouch,” was his reply, but it was said good-naturedly. The waiter approached and Paul ordered two coffees and two chocolate-chip cookies. I was trying to think of a way to broach the subject of Frank without seeming like I was trying to pry, when Paul offered the perfect opening.

“He’s a character, isn’t he?”

“Reggie?” I asked.

“Frank. Hell, Frank and Reggie together.”

“What do you mean? Does it bother you?”

“Them being gay? Not at all. I just mean you never know with Frank. He’s a cool customer. Keeps his cards close, and then all of a sudden, he does something like help me with my script. Really, though, he’s doing it as a favor to my father. They’ve been friends for years.”

“I still don’t know how Frank and Reggie met.”

“Reggie’s sister had some kind of event, maybe a charity event, at her house...”

“I didn’t realize Reggie had a sister.” My lips quirked as I tried to envision a

feminine version of Reggie.

“Well, according to Frank, she’s some kind of money manager...what do you call that...a financial planner, and he’s one of her newer clients, so he went to the event. She introduced them and that was that.”

Wasn’t that interesting. Why would he go to a charity event? Why would a...possible *killer* go to a charity event? What was he really doing? No way would I believe that Frank was doing anything charitable, which opened the door to many more questions, none of which likely had good answers. Ultimate creepiness. Poor Reggie! How could I let him know his partner was dangerous? He wouldn’t believe me if I did try to

tell him. He'd likely fire me...

“He's changed Reggie. For the better, I mean. Reggie seems happier. He has the ability to relax more, which he was not able to do before, and we all suffered for it.” I covered my silence with a weak smile, only to realize Paul had taken my words the wrong way.

“So the work environment is better for you if he's getting laid regularly?”

“That's one way to put it.” I flushed, realizing that we were starting to cross a line here. Paul wasn't my pal. He was a client. And he wasn't a full client yet. He hadn't signed a contract or anything. “I apologize. I don't mean to imply that Reggie needs anything. He's got a solid

reputation because he works so hard.”

“Don’t worry, Taylor.” Paul took my hand in a loose clasp on the table, his expression light, flirtatious. “I know what you meant.”

His touch didn’t move me in the least. He had large, warm hands, but somehow they were too soft. They didn’t feel quite right holding mine. I could still remember Ryder’s big, roughly calloused hands touching me, which was wrong. Totally wrong. Ryder was a great big user and manipulator. I would convince myself of this. Soon.

“So what did you mean about Frank and Reggie? I don’t know Frank at all. This was my first time meeting him.”

“I’ve known him for about ten years

now. He's changed teams a few times, if you know what I mean. I wouldn't share that with Reggie, though."

"You mean he's had girlfriends?"

"Yeah. His last partner, at least, was female. Interesting woman. Frank brought her to dinner at my father's house a few times. Not sure what happened to her. She seems to have gone underground. Linda something. She owned an investment firm. Somehow inherited after her husband died. Something like that."

Paul took a sip of water from his glass on the table. "Maybe her company became a casualty of the financial meltdown, because it did go bankrupt, as

I remember. Anyway, just before that happened, Frank stopped seeing her.” He shook his head with a cynical smirk. “She broke his heart. Started seeing another guy with more money. Something like that. Anyway, I’m glad to see him happy. He’s a good guy.”

The waiter returned and Paul dropped my hand to fix his coffee. Resisting the urge to wipe my palm on my dress—his hand had felt a little clammy to me—I put some cream and sugar in mine and took a sip, meeting his gaze over the rim of my cup.

“So Reggie isn’t Frank’s first guy?”

“I don’t think so. I was younger at the time and less savvy, but he may have brought a guy over he was into. But—”

he gave me his charming smile, his eyes creasing at the corners as he looked over my face softly, “—I don’t feel like talking about Frank right now.”

“I know it’s none of my business. I just find people so interesting.” I gave Paul a small shrug, as if to show I couldn’t help being curious, hoping it didn’t seem strange that I was asking so many questions.

“I want to talk about you going out with me for dinner or drinks.” He was trying to hold my gaze, but I looked down at my cookie and broke a piece off as I thought about the best way to refuse.

“Paul...”

“Don’t say no.” His voice came out

gently. Again, I immediately recognized that his voice wasn't as deep or gravelly as Ryder's and wanted to kick myself, or Ryder.

"We're going to have a working relationship, not a romantic one."

"That's not a good reason. I'll go with another company and ask you out again."

"I am not part of the deal," I said firmly. "You need to decide what you're going to do, and regardless, I'm not going out with you."

"Is there a guy in your life?" His expression turned shrewd.

"Sort of. I mean not really. Maybe." Just my fumbling made me want to bury my head in my arms on the table and probably delivered a more truthful

message to Paul than my actual words. Instead, I put the piece of cookie back down with a sigh and wiped the crumbs off my fingers. “I met someone a few days ago, but I don’t know what’s happening with him just yet.”

“All right. I can accept that.” Paul nodded. Then he became all business. “So let’s talk about when the meeting should take place.”

“Oh. Okay.” It was an abrupt change in subject, and I wasn’t sure if he was the type to pout and be passive-aggressive (because I’ve experienced this before when a guy doesn’t have his feelings returned) or if he was just trying to get back to business.

I pulled my smartphone out and hit the app for Calendar. I keep track of all of Reggie's appointments along with corresponding phone numbers for "just in case" moments when something goes haywire. I like being prepared.

"What's good for you?" I asked. I could feel his eyes on me, analyzing me.

"Anything. I'm not on the clock anymore."

"What about Thursday at 2:00 p.m.? We can meet in the boardroom."

"Works for me. You have a pen I can borrow?"

I dug one out of my purse and handed it to him. He wrote the information down on a napkin, which he then folded and

stuck in his wallet. I began quickly thumb-typing the information, the time and the date. When I asked him for his number, he gave me a slow grin while reciting it, which probably usually had a killer effect on female hearts and maybe would have on mine even a week ago.

I emailed the information to myself, so I would remember to put it on Reggie's calendar.

"I'll give you a reminder call, if you'd like." I looked over at him. He was still watching me admiringly. To cover my discomfort, I took a sip of coffee, not knowing what to do now that I'd told him I wasn't interested.

"I'd appreciate that. I wouldn't want to miss the meeting."

“All right then. We’re set.” I put my phone away.

“Are you going to leave me now?”

“I think it’s best, Paul.”

“I know, I know. I hope we can become friends?”

“Absolutely.” *Business, phone-only friends.*

After making sure the money on the table was enough, we walked out to the sidewalk, where Paul leaned in, his lips near my ear. “Keep my number handy. Call anytime. You never know, right?”

“Okay.” I pulled away. “I’ll see you on Thursday.”

“Where are you parked?”

“Not far.” I was deliberately vague,

because I didn't want him offering to walk me back, which had the potential for more awkwardness.

I started to walk away and knew that he watched me until I rounded the corner and was out of sight. It felt like a really long block, particularly since I had to step carefully with my heels, but then I was on Alden Drive and could almost see my car on the next block.

I could even take my time, now that I had the afternoon off.

Being that this was a business district on a Monday afternoon, there were a few people milling about, weaving into and out of shops and restaurants. I decided to open my mind and see how much noise I could pick up from people

around me. I wanted to know the range, as if I was experimenting with mental sonar. At first, I was getting nothing. It seemed that my mind couldn't latch on to people blowing by me in cars. An elderly couple walked by me and smiled. I sensed their general feelings of contentment. Underlying this, I could feel the man was worried about his wife's diabetes and how she needed to *stop with the damned pastries*.

Traffic, while light, was constant, which was why I didn't think anything when a dark van pulled to the curb into an empty space ten yards ahead of where I was walking. I was in the midst of taking a deep breath and realizing, with

no small amount of pleasure, that this was two workdays for me that were cut short, which was unheard of in this industry. Yet here I was, with no idea what to do.

Young Asian girl tied up in a remote village in the tropics. Clothing ripped. Face beaten.

The image, clear and crisp, slammed into my mind. It startled me, and I looked around. Holy crap, what was that?

Just like that. I'll do her just like that.

The evil voice snaked into my head, and I looked around a moment, slowing my steps to see who the sick perv was who was thinking about this. No one looked creepy enough. A couple of

young teens who looked like they were ditching school; a couple of guys in business suits, looking slick and harried, deep in conversation; and a grandmotherly type walking a little Paris Hilton dog were in the immediate vicinity. The older lady walked through the shoe-store doors. The image died but left behind the bloody taste of death, violence and helplessness.

I guess you never get too old to appreciate shoes, I thought without humor, mostly just trying to calm my nerves. Unable to figure out where the image had come from, I continued walking, but with less enthusiasm. I had a sense that that girl had met a horrible

end. It sort of took the wind from my sails.

I was nearing the van on my way back to my car when the sliding door opened. Two burly, middle-aged guys jumped out with muscles and no-nonsense expressions. One man had a shaved head and wore a beat-up, holey T-shirt and threadbare jeans, while the other had a buzz cut, old army fatigues and a white muscle shirt.

There she is.

The menacing voice stretched decrepit fingers into my mind. A tingle went up my spine. The men weren't looking around, like they were getting ready to shop or eat. No, they had an immediate bead on me, and me alone.

The *run away* danger vibe hit me dead on. I stopped cold. I may have even taken a few stuttering steps back, but before I knew it, they rushed me!

I didn't have time to scream. I gasped and turned to run, but a meaty hand clapped against my mouth, smelling of foul must and old onions. A tatted-up forearm encircled my rib cage. Another set of arms came around my legs. I was suddenly weightless, lifted off the ground.

Horror, fear, paralysis.

Fight!

This was a waking nightmare. The roaring sound of my blood pumping furiously deafened me. With my whole

body, I bucked and scratched at the arms holding me as the men tried to rush me to the van.

Ryder! I shrieked mentally, wishing for the mental connection, opening my mind wide to him, but there was no response. A single second dragged by. The world was in slow motion.

I scratched at the face behind me. I kicked out to slow them. Where was everybody? Anybody! But the line of cars blocked most of the physical scuffle. I couldn't make enough noise to draw attention to myself, and they managed to make half the distance back to the van!

I bit down hard on the hand holding my mouth. I tasted blood.

“Fuck!” A voice snarled. The man snatched his hand from my mouth, which gave me enough time to scream. Loud. Shrill. Adrenaline added strength to my struggles, making it hard for them to keep a tight hold of me. I got a leg free! I kicked the crew-cut guy, using the heavy wooden platform of my shoe, but not with enough force to do any damage, which added to my crushing fear.

The little old lady with the tiny dog came out of the store several yards away. We made eye contact. Her dismay was clear, but she was so far and fragile. What could she do? A young woman was several feet behind her with her cell phone in hand, but there was no

time.

“Hold her tighter,” the bald guy growled, covering my mouth with more force, leaving me no room to sink my teeth into his skin again.

I kept fighting, but they were stronger, and that’s when I knew. I couldn’t get away. I would never see the light of day again. Just like the Vietnamese girl Crew Cut had killed during a tour of Vietnam. I could see that he wanted to hurt me. Badly.

This was my death sentence. Right here. Tears filled my eyes as I realized my struggles were futile, and I was getting tired.

A roaring sound grew until a motorcycle came ripping up on the

sidewalk, the rider wearing a black helmet, the engine blazing, echoing off the building. As it went by, a powerful, jean-clad leg with a heavy black boot whip-kicked Crew Cut, who was holding my legs, dead center on his face. Blood spurted like a faucet from his nose. He let go of me with a howl of pain, grabbing at his face.

My feet were free!

“Let’s go!” a male voice yelled from in the van, and Crew Cut scrambled up from the ground into the vehicle, still holding his gushing nose.

I kicked back at Baldy’s shin and tried to ram the back of my head into his nose as the motorcyclist spun around to come

back at us. Immediately, he threw me down in his bid to escape. I fell heavily to the ground on all fours, crying out as sharp pain radiated up my arms, and my teeth clacked together. Baldy dove in the open door of the van as it swerved into traffic and disappeared around the next corner.

The motorcycle came toward me.

It took a moment, as I had to breathe heavily and fight back a choking ball of emotion, but I clambered to my feet clumsily, stumbling, wincing, ready to thank my savior as he pulled even with me.

“You okay?”

I recognized the harsh voice immediately. *Ryder*. His name was a

soft, caressing sigh across my mind. Crashing relief, warmth and security, along with a violent case of the shakes, washed over me.

“I—I think so,” I replied tentatively, looking down at my trembling hands.

He flipped his visor up. His pale eyes were mad-dog angry, and his jaw was clenched tightly, teeth gnashing, as though he was trying to contain his rage.

“Get on.” He looked ruthless. Dangerous.

“Ryder... How did you...?”

“Get on.” He all but barked the order in a low, rough-hewn voice. He wanted to kill those guys. I could see it in the way his body thrummed with energy,

taut, tense, ready for action, which was awe inspiring.

“I’m in a dress.” I looked down at myself, surprised that I’d managed to retain my purse. Feeling awkward and like I was in someone else’s reality, I slid the long strap over my head diagonally, not sure what else to do with it or what to do next. It wasn’t my finest thinking moment.

“Turn around,” he demanded, aggression still edging his nervous system.

“What?” I looked at him stupidly.

Impatiently, he turned me so I was facing away from him. He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me across his lap, butt first. I was

sidesaddle, partly on the metal covering the gas tank and partly on his lap.

Gasping with surprise, I looked into his eyes. His wrath and anxiety-ridden fear poured off him in thick, powerful waves.

The force of it blew me away. It was all for me. Raw emotion choked my throat from the realization. No one had ever worried for me before. No one had ever been driven to the edge of panic trying to protect me. He was in a killing rage over me.

His arms caged me in protectively as they grasped the handlebars.

“Hold on.” This time his voice was a little gentler, though it still sounded like it had gone over a rough patch of road.

“To what?”

“Me.”

A feeling of rightness went through me. Engulfed by his compelling, flinty green stare, surrounded by his strength, there was nowhere else I wanted to be. It didn't make a lick of sense, considering our short and somewhat volatile history, but I was beyond judging the situation. Tentatively, I ran my shaky hands over bunched muscles outlined by his black-T-shirt-clad chest and shoulders. The familiar scent of his spicy soap gave me comfort as I leaned close.

He gunned the engine.

We shot off the sidewalk.

I kept my face pressed into his hard shoulder as we rode. It felt good to have his warm, solid body under mine. It felt good to have the air pushing through my hair and weaving itself around me. I didn't know where we were going, but I was still too much in shock to care. The temperature was up in the high nineties, but I couldn't seem to stop shaking.

It was only a few minutes later that we turned down a residential side street, and Ryder pulled over. After shutting the engine down and engaging the kickstand, he unclipped his helmet and hung it on one of the handlebars. I sat up and looked into his eyes. They still looked agonized.

He snarled, “I couldn’t find you.”

With no warning his calloused hands cupped my face, and he covered my lips with his. It was hot. It was desperate. It was fearful. He slanted his strong, warm lips firmly over mine, like he just couldn’t get enough, like I was desperately needed oxygen, like there was no tomorrow. He needed me. A mewling whimper escaped me. Tingles of sensation shivered over me. Nerve endings fired hotly. I didn’t want to let go. I did some grabbing of my own, my hands sliding through his thick black hair. I immersed myself in him, tasting him, needing to feel his strength.

“Dammit, Taylor,” he growled,

pulling away. He was glaring at me at the same time that he tenderly wiped tears from my cheeks with an unsteady hand—tears I hadn't even realized had spilled over. "I heard you calling me. I didn't think I was going to get to you. You didn't tell me where you were going, and it took too fucking long to find you. Shit." He yanked me into his chest, and I felt his strong arms crushing me close, his hands running down my back and up over my shoulders tightly, as though I was...precious to him.

"They were going to take me." I buried my face in his corded neck, feeling the rapid beat of his pulse.

"Why? Why me?"

"We need to talk. Something's going

on here, but we need a safe place. I have a lot to tell you. Can you call in sick tomorrow? Maybe the next two days? I know a place, but it won't be easy to just come and go."

"I guess so."

"Call now, because where we're going, your phone won't receive service."

"Where are we going?"

"It's hard to explain. I'll just have to show you."

Sniffling, I stared into his eyes, which were normally hard and steely but were now acutely distressed, a vein on the side of his forehead bulging outward as a sign of his internal upset. He was

worried about me, and I figured it was time to trust, at least a little, that I wasn't just a job to him. He'd saved me. I was here, with him, and not in some van wondering how or when I was going to be assaulted or killed.

This whole ordeal could have gone a completely different way. A way I didn't even want to think about. I needed some answers, and I needed to make a plan.

"I'll make the call."

Chapter Seven

“Holy Toledo, Batman. The Joker will never find us here.”

We were at the mouth of a hidden cave, in the middle of a rocky canyon, without another soul for miles around. I'd just survived an attack on my person and was hoping for some creature comforts, like maybe a quiet restaurant with soft seating to rest on, a coffee shop with soft seating to rest on or even a two-bit motel nearby, which would also have soft seating to rest on. See my theme here?

Looking around, I saw rocks, dirt and

more rocks. I was feeling just slightly disappointed by this turn of events. With a great deal of reluctance, I got off the bike.

“We could take the Batmobile out for a spin, battle the forces of evil, combat nefarious plans of mischief and mayhem and save the citizens of Gotham City.”

Ryder's eyes were still a bit stormy when he looked at me over his shoulder, noting my not-at-all-veiled sarcasm. Even in my brooding state, I couldn't help but appreciate how good he looked uncurling his muscular body from the bike. His midnight-black hair was sort of sexily unkempt because of his helmet, his light eyes piercing as they tried to analyze what I was thinking.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a smart-ass?” He frowned.

“*Moi?* A smart-ass? I’ve never heard that before,” I said in a dry tone, and I ran a hand over my own helmet-styled hair, trying to pat it down. It was more a gesture of comfort and familiarity than actually thinking I could do something about my falling-down, faux-chignon, helmet-head hair. “So is this a campout? ’Cuz I forgot my sleeping bag and my toothbrush.”

“Not a campout,” he answered shortly, hanging our helmets on the handlebars.

“Ryder, that was my smart-ass way of asking what the plan is. I wasn’t

expecting to have to hike in the wilderness in order to do some talking.” I gestured toward my heels.

“Be patient,” he replied, and he opened up the seat compartment to snag what looked like a flashlight and a black case the size of a minilaptop.

“I am being patient. My patience is clearly evident, because I’m still here talking with you when what I really want is a nice soft bed to burrow into for like a week. So we’re here because...”

“You’ll see. Here. Hold this.” He handed the black case to me, checked the flashlight by turning it on and off and shut the compartment.

“Shouldn’t we call the cops or something?”

“Not yet.”

“You’re very secretive,” I complained with a scowl. “Why can’t you just tell me?”

“It’s complicated, and it wouldn’t make sense to just hear it.” A troubled look swept his face a moment, like a he-was-second-guessing-himself kind of look, but then it was gone, leaving me with a mental *grrrrrrr* as he walked away. Over his shoulder he grated, “Wait here.”

“Bossy,” I grumbled to his departing back. I wasn’t sure if he actually heard me, though, because he turned the flashlight on and disappeared into the cave.

I stood there in my chunky heels and ruined designer dress, feeling tired and still somewhat shell-shocked. Could I be blamed for being a little cranky when faced with rocks and dirt? I just wanted to curl up in a blanket, wearing my girl boxers and tank, and sleep for a bit while the police took care of everything. That would have fixed me right up. So how had I ended up here?

Bait and switch. That's what it was, I grumbled mentally. I replayed in my mind how we'd ended up parked in an isolated canyon.

* * *

After Ryder stated that he had a place

where we could talk, we'd hit the Pacific Coast Highway. It was a short twenty-minute jaunt off of Sunset Boulevard, past all the fancy homes with the vast estates and silly-looking topiaries. I, of course, was shuddering with relief that I would not be found dumped at the base of the Hollywood sign or have something equally horrifying happen to me. I was slightly uncomfortable that I had to bunch my dress up to my hips in order to swing on behind Ryder, but what the hell? I figured it for a goner anyway. It had ripped seams and ground-in dirt after I'd been thrown to the ground by my attackers.

In any case, I figured further damage

to the dress was worth it, if the beautiful ocean, vast and blue, would continue meeting my gaze to the west as we made our way along the PCH.

I'd felt so helpless during my attack. It left me with a new, permanent recognition of my own vulnerability, making me fearful for my safety clear down to my bones. My lesson for the day was a horrifying revelation: if someone truly wants to hurt you, no amount of preparation is going to save you. My bubble of naïveté, where I was safe as long as I followed all the rules (be in public places with other people around, don't go out alone after dark) was gone, which made me feel weepy, weak and

wimpy.

I hated that! I needed to be strong. I couldn't risk falling apart. There wouldn't be anyone there to help pick up the pieces, and then where would I be?

But that was too much to think about. Instead, I concentrated on the soothing colors and rolling, repetitive motion of the waves, which allowed tranquility to descend. My overwrought emotions were calmed, allowing the horror of the afternoon to temporarily slide away on the cool breeze.

I rested the side of my helmeted head on Ryder's back, my arms clinging to his ribs with my hands resting on the warmth of his hard abs. In a purely primitive way, a deep sense of satisfaction

bloomed with the knowledge that Ryder was savagely protective of me. It was somehow giving me a sense of connection to him. Belonging.

I frowned as my internal compass flashed a yellow warning light. How could I be so cavalier? This wasn't real. It was the situation, the life-and-death dramatics of it all, creating the feelings. Logically, that made sense. I mean, how much did we really know each other? *But I really like him...*

Disappointment threatened to cloud my fragile peace. Thinking about all this deep, introspective stuff was taking too much energy when I just wanted to relax, so I let those thoughts float off on the

breeze and focused on the present. Closing my eyes briefly, I felt pure pleasure in just experiencing the ride—the bare skin of my inner thighs rubbing against his denim, my breasts pressed against his back and a motor vibrating beneath me. Very stimulating. It was the first time I'd ever been on a motorcycle, and I found it was definitely something I could get used to.

There were a number of canyon roads along the way, and it was on one of these that Ryder turned off, cutting right and heading away from the inviting sandy beach. A pang of disappointment echoed softly at the loss, but only for a moment. It was a quiet road. No other cars pulled off with us. He followed lazily along the

twisting, winding route, where hills of dry grasses, green shrubs and large oak trees grew happily.

I was enjoying the serenity of nature and appreciating the beautiful scenery when, with no warning other than a terse “Hold on tight,” he veered off the paved street and onto the rolling hills! What was this? Motocross? I didn’t sign on for this!

Don’t worry. The bike’s modified. It can handle this.

In spite of his reassurance, my heart jumped into my throat and pounded with the force of a sledgehammer. The grinding, protesting motor was revved hard, so the bike’s tires dug into the wild

ground covering and roughly launched us through the rocky terrain, kicking up bits of sand and gravel as they sought purchase. Hanging on tightly, I was white-knuckling each dip and turn, so that whole tranquility piece I'd been feeling got shot to hell.

There were several minutes of the bone-jarring ride, and I could feel Ryder's powerful muscles flexing, adjusting, controlling the powerful, vibrating motor that sent us surging over the land. It seemed like a fight just to stay upright. The rocky part of the ride felt like it took hours, but in all likelihood, it was probably about ten minutes total before we came to a stop and shut down the engine.

It took a moment to realize that we were there, wherever “there” was.

Ryder pulled his helmet off, his thick, dark hair ruffled and damp with sweat.

“You okay?” He spoke quietly over his shoulder.

“Peachy,” I muttered, a little put off that he hadn’t warned me about what I was getting into before we started.

Unclenching my fingers from the death grip I had on him, I looked around to find that we were parked in the middle of nowhere near a canyon wall with rocky, boulder-like outcroppings and a shallow little cave. It was no wonder the ride had been so uncomfortable. There wasn’t even a trail where we were

parked. There was no even ground, just rock, scrub brush and trees.

What the hell are we doing here?

With the engine off, it was eerily silent except for the quiet whisper of the breeze brushing through the leaves and bushes. We were quite isolated, and though I had to admit the setting was lovely, I had my first misgivings about being so far removed from any other people. Something about coming here was getting my Spidey senses tingling.

“This is where you wanted to go?” I asked hesitantly, pulling off the helmet and looking around as he took it from me.

Ryder turned in his seat and held my gaze. Sounding dictatorial, he demanded,

“Trust me.”

He held out his hand, which was kind of symbolic. To take it was to agree to this. I stared at it a moment, noting it was large and bronzed, containing calluses and a few faint scars. With my mental shield already down from calling to him when I was being kidnapped, I tried to see if I could sense any thoughts or feelings coming from him. He was a natural at shielding himself, so I got nothing and released a deep sigh. In that moment, I decided that I'd already jumped down the rabbit hole. I needed to find the bottom in order to reach normal again. Besides, where else was I going to go?

“Here goes...” I murmured, more to reassure myself than anything because, hello, we were deliberately parking in the canyon without another soul in shouting distance.

“You’ll be safe,” he said firmly, reading me expertly. With burning eyes, he vowed, “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I believed him.

* * *

So here I was. Waiting. Watching. Wondering. What was going to happen next? At this point, my ability to think things through logically was lost to me. This whole situation hadn’t followed a

predictable process, but neither had it made sense that Frank might wish death on me.

With an ease that spoke of regular precaution, Ryder gave a sharp look around, scoping the view to make sure no one was lurking about, obviously not wanting to expose what we were doing. He strode determinedly toward one of the larger rocks next to the canyon wall. This meant maneuvering around and over different-sized rocks and boulders, which required balance and full muscle control. Expecting someone his size to be clumsier, I was surprised to discover he moved with grace and agility. He bypassed the small cave.

Reaching the particular rock he

wanted, Ryder set to work moving it. It was a heavy rock, from the way he grunted while shoving it aside, his muscles flexing under his black T-shirt in a very distracting manner, but once it was gone, there was a hidden control panel embedded in the rock wall.

What... Wasn't that surprising?

He punched in a code on the sleek, black, high-tech keypad, after which he laid his thumb against a small scanner. *Very Mission Impossible.*

Then, much to my amazement, one wall of rock—which turned out to be a well-constructed rock facade—opened noiselessly, as though on a thick, well-oiled metal hinge. If I'd had to guess, I

would have said it measured around six feet tall and three feet wide. Its edges were camouflaged by the actual rock crevices surrounding it. I was speechless, which I had to admit was rare for me.

What was behind door number one? The mouth of a deeper, darker cave was revealed. Ryder ducked into it briefly with his flashlight, taking a quick look around. All must have been well, because he went and moved the boulder back into place to hide the control panel once again.

“Okay. We’re ready. I need to push the bike in.” Ryder had rejoined me. Again, there was a pause in his actions. Concern? Uncertainty? I couldn’t tell.

What I did note was that the longer we stood out there, the more tense he seemed to become—as evidenced by the clenching of his jaw and the deepening crease between his eyebrows—for reasons unknown.

“Are you going to push the bike in?” I asked hesitantly.

There was a hint of vulnerability to his face that quieted my smart-ass self. He stared down at the ground a moment longer. Stranger and stranger. A mystery presented itself. Did he not want me to see the clubhouse? Were there girly mags on the walls? Porn strewn about? Was I about to learn more about Ryder than he was comfortable with?

Before I could ask, he turned away.

“What the hell am I doing?” I thought I heard him mutter as he grabbed the handlebars on the bike.

I cocked my head, considering his behavior, as I observed him. It was kind of funny. The more reluctant he seemed about showing me around his man cave, the more excited I was to go in. What secrets was he hiding? What in the world could be making him so uncomfortable?

It took a few moments to push the bike through the cave opening, since he had to physically muscle the machine over a few of the outward-jutting rock groupings. Then he was striding

purposefully back to me, slightly out of breath. The uncertainty was gone, replaced by a set expression. Clearly, he was determined to see this through.

“Grab on.”

I arched an inquisitive eyebrow. “Are you going to carry me in?”

“Yeah. I don’t want you to trip in those shoes,” he said, nodding briefly toward my feet. “The ground’s uneven.”

He picked me up in his strong arms, and in the spirit of being helpful, I looped mine around his neck, trying to make it easier on him. In no way was I trying to enjoy more of his personal scent by resting my head near his neck and taking a deep breath. Absolutely not. Okay. Maybe that was the case a little

bit.

“You distract me, *lin ’de*,” he murmured. He gave me a gentle squeeze, reminding me that he was listening.

“It’s only fair,” I grumbled.

Recognizing that mental privacy was oftentimes a good thing, I built up my elaborate mental brick wall. That way I could ogle him to my heart’s content without feeling like I had to censor my thoughts. It was hard getting used to this mind-reading stuff. Heat crept up my neck as I did a quick inventory of my most recent thoughts, wondering if I’d revealed anything I shouldn’t have.

Then I had to pay attention to what he was doing, because that same jumping

and balancing on rocks he'd done before, he was doing again, now holding me. I had nothing to worry about. We got to the cave opening without even a bobble. Very impressive. Trying not to bang me into the doorway of the cave, he turned sideways. Delicately, he maneuvered me until we were in a small cavern that was only dimly visible in the light coming through the opening of the cave.

“I’m going to set you down here.” He slowly lowered me, making sure I was secure before stepping away. The air was cooler, damp.

“How much does someone have to try to listen, and how much is just free flow if someone *isn't* using mental barriers?”

I asked.

“Depends on different variables. Most of the time, you’ll encounter white noise in someone’s mind, a mix of thoughts and feelings happening simultaneously. Picking through them is exhausting and time-consuming if you’re looking for specific information, but if a person is focused on one thought, it often jumps out clearly.”

“Why can I hear your thoughts? Why can I hear anyone’s thoughts?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe being near me is giving you enough exposure.”

With his hand outstretched, I realized he wanted the small black box he’d given me when we arrived and handed it

over. While he fooled around at another keypad of sorts deeper in the cave, I thought about what he was saying.

So I wasn't going nuts. It seemed as though I really could hear thoughts. I'd been edging my way toward believing but hadn't wanted to fully commit to the idea. Hearing Ryder confirm the ability as something commonplace was giving me confidence. This was definitely going to require some exploration. That could be fun.

"Ryder Langston." Ryder said his name in the darkness just ahead of me, along with a series of numbers. He seemed to be talking into another keypad in the wall, and that prompted the faux-rock panel we had just entered through

to move back into place, cutting off the outside light completely. I'd never experienced such dark darkness before—and yes, hearing myself say this even in my own mind sounded moronic, but there you have it. There was absolutely no source of light anywhere. I couldn't see my hand in front of me.

“Uh...Ryder? What are we doing?” I asked.

“We have high levels of security here.” His voice came out of the darkness, and I almost jumped when I felt his hand touch my waist.

Vibrant blue light appeared in the rock a foot away. It formed a two-foot-thick archway between us and the next

room in the cavern. It was powerful. It was beautiful. It was otherworldly and mesmerizing. I was enchanted. It lit up the interior of the cavern.

Ryder ran his hands over my shoulders, his eyes focused intently on my face. There was a thrum of energy coming from him that I could almost touch. It reminded me of the feeling of static, only multiplied.

“Are you ready to blow your mind?”

“Sure?” I answered with a question, because now I was getting nervous again. We were in the dark, in a cave, in the middle of nowhere, and I had just been attacked. Instead of immediately calling the police, I had agreed to go with Ryder.

I shook my head. This was either going to be a really good or really bad idea. My gut instinct was telling me to go with it, and it hadn't steered me wrong yet. This was not logical, but I felt as though I was a part of whatever was happening in some weird, fateful, fatalistic way.

“Trust me,” he repeated quietly, his strong, deep voice caressing me intimately in the vibrant blue light, his eyes making dark promises. I forgot to breathe for a moment and felt my heart pounding fiercely.

Catching my breath, I answered, “I do.”

“I’ve never brought anyone with me

before,” he explained with a fierce, searching look.

A flare of satisfaction pulsed as I mentally committed myself to whatever was about to happen.

“It’s going to feel strange.”

“Strange?”

“Hold on to me. Tightly,” he warned roughly. “Don’t let go, no matter what, until I tell you to.”

“You’re making me nervous.” I quirked a lip up, but found myself losing the expression immediately.

“You’re going to be fine. I promise.”

He picked me up, enveloping me with his size and warmth, and I grabbed hold around his neck once again, our faces only inches apart. He stared down at me

in the semidarkness. His piercing eyes softened as they studied my features in the strange light. I had the feeling he didn't show this side to many other people.

As though unable to help himself, he placed a warm, soft kiss on my lips that lingered and made my blood thicken. Then he took one step, which put us in the archway. His head was thrown back, exposing his muscular neck, his eyes closed and deeply focused. He tightened his grip almost painfully on me and stepped through the opening.

A powerful tingling sensation attacked me. A violent lightheadedness enveloped me. I was squeezed, feeling

my blood pounding almost painfully hard. Compressed, the air was forcefully pulled from my lungs, and I had a sudden sense of free fall. My stomach dropped, and I couldn't get any air to even scream. All I could do was hold on tight. Not let go.

Then it was over.

Complete darkness crept over us. The brilliant blue light faded incrementally, until once again not a hint of that brilliant illumination entered the space. All I could perceive was the feel of Ryder's skin, though it was now clammy and cold. As was mine.

"What was that?" I croaked.

"It's okay," he murmured on a deep breath. "Hold on. I'll get a light." He

stepped away, his heavy boots slowly shuffling in the darkness. A few seconds later, a soft luminescence gently touched our immediate space. I saw him standing in front of a set of secured cabinets.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I think so. What just happened?”

“It was a form of travel. We call it a mylunate transfer. This is my transfer room.”

“Travel? What do you mean? I felt like I was in a blender.”

“Been in a blender, have you?” One side of his mouth quirked into a sexy half grin, which zinged me unexpectedly, sparking a feeling of tenderness which I knew was dangerous for me in a whole

other way. I knew he was trying to put me at ease, but I immediately recoiled from it. “Look who’s being snarky,” I replied lightly.

It appeared that I was in a stone room. The walls, the floor, the ceiling—all made of some kind of smooth rock which was a gorgeous, vibrant blue. The room was small, maybe half the size of my bedroom, but there were no windows, which made it feel even smaller, like a large walk-in closet.

Cabinets made of some kind of dark wood took up wall space directly behind Ryder, but they also had thick metal bars over them, protecting whatever was inside. Was there something dangerous or something secret in there?

“Holy smokes, Batman! Is this your super-secret weapons lab that no one else knows about?” I said this jokingly as I walked around the room, checking things out. I threw a smile over my shoulder, but Ryder watched pensively from a few feet away. “Taylor, you should lay off the TV for a while.”

“The TV was my babysitter,” I replied absently.

I noticed the source of the soft light appeared to be some kind of large, glowing rock in the middle of a glass wall sconce, which was absolutely strange, and I lost my train of thought. “How does that work?”

“Trinium is a naturally occurring ore.

When you shave pieces off it, the energy from separation produces the light as a by-product.”

“Wow. Are you kidding me? Light that doesn’t have to use electricity? The Edison Company will flip out over this. Can this be channeled into appliances?”

We were in his lab. That had to be it. He had a secret lab in the middle of nowhere because he was developing this really cool “green” technology that all the big corporate energy producers would do their best to sabotage, given the chance.

“Yeah. It’s how we power most everything here. Let me show you the rest.” He went to a section of wall that had another of those slick black-box

keypads. “It’s not summer here right now. We need clothes and heat. I haven’t been here for a while.”

That just didn’t make sense. “How can it not be summer here?” He had to be speaking metaphorically.

“Be patient.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that, but what is this place?”

“My home.”

“But I thought you lived—”

“Be patient,” he repeated briskly. “I’ll answer all of your questions.”

It truly must be appreciated that I held my tongue, which was really hard for me.

We’d just walked through some weird

psychedelic door in the canyons by Malibu, and now we were in his cave house with glowing rocks? That begged for explanation, didn't it?

Then he pushed open a hidden panel that led out of the room. A bit paranoid were we?

It was then I realized I was *shivering*. I followed him through the hidden panel in the blue stone wall, which I would have been more intrigued by if I hadn't been losing my body heat so quickly. The air *was* really cold, like snow-on-the-ground cold where crisp air filled your lungs and you stopped being able to feel the tip of your nose. I did need more clothing. Was this just a factor of being underground? I knew that underground

caves could stay pretty chilly year-round. Were we in the canyon wall?

As we stepped into another darkened room, I decided that electricity had its place. There was something to be said for being able to flip a switch on the wall and have everything brighten up. Ryder pushed the wall panel back into place behind me and continued ahead. Within a few moments, soft lighting flared from yet another trinium rock, bringing the room to life where I stood. Holy cow, those were a lot of books! Two perpendicular walls were full of them, and they were stuffed in bookshelves and stacked in piles on the floor beside the shelving as well as on

side tables around the seating area.

“Like to read much?” I arched an eyebrow at him.

“When I have time,” he stated.

“Quarantine doesn’t allow for much else.”

Quarantine?

Ryder had created light with those strange rocks in a vase across the room. I noted the artistry of both vases, which flanked the seating area. They were made of softly tinted swirls of yellow and orange, the light from the trinium filtering through the colored glass making the room warm and welcoming.

“Those vases are beautiful.”

“My sister made them.”

I briefly wondered if this was the

same sister he'd mentioned earlier who'd been somehow hurt.

The walls were of the same smooth stone as the room I'd just left, beautifully deep blue, buffed to a smooth polish. The floor under my feet and the ceiling all around was of the same stone, and I realized the room was literally cavelike, but luxurious at the same time. It was amazing.

“Who knew that Malibu had such beautiful underground stonework?” I said admiringly. “Better hope this doesn't go public or you'll have every pseudocelebrity suddenly wanting a cave home in the Malibu canyons. This is really lovely.”

“Things aren’t always what they seem, Taylor. We aren’t underground.”

“What does that mean?” When I gave him a questioning look, clearly a what-are-you-talking-about-would-you-care-to-expand look, Ryder narrowed his eyes, but he kept his lips pressed in a thin line. There was something he wanted to say, but he wasn’t saying it yet. Why?

With a mental shrug, I figured he’d get to it when he was ready.

The stone floor had two small, naturally formed steps that rose four inches or so each. These led to the slightly upraised living area where, in masculine tones, there were comfortable

furnishings: a couch, armchairs, a coffee table and what looked like a supersoft, thick, furry rug.

Then I caught sight of the real showstopper.

The wall opposite the sofa was made entirely of glass, allowing me to look out and see the somewhat strange ambient light that was illuminating the outdoor surroundings. How could there be a glass window in an underground cave? My sense of direction told me I was supposed to be underground, but here was a window looking out aboveground.

The sky was dark, but not fully, which was my first clue that something really strange and surreal was happening. Why in the world was it dark already? It

wasn't supposed to get dark for hours yet. It couldn't be more than four in the afternoon at most. I'd had lunch just a couple of hours ago.

“Wow. Great window,” I murmured, rubbing my arms more rigorously to warm them.

I walked up the two stone stairs cautiously and ambled toward the window, needing to see, at the same time that the cold fingers of panic tripped up my spine. I had a fleeting moment in which I marveled at the way my shoes seemed to sink into the soft, carpetlike flooring, absently thinking that I'd never seen or walked on anything like it in my life, but just as quickly my attention was

drawn back to the window.

Though it was clearly nighttime, there was still a lot of some kind of light giving shape to foliage below. It was enough that I clearly saw I wasn't just not below ground; I was a few hundred feet up. I also noted that a Jurassic-age-like rainforest was right outside the window.

A few of the treetops actually reached the height of the window I was looking out of, and beyond that, a valley stretched far and wide. There were no city lights in the distance as I looked out. There was no ocean.

What...was going on?

There was nothing like this in Malibu. There was nothing like this in Southern

California. How... What... Where... I didn't even know what question to formulate. My brain was in such a sensory jumble, I couldn't put a full thought together. The puzzle pieces were all oddly shaped and didn't fit each other.

“Ryder?” His name whispered across my lips in confusion.

I looked up at the sky and gasped. There were two moons. Two. One of the moons was off to my right, low in the sky and looking very big—way larger than normal—whole and bright, while the other was up high to the left, looking smaller and crescent shaped.

“Two moons,” I whispered. My alarm

blared. My blood pressure blew. My heart suddenly pounded triple time. No wonder there was so much light. Enough that I could see that I was nowhere I'd ever been before. I was having trouble pulling in air. "Ryder, there are two moons." My voice was hoarse. I couldn't take my eyes off the sky.

"Breathe, Taylor. Take it easy." He was suddenly in front of me, his hands on my shoulders, trying to block my sight, but I was transfixed.

"What do you mean, take it easy? Two moons! T-two m-moons! There are two moons in the g-goddamn s-sky. Earth is a one-moon kind of planet. Where did the other moon come from?" My voice went shrill, but I couldn't help it. Something

was very wrong here. I felt like I was dreaming.

“You aren’t on Earth anymore.”

“What are you talking about? Where would I be if not on Earth? Of course I’m on Earth! This isn’t a good day to screw with me, Ryder. Oh, my God. Take me home. I want to go home! Where’s your motorcycle?”

“I left it in the cave. Back on Earth. We’re more than a hundred million light-years away.”

“Oh, my...millions...light-years...”
Panic swamped me. I could feel myself hyperventilating. My vision tunneled. It shrank. Blackness closed in until there was only a point of light that I couldn’t

stay focused on.

Not on Earth. Far away. Unable to fathom the distance. How. Not possible. Never see home again. Going to die.

“Breathe, Taylor!” Ryder’s voice sounded far away, desperate, disembodied in the growing blackness...

Chapter Eight

The black convertible Karmann Ghia was in pristine condition as I drove down the long coastal road along the bluffs. I could see the white roller coaster in the distance, where Santa Monica was supposed to be, and though I thought it strange that there was no actual city up ahead, it didn't seem to matter. Somehow, that white coaster was enough, and it was where I was headed. The fair was coming to town, and my mother was supposed to take me there. It didn't seem strange that the fair was not in Pomona, California, as it usually was.

Taylor, I need you to listen to me for a moment. The deep, autocratic voice grabbed my attention immediately, because I knew exactly whom it belonged to. It was a voice that I realized I was starting to listen for and anticipate.

Ryder had joined me in the passenger seat, looking dark, sexy and dangerous, his large, muscular form taking up half the space in the small car. A lock of his dark hair fell over his forehead, and my fingers were itching to run through it. What was it about him that made me just want to eat him up?

Rawwwr, was all I could think, looking at him.

I gave him a brilliant smile, hoping I looked a little like a sprightly wood-nymph version of Audrey Hepburn, who was always so elegant and seemingly carefree, yet somehow earthy and grounded at the same time. I was also hoping to alleviate the concerned look on his face with my good humor, which was a great way to make sure that the people around you always felt good about you and wanted to keep you. Good survival strategy.

Ryder! Feel like going to the fair? Though I suppose you don't really have a choice at this point, because that's where I'm driving. Isn't this car magnificent? It looks good, it feels

good and it smells good. Definitely suits me.

Taylor, can you focus here? It's important.

You sound so serious. Let me see if I can put my serious face on for you. I pursed my lips into a pout, but I could only hold it for a few seconds before I started giggling. My mom's going to give me her bracelet today. I've always loved it. She started collecting the pieces for it when she was little. The last charm she added was two sort of antiquated-looking silver hearts that were intertwined with a small pearl in the middle of them, and it was given to her by her first love. My father. Though I don't know who he was. Sad, isn't it?

She never told me. I think she was too heartbroken. The hearts represent the two of them, and the pearl is me when I was born. I'd always loved that story.

This is a dream, Taylor. This isn't real. You passed out. You fainted at my place.

Fainted? I frowned. *I have never fainted in my life. I've never had the luxury of being delicate.*

I know, lin'de. His rough voice gentled into a caress that rumbled through my mind soothingly. It was that soft, caring quality that made me see through the film of dream.

Are you dreamwalking right now? I tried my newly learned vocabulary

word.

I had to. But actually, I think it's better if you hear some of it in the dream state, so your brain won't overload again.

Did I really faint?

Out cold. He smiled and my heart skittered with pleasure. It felt so intimate, meant just for me.

You should smile more.

Taylor... His smile faded, his eyes turning somber.

Okay, okay. Let me catch up here. Did I hear you right that we are on a different planet? Somehow, hearing myself say it in my dream was less of a deal.

Does it surprise you to think there

are other planets that are life sustaining?

I thought about that for a moment. I don't think it surprises me. I mean, if it can happen on Earth, why not somewhere else? I just have never really thought about it, because finding those planets would seem to be a physical impossibility.

My planet is named Te're.

Te're, I whispered, trying out the name. There was a pleasing quality to the sound as it crossed my lips.

I'll show you.

The car was suddenly in space, and I knew Ryder was now controlling the visuals in my dream. Starlight zoomed

by at an incredible speed, and I was starting to feel like I was on a space-themed roller coaster, making the trip through space feel fun and exhilarating. And then there it was. It was a planet that looked much like Earth, with green-and-blue colors reflecting back at us from a distance.

It's too far to travel to by ship. It has two moons, but in many other ways it's comparable to Earth. We have an atmosphere with breathable oxygen and many of the same kinds of geological features that you're used to, like forests, mountains, rivers and oceans—and a few that you aren't, but that's for another day.

In the next moment we were on the

bank of the lake where I had watched Ryder and Nick playing on the rope swing.

Hey! This is where your friend broke his leg. He smacked into that tree.

That's right. This was one of my favorite places as I was growing up. I spent hours here as a boy and then a young man. Ryder looked troubled for a moment as he scanned the peaceful setting. I took solace here on many occasions. I would sneak out of my parents' home and walk up here, sometimes meeting up with Nick. There were dark times.

Why would you have to sneak? Weren't you allowed to enjoy the

outdoors?

There were reasons, he said firmly, and that was all he was going to say. An awkward silence began to build. I tried to fill the space.

I remember the two moons from that dream. I thought they were beautiful.

Very few nights on Te're are ever completely dark. For us, it's strange to have a fully darkened night. The closer moon is Padu, and the smaller one, which isn't actually smaller, just farther away, we refer to as his sister, Mena.

It sounded beautifully poetic.

With a serious face, Ryder turned to me. I think it's time to wake up. We have some talking to do.

Okay. I think I'm ready.

A hand lightly shook me awake. I was lying on a strange couch in the strange, cavelike room with the strange glowing rocks, and Ryder was kneeling on the floor by my head. Concern deepened the creases around his light green eyes, and his blue-black hair was mussed.

I scrambled to a seated position, looking around swiftly.

“Take it easy,” Ryder said calmly, rubbing my arms.

My head swam for a moment, but I took stock of the situation. I mentally logged things that my brain had written off, like the trinium light and the supersmooth, shiny blue cave walls.

Then I hesitantly glanced out at the two moons again. They were truly beautiful. And still... Another planet? Really? Earth was out there in the black distant space? And that crazy, gut-squeezing, vacuumlike experience had somehow brought me here?

Was I safe? Would I ever get back home?

I could feel that I was still riding the edge of a potential full-blown panic attack, my breathing still shallow and quick. Cornered-animal syndrome. My body was shivery from a combination of shock and cold. I felt so helpless. Powerless. I hated that.

I'd been forced to give up my control. Had I agreed to come with him? Yes, but

not with full knowledge of what I was getting myself into. That, more than anything, freaked me out. How was I supposed to trust him when he wasn't giving me full information?

“Why didn't you warn me?” I glared at Ryder. I jerked my arms from him sharply and scooted away from him, back into the corner of the sofa, and almost saw the growl that wanted to erupt from his chest. It rose and fell sharply, and he only just checked himself from hauling me back to his arms.

“Why are you pushing me away?” His voice rose with agitated confusion, which only made me madder.

“You can't make decisions that affect

me without consulting me. Shit!”

“What are you talking about?”

“You could have prepared me for this! Holy Christ, Ryder.”

“Prepared you for this?” His look told me he thought I was nuts and that he was getting pissed off. “How? How was I supposed to do that exactly?”

“I don’t like being thrown into the deep end without warning!”

“You’re being ridiculous. There’s no way I could have talked with you about this.” Swiftly, he stood and scowled down at me.

“I am not being ridiculous! You could have thought of something.”

“Play that little scene in your head. The one where I tell you I’m from

another planet. How would that have gone over? You would have said ‘nanu-nanu’ or some shit like that. If you can think of a better way I could have done this, I invite you to fucking share it, because I was at a loss.”

He was likely right. “I don’t know. But at least I would have been ready for all this.”

“No you wouldn’t have been. You’d have thought I was a fucking nut job.” He swung away in complete exasperation, stalking half the length of the room before pausing to look up at the ceiling as if asking for divine guidance. The muscular outline of his broad shoulders and perfect ass faced me, and strangely,

getting back in touch with my libido calmed me down.

He turned and faced me with a look of angry bewilderment that was so...hot.

“You are so fucking difficult!”

An inappropriate giggle wanted to escape my lips, but I held it back. Likely it was just residual hysteria. Instead I said, “Cut me some slack. I just discovered there’s another planet with life.”

“There are infinite numbers of other planets that are life sustaining.”

“That’s not common knowledge where I come from. You may as well have just told me I can fly.”

His sarcasm started to kick in. “Let me assure you, you can’t.”

I felt myself calming and just continued glaring for a moment before I said, “So how did this happen? How the hell do I find myself...here? And how do I get back home?”

I couldn't allow myself to think about the distance back to Hollywood, California, or I'd start feeling the choking sense of panic again, and I desperately needed to feel a sense of control.

His pale eyes glared right back at me for a few silent moments. He must have seen a hint of my fear, because he took a deep breath and sat at the other end of the short couch, facing me. Our shoes were almost touching. “Look, I can see

you're upset. I don't blame you. Maybe understanding it will help."

"Yes. Please," I fairly begged, needing something to hold on to.

"There's a substance called mylunate. It's an ore that can be found naturally on Te're and Earth."

"That's the stuff you were asking me about in your dream. I remember that," I said with a tone of understatement. Ryder could look *e-vil* when he wanted to.

"The best way to explain this is that mylunate can create a gateway between two places. Essentially, it binds to the mind with exposure. The traveler mentally images a place in detail, something the mylunate helps the

traveler do with crystalline precision, and if the environmental conditions are right, the gateway opens. With continuous exposure, it has certain side effects, like mind access and dreamwalking.”

“Then how was I able to go into your dream?”

“I don’t know.” He looked at a loss. “This is a first for me. I can’t explain it definitively. Maybe through exposure to me?” From underneath the collar of his black T-shirt, he pulled out an inconspicuous glass vial. It hung from a brown leather cord and was the size of a quarter, though I couldn’t actually tell what was in it. Etched delicately into the

glass was a large, predatory bird in flight, sharp talons dangerously splayed. It was such intricate work that it momentarily distracted me.

“Does everyone on this...planet...have some of that?”

“No. It’s highly restricted.” He resheathed the vial under his shirt and leaned back, casually resting his boot on his jean-clad knee. “You need special clearance. It can be dangerous.”

“Why?”

“If someone isn’t careful with their imaging, they could end up in a foreign place, perhaps one without oxygen or one with an inhospitable climate. We’re pretty sure that an early pair of scientists died this way.” He paused. “No one

knew they were looking into other life-sustaining planets.”

“Why aren’t you guys sure of any of this?”

“All we have left are journal notes. No...bodies. My grandfather and his assistant were the scientists.”

How awful.

“Since then, we’ve implemented safety regulations when explorers set out, which isn’t frequently. Not much experimentation is done with it anymore. The process of mining mylunate was outlawed because of the danger involved, and because of the health risks to the workers, so there’s a limited supply.”

“What made it dangerous?”

“Extremely hazardous chemicals are used to extract the ore, and they caused many to die young. What’s already been pulled from the ground is protected and used strictly for high-court purposes.”

He ran a hand over the back of his neck, as though a stress headache was coming on. I saw he was looking tired, and it was no kidding, if he’d been trying to protect me the last several days. He couldn’t have had a lot of sleep.

Reluctantly, I felt my anger start to drain away.

“You guys have a lot of this stuff?”

“We’re rich with it here in the north. There’s enough of it buried under the

surface that most citizens can transfer right from their homes. For those who aren't near enough to a natural deposit, the high court had transfer units built in secure locations to make travel accessible for all."

"You guys don't need roads at all."

"We don't. However, the southern regions of the planet have a different geologic makeup. If they have any deposits at all, they're minute and not easily accessible. It's for the mylunate that the people of the south, the Brausa —" he curled his lip in disdain, "—have waged war with us. They're a crude, animalistic, barbaric people who don't care if they kill women and children in their quest for power."

“I guess you don’t want to share your resources with them, then.”

“Have no doubt they would seek to enslave any nation they encountered. They have very little respect for human life, including the lives of their own kind.”

“Sounds bad,” I murmured, though in truth, I was having trouble taking it all in.

With a sudden frown Ryder said, “Christ, Taylor, you’re shaking. We need to get you warm.” I hadn’t realized my teeth were still chattering and that I couldn’t feel my toes.

“You have a heating system?”

“The heating rods will take a few

minutes to warm up.”

“Heating rods?” I arched an eyebrow.
“Sounds like it’ll hurt.”

“They line the floor, Taylor. They heat the whole room. I’m not going to stick you with them.” His lips quirked as he stood. I really liked to see him smile.

I sniffed, getting that cold-air, runny-nose thing, and said, “I guess I am cold.”

“This should help.” There was a blanket that I hadn’t noticed lying across the top of the sofa. He pulled it over me.

As it turned out, warming me up took not only a warm blanket but a fireball of a drink, one that had a murky look to it, that Ryder said was soldier’s brew out in the field. It singed my throat as it went down, making my eyes water, but my

shivering stopped completely. I'm sure the heating system he went to turn on kicked in as well, but his brew, whatever the hell was in it, was powerful.

“Holy smokes,” I hissed, and I coughed.

“It’s potent. Take it easy,” Ryder said.

Taking care of someone else seemed to be a new experience for him, as he watched me closely, unsure of what to do for me. He was trying to be thoughtful, but the edges of his bedside manner needed smoothing out. He stood over me like a drill sergeant, first insisting on having me lean back on the arm of the sofa with my feet up, then

wrapping me cocoon style—shoes and all—into the thick, warm blanket and finally forcing the jet fuel on me.

However, where the first sip of witches' brew had had me coughing and sputtering, my eyes watering as I tried to breathe through the alcoholic fumes that choked my throat, the second and third got me to feeling like everything was A-OK. By the time I got to the bottom of the cup, heat flushed my cheeks, and the world was looking pretty damned rosy.

The world was looking so rosy that Ryder had gone back to being my hero again, saving me from the dark forces of evil, instead of the guy who'd just thrown me, with no warning, across the universe.

“Better?” he asked. He took the empty cup from me and casually perched it on a side table before sitting at the far end of the sofa again.

“Just like the frosted cornflakes tiger.” I slurred my words with a big silly grin, which had him looking at me with faint confusion, since he likely hadn’t watched enough TV to know who Tony was, but I was feeling too good to explain. I burrowed into the warm blanket and, strangely, felt as though it hummed with energy. What was it with all this energy? Why hadn’t I ever felt it before? In dreams now I could feel it swirling around me, knowing that it was my own, recognizing it like it was a

personalized fingerprint or something like that. I could feel Ryder's energy too. It was different from mine.

I noticed the blanket wrapped around me was absolutely magnificent. It was silky soft, mostly forest green, though there were sunbursts of burnt oranges, reds and browns sparsely woven in, creating a beautiful image. It had intricate stitches in a pattern of an animal. After looking at it more carefully, I realized it was that same magnificent bird of prey from the glass vial hanging on his neck. It must have taken hundreds of hours to plan and make.

“Ryder, this is amazing,” I breathed, running my fingers over the pattern more

gently.

“My grandmother made it.”

“It’s so soft. I’ve never felt anything like it. It’s like butter. What is it made from?”

“It’s a special, rare sun plant that we call *sele’tuen*. My grandmother has spent her life nurturing fields of this plant species. Very few others have been so successful in growing them. It requires special care. Patience.”

“She spins her own yarn?”

“Spins it, dyes it, plans the designs and weaves it.”

“What a wonderful gift.”

“Everyone in our family has their own. My grandmother waits for a sign

from our..." He frowned, as though looking for a word and not finding it in English. "In our world, I would call him *Pere'seiunat*. Like a spirit animal."

"Is this your spirit animal?" I noted the large talons outstretched in attack mode and traced the outline gently. "I saw this on your necklace."

"He belongs to the people of my province. My grandmother has the ability to commune with the spirit who protects our people."

"With the spirits?"

"*Pere'seiunat* came to her in a dream and revealed his warrior essence to her. That's when she knew what image to place on my spirit mantle."

"Well, it's wonderful," I slurred,

appreciating the heat beginning to radiate through my body. The alcohol was kicking in.

“I figured you’d be able to handle this situation better if you were relaxed.”

“Okeydokey.” I sighed, feeling carefree. I couldn’t seem to stop smiling. “Mission accomplished.”

His lips curled, and his eyes warmed as brief humor crossed his face. “I can see that.”

A surge of tenderness twisted my insides again, but this time I didn’t cringe from it. What I wanted to do was thank him for taking care of me, since he always seemed to be rescuing me from something or other, and then I wanted to

assure him that I didn't usually lead such an exciting life, and that I wasn't typically this much of a pain in the ass.

What I actually said though was "You're really super nice." A hiccup snuck up on me. Belatedly, I covered my mouth, with wide eyes and a giggle.

"Taylor..." It was like he couldn't stop himself. He gave me a crooked grin, and it was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

But I didn't know what to do with that. What would Cynthia do?

"I think I gave you too much *durma*."

"No, really." I hiccuped again and frowned at myself for interrupting before continuing. "This is not the alcohol talking (hiccup). Well, maybe it is a

little, but really. You act like such a tough guy all the time, with your tough-guy look (hiccup) and your tough-guy muscles and your tough-guy motorcycle, but I've (hiccup) got your number."

His eyes had become riveted on me. They turned slumberous. "You do?" He set both boots flat and leaned forward. "What's my number?"

For a moment I was mesmerized by his beautiful eyes staring into mine and forgot what I'd been talking about. Hiccup. "Number?"

He reached for my hips and pulled me halfway across the couch toward him, blanket and all, until our faces were inches apart. My heart pounded with

excitement at his ability to physically manipulate me. “You said that you had my number.”

“I do?” Did I have his phone number? It was hard to think when I couldn’t tear myself away from his green eyes. “I didn’t mean his phone number,” I mumbled to myself, still caught in his gaze. Hiccup. That’s right. I was starting to figure him out. “I do have your number. You are actually a...do-gooder...a...a Good Samaritan under all that tough-guy stuff. You needed to save someone, and for some reason, I seem to need saving a frickin’ lot these days.” Hiccup.

“You don’t make it easy,” he said gruffly, turning serious, and I knew he

was remembering what had happened to me earlier. He gently picked up a lock of curling golden-brown hair where it had escaped my faux updo.

“I don’t?” I got goose bumps from his light, fleeting, inadvertent touches against my skin.

“You’re a frustratingly stubborn woman.” The growl came back to his voice, and I *liked* it. I could almost feel myself purring.

“I am?”

“Good thing I know one or two of your kind.” His eyes were following the movement of his fingers.

“You do?”

“Yeah, I do.” He leaned closer. In that

growly, sexy voice he said, “Open your mind to me, *lin'de*.”

“Why?”

“I need to see you.”

“Why?”

“You make me crazy,” he ground out in a rough whisper.

“Are you going to kiss me?” I asked breathlessly.

“Count on it.”

Wicked heat, swirling desire and naughty thoughts came tumbling through my mental barriers, winding around us deliciously as Ryder's lips hovered just a hairsbreadth from mine. I could feel his warmth. I could smell his masculine scent, a scent that was making me wanton.

The anticipation built a fever.

His lips lightly brushed mine once...twice...scorching me with each touch, driving heat to private places, but I needed so much more. *Ryder, please.*

What do you want? The husky sound of his voice wove through my mind. He'd dropped his walls to whisper intimately into my mind.

I want your lips.

His lips took mine fiercely; searing pleasure sizzled through my veins. It was hot. It was wild. With a muffled cry, I grabbed handfuls of his thick black hair, holding him to me where I wanted him most. I nibbled his delicious bottom lip as I'd been dying to do, and he groaned

roughly, crushing my breasts to his chest more forcefully as he lowered us both to the sofa. The feel of his weight on me was delectable, his hand squeezing my hip and waist. It was working its way to my breast, and I silently encouraged him. My nipples were hard and aching.

Yes! Feels so good...

Can't get enough... His rough voice threaded through and around me, lingering.

He ran his tongue over the seam of my lips, parting them then plunging, tasting dark and delicious. His tongue tangled with mine, ramping up the need that was quickly getting away from us.

He pulled back abruptly, his breathing harsh, as he looked at me hungrily, the

rough-hewn lines and planes of his face beautifully masculine and imperfect.

“Ryder—” I tried to pull him back down.

“Not like this, *lin ’de*,” he said darkly, resting his weight on his elbows on either side of my head.

“Why stop?”

“You’re drunk.”

“I am not.” My inner sex kitten was glaring at him through my eyes, feeling thwarted. Hiccup. Okay. Maybe I was a little toasted.

“This will happen.” He spoke the vow as he looked into my eyes heavily. “Now be a good girl and turn on your side. I don’t want to let you go just yet.”

I knew he was trying to do the right thing, but honestly, did he really have to be such a Boy Scout?

“Okay, fine. Tell me about this place,” I said with a sigh of exasperation. I turned to face away from him as he slid behind my back to spoon me (so glad it was a deep sofa) with his arm curled over my rib cage. I could feel his hot, hard arousal tucked against my bottom, and I wiggled against it for good measure. He hissed in my ear, staying my hips with one of his heavy hands.

I grinned secretly.

“Be good.” He nipped my earlobe and kissed it.

“You’re not playing fair.”

He ignored that.

“I’m one of the people of the north. We called our federation Sunan, which means seven. It’s made up of seven provinces, and the one we’re in is Milak, named for the ancestor who first led his group of followers to this land.”

“What’s your daily language?”

“Most of us learn English now. We’ve been partners of trade with nations on Earth for several hundred years, but for the last hundred or so, we’ve relied heavily on the U.S. There were numbers of wars over the course of time, which made trade a challenge in other parts of your world. Your nation has been consistently unchanged for the greater

length of time in more recent history.”

“That’s crazy. Why doesn’t anyone know about you?”

“We don’t exactly have green skin or extra limbs.” He gave me a squeeze.

“We’re very careful. A number of us have worked successfully on Earth for years. We have businesses established, connections, trade routes. A few of the Sunan who work in trade prefer to live solely on Earth, and there are a few from Earth who have come to live with us. Scientists, mostly. Scholars. Most people on your planet can’t know about us. They wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

“So all of those people who claim to have been kidnapped by aliens for sexual experimentation were telling the

truth?” Of course, there was a smile in my voice when I said this.

His tone was dry when he stated, “Hardly.”

“Can I volunteer?”

“Taylor,” he groaned. “You’re killing me.”

“Okay, okay. Something safe. So what is this place where you live? It looks like a cave.”

“I live in the Catacombs, over an old volcanic site.” The sound of his voice was hypnotic, and I could feel my lids growing heavy. “There is still geothermal activity, and it gives us access to natural hot springs, but the volcano is dormant. A number of us live

here. The Catacombs have been lived in continuously for generations. We've found evidence of our earliest ancestors in some of the rooms that are now underwater."

"Kind of like a natural apartment complex with plumbing benefits. Are there any traditional neighborhoods like we have on Earth around here? You know, like *Leave It to Beaver* style?"

"No," he said firmly. "Makes us too vulnerable. Over the last twenty or so years, we've blended our homes and businesses into the natural structures that make up our environment. It helps to keep us out of sight and protected. We build around the trees within our forests, within our caves carved out from

erosion over time, within the hills and mountains that surround us. To the north, the homes have been built underwater. To have a home out in the open shows your enemies right where you are. It's foolish. We learned our lessons in the past."

"When was the last time you guys were attacked?"

"It's been twenty-five years since we won our last battle, but there have been skirmishes over time, and more recently, acts of violence we are still investigating that cost hundreds of lives."

My eyes closed. "You guys sound like you've made yourselves prisoners."

Don't you all miss the sun? Freedom?"

"Now you sound like my sister." He sounded disapproving.

"A sister. I always wished I had a sister. How many siblings do you have?"

He paused a moment, and I caught sight of two different girls in his mind, one with dark hair and one with red.

"Just one. Her name is Shandria."

He'd forgotten to up his mental shield, so I knew he wasn't giving me the full story. It must have meant that something horrible had happened to one of them.

"So how do I sound like her?"

"She chooses to live outside the boundaries of the province as an outlier. For her own protection, she was sent to live there with my grandmother when

she was a child, but as an adult, she refuses to return.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“She has a house aboveground where anyone can know where she is and know what she’s doing. Anyone can get to her.” He scowled his frustration.

“We’ve all tried to reason with her, but she refuses to move. She listens to my grandmother, who is also an outlier.”

“The grandmother who made this blanket?”

“The very same.”

“Why is that so bad? Shouldn’t they be able to choose how they want to live? Women have been fighting for their rights for hundreds of years on my

planet.” I giggled, hearing myself say that aloud. “My planet.”

Ryder ignored my humor. “We have no way of protecting either of them.”

“Can’t they protect themselves? Maybe use some of that mylunate to beam out or something?”

“They choose not to have any, though my grandmother was offered its use by the high council, our governing body. She insists on using the transfer unit that was built near her region, saying the walk is good for her. She argues that if she doesn’t have it around, then there won’t be a reason for anyone to attack. So no, there are no defenses that would be strong enough to hold off even one Brausiian warrior. It’s well-known that

the Brausa have vowed to exterminate every one of us.”

“She must be important, if your government is trying to protect her.”

“She’s highly important to our...spirituality.”

There was so much. It was hard to process it all. Hearing Ryder talk about spirituality was showing me yet another facet of his personality. I wondered what this big, tough guy believed in, really.

“So were you referring to your sister and grandmother when you said you were familiar with stubborn women?”

“Yes. They play with their lives.”

“But freedom’s important.”

“Only if you’re around to use it.”

“It must be nice to have a grandmother and sister.” It was the last thing I remembered saying before darkness settled in.

Chapter Nine

Powerful gusts of frigid wind were rushing over my body, but I wasn't cold. I was feeling absolute exhilaration. Riding on the back of an amazingly large bird, I felt part of him, as free and limitless as the bird itself, able to predict the movements he was going to make. The powerful wings pumped effortlessly, creating the *whump...whump* rhythm of our travel, propelling us over the vast countryside. Dipping and coasting, we punched through cottony clouds, and pure joy spilled unfettered from my soul in great

gasping peals of laughter at the magnificence of the experience.

What a gift to be alive!

I saw that the countryside was lush and green, vibrant with varying colors of wildflowers. There were beautiful forests amid the mountains, and beyond that, in the far distance, yellow hilly grasslands. They called to me! They looked soft and welcoming. They needed someone to lie down at the top and just start rolling sideways until a body was dizzy with silliness.

Before long, a large lake sprawled beneath us, reflecting our rapidly soaring undercarriage, and I knew when I looked up, the two moons would be hanging, pretty as a picture, in the blue sky. To

skinny-dip under the moonlight sounded sinfully sexy. What I wouldn't do to get Ryder on board with that plan.

Meeting him had changed my whole view on myself. Before, I would have considered myself a less sexual creature than many of the girls I'd known who gossiped about experiences in the ladies', but lately, I'd had a number of creative wishes and fantasies that involved his beautifully sculpted body. Definitely wanted to try me some of that.

Where are we going? I asked, running my hands affectionately over the downy, burnt-sienna feathers under my fingertips.

I wasn't even holding on. There was

no fear of falling. My whole body felt enveloped in a cloud of protection, as though I were a cherished being to my animal friend.

No words were spoken, but projected into my mind from my feathery companion was the understanding that someone was waiting for us and that we would be there soon. Within moments of this communication, I saw a little house in the distance. It was like an old farmhouse, with a wraparound porch and fields and fields of white, iridescent flowers, tall and swaying with the breeze, surrounding it.

The flowers! That's where they came from. So beautiful. There were rows and rows of them here. Magical.

Shimmering. An energy field that wrapped around me with pure contentment. What a rush.

How had they ended up in my dreams?

Standing outside, at the bottom of the front steps, was an older woman. She was turned away from us, shading her eyes against the sun and squinting up at the sky with a frown. She seemed to be looking for something up high. She angled herself more toward us and relaxed.

She waved and smiled, a gesture and expression I returned eagerly.

Is this who we're visiting?

My friend told me that it was and

wished me well. The next thing I knew, pretty seamlessly, I was in the middle of the field of flowers. The soft floral scent washed over me, almost like that of night-blooming jasmine. I aimed in the direction of the farmhouse. Skipping lightly, I bounced down the row of blooms, my arms outstretched like those of a tightrope walker, touching the soft petals as I went.

Hallooo! Over here, dear!

Finally at the edge of the field, I broke through the flower line into the front yard, where the older woman stood on a patch of wild grasses. A big, welcoming smile lovingly nurtured the creases around her eyes and mouth. I felt warmth humming through the air surrounding us

and in every practiced line of her face. Her dark gray eyes peered out at me under a snowy white bun.

I've been waiting for you. The woman came forward. Pere'seiunat *told me he was bringing you.*

He...did?

It's a long story, not made for a single telling. It's enough to know that it was time. You were expected. Let's walk. She had a soft voice, a melodic voice that belied what seemed to be her advanced age. With purpose in her steps, she followed a path around the side of her house under what looked like a very old grove of oaks. A beautiful garden greeted us.

My name is Dreya. There was an expectant look to her face as she stuck out her hand and silently willed me to speak my name. Power swirled through the air between us, so much so that I could almost feel it crackling, but in a nonthreatening way. She was a protector. I knew instinctively I could trust her.

I'm Taylor.

Thank Pere'. As though she'd had some doubt that was just now erased, Dreya seemed to become overwhelmed with emotion and enveloped me in a tight, spontaneous embrace, which I couldn't help but return. How could I not appreciate someone who was, for

whatever reason, this glad to see me?

How is it you were expecting me?

We pulled apart. She held on to my upper arms a moment, staring deeply into my eyes. A somber expression smoothed the joyful lines from her face. As though satisfied with what she was looking at, she nodded and ran my hand through the crook of her arm, holding it tightly.

Our origin story is quite a curiosity, Taylor. How we came to be on this planet would interest you. Would you like to hear it?

Sure. I wondered if she was trying to put me off from my question or if she hadn't really heard it. Either way, I was determined to reask it.

Come and sit. She led the way through a winding path in the garden to a pair of comfortable Adirondack-style chairs. *Our people came from Earth about five thousand years ago. They lived in a tribal society in what you would now call Austria and Italy. They hunted food and fought off enemies to protect their territory and resources.*

Dreya paused as we sat. *Pere' told us that the tribe was feeling desperate and grief stricken. Neighboring enemies were getting stronger. Sitting together in worship to the sky god, they wished for their home, their forest and mountain, to be bountiful and peaceful, praying for that time to come so they*

could heal their sprits. Unbeknownst to them, they were sitting over a large deposit of mylunate. It brought them here, to these mountains, which were calm and peaceful.

Mylunate? The stuff Ryder told me about?

Yes. There were eight major clans that arrived. They were visited by the Great Spirits, and each was guided to the different provinces of Sunan.

Sunan means seven, though. Doesn't it?

Yes. The eighth clan refused to join with others, believing it would make them weak, and decided to forge an independent path.

They were the Brausa?

Yes. There's more to the story, but it's a lot to take in for one sitting.

To say the least, I agreed. I still expect to wake up at home in bed and find that all of this was a dream.

Tell me about growing up on Earth.
She leaned toward me with a curious expression, seeming to be genuinely interested. *What was your life like?*

Some of the time I lived with my grandmother and some of the time with my aunt.

What happened to your mother? The woman paused, curiosity marking her face. I thought I caught a glimpse of some concern there, but that didn't make sense.

No one really knows. She had problems. I didn't want to make my mom look bad, so I chose to gloss over things.

Unresolved pain?

I frowned, thinking about it.

Maybe.

Dreya seemed to understand. A look of empathy passed over her face during the moment of silence. *And yet you've done well for yourself. It couldn't have been easy. It speaks to your strength that you have found a way here.*

Yeah, about that... How did you know I was coming?

I promise we'll talk more. Your questions will be answered in time. This was a meeting for us to learn of

each other. Let's not make this uncomfortable by revealing too much too soon.

Okay, but did you put those flowers in my dreams?

We all serve a purpose, Taylor...

The gentle words echoed through my mind, reminding me of another time. *It was you!*

Sleep well, dear. There's a lot for you to learn, and the one who is set to show you isn't known for his patience. Keep that in mind when you wake. Don't be too hard on him. There are reasons for the behavior he's about to show you.

She stood and again looked expectantly at me, willing me to stand.

With a hint of frustration, I did, but I kept up the questions. I didn't want this to end quite yet.

What do you mean, the one who is set to show me? Are you talking about Ryder? What's he going to do?

Welcome home, Taylor.

Welcome home? Why...

With a final smile, fragile-looking, elderly Dreya gave me the most amazingly Herculean shove, and a power beyond my control took over my body and yanked me away from her at a faster and faster rate. I fought the pull, struggled fiercely to try and stop the momentum that was taking me away.

Wait! No!

But the black void enveloped me and I felt myself return to the present. The dream was leaving me. I couldn't hang on to it no matter how much I told myself to remember. I wanted to shout my frustration, not wanting to lose the warmth and sense of comfort and security I'd been submerged in.

Beep. Beep. Beep. I heard some kind of alarm, followed by Ryder's low murmur. As I lay there, reality rushed at me like a freight train. I remembered everything from the previous day and night. Someone trying to kill me. Transferring to another planet. Really? Another planet? Could I just go back to sleep?

“Taylor.” A gentle caress over my arm was followed by a quick squeeze. Momentarily, I was distracted from my worries. “I’m getting a shower. I’m being called to the border.”

“You’re leaving?” I mumbled, blinking up at him blearily. He was looking down at me from behind the sofa. He’d taken his call in the other room and come back with his device still in hand.

“Pretty soon. I’m sorry about this. An emergency has come up. If you get up, I can make you some food, and we’ll have time to talk.”

“Okay.” But I really wanted to pull a pillow over my head. Wasn’t going to

happen.

He left me alone on the sofa with the blanket still tucked around me, squinting into the light that was pouring through the large window. Pulling the blanket off my body, I realized my damned high heels were still on my feet. Muscles, stiff and sore, protested their movement, and it took a moment for me to fully come out from under the blanket and set my aching feet on the floor. I winced as I stood and put weight on my cramped feet.

Taking pity on myself, I unbuckled the heavy platforms and stepped down from them, appreciating the extra-soft, cushy floor covering that my feet sank into. I even took a few minutes to rub the balls

of my feet, gritting my teeth with the pain of it. But before long, I had to face my reality.

The window called to me, and I went to look out at the valley of absurdly lush, overgrown trees, feeling like I was in an episode of *Land of the Lost*. Next I would expect a Sleestack to come after me.

A series of blaringly loud, hornlike *caw-caws* jump-started my heart just as several boat-sized birds in vibrant peacock colors smashed up through the tree canopy. They soared over the trees with crazy-enormous wingspans before disappearing one by one beneath the canopy once again. Awe inspiring. A

Nat Geo moment.

And I was back to breathing rapidly, wondering what else could be out there. At least on Earth, I knew where the dangers were. In Africa, I would be aware of lions. In South America, I would be aware of panthers. In the deserts and mountains around California, I would be aware of mountain lions, bears and snakes. What was I supposed to be aware of here? Maybe those great big birds were actually carnivores. Who knew? I didn't.

Most areas of the forest were so dense that it was impossible for my eyes to penetrate the canopy and see the forest floor. We were so high up! I looked left and right but didn't see any kind of road

or village. There was nothing that would even hint that we were near any form of civilization. Where were the people?

WTF! What am I supposed to do now?

The edge of a panic attack threatened, and I tried to just breathe my way through it. Ryder had my back here. He wasn't going to let anything hurt me. I'd be back home soon.

It didn't help that his arms looped around me from behind when I wasn't expecting it. I jumped a mile high and almost swallowed my tongue. Okay. I needed a vacation after all this excitement. When the drama was over, Taylor wanted a trip to the Bahamas or

something.

“Whoa.” He turned me around. “Still a little jumpy?”

I gave him a nonhumorous look. “I’m trying to keep it together,”

“Breathe.” He pulled me to his chest. It was bare and smelled heavenly.

“Nothing’s going to hurt you here.”

This really did help me to back off the edge of the cliff and feel calm again.

My face nuzzled his chest. It began as a means of seeking comfort, but then my lips lightly touched his warm skin, and it felt so good and he smelled so good that I badly wanted to taste him, bite at him. I heard him groan as he heard my thoughts. His arms tightened around me. One of his hands lightly fisted the hair on the

back of my neck and pulled me more firmly into the curve of his body. My breathing went shallow again, but for an entirely different reason.

Taylor...what's happening?

I don't know.

Can you feel it?

I don't know what this is. Everything is so new to me.

You...affect me. He admitted this hesitantly, darkly.

“I’m not trying to.” I pulled back to look into his troubled face. I could see a shadow of vulnerability in his eyes that touched me. I wanted to reach out to him.

He frowned and stepped away from me. *I can't be distracted.* It was the last

thought I read from him before he put his shield up once again. Strangely, it pained me when he did that. The mood officially became more businesslike, a shutter coming down over his eyes.

“You’re okay?” His words became more formal. He leaned casually against the window.

“Cool as a cucumber” was my clever reply, though partly I wanted to see more of his vulnerable side. I was tired of being the only one with a visible, fragile underbelly. Reluctantly, I put up my own mental shield. It felt warm and intimate to have him in my mind, but it was a sure way to get hurt. That kind of feeling was addicting, but it wasn’t going to last, so why invite pain? Funny how quickly you

could learn new habits.

Part of my daily ritual now was going to be the need to watch my mental exposure. I wondered briefly if there were laws here against mental public indecency?

“Hey, so what is it you keep calling me? There’s a word, and I kept meaning to ask if it is a word from your language? *Lin’de*?” I tested it softly.

He nodded.

“What does it mean?”

Was that a light flush spreading across his cheeks?

His eyes burned into mine. “It means...beauty.”

My smile spread across my face

shyly. I could live with that. His name for me was Beauty. If I thought on it too long, it would make me get teary.

“You okay now?”

I did a quick internal schematics check. “I think I’m okay now.”

“It’s a lot to take in.”

“Isn’t it though? What am I doing here, Ryder? I shouldn’t be here.” I shook my head helplessly, gesturing toward the vast jungle that was so beautifully framed below us. “I just...”

“What do you need? I’ll take care of it.”

“I don’t know. A shower?” Maybe getting clean would help me feel human again, would help me get my head on straight, so I could start thinking my way

through this problem.

“I can set that up for you.”

He smelled all spicy, like he'd just taken a shower with that good-smelling soap. It reminded me that I likely had raccoon eyes from the makeup I'd worn yesterday, and that probably my hair was half up and half down and sticking out all over the place. Damn, but I needed some makeup remover and a brush. Only Cynthia had ever seen me so unkempt before.

I was reaching new lows.

I turned to look out the window once again and took a deep breath. “So, are there like reptile-man people out there, like on *Star Trek*? Or maybe dinosaur-

kangaroo hybrids with large sharp teeth made for ripping human flesh apart?”

He smirked. “Humans. No hybrids. But don’t expect to find exactly the same animal species here either. There are some that are similar—some feline creatures, some wolflike creatures—but also some extras. Some are safe, others aren’t, so don’t touch anything unless you know for sure it’s a friendly.”

“I’m not likely going to be here long enough for it to matter, I suppose,” I replied. I was saddened by the realization. I felt this connection, this mixing of our physical energies, as absurd as that seemed in so short a time. Maybe it was artificial and based on our series of life-and-death circumstances,

but there you have it. I was beginning to care about him.

My eyes stared out the window as I contemplated my words.

We'd shared kisses, and he'd saved my life, but there was no way this was going to go anywhere. Right? I mean, talk about your long-distance relationships! We weren't even in the same solar system. With some amusement, I figured I needed to stop my runaway thoughts, or I'd end up practicing the supergirly act of writing his last name after mine with silly hearts around our initials, or something else equally foolish.

I came back to the present just in time

to feel my foot being grabbed, roughly. I yelped with surprise and yanked my foot back so as not to fall.

“What the hell is this?” Ryder’s voice was a deadly whiplash of anger. He was kneeling, glaring up at me. Surprised by the emotional turn of tide, I was alarmed by his look of betrayal. A flash of pain seemed to radiate from his tortured eyes, eyes that blamed me for something terrible.

“What’s the matter?” I asked with genuine concern. I could hardly focus on his words, after seeing the force of his sudden anger.

“Mylunate. You told me you had no idea what I was talking about.” His eyes blazed up at me accusingly, but I could

see he was actively trying to soften his voice. "Please. Tell me about this."

"Ryder, I don't know what that is," I insisted sincerely, but I saw immediately that he didn't believe me, which felt like a slap in the face.

"Where did you get it, Taylor? Who gave it to you?" He stood swiftly, effortlessly, towering over me.

I couldn't seem to catch up. Did I get bonked on the head here? We were just having a pleasant moment, we'd shared kisses last night, and now I was to be distrusted again?

"Look." Ryder took a breath, but there was that vein starting to pop out at his temple. His patience was evaporating.

“We didn’t know each other before, and who knows what Grayson told you to bring you on board, but now you need to come clean. You have no idea how important this is. I want info on the network, and you’re going to provide that to me.”

“What network? What are you talking about?”

“Grayson’s.”

I shook my head with disbelief.

“Haven’t we covered this material already? Who is Grayson?” We’d done a whole show on this same subject just a few days ago where we’d uttered the same shitty lines to each other. It was time to move on.

“I’m trying to be cool here, Taylor. I

don't think you're a bad person, I just think you don't know what you got yourself into." His voice grew louder with his frustration.

"That's for damn sure." I scowled at him, gritting my teeth against my own pissed-offness. "Gee, thanks for the compliment. I'm so glad you don't think I'm a bad person."

"Cut the bullshit. You're going to tell me about the mylunate, and then we'll figure out what to do." His voice came out all snappy. "Help me solve this, Taylor."

"What we're going to do? Do you mean with me?" I wanted to laugh, except not. There was no way I was

going to win in this situation. I was automatically a criminal in his mind. What kind of fucked-up world did he live in that he would have to immediately come down on me after all we'd gone through together? What kind of fucked-up shit had happened to him that he couldn't see me? Part of me felt empathy, but the larger part was building a very hurt-based mad.

“If you're going to refuse to cooperate, then this is beyond my control. Traitors are usually put to death, but considering you aren't from our planet, you might get leniency. Especially if you provide information.”

WTF? “Traitor?” How could he say that about me? The lid blew off my

pressure cooker in reaction. That was a fucking loaded-ass word.

Heat scorched my cheeks, and my inner bitch opened her door in self-defense as a knee-jerk reaction.

“Traitor,” he ground out.

“How’s about this? You’re going to back the hell off, explain to me what you’re talking about, and then I’ll decide if I feel like sharing anything with you.”

“Good hiding place, by the way.” As though I hadn’t said anything, he took a casual walk across the room to stand by the bookcase and rummage through a small, ornate, metal-worked box.

His stony gaze caught mine, and I couldn’t stop the pain that stabbed my

chest. I didn't recognize the cold stranger who stood before me as the same one who'd saved me the day before and had been just this morning calling me by an endearment.

“What hiding place?”

“What man would look at your toes when you offer other, more *titillating* sights?” His face was grim, giving nothing away, which was why I was listening for clues.

“That, on my toe, is what you were talking about? The metal stuff? That's mylunate?” I had completely forgotten it was there.

“Stop the act, Taylor. Tell me the truth, so this doesn't have to get worse for you.” He lifted something circular

and metallic from the box and shut it.

Were those...handcuffs? Holy shit! What the hell was this? He was going to hold me here? Take away my freedom? Dismissed, disregarded and discounted, yet again. My alarm became full-fledged anger. Someone was trying to kill me. I had no home to go to that was safe, and no one to turn to for help, including him. How stupid I was to put myself in the position of leaning on someone! What the hell was I thinking?

My eyes burned.

I faced off with him, my body hot with growing hurt and rage.

“You son of a bitch!” I snapped through a sheen of tears. “Who the hell

do you think you are? You think you can just treat me like shit whenever you feel justified, and believe I'm going to play along like a good little girl? You think you can play hot and cold, lover one minute and monster the next, and that I'm just going to stand here and take it from you?"

"I know who the hell I am. I'm the guy tracking down a killer through the trails of death and destruction he leaves behind. I don't know who you are." He snarled, shoving the handcuffs into his back pocket. "But I'm going to paint a picture for you. I was covered in my cousin's blood only months ago from the last terrorist attack your network launched on us. She bled out in my arms,

pleading with me to save her, and there was nothing...nothing I could do to stop it. When your arm's been blown off and your body's been ripped apart by shrapnel, there are only moments left to live. She was eighteen.”

Grimacing at the image, I said, “I’m sorry for your loss, but I had nothing to do with it!”

“My aunt survived, barely, but wished for her own death when she saw what had happened to her daughter. She begged the Great Spirits to take her life. Begged. Do you know what it’s like to watch people you love live out their worst fucking nightmares? There’s nothing you can do. Not a fucking thing! I

couldn't save them.”

Able to picture the scene, but unable to handle seeing the tortured look on Ryder's face, I blinked hot tears down my cheeks. How could I respond to that? “It sounds horrible. Horrible.” My breath hitched on a dry sob. He opened his mind, and I saw chaos, the dazed look of dawning horror on the faces of the people.

“Hundreds bloodied and maimed. Sixty died, all families with little children. A bloodbath—”

“Stop!” It was too raw. It hurt too much. His eyes looked too haunted. He held me responsible for these horrible acts. It wasn't like he thought I was a bitch; he thought I was inhuman. A

monster. “I don’t want to hear any more!”

“You need to hear it!” He grabbed my arms roughly. “Think about how these were real people before you consider lying to me again.”

Shoving him away was like trying to move a wall. Angry tears continued to fall as I tried to twist away from him. “Get off me! I can’t believe you’re saying this. You’ve been in my head. You’ve been in my life. You know I’ve been targeted! I’m not responsible!”

“You aren’t the first Earth-bound human I’ve caught who tried to convince me of their innocence, but you’re the first who made me question my judgment

and overlook all the evidence pointing to you—”

“What evidence? There’s no evidence, because I’m innocent.” I swiped with resentment at the moisture on my cheeks.

The muscle in his jaw ticked wildly. “Thousands more are likely to be murdered before this is over, and I’m surrounded by liars and traitors—”

“Wait a minute! Let’s turn this around. The only one here who’s lied and manipulated is you! You think you’re so innocent, but you worked me over in my sleep! How long have you been watching me?”

His eyes blazed a darker shade of green as he let go of me and snagged the

cuffs again, but I didn't back down. I lifted my chin in silent challenge, daring him to bring it.

“Long enough to know that you expect to call all the shots. You don't get to do that with me. Only one of us knows what the hell is going on, and until you convince me that you have nothing to do with this fucking war on my people, you're a suspect, especially when I find the fucking evidence on your goddamn toe! And you have no way to explain it.”

“I don't need to *explain* anything! I'm an innocent bystander in all this. I'm sorry that you've lost family members, but I've had nothing to do with this.”

“There's only one way you could

have gotten that substance legitimately, and that didn't happen, because *only a few of us* have access to it, and I sure as shit know I didn't give any of it to you! If you don't start talking, you leave me no choice."

"What does that mean?"

"I take you to the high-council courthouse, where you get imprisoned and possibly tortured until you start talking."

Torture?

This was totally surreal. Just a few minutes ago, I'd been standing here practically drawing mental hearts with our initials in the middle, and now he was treating me like I was his enemy. If there was ever a time that I felt alone

and ready to cry it was now, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction anymore. Even more frightening? From somewhere deep in my soul came the wish that he would suddenly give me a tender look and that this was all some sort of misunderstanding. But it wasn't.

I knew how to cut off my heart. It was one of the first lessons I'd learned in life.

Casually, I offered, "Of course there was a legitimate way I got this, but you don't get to hear about it. And here I was actually starting to like you. I thought you were one of the good guys, saving me from murderers and all."

It would be worth it to go to prison. I

was fully willing to shed some light on this tangled situation, but not to him. I opened my mind and blasted him with the fierceness of my anger and the pain of my own hurt feelings. I wanted him to know exactly how I was feeling.

The rush of emotion hitting him made him pause. He scowled, and a brief look of confusion creased his features, but I wasn't going to wait around for the outcome. I wanted out. I spun to make a run for it.

He dove at me, wrapped his arms around my torso and lifted me off the ground effortlessly. The handcuffs clanked to the floor as I battled his imposing strength. I kicked my legs back at him and tried to whip my head up to

catch him in the chin, which didn't seem to faze him. I silently cursed those muscles I'd previously drooled over.

“Settle down!”

“Fuck off!”

“Where did you get it? Just tell me that. Who gave it to you?”

“I'm not a criminal! And I don't have to talk to you *at all*! You can just go *suck balls* for all I care!”

“Not my style” was his grim reply as he set my feet back on the ground. “I'm trying to work with you here!”

“Is that what you call this?”

“I just want to talk!”

“Do you usually manhandle women? You're really good at it!” I resumed

trying to work my arms free and was furious that three times now in two days I'd had men restrain me. For the love of God! Really?

"Stop fighting! Hear me out," he growled next to my ear.

"I haven't heard anything worth listening to yet. According to you, I'm a lying, murdering criminal of some sort. I don't even know what crime I've committed, but in your mind, you have me tried, convicted and going to jail."

"I want to believe you," he said through clenched teeth. "You don't understand—"

"I'm done. I don't need to understand. I need to go home." I paused in my struggles, breathing heavily from

exertion. My head fell forward as I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, not wanting him to get the best of me, yet I couldn't free myself. I could feel a personal sense of failure taunting me. Helplessness. I hated it. I was at the fair again, and my mom was gone, and I was all on my own the way I've always been on my own.

When was I going to learn? People like me never caught a break. No matter how hard I worked to better myself, no matter how hard I tried to pull myself out of poverty, I was always going to be the dirty little girl who didn't have a mother, who rarely had enough food, and whom no one cared about.

“Taylor, I didn’t...didn’t want it to go like this.” His voice had softened marginally, turned gruff. “It doesn’t have to be this way. I just want to talk.” I sensed that was true, but couldn’t get past my feelings of hurt.

“Screw you, buddy,” I muttered tiredly. What a way to wake up in the morning. Personally, I would have preferred coffee and maybe some eggs or toast or something. It might have been fun to see...I don’t know...how much fun we could have together. He smelled so good. My arms were pinned to my sides. His forearms were wrapped around my abdomen, with one hand splayed high enough that my breast rested on it. I had

to admit that all this body touching and being overpowered by him was maybe a little arousing, and that was more shaming than anything, because what did it say about me? That stupid compulsion to soothe him in his upset—to comfort him, to open up to him and solve this—was still fighting within me, and I worked ruthlessly to suppress it.

He was silent a moment, his own breath coming out in puffs.

“Dammit, Taylor. We need to figure this out.” He released his pent-up breath with a defeated utterance. He nuzzled my neck with his prickly whiskers as though he couldn’t help himself, which gave me a quick twinge of heat and shivers mixed together. A panting breath that had

nothing to do with exertion pushed through my lips.

“Ryder,” I whispered painfully, his sudden tenderness bittersweet.

“Work with me,” he whispered against my ear. He bit my lobe gently.

“No.” I strained away from him, feeling panicked by my own reaction and not wanting to capitulate.

He sighed heavily, lifting his lips from my neck and letting his forehead rest on the top of my head. “There’s a lot you don’t know. I need your information.”

“You aren’t acting like it. You could start by asking nicely.” The fight had left me momentarily, but I wiggled once

more out of sheer stubbornness, trying to get free. That's when I came to realize that the more I wiggled my backside trying to get loose, the more I became aware of a growing hardness behind me, which made me stop struggling immediately. I didn't need any more stimuli. I was already riding a sexual edge that was brand new to me.

“Let me go.” I stepped away from him, recognizing that he let me do so likely because he didn't want the sexual distraction either.

“Talk to me,” he said in a quiet, steady voice.

Just as calmly, I restated, “You don't get a free pass to act like a jerk when you feel like it. In fact, this trailer-park

girl might just decide she doesn't want your help."

"You don't get a choice," he replied firmly.

"You think not?"

He shot off, "You don't have anyone else. No one. I know this."

"You're right. I'll figure it out," I said, looking down at my toes and trying not to cry. Because I knew this was true, but having him throw that in my face was humiliating and emotionally overwhelming. The damn mylunate was winking up at me, taunting me. He hadn't taken it from me, which was strange. I needed to get out of here. Needed to!

Turning away, I headed for the stairs.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m done with this house of horrors. I want to go home.”

“You aren’t going anywhere.” He grabbed for me one last time, but just that attempt gave me permission, and I swung back around and shoved him away with a ragged grunt, finally letting my own rage loose physically. Not that it did much good, since it felt like I was trying to shove a building or something. He didn’t move. He did smirk, though.

It was the proverbial last straw. It was like waving a red flag. I refused to be disregarded or found to be amusing in a patronizing way even one more time!

“You think I can’t take you?” I cried

out. I faced off and got into my fighting stance, yanking the hem of my dress up so my thighs could move more freely. If I'd had a hair band, I'd have gotten really trailer on him and put my hair back, which in my culture signified readiness to fight.

He made the mistake of showing a trace of real humor in his eyes, mostly because I think he could read my thoughts, which served to create a hot, red haze of tunnel vision. I was tired of feeling out of control and manipulated. I was tired of feeling like there was something beyond me, something more than what I could see, pulling my strings. Angry adrenaline pumped through my system. The next thing I knew, I let out a

cry and threw a roundhouse kick and a back kick, which he had to quickly dodge, much to my wickedly delighted eyes.

“Cut it out,” he snarled, clearly surprised, circling me just out of reach. “I don’t want to hurt you!”

“Too late!” I threw a front kick that he managed to catch and toss away, but it didn’t keep me down. A side kick caught his hip, and he slapped it away. There wasn’t much room to work, due to the furniture and all, but being the more compact of the two of us, I was doing just fine. I noted this with an evil tilt of my lips, which had his eyes narrowing.

“This isn’t going to help things,” he

growled, getting into his own fighting stance.

“But it’ll make me feel better!” It was entirely satisfying to note that he felt the need to get into a defensive position.

I knew he was going to try to rush me. It was in his eyes. They were calculating the distance separating us. As I saw it coming, I did a jumping side kick that tagged him in the kisser, snapping his head back. When he stepped back to catch himself, his foot caught on the leg of his armchair, and he went down with a roar.

Surprise and dismay at my own success gave me pause, but only for a split second before I spun around to run for the door and found...air. Forgetting

the room was slightly raised, I stepped out into nothing and did an ungainly sprawl that landed me on all fours on the beautiful stone. I cried out.

“Taylor!” Ryder was on me in a flash, kneeling beside me, his hands gently turning me over.

“Get away from me!” I kicked out at him, just barely missing his ribs, when he tried to pick me up. He immediately sprawled over me to keep my limbs pinned. With my arms shackled by one of his hands and his thighs bracketing mine, I couldn’t move. I struggled briefly, venting the final surge of fury I’d felt. We’d done this before! I’d gone through this already!

And still, a touch of blood dotted his lip and part of me wanted to wipe it away and apologize for hurting him.

Thank you sir, may I please I have another? Sick puppy. Me.

So weird. So dangerous. Needed to get away from him. Needed to save myself. This was going to finish me if I stuck around. Needed to figure something out for myself or I'd get lost in him, and he'd eventually be done with me. I still hadn't recovered from being left by my mother. I'd loved her so much. She'd meant the world to me, and I knew that didn't make sense, considering what she'd done. Not really. I couldn't risk letting Ryder have that

kind of power over me.

“Stop fighting so we can talk,” he growled, his eyes angrily, desperately searching mine. Energy seemed to crackle and snap, the air humming as our emotions spiked.

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.” The tears that had been threatening finally gave way. “Just get away from me. I’m tired of this—having to figure out where I stand with you, having to defend myself. I just want to go home. I didn’t ask for this. I don’t want this.”

After a moment, the anger left his face. With his free hand, he gently wiped at the moisture, leaving wet trails toward my temples. “I need to know

where it came from,” he said firmly. “Face it. You are totally alone. You need my help. I can’t give it to you until you tell me the truth.”

I turned my face away, slamming my eyes shut, not wanting to look at him. He had all this ammunition he could use against me. He’d been *spying* on me, but *I* was being seen as the liar? Might as well just tell him, so I could get away from him.

So I summarized the facts. I kept up a monotone and refused to look at him throughout my telling.

“Reggie sent me to do some errand at his house. I was looking for something to write with and on in one of his kitchen

drawers, so I could leave a note. This stuff was in his drawer, and it just grabbed onto me when I touched it. It was fascinating, and I started playing with it. It reminded me of the liquid-metal dude in that one movie. Anyway, Frank scared me, coming at me in a crazed sort of way, and I ran out of the house, forgetting that I was still holding the stuff.”

“Frank?”

“Reggie’s boyfriend. And I was so sure I was going to get canned for handling the situation like such a dweeb that I kept the thing on, so I would remember to return it to Reggie. I was so sure that even with a big apology, I was going to lose my job, but at the very

least, I wanted to return it because I'm not a *criminal*." I said that last part pointedly, opening my eyes to look at him as I did. "Then he surprised me with this lunch thing with Paul, and I forgot anyway."

I didn't know if any of this was making sense, but I kept my mind wide-open to him so he could see the truth for himself.

"Can you work up a mental image of Frank for me?"

Closing my eyes again, I could more easily focus, thinking of the luncheon the previous day when I shook his hand in greeting.

"It's just as I thought." Ryder let out a

breath. “Frank is Ranik Grayson.”

“He’s the guy you accused me of working for, isn’t he? You thought I was working for Frank.” My voice sounded dull and lifeless to my own ears.

“We’ve been chasing Ranik Grayson for years, but he’s got too many followers who are willing to shield him. He pays well until he doesn’t need you anymore. Then he gets rid of you because you can identify him.”

I opened my eyes and looked at him. “You thought I was one of those people?”

He gazed back at me steadily. “I did.”

“Let me up,” I said stonily. I tried to move my limbs out from under him, but he didn’t relent.

“Not yet. We’re not done here.”

“I’m done.”

“I need you to hear this.”

“Fine. Say it fast. I want to get the fuck out of here,” I stated calmly.

It didn’t make sense that I was feeling so incredibly hurt, because we hadn’t made any promises to each other, but so what? Who said things had to make sense? Understanding why and acceptance were two different things. Shit was going down in his world, and I, through circumstances, had become a suspect. I definitely understood how that had happened. But he was the one who came on to me, who violated my dreams and who let me trust that he was a

regular, everyday kind of guy.

Ultimately, it was I who'd let my guard down.

Totally my fault.

I'd let myself become one of those stupid girls on a daytime talk show who sobbed in front of the miserable prick, crying, "But I thought you loved me." Weak!

"You aren't weak," he scowled.

"Stay out of my goddamn head," I said coldly, and I put up a wall. I imagined a thick steel one that reached far and wide, like the Great Wall of China. "Say what you need to say."

He continued to scowl down at me. Then I felt my mental barrier get hammered, creating a momentary

dizziness. He was trying to break through. Arrogant! I imagined my wall with sharp stabbing instruments embedded within it and launched them. He grimaced, slamming his eyes shut as though it hurt. When he opened his eyes again, they were momentarily unfocused, and it looked as though a blood vessel had popped in the corner of one, because it was bright red. I was appalled, but I made myself turn away from the sight. I couldn't be concerned. I hadn't started all this.

I kept my voice all business. "You aren't welcome in my mind anymore. Just tell me what you need to tell me, and I'll handle this for myself from here

on out.”

I could tell he had the urge to argue with me, but he seemed to rethink it and pressed his lips into a thin line. “We believe Ranik is responsible for acts of terror that have killed hundreds and injured many more over the years. We also believe that he was able to steal large stores of mylunate through the use of an inside source. This could be used to launch an all-out attack on Sunan.”

“How does that connect? Mylunate and attacks?”

“It multiplies the power of a blast exponentially.”

I let that sink in a moment. What was on my toe was truly deadly. “Why haven’t you taken it from me yet?”

“It’s going to hurt to pull it off. When you’ve worn it directly against your skin this long, it sinks in. Those of us that have to carry it keep it contained.”

Great. I was likely going to get cancer or something from touching the stuff directly. I’d be like one of those people on the asbestos commercial or something. “Am I going to grow a third arm or develop tumors over this?”

“No.”

“So you think a traitor is responsible?”

“Yes. Likely many. What Ranik’s managed to do he wouldn’t have been able to do alone. We need to find everyone involved or it will never end.”

There was a sudden beep. Peripherally, I saw the wall give way beyond the archway. Someone was coming from the transfer room.

“Can anyone join this party?” The amused tone came from Nick, aka Adonis, as he stood in the opened stone panel where the transfer room was located.

“What are you doing here, Nick?” Ryder kept his eyes on mine as he addressed his friend.

“Your mom sent me. It seems your grandmother told her you’d arrived.”

My face burned as I saw the amusement Nick was receiving from seeing me pinned under Ryder. He

continued through the door, and right behind him was none other than Cynthia! Her expression went from neutral to surprised concern instantly.

“Tay! Oh, my God! What happened to you? What’s going on here?”

Chapter Ten

It was entirely embarrassing that I broke down when I saw Cynthia standing there. She was such a normal sight, her blond hair hanging straight down in a silky curtain, her warm toffee eyes rounded with concern. I'd managed to remain strong until I saw the kind, loving face of my good friend. Then the floodgates broke and a dry sob shook my chest.

“Get off me,” I said hoarsely, yanking my hands free and shoving at his thick shoulders.

Ryder looked darkly remorseful and let me shove him off so I could scramble

up, ignoring his helping hand like it had the plague. Nick's smirk melted as he realized this wasn't all fun and games. Cynthia held me in a tight hug, looking entirely bewildered by the situation. Clearly she was thrown, totally not expecting me and probably wondering what the hell I was doing at Ryder's, though her voice was gentle when she spoke to me.

"It's going to be okay, Tay."

"I'm such a mess," I whispered inanely. "Do you have a b-brush or something?"

"Let's get you cleaned up," she soothed, smoothing a hand over my hair as a mother would a child's. It was very comforting to feel like I had someone on

my side.

“I want to go home,” I whispered quietly.

“We’ll get you there,” she whispered back.

“Shower’s through there.” Ryder did one of those brief chin jerks toward the nearest archway.

“Thank you, Senior Officer Langston,” Cynthia said formally, which totally threw me. I frowned at her in confusion and looked back at Ryder as she drew me away by my hand. She was pulling me along sharply, but my feet felt like they were walking through glue.

His green gaze was locked intently on me, and I couldn’t look away. It was like

there was just the two of us. I finally took a deep breath and followed Cyn, missing Ryder's touch already and exasperated that I felt this way because, hello, he was just physically restraining me.

But the questions of the hour had become who was he, and why had he brought me here?

There turned out to be another wing to Ryder's cave home. Through the small archway was a larger room that revealed an open floor plan. It seemed to serve as a kitchen, eating area and recreation area all in one.

"What's going on, Tay?" Cynthia asked quietly when we were just out of sight. "How did you get here? What's

happening?”

“Really long story.” I turned my tearful gaze toward her, but I was too near the razor’s edge to handle a retelling just yet. “Let me have a little time to put myself back together, and I’ll tell you the whole thing.”

I could tell she was impatient and wanted answers. The feelings were rolling off of her, which felt weird because I’d never picked up anything from her before. She was grudgingly willing to wait for answers, particularly since her frustrations and hurt feelings seemed to surround Nick. She was preoccupied with personal issues.

Were all these sudden “feelings” and

“energy” related to the mylunate on my toe?

Cyn sighed with resignation. “All right.”

The blue stone followed us through all the rooms. Above our heads, there were holes in the ceiling, like skylights people pay for back on Earth, except these were naturally occurring, though glass covered. It seemed we were in the penthouse suite here.

“This is amazing,” I couldn’t help murmuring. I scanned the interior, noting furniture similar, yet just slightly different, to what would be found back home.

“The Catacombs are pretty cool. I’ve got a place on one of the lower levels,

so it's a bit darker and a little smaller than this place, but still cozy.”

“You have a place here too?” My voice hitched on the upswing. What else didn't I know?

Cynthia gave it to me straight, in a firm voice. “I know you're probably pissed and hurt. If I were in your place, I would be too. You have to know that I wasn't allowed to tell you about this place, because it's against our laws to disclose our existence without permission from the council. We've struggled to survive, and I'm not sorry for keeping quiet. I won't jeopardize my people. This is my home, Taylor. Keeping it safe is my primary mission.”

“I understand.” And mostly I did, but this was all just so much to process.

“That’s quite a mental wall you have up in your mind.” She relented with a half smile that seemed a bit hesitant, as though she was now uncertain of me. “I used to be able to know what you were thinking. I bet that only pisses you off more.”

It did piss me off, now that she mentioned it.

“I’ve had a lot to learn.” I gave her a searching look, hoping to see deeply and recognize my good friend. Her sensitive eyes, the ones that had offered trust, support and care during the last year and a half of my life, looked steadily into

mine. She was still in there, even amid all this.

“It probably feels like an invasion of your privacy, but please know that I tried to shield you as much as possible. It’s just that...your energy was powerful. Is powerful. I can feel your pull even now.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m saying there were times when I was working hard to shield against you, and I’d still catch thoughts. Waves of emotion. Memories. Even dreams. I didn’t know what to make of it because I knew you were of Earth. I’d been in your mind, and I knew you had no idea about any of this, us or mylunate.”

“I drew you into my dreams?”

“Many times.”

“What dreams?”

“All kinds. Sometimes they were surreal, other times abstract scavenger hunts. A few times we went looking for your mother. I could always exit the dream if I wanted to, but hanging out with you in our dream state was so fun. We had some great times this last year, so I stopped questioning it and just accepted it as a kind of fluke thing. You’re powerful, Tay. You don’t seem to need mylunate for some interesting mindwalking.”

“I don’t remember any of it. How can that be?”

“You weren’t trying to.”

Oh, crap. Is that how Ryder had ended up in my dreams? Had I pulled him in? Was he truly not culpable? Had he been off minding his own business in his own subconscious la-la land when I yanked him into my fantasy world? My sexual fantasy world? Let me hang my head in shame. He probably thought I'd delivered an invitation. If that was true, it was no wonder he'd stayed to enjoy the sensual play. I couldn't fault him for that.

“Should I apologize?” I asked hesitantly. “I mean, is it normal for people to jump into each other's dreams here? Or pull each other into one? I mean, how does that all work?”

Cynthia shook her head with exasperation, her hair swinging gently around her face as she added, “Don’t you dare apologize to me. Look. Those of us born in most areas of the Sunan nation are immersed in the power that mylunate gives off from birth, because there are rich deposits sitting right under us. From birth, we can do all of these things that probably sound like sci-fi or something, but it’s just part of our reality. Kids have to be taught how to control these abilities in Sunan the way they have to be taught how to cross the street properly on Earth. It’s just a thing. Sometimes they end up in a parent’s dream. It’s also common for couples to

share mental space for a little exotic fun.”

“Exotic?”

Cynthia actually flushed. Wow. “You can do anything in a dream, Taylor. You just have to know you’re in one.”

“I didn’t pull you into a...” How to put this delicately? What was a good way of asking if I’d ever subjected her to a sex dream? Or maybe it was better to just not go there. “Never mind. As long as I didn’t offend you or put you in a weird situation.”

“Never. And remember, I could have exited at any time if anything weird did happen. But it didn’t. And no, I have not been in your sex dreams.”

“I thought my mental wall was up.” I

frowned at her.

“That was an easy guess.” She grinned. “You recognized my energy on some level without realizing it. You identified me as a friend and brought me in for some fun, adventurous times. You’re a busy girl in your sleep.”

“Recognized your energy?”

“Yeah. Like I can recognize yours. We each have our own, and if you start looking for it in the people around you, it will suddenly jump out at you.”

Man, did I have a lot to think about. If I’d recognized Cynthia’s friend energy when I needed it, what did that say about the kind of energy I considered Ryder to have for me?

“Let’s get you a shower.”

There was an archway at the far end of the big room. This led to a hallway where two rooms were located. I quickly glanced in the first as we walked by. It seemed to be a bedroom, but we walked by too quickly to catch more than a quick impression of neatness. The second was a bathroom, where I was blown away again.

Cynthia explained that there were a number of springs running throughout the Catacombs as well as on top of the ridge above us. Much of the water from the springs ran through the Catacombs, naturally seeping through soil and cracks in the rock to drain into the forest below,

which was why it was so lush. Earlier Te'reans had learned how to harness it and redirect some of the flow in order to support life in the caverns.

“Wow. Natural plumbing?”

“Exactly. Never need to repair any pipes. At least not for the shower or the sink.”

Though clearly a bathroom, it was foreign looking, and Cynthia had to show me how to release the water in the bathing area so it sprinkled like a gentle waterfall from a natural overhead spout. A small hole in the floor by the side of the wall, about large enough to fit a golf ball through, allowed the water to escape, which she explained was its natural pathway. The hole led to the

outer wall and drained to the forest below, as it had been doing for millions of years.

There was a toilet, and luckily, it worked much the same way toilets did on Earth. While an attempt to keep things natural was clearly prevalent, they'd had to make some compromises in plumbing.

The naturally warmed spring water felt great. It was the perfect temperature by the time it worked its way through the rocks, not too hot and not too cold. I could feel myself rallying as I soaped up with the good, spicy soap that Ryder used.

Okay. Confession time. Momentarily, and only momentarily, the scent took me

back to the sexual dream where Ryder first gave me a cataclysmic orgasm, and my cheeks flushed with the memory of his rough skin skimming mine in ultraprivate areas. It's funny how being naked in the shower of a guy you're attracted to can make your mind go places. Involuntarily, my thighs clenched, and I felt my body warm. My heart double-timed. That led to the memory of his beautiful lips and strong hands running over me when we were in his bedroom back on Earth. It still had the power to give me goose bumps.

Hussy! My intellect wasn't having it.

Cynthia, who'd stepped out to grab me some of her clothes, reappeared and kept up a steady stream of one-sided,

soothing conversation about how the Catacombs were created and how the spicy-smelling soap was made locally from native plants known for their regenerative medicinal oils or something. I appreciated the distraction. There wasn't a curtain for privacy, but I hadn't wanted her to leave when I was just beginning to feel normal again, so she sat on the closed toilet lid with her back facing me.

“Okay. I think I've waited long enough. How the hell did you get here, Taylor?” Her voice drifted toward me impatiently. “It's almost unheard of that any one of us brings an outsider in. It's nothing personal. It's just that after

everything that's happened to us historically, our people as a whole have nurtured a culture of exclusion. And after what's been going on lately, everyone here is on high alert. There isn't an open-door policy for strangers."

I thought back to Ryder's indecision outside the cave, how he'd seemed so reluctant to bring me here, and realized why he'd been uncertain. It had seemed out of character from what I knew of him. He was more the arrogant, take charge, I-have-all-the-answers guy, but he'd been fighting his inherent reserve. So why would he bring me here?

Cynthia's continued dialogue mirrored my thoughts. "It's so weird that Ryder would bring anyone over. He's as

tight about this as anyone. He must have felt strongly compelled. What happened to you?"

As the water streamed over my face, remembered feelings of terror and helplessness whispered through my mind. An image of the scared Vietnamese girl, her eyes looking at me, flashed like an old photograph in my memory. I had to consciously breathe deeply before shutting off the water and wrapping up in Cynthia's soft robe. As I crossed to the mirror over the basin, she tossed me a towel for my hair, which I made quick work of drying the drippy ends of.

"It was a nightmare," I offered

tremulously, wrapping my hair up turban-style.

She listened intently as I told her what had happened with Paul and how he considered Frank a family friend (which was odd, considering he'd felt innocent to me in all this and not in league with some big evil guy). My description of the contradictory creepiness of Frank's simultaneous charm and menace had her frowning with distaste.

My near abduction had her properly horrified, enough so that she jumped up to hug me tightly and whisper with heartfelt relief, "Many thanks to Ryder." Pulling away, she studied my face anxiously, our eyes meeting in the mirror. "Are you all right?"

“Few scrapes, bruises.” I studied my reflection. I wondered if the last few days’ adventures were etched on my face in some way, but they weren’t. It was just me.

As more of an afterthought, I told her that Ryder had confirmed Frank was someone named Ranik, which made Cynthia stare at me in shocked silence for nearly ten seconds.

“Taylor, Taylor.” Cynthia shook her head in disbelief and paced the confined space as though her nervous energy wouldn’t allow her to remain still a moment longer. “I can’t believe you were in the same house with Ranik Grayson. You told me this story the day

it happened, but now, knowing it was him...I can't believe you got out of there alive. You were lucky!"

"Some luck, but I also ran out of there, like, fast. Speedy Gonzalez, you know?"

"Taylor, you don't understand. He could have had one of the RT lasers and just pulverized your insides with it from a distance!"

"What?"

"Radiation transfer, which means that your soft tissues are zapped with radiation and heat until they basically liquefy. We call them RT lasers for short. Taylor, he didn't need to be right on you!"

I thought back to my dash out of Reggie's house and pursed my lips. "I

should probably warn Reggie. But what would I say? ‘Hey, Reg, you have a wanted alien criminal living in your house with you.’ He wouldn’t exactly take that well.”

Cynthia stopped her pacing on the next pass and glared at me. “You’re being very lighthearted about him because you don’t know what he’s done or what he’s capable of. You also haven’t seen the damage a digital laser can do.”

“I got a feel for how dangerous he was when I shook his hand. It was in his mind that he was going to kill me, and that’s when I realized that my first instincts about him were right on.”

“That’s right. You *touched* him.” She

grimaced with truly frightened eyes before adding, “You’re also assuming Reggie isn’t part of his scheme. You might have a sense of Grayson, but you don’t truly understand the scope of what a monster he is. See, he’s charming and has many people willing to protect him—even people who you’d think would never do anything wrong. We’ve found factions of rebels sympathetic to him, even amongst our own people, which was absolutely heartbreaking for us.”

“Death sentence for traitors?” I repeated Ryder’s words.

“Yes,” she said softly, an air of sadness to her delicate features. Shaking it off, she asked, “How do you know Reggie’s not one of them?”

“Helping Frank, you mean?” I frowned, tightening the tie on the robe and turning away from the mirror to face Cynthia more fully. “I can’t imagine he would be. Reggie’s his own megalomaniac, but he’s not a criminal. I’d know. I’ve worked with him a long time. I handle all of his business calls, his personal calls, his errands. I could almost guarantee he knows nothing about who Frank is.”

“I need to give you some perspective here.” Cynthia shook her head. “Okay, Ranik? He’s worse than Charles Manson or the Nightstalker. He’s infamous for recruiting followers and causing gruesome deaths. Pure evil. But throw in

fearmongering as well, because he's been linked to at least one horrible act of terrorism."

"Ryder told me you guys have been after him for a while."

"We have. He's ruthless, and...and...brilliant. He somehow knows how to embed himself in any area, anywhere, and not just remain hidden, but fit in."

I stared at her quietly, processing the new information. I was luckier than I'd realized. How smart of me to have gone with my instincts and run from Reggie's house when my mind had screamed at me to escape. That was definitely a plus to raising yourself. You learned early on that in order to survive, you had to listen

to your instincts.

“Okay, Ranik is Frank. Frank is Reggie’s boyfriend, and he wants to kill you. Something is missing here. And this still doesn’t explain the scene we walked in on, where Ryder, one of our most respected senior officers and a man who is likely to take over the high court from his father in coming years, was pinning you to the floor. Care to share?”

There went my calm. Senior officer. Respected. Even revered. He would soon take over leadership among his people. His family was in a position of power. Boy, was I out of my league. I was just a little nobody in his world. No wonder he thought so little of me.

Tears pricked my eyes as I thought about the way he'd treated me. He saw me as his enemy and that just...hurt.

Cynthia was dismayed, seeing me turn emotional so immediately for the second time ever. "Oh, Taylor, honey. What's going on?"

"I found mylunate at Reggie's house. I didn't know what it was." I looked down at my toe, sort of lifted it, and showed her the shiny metal that was still there. Cynthia's eyes widened perceptibly.

"That is mylunate, Tay." Her voice was a whisper, quietly awed as she tentatively reached out to touch the metal. She drew back just short of

grasping it. “It is highly restricted. It would be like...like...I don’t know. It would be like someone flashing crack cocaine or maybe something worse, because mylunate has been the root of our ongoing war with the Brausa. It’s definitely a controlled substance here. It’s hugely powerful. Of course Ryder would be suspicious. Getting your hands on some is next to impossible. Most people who live here don’t have any, have likely never seen any of it in its raw form and would be highly suspicious or disapproving to know an outsider had some.”

Oh. I considered this new information. I tried to imagine how I would feel if someone I knew, Cynthia, for example,

had walked into the apartment with a baggie of meth or heroin.

Okay. I was beginning to understand the significance.

“Were you given some?” I asked.

“I’ve been given clearance to have a small amount on Earth. Those of us who are high-court employees are issued a small bit, but we go through training and have to sign our lives away, because there are a number of dangers surrounding the carrying of it, including but not limited to the possibility of discovery by Brausiian soldiers, who would be willing to kill for just that small amount on your toe.”

I hugged my arms in a protective

gesture. “Ryder saw it and accused me of working for Frank, or Ranik, whatever his name is. I told him I didn’t know what he was talking about, but he didn’t believe me. I got pissed off because I...we...” What had we done, exactly? It would have been childish to itemize it, and it wouldn’t have sounded like much at the end of it all. How could I describe in words the compulsion I felt to be near him? I felt like we were being pushed together?

I couldn’t. So instead I said, “I thought there were more personal feelings on both sides, but I was wrong, obviously.”

“Why obviously?”

“He could just turn off. Eject me from here without a care. He cut me off cold,

like I was some kind of criminal, and he said...he said..."

That's when the tears spilled, as I thought of his threats.

"He said that he was going to take me to some court where they would make me talk. He even had handcuffs. He was going to take me in when I didn't even know what he was talking about, and I tried to tell him, but he wouldn't listen. He said that they could torture me to get me to talk. Can they do that?" I swiped at my drippy eyes again.

"Yeah, they can," she admitted solemnly. "But you have to understand that we've all been living in the shadow of death for most of our existence. I

almost lost my mother when she was trying to save my oldest brother in a surprise attack. She wasn't successful."

"Oh, Cyn, I didn't know."

"It was long ago, and it happened around the same period of time that Ryder's sister was killed. There'd been a series of attacks."

"His sister died?"

"His oldest. No one talks about it, but no one has forgotten. She was well-known, much loved, the daughter of our leader." Cynthia shook her head sadly and closed her eyes. I could see she wasn't going to say any more on this.

"Okay. I think I understand why Ryder would react the way he did after seeing the stuff on my toe." I still felt all

confused about how I should feel about it all and how to act around him. Was I supposed to bow and scrape too? Yeah, right.

“Well, there’s much more you don’t know. Ryder almost died in an act of domestic terrorism just a few months back—the one we think Ranik orchestrated. We learned that mylunate, when superheated, becomes a deadly explosive, and we learned that because someone detonated a mylunate bomb in our outdoor community garden. It was bad. Really bad. I was on Earth, so I don’t have the details other than that people he was with died and that it was bloody. I don’t know how he survived,

having seen the pictures of it.”

“That’s horrible.” I thought of Ryder in a bomb explosion and cold fingers of fear trickled down my spine. I really couldn’t blame him for his reaction to me. More and more, my understanding of their situation here was finding its way through my layers of consciousness, and the overall image forming in my mind was frightening.

“Why is Frank—Ranik—trying to kill me?”

“You took his mylunate. It would be like taking someone’s gold nugget during the Gold Rush. He likely had to lie, cheat, steal and kill to get that amount.”

I appreciated the analogies. They were helping me understand the situation

better. Pulling the towel off my head, I draped it across the rock ledge to dry.

“No wonder Ryder wouldn’t let me leave. This is all making a horrible kind of sense.” I covered my face tiredly, trying to keep the facts straight. So much to think about. So much to remember.

“You tried to leave? Where were you going to go?”

“I don’t even know.” I dropped my hands with a wry smile. “These last few days have not been shining moments in my life. In any case, Ryder physically stopped me, and it pissed me off, so we fought.”

“He hit you?”

“No!” I shook my head vehemently.

“Not even close. He was trying to keep me contained.” Somewhat chagrined, I stuttered, “I m-might have h-hit him, though. Kicked him, actually.”

“You gave him that fat lip?” She arched an eyebrow in surprise.

“I felt like I was fighting for my life,” I said defensively.

With a look of sharp consideration crossing her face, she took a few quick steps and peeked out of the archway. Obviously, she wanted to share something privately. “Look, there’s more to this than you know. I wouldn’t normally give you classified information, but since Ryder brought you here, it could affect you. Dangerous things are happening.”

“Danger does seem to be following me lately,” I said with a hint of exasperation.

“Yeah, well, I’ve learned that the acts of aggression are ramping up on Earth as well as here.”

“On Earth?”

“There are a half-dozen confirmed cases of women from Earth who have gone missing. There are likely many more who have not yet been confirmed, and our intelligence tells us that Brausiiian soldiers were spotted on Earth and likely had something to do with it. Also...”

Tall and imposing, Ryder suddenly filled the archway with his rugged

visage, and my heart involuntarily sang. He was so damn hot. My inner sex kitten was purring, seeing him there with his black hair looking messed, like he'd run his fingers through it. The urge to run my own fingers through it made my palms itch.

I frowned to see that his eye really had a broken vessel in it, and remorse grew uneasily in me.

Cynthia stopped talking abruptly; I suddenly couldn't remember what she'd been saying, anyway. A void of silence was created, but it didn't seem to matter. It was like I got tunnel vision and could only see Ryder's unwavering stare.

His eyes raked over me, though his expression was impassive, so I couldn't

read what he might be thinking. A tentative mental push to see if I could sense anything from him came up blank, which wasn't surprising. His mind was always closed to me.

“We need a moment,” he said firmly to Cynthia, though his eyes never left my face. She looked at me hesitantly, torn. I was her friend, but I had sensed Ryder outranked her. I gave a small shake of my head to indicate I didn't want her taking a stand now. I could handle this. At least I hoped.

“I'll just be out in the other room,” she said quietly, and she exited.

Though emotionally confused, I definitely felt the need to see Ryder

again, and my eyes soaked him up. His light eyes bore into mine. I could see the puffiness of his lip, as well as a dried fleck of blood. I'd done that? For a moment I stared at the evidence, in awe of myself. I truly was a badass. Then I confused myself because I also wanted to kiss it better.

I never said I was consistent.

In the few seconds that followed Cynthia's departure, my brain whirled with questions and doubts.

Was he sorry? Did he care? Did he want to see me? Did he still think I was working for his enemy? The small, vulnerable voice in my head whispered those questions in a bubble of fragility that felt new and wholly uncomfortable,

but I allowed the new feeling to sprinkle over me, even though it felt dangerous. Sometimes you need to turn on the heat to enjoy a good meal, right? Or so I've heard.

“There are reports of disturbances on the outer perimeters,” Ryder said in a quiet tone. “We’ve been advised to go on alert. Our defenses are being tested systematically. We’ve sent reinforcements to the borders.”

Yeah. None of this made sense to me. I folded my arms across my chest, very aware that I was naked under the robe, and waited for more information.

“I’m going to need to visit the posts to get a clear idea of what’s going on. I’ll

be gone most of the day. You're going to need to stay here. Cynthia will stay with you."

"All right," I replied evenly.

His face softened as he noted my stance and looked into my eyes. He stepped closer. His hands reached for my shoulders, and I couldn't help feeling a jolt of excitement, wondering what he was about to do, but all he did was gently flatten the lapels of the robe by my collarbones. They'd been tucked in awkwardly, and I hadn't noticed.

"Do you need anything?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you need ointment for any scratches? Ice for bruising? You've had a rough couple of days..."

“No.”

That’s when he dipped his head toward my neck. My hands flew to his thick shoulders, but I couldn’t quite work up the energy to push him away. Instead, my fingers flexed, holding on. Just that easily, he disarmed me. I felt his lips at my ear, his whiskers rubbing just below on my soft skin where he took a deep breath. Nerve endings flared to life, making my skin prickle and heat swirl around my womb. My breath caught with the suddenness of the sensation.

Who was this guy?

“Are you okay?” he asked softly. The vibrations against my lobe caused

delicious tingles.

“I’m fine.” The words came out a little breathless sounding.

“It’s been a rough intro.” His lips brushed my ear again.

“Ryder! We’ve got to go,” Nick called from the main room.

“We need to talk. Later.” He straightened with a somber look and stared into my eyes. After a moment, he let go of my lapels and stepped away. It was only when he was out of the room that I was able to breathe normally again. Damn, that was intense.

I was in trouble.

Chapter Eleven

“You need to get dressed.”

Cynthia was holding an armful of clothes as she came back into the bathroom. There was a question on her face as she gazed at me; she looked as though she was contemplating something but had chosen to keep it to herself, which I have to admit was relieving to me. I had no idea what to say about Ryder. My emotions were all over the map, which freaked me out on a personal level. I needed to feel in control of me, at the very least, but since meeting Ryder, the roller coaster had left the

gates and there was no end in sight.

“So what do you aliens wear up here?” I smiled.

“Aliens?” She snorted indelicately, which was so out of character for her cool, blond, chic image, I couldn’t help but chuckle. She handed me the clothing.

“I’m a little disappointed that my first encounter with a foreign planet yields no little green men.”

“You’d have to go to Mars for that,” she said authoritatively. Though I knew she was joking, it brought up a question for me.

“Have you been there?”

“To Mars?”

“Yeah.”

“No, but we have found other planets

similar to ours in composition. I've seen pictures. Not too far off of Te're or Earth. Oxygen rich. Oceans. Mountains. Very beautiful. Still in the early stages of discovery, though, trying to figure out the flora and fauna. A few small groups have gone to map areas, build temporary shelters."

"Wow. Modern-day Lewis-and-Clark kind of people? Are you guys going to start a colony?"

"No. Or not just yet." Quietly she said, "We're preparing for war. Women and children will be moved to safety if we're attacked, and it's looking more and more like that will happen."

That was a sobering thought.

“Try these on.”

The clothing she'd brought me was from her own apartment in the Catacombs, which I made her promise to take me to. The top was made of the same soft material that Ryder's blanket was made from. It was semifitted with an Empire-style waist, in a beautiful shade of rich chocolate. It fell to my waist, gently outlining slim lines. A pair of too-long (Cynthia is a few inches taller than me), beige, cottony pants that were loose fitting and had a drawstring went under the blouse. Borrowing underclothes was just weird, so I went commando, which always feels a little strange because I'm out in *public* feeling

totally exposed.

“Thanks for the loan.”

She acknowledged my appreciation with a quick smile. “You can roll up the hems.”

“I’ll do that. Maybe I could grab some socks from you, since we don’t wear the same size shoe. The thought of putting my heels on again is causing me actual mental anguish.” I’d worn mine for twenty-four hours straight. I could hear my toes crying out in high, screechy voices.

“We may need to go shopping for a couple of things. Just wear them a little longer, and we’ll see what we can get for you.”

“I need to get back to Earth by

Thursday, Cyn. I can't stay here more than one more night. In spite of all the craziness, I can't lose my job. It's all I have to get me by."

"Don't worry. We'll make sure you're back safe and sound."

"All right. Shopping on a different planet. I can't even believe I'm saying that out loud and meaning it. But cool. We'll take some time to hit the local mall, check out the local fashion center and maybe grab some food. I'm starving."

Cynthia slowed down my monologue with a shake of her head. "You have to know that things are going to be different here, Tay. In fact, I'm not sure I should

even take you to the marketplace, but I suppose, if asked, I could always state you're a visiting cousin from Reethan, the province where I'm from."

"People would be that nosy?"

"Oh, absolutely. Now, women are far more conservative here. You aren't going to find any real variety. Sunan women do not flash skin. As you can see, I'm wearing pretty much a matching outfit to what you're wearing, just in a different color."

She was wearing a semifitted, tuniclike top with loose-fitting pants, but her top was in an amber tone that brought out the color of her eyes. I didn't think I'd ever seen her dressed so conservatively before, not that she

dressed like a ho-bag or anything, but she was usually extremely fashionable. In my town, that involved showing off your assets (my brain smirked, because yes, I can be immature).

“Some of the materials are actually really pretty in this style. We have a number of artisans who can make the most delicate materials in beautiful prints. You’ll see. Very feminine.”

I could tell she was excited to show me around, but I had one more issue I needed settled. There had been an irritating gnat of a voice that was keeping me from being completely on board, and I needed to ask a question to make sure Cynthia really was all in the

clear for my peace of mind.

“Cynthia, did you know it was Ryder moving into our apartment complex?” I needed to know that she hadn’t set me up to be Ryder’s “in” with Reggie and Frank.

“No. I swear to you I didn’t. We have a large network of people who work on Earth, but we all have different responsibilities. Mine is research and maintenance. I keep tabs on visitors who apply to go to Earth. I spend the days monitoring who’s coming, who’s going and what they’re working on.”

“How can you do that and get your stuff done for the company we work for?”

“The company is a front. Most of the

partners are elders of Te're.”

“But the actors and writers and—”

“Are legit. They make money for the company and have no idea that anything else is going on. It’s a real business, which allows us to be in the middle of it all, so we can monitor our people as they come and go. The president of the company has a transfer unit that can connect here directly.”

“Were you the one who was able to let everyone know Ranik was lurking about?”

“There are a number of agents who’ve caught sight of him here and there over the last dozen or more years, but no one has ever been able to capture him. He

always seems one step ahead. He even has his own way of transferring to Earth. One we haven't found yet. So actually, this is the first time we've been this close to capture."

"How did we become friends? You weren't friends with anyone else. Why me?"

"I was drawn to you. You're right. I wasn't friends with anyone else. I'd been inside the minds of all those silly, desperate, bitchy women who wanted fame and fortune. In my mind, with the very sobering situation our world finds itself in, I didn't have time for anyone, but your energy was so powerful, it reached out to me. That's never happened to me before." She frowned

thoughtfully. “As a matter of fact, I only know one other person who has that same powerful kind of energy signature. Ryder’s grandmother.”

Oh, joy. I was going to be able to remind him of his grandmother. Great.

I prompted, “And my energy reached out to you?”

“You came by when I was having a bad day and, okay, this is going to sound totally corny, but I immediately felt your heart, your pure intentions in trying to comfort me. There was nothing fake about you.”

“And we lived happily ever after?”

“Yes, we did.” She smirked and rolled her eyes.

“Okay. I get how things went down.” I smiled brightly. “Let’s go shopping.”

I have to say, the local shopping mall was not quite what I expected. I came to learn that there is no front door to any structure in Milak. There were transport centers within structures, which was how everyone traveled. Due to the large deposits of mylunate beneath the northern surface crust, it wasn’t hard to stand in the center of Ryder’s big rec room, give Cynthia a hug while shutting my eyes tightly and find myself going through a brief, internally tumbling, dizzying few seconds. The transport was less intense, with a shorter travel time than the one from Earth. When I opened

my eyes a few seconds later, it was to find myself in a massive indoor marketplace with hundreds of people moving about.

The room was cavernous, the size of an indoor stadium, like the swap meet at the Rose Bowl or something.

Semipermanent stalls made with deep, rich wooden frames were set up in rows and rows, selling all manner of goods. Glass lanterns with glowing trinium rocks hung from posts at regular intervals, giving off warm light and making the room feel dark but cozy. It was colorful with movement and textures. People were socializing, creating a din of white noise, and something good was scenting the air and

making my stomach growl.

“Not what you expected?”

“No. I figured you guys would be all high-tech with glass domes or something. This almost has a medieval feel to it.”

Women really were all covered up, but even within the culture of conservatism, there were designs that were flattering and feminine, reminding me of the women's clothing in India. It was just strange not to see any T-shirts and jeans, or miniskirts and flip-flops. The height of fashion for men seemed to be more formal wear, suits for the most part.

“We can't afford to be.” She looked

around. “We learned over time not to draw attention to our social centers. They’ve been targeted in the past.”

“So now...no front doors.”

“No entrances to any structures. We all use mylunate transport.”

“To be safe from the Brausa?”

“Yes. If they’ve never seen it, they can’t find it.”

“But Ryder said it was so dangerous, then he brings me here using that same method—”

“Travelling locally is perfectly safe. The power of the ore is somewhat dissipated through a layer of earth. What can get tricky is having actual mylunate in your possession and then trying to transfer, because its power is not at all

diluted. At that point, you really have to control it, because it can take you farther, and it doesn't absolutely need a deposit on the other end."

"So, if I had mylunate back on Earth, would I be able to travel from the apartment to the beach?"

"Easily. With the amount on your toe, you'd be able to travel from the apartment to the Rocky Mountains."

"Unbelievable. This feels so unreal."

"And the larger the deposit that you're surrounded by, the farther you can go. As you can imagine, you need a lot of ore on both ends to jump light-years, and that's what requires a lot of training."

"So we needed lots of ore on Earth

and lots of ore here to make the trip?”

“Yup. Now, explorers are the ones who are most at risk. They never know where they might end up.”

“Ryder’s grandfather died this way? Exploring new land?”

“Yeah. It’s because of him that new regulations were developed. We haven’t lost anyone since.”

“Why don’t you guys just transport yourselves to the Brausiian side of the planet and blast them away?”

“We’ve launched attacks like that in the past, but since they don’t have deposits of mylunate to the south, we’ve only been able to transfer partway. Then our troops have to go by foot, which is highly dangerous for a number of

reasons. One being they look for our blue transfer light.”

“So they can easily see you guys coming and are prepared?”

“Exactly. Another reason it’s dangerous is that beyond our borders are the Savage Lands, which are only inhabited by wild animals, and have treacherous terrain. We’ve been more concerned with protecting our provinces from bomb attacks than extending our civilization.”

I thought of the bomb explosion Ryder had been caught in recently and shuddered, feeling anger toward anyone who would seek to damage him. Going over the conversation I’d had with him

just before he left, I suddenly understood what he was doing today. The borders were being tested, and he was visiting them to compile some kind of report. Was he in danger? Would anyone try to attack him?

I worried my bottom lip as we walked through the marketplace. Ryder wasn't a superman. He was flesh and blood, and he could die just like anyone. But he was tough. He knew how to take care of himself. Nothing would happen to him out there. Right?

"Everything okay?" Cynthia glanced over at me.

"Tutti-frutti." I smiled and tried to find the spirit of our outing again. "Can we grab food first? I can't even

remember the last meal I ate.”

“Sure.”

We walked through the rows of vendors, which let me see many facets of the Sunan culture. There were beautifully and finely designed pieces of furniture, fabrics, rugs, pottery and glasswork. There were vendors that specialized in various knickknacks that would help to organize or decorate rooms in a dwelling. Then there was the whole other side of the market. It had stalls of different foods, most of which looked familiar. Vegetables and fruits, meats, breads, cheeses and some canned goods were all available. It was like an all-purpose market on steroids, but with

a Middle Ages feel to it. I liked it.

Cynthia steered us toward one of the stalls, where the smell of something absolutely delicious filled the air.

“You’ll like these. They’re like empanadas. Sort of spicy meat pies.”

“Meat I’d recognize?” I asked, though in all honesty, I was sold on the smell alone.

“A fowl-like critter,” she replied, and then she smirked. “I promise it’ll taste like chicken.”

“Well in that case...”

She purchased us each a meat pie and a cup of what smelled like warm cider, and I practically inhaled it, it tasted so good. Warm, spicy chickenlike substance with melty cheese, potato and

peas all wrapped in a handheld piecrust, like a chicken potpie. Heavenly. I could feel life returning.

“I take it you were hungry?” Cynthia grinned, still only halfway through her own food. I flushed and looked around to see if anyone was watching. Luckily no one else saw me snarf up my food like a pig. Sheesh.

“Tell me about this place.”

Cynthia gave a skittish look around before sharing in a hushed voice, “I don’t want to have to explain our conversation to anyone, but we seem to be good.”

“Right.” I looked around. No one was paying us any attention. We were far

enough away from others, at a rectangular communal table, that they wouldn't be able to hear us. I also made sure my mental wall was way up and strengthened.

“Well,” she began, taking a quick sip of her drink, “we’re hugely proud of being a completely democratic society. We’ve got seven provinces, and each province has seven representatives who must be elected every year. Then one is chosen from the seven to be a council representative in high court.”

“Every year?”

My eye was caught by the flash of blue light in the transfer chamber. A man appeared and wheeled his cargo boxes carefully into the constantly milling

crowd, and it made me think there was likely a distribution center in another underground cavern. Another man disappeared. A family appeared and moved down the rows. There was a constant flow from the transfer chamber. Cynthia kept on, seeing nothing unusual.

“Huge celebrations take place. Feasts and festivals in all capital cities.”

“Sounds like a good time.” My eyes scanned the room, and I saw that just like on Earth, many people were talking into electronic devices, only here it was just a little different. Just like what Frank had used, each of the devices people carried projected an image that seemed to rest in the person’s open

palm, displaying whomever they were talking to.

Totally bizarro world. So many things that were like what we had back home, only slightly tweaked.

“The elections are mostly for show. The leaders are all so beloved, particularly because they’ve brought us through trying times, we’ve basically had the same ones in office for the last twenty years or more. It’s how I know Ryder and Nick so well. Their families are part of high court.”

“Are the festivals fun?”

“Absolutely. Wouldn’t miss it. The one in Reethan is a blast. I think it’s the best one. The people of Reethan are way more relaxed than the people in every

other province. We've actually been able to find loopholes in a few of the nation's laws."

"Where is Reethan?"

"We're basically an island to the north, which allows us to specialize in seafood exports to all the provinces."

"Is Nick from Reethan?"

Cynthia wrinkled her nose. "No. He's from Milos. There isn't a more conservative region in Sunan. Every *t* is crossed and every *i* is dotted."

"Sort of Amish?"

"You might say."

I gave it a moment, let her think I was going to move on, smiled at the children playing tag in an area sectioned off for

them, then popped a question. “You and Nick. What’s happening?”

She flushed a red that was bright enough to make the sun envious.

Jackpot!

“There’s nothing going on.” She took a big bite of her meat pie and started chewing slowly, trying to look nonchalant. *Damn, she’s good, but I’m sneaky.*

“That’s not what I read off of him earlier.” I gave her a pointed look.

“What—” She almost choked on her food. Coughing and sputtering, she grabbed a big gulp of her drink to wash it all down, and she was still gasping and trying to recover a full minute later. I felt bad for tricking her. Nick was

actually tight as a clam. He gave nothing away voluntarily, not that I'd tried. It did tell me she had something to hide, though.

“Did you really get something off him?” she croaked with reddened eyes.

With an apologetic, chagrined look, I shook my head, which made her glare at me. Still, I demanded, “Spill it Cyn. What’s happening with you guys?”

She took a deep breath and wiped her mouth absently with the back of her shaky hand. “Okay. This is all I’m going to say, so listen hard. I had a crush on him a few years ago. I managed to embarrass us both with it, and I’ve left him alone ever since. He thought my

brother was in danger and came to let me know. My brother turned out to be fine, but other than that, there's nothing going on. I probably have some residual embarrassment left over from that time, but it's nothing I want to go into details about. I guarantee you."

I pouted, wanting more of the juicy deets, but gave it up with a mental shrug. I knew that mulish look on her face. I wasn't going to get anything else out of her. Playfully, I stuck my tongue out.

"You want some shoes?" She tried to give me a frosty look.

I answered with a winning smile that spread across my face, cheek to cheek, and sing-songed, "I'll be your best friend."

She arched an eyebrow. “I thought you were my best friend.”

The next hour was one of perpetual motion. There were wonderful materials—beautiful, soft and feminine—to choose from. It was true that all women were dressed in the same kinds of clothes that we were wearing: blouses and loose-fitting pants. I mentioned that I thought it strange that not one woman was wearing a dress, and Cynthia let me know that dresses and skirts had been outlawed for safety reasons.

“What safety reasons?” I scowled, feeling outraged. What a crazy place it was that women couldn’t wear what they wanted to wear. It felt like a violation of

justice and personal freedoms.

“Rape prevention,” Cynthia said matter-of-factly.

“How does a pair of pants prevent rape?”

“By wearing fewer form-fitting or revealing clothes, women will somehow be safer, and men won’t be tempted to cross boundaries without invitation.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’ve been on Earth for a while now, and you wear whatever the hell you want without having problems.”

“Well, obviously, I agree with you,” Cynthia replied impatiently. She continued poking through a stack of folded blouses on a table. “I didn’t vote for the law—I guess I was too young

anyway—but it won by a majority.”

“So if a law passes prohibiting you to do something that’s perfectly innocent, then that’s it? You have no more choice in the matter?”

“Pretty much. That’s what makes us a successful democracy. We all need to compromise to get along.”

“Don’t you guys have any guaranteed rights?”

“Of course, but the law passed after Ryder’s sister was raped and killed. It was like having...I don’t know, Princess Di pass away. She was the poster girl for Milak in particular and Sunan as a whole. The people felt like they needed to do something, like somehow that

would keep us all safe. You know, we aren't hugely populated like the U.S. We're a very close-knit society."

I grimaced. "She was raped and killed?"

"The provinces were in shock. They didn't want any man to have easy access, I suppose, and didn't want women's legs hampered while trying to run, which, I'm told, is what happened to Ryder's sister. I have to say, it took me a while to wear a skirt back on Earth." Her eyes became unfocused as she remembered something that made her cheeks flush and her lips flatten into a grim line. "But I do appreciate the personal freedoms that you have there. It's more what I'm used to on Reethan."

This explained so much. Now the whole I'm-flashing-my-ass-for-everyone-at-the-club argument made sense. Ryder's anger over the fact that I was wearing a miniskirt and that he'd had to school some guy for trying to make an ass grab was clicking. Maybe his sense of propriety had been offended, but even deeper was a...rage? Did it remind him of what happened to his sister?

“Okay, you will love these shoes. They're made with the most comfortable cushiony soles from one of our native species of rubber tree, the *burbur* tree.”

“Hey! I've seen a pair of these in your closet.”

“Well, technically, I wasn’t supposed to bring them to Earth, but I just couldn’t resist, so keep quiet about it. But trust me, your feet will feel like they’ve gone to heaven.” She handed me a pair of shoes that were soft and had light beige suede that wrapped across the top of the foot and buckled at the heel, like a little wraparound blanket for my foot. The sole was thick, but light.

Thankful to get my heels off again, I stepped down into the shoes and wanted to cry out with the joy of it. My abused feet wept happily, and I made a silent promise not to force another heel on them for at least thirty-six hours. Of course, I immediately wanted to buy the

shoes. We also managed to grab a pair of pants in my size and another blouse that was a feminine, pale blue material, soft and delicate and perfect for my height and skin tone. Cynthia was enthused because she thought the color made my eyes “pop.”

They will all be killed! Their blood will paint the walls, and I will have to live with my conscience. Can I do this?

I heard the anxious thought loudly and felt grief engulf the words. The emotion wrapped me in apprehension, and I glanced around, wondering where it had come from. All I saw were people minding their own business in various modes of interaction. There were some people walking swiftly with purpose,

others ambling and still others standing, looking over merchandise or just chitchatting while children played together. No one looked suspicious. Cynthia seemed unaware of it, chattering away about the clothing we'd bought and the fact that I would have something absolutely unique to wear back home. Well...if she hadn't heard it...

"I will pay you back. I'm getting paid in a week," I said with a forced grin, though I was feeling just a smidge discomfited.

"You've paid me back in spades," Cynthia stated simply. "Let me do this."

"No, I'm not going to..."

I can't let him do this! But I have to.

It's the only way.

The pain-filled words were accompanied by a feeling of growing horror, which wrapped around me with interwoven strands. It invaded my personal space and braided through the sinews of my thoughts, pricking me with painful thorns. I winced from the mental anguish.

My head whipped around. I knew it was coming from someone here. Now.

“What is it?” Cynthia sounded concerned.

“You didn’t hear that?”

“What?”

“Somebody...”

I tried to open my mind and focus on just the one grief-stricken thread I was

looking for. It had fallen silent, but another thread, a darker, destructive, violent thread, became a force that squeezed my lungs. I felt like I couldn't breathe, and I gasped with the need to take in air. Someone was going to do indescribable harm.

"You're scaring me! Don't just stand there! Talk!" Cynthia shook me sharply. My head snapped hard, making me come back to the present.

"Violence. Death."

"When?"

"Immediate."

The virulent intent grew. Vicious anger enveloped me until I felt I was swimming in it. A chaotic mind ached

with feelings of grief for loved ones lost and was looking for revenge.

“How?” She grabbed a device calmly, but swiftly, from her shoulder bag.

“I don’t know.” Panic edged my voice, making it sound shrill.

“Take a deep breath and concentrate. You have amazing power, Tay. Work it. Focus it!” Her voice turned hard and slapped at me. Her fingers flew over a device she’d palmed, and I reached for calm.

I looked more closely at those moving around the market. Was there someone acting suspiciously? Being furtive? But with so many people moving around, that wasn’t going to do me any good. I

stepped out into the busy aisle, hoping to get a hot or cold feel for where the energy was coming from. I needed to focus on the energy signature; the concept Cynthia had introduced me to now made sense.

I filtered out the surrounding white noise and unfocused my eyes so they weren't caught by perpetual movement or colors. I dimmed the roar of thoughts and feelings that were coming to me from all directions and just probed mentally where the dark, roiling venom was coming from. I caught it. I felt the strength of it growing. It tugged at me.

The moment was surreal. I was experiencing space separate from time

as I moved through the layers of people with Cynthia following me, looking around anxiously.

“There it is,” I whispered to myself as I felt the pull of dark energy. It was near the transfer center.

“Do you have a lock on it?” Cynthia asked tersely.

“Somewhere near where we came in,” I murmured, and my eyes quickly scanned the individuals.

“Yes,” she breathed, as though now having a sense of it.

On the face of it, the scene was commonplace to any public setting. People arrived and departed sporadically, individually and in groups, suddenly appearing or evaporating

within the vibrant blue light. The only people who stood out were a pair of women walking together, one of them holding a catlike critter in her arms. A frown marred her features as she looked over her shoulder.

Inexcusably rude was the comment that jumped out at me. *Almost knocking me over without a word of apology.* I focused on whom they were referring to and zeroed in on a pair—someone fairly tall and someone of more average height. They had cloaks on, hoods resting over their faces, obscuring them. That in itself seemed strange, as not a single other person was covering their head. We were indoors. It wasn't the least bit

cold.

They were absorbed in a task within a large canvas bag that was hanging from the shorter person's shoulder. It wasn't an unusual bag. Cynthia had one on her own shoulder, sort of a large canvas tote. A shallow glance would give the impression they were rummaging for something. Other than that, they blended in with the cavern wall, remaining out of the way.

This will become their tombs.

The original pain-filled thread presented itself again with a tone of acceptance. Finality.

Armed. Ready to go.

It came directly from one of the hooded pair.

A door in my mind whispered open, briefly showing me another plane of acute and infinite knowing, and my senses had a moment of saturation. Within a fraction of a second, the details fast-forwarded through my brain with stinging pain, like a wind whipping sand against my flesh at a hundred miles per hour. I was seeing more than I could make sense of. And I was filled with power.

“A bomb!” I gasped painfully, finally seeing the entire plan in mind. “We’re all going to die!”

The surge of information ended with one more piece. I saw my purpose. A chilling, calming shroud fell over me. I

had never been more important in my own life than right at this moment, right here. *Now or never...*

I ran at the pair, screaming a battle cry. Distantly, I heard Cynthia's horrified shout. With no real weapons, I paused a dozen paces from where they were and threw my heavy platform shoes at them. The pair broke apart, startled. A foreign-sounding expletive shot from the taller one.

The smaller of the two suddenly became engulfed in vibrant blue light and disappeared with the bag. The larger of the pair tilted his head back and roared out his displeasure at being left behind. This dislodged his hood, which caused immediate pandemonium.

“Brausa!” Someone shouted,
horrified.

Screams sounded.

People ran wildly.

Hysteria reigned, echoing chaotically
throughout the cavern.

Vibrant light flashed sporadically
around me as most escaped through
transferring, but I could only stare at the
giant before me, frozen with fear.

Massive, enraged, muscles heaving,
the man was well over six feet tall and
wearing leather breeches and a tunic of a
heavy cloth. His brown hair was long,
dirty and matted into locks that fell down
his back. He was an animal!

His feelings of wrath and betrayal

intertwined and swamped me. I tried to backpedal, realizing I hadn't thought this part through very carefully, but I couldn't make my feet work properly. I couldn't even turn to run. It was like they were rooted to the ground.

“You think to stop me?” he roared, rushing me. “I will own you!” I had no time to think. His putrid breath reached me before his arms encircled me in a punishing grip that nearly cut off my circulation. A sharply pointed, metallic edge suddenly dug into my side. I gasped with the pain. “Take me from here! Now!”

This was the second time I had stared death in the face, and it was dirty, rank and filled with a fuck-all fury that was

terrifying. My heart pounded triple time. I struggled to drag air into my lungs.

He was going to shove the blade into my side and not give a rat's ass about it.

“Do it!” he roared in my face. A droplet of spit smacked my cheek.

I didn't know what he wanted from me, but my brain went into survival mode. I closed my eyes and flashed back to the mental attack I'd pulled on Ryder earlier.

If it worked once...

A surge of unnatural energy pushed through me, and I gritted my teeth, pulling it all in, soaking it up. I imagined a gigantic fist, a haymaker, projecting through space, building momentum,

speed and power before pounding through the thick skull of the brute holding me. He shouted out, his grip loosening. I threw fist after mental fist like a grappling MMA fighter who'd sunk leg hooks into his quarry and was just pounding the shit out of his unprotected face—in this case, unprotected mind. The power surging through me was practically tangible, crackling behind my lids.

He cried out again and let go, holding both hands to his head as though in great pain. His dagger clanked onto the stone floor. Cocking my knee back, I rammed the guy in the nuts with as much strength as I could muster and felt a hit of pure satisfaction when he bent and grabbed

his groin with a shout of anguish. He was on level with me, and I cracked a head butt across the bridge of his nose.

We both cried out on that one. He fell to the floor with blood gushing down his face, and I stepped away from him holding both hands to my forehead. Helping hands were dragging me away from the guy, and armed men suddenly swarmed the area, taking the brutish warrior into custody.

The door whispered shut in my mind, and the power surge ceased.

“Thank Pere’ you were here, and that you’re okay.” Cynthia held on to me tightly. The problem for me at this point was that I was absolutely wiped out. I

couldn't even stand anymore. Black spots swarmed like bees before my eyes, blocking out my vision.

“Taylor?”

“I'm so tired,” I whispered from a thousand miles away, unable to see through the darkness. “I'm okay. I think I'm...going to sleep.”

* * *

The darkness took over.

Cynthia's cry receded into nothingness as I left the corporeal plane. The darkness opened up to the airy blue heavens and the rhythm—*whump...whump...whump*—of my old animal friend.

I ran gentle hands over his beautiful feathers as we skimmed high, thin clouds. I thanked him for helping me with the final bit of energy I'd leveled at the bad guy, but telepathically, I was told that it was all part of a larger plan. Nothing was coincidental. There were no accidents. There was no judgment. There was no good or evil.

I don't understand.

He let me know in soft tones that I soon would.

I felt a familiar energy signature. *Is Dreya nearby?*

The knowledge that she was present and wanted to speak with me was relayed.

I would love to see her.

We descended through the clouds, flying low over the lake that sparkled with a thousand points of brilliant light as the water rippled under the sun. We left the field of iridescent flowers swaying in our wake, and Dreya was just there, coming down her porch steps as we landed. Her hair was beautifully white and swinging clear down to her waist. She was in a light, flowing peasant dress, and I was surprised that she was wearing clothing that had been outlawed. I had to give her points, though. She was very bohemian.

Stepping down, using one massive outstretched wing as a ramp, I thanked

my animal friend and wished him all health and happiness. He responded in kind and flew straight up and away in an impressive show of magnificence.

I felt the strength of your power, Taylor. You seem to have come through your first trial with hardly a scratch. Dreya enveloped me in one of her hugs that felt so good, though her clear blue eyes reflected a shadow of uncertainty. *I hope your next is as easily resolved.*

Will I have time to rest first? My body seems to be worn out, I offered with some amusement. *I think I left it behind.*

Dreya's smile faded. *This is the Gods' plane, dear. You have access to this. The Great Spirits are here,*

watching everything. It takes much energy to be a conduit for the Great Spirits.

The Gods' plane? I must be moving up in the world. Can I tell that to the IRS?

This is no laughing matter, Taylor. I'm here to tell you that your next trial will be of the heart.

Fear pricked my gut. Another trial? Really? Does this have to do with Ryder? I'm really not good with romantic relationships, and I'll likely bomb any test you give me—

I will only tell you that you must find your mother. Quickly. She is very important to your journey, and your

journey is important to all of us. You are the first step on a new path, but she must first answer your questions.

This request threw me for a loop. It was the last thing I was expecting to hear. *What questions? I don't have any questions for her.*

You do. Look into your heart. Find her, Dreya insisted sharply. Panic struck fast and furious as I imagined my mother in front of me again. It struck me that I was afraid of knowing what was more important than me that kept her away. *I don't even know how to find her!*

You will. Think about it. Haven't you wanted to find her your whole life? You weren't ready yet, which is why you never succeeded. Now it's time. You

must overcome your fears.

I wanted to howl in protest. *She's a junkie somewhere, maybe even dead! She couldn't have cared less about me. How do you expect me to find her?* My heart suddenly tripped up as I thought of not just finding my mother, but actually confronting her. Momentarily, I relived the pain of the moment when I realized she wasn't coming back. I viciously ripped that mental poster from my private memory bank, tearing it to shreds. What would I even say to her?

Life makes us who we are, Taylor. Life has made you strong, allowed you to survive and thrive, though you've had to face challenges.

Challenges? You make it sound so simple. I had challenges. I laughed without humor. Let me tell you something. Making it across the San Fernando Valley during rush-hour traffic is challenging. Growing up a second-language learner is challenging. I had to raise myself! I was alone with cruel, angry adults taking pleasure in putting me through hell!

You don't know the details, Taylor. I don't want to know.

You will soon learn. Then you'll understand.

Alone! No one cared about me! The bitterness was suddenly welling up from

the depths of my soul, overwhelming my heart and mind. I could see all the times I was heartsick, missing her, wishing she would show up and take me home with her. I remembered all the times when I had no one to talk to who cared, no one to share news with, good or bad.

Why did she leave? What did I do that was so bad that she didn't want to be around me anymore?

The pain flayed my lungs. I was hyperventilating with my sudden rage, and I felt disoriented, wondering where it was coming from and why I was feeling all this now.

All things happen for a reason.
Dreya's voice was firm, but kind. *Your struggles won't be for naught.*

So easy for you to say!

Remember. No judgment.

How will I remember this? I don't even get to keep you. It hurt. It really did. Dreya was becoming another source of warmth to be teased with.

You'll remember when you need to.

The darkness enveloped me again. Gratefully, I let the dream fade into the mental black hole that housed unwanted, painful memories.

* * *

Opening my eyes, I saw that I was in yet another room I'd never been in before, tucked into a warm, fluffy bed and feeling pretty good. Sleep was a

beautiful thing. I managed to take it in stride, remembering immediately that I was on another planet. My pulse didn't even flutter. I was probably all tapped out of fear at this point.

“Oh, thank the Gods you're awake,” Cynthia murmured from a chair by another of those cool floor-to-ceiling windows, like I'd seen in Ryder's library, where I'd first learned what I'd gotten myself into, surrounded by his stacks of books. The wild jungle was just beyond, and it didn't seem quite so frightening to me anymore. She set her book on a side table and approached the bed quickly. “How are you feeling?”

I was somewhat confused by the concern in her warm brown eyes, but I

cautiously did a quick internal check and replied, “Good. Why?”

“Ryder has been going out of his ever-loving mind since he met us at the medic ward. I think they were glad to let him bring you home. They couldn’t wait to get rid of him.”

“The medic ward.” I let that sink in a moment.

That’s right!

Memory returned in a messy, tangled flood of sound, color and texture. The marketplace, the Brausiian warrior who was going to gut me—these were all things that had taken place, along with a host of other equally terrifying events.

Yes. I’d survived them all. They were

all lovely things I would be able to add to my résumé. Visited foreign planet...check. Defeated big, nasty warrior with cool ninja mind trick...check. I smirked, feeling like my life had become one big sideshow.

“Don’t worry. Aside from a minor scratch from the dagger he pinned you with, nothing is broken, and you’re just fine. You slept like the dead, though. Nothing could move you. No one could connect with you.”

“Connect?” I assumed she was referring to dreamwalking or mindwalking, but I didn’t get confirmation on it. Cynthia wasn’t listening to me. She seemed a bit distracted, almost absently continuing

her monologue of what had occurred while I was out.

“So the Brausiiian was removed, people were saved, but you were out cold. The medic unit arrived with a stretcher, and we got you all checked out. I called Nick so he could let Ryder know what had happened, and he showed up at the ward all crazy with worry.”

As an afterthought, she added, “What have you done to that man? He’s become certifiable. He has only ever behaved calmly, logically and with a cool head, but not today. Ryder was barking orders at everyone, ripping on the medical team for not curing you. No one knew what to

do, and the general consensus was to let you sleep it off, since your vitals appeared fine, but that wasn't enough for Ryder. Nick had to physically remove him from the examination room, which almost caused a fight between the two of them, when the medics were checking you out."

"What have I done to him?" The question bemused me. Like I had the power to do anything. He was a big, powerful male, probably used to getting his way in all things. There wasn't anything I could do to influence him one way or another. "I'm sure he just feels responsible for me."

She shook her head exasperatedly, obviously in disagreement. "Anyway,

we now have this big investigation to conduct. The tapes were retrieved and reviewed by the council over the last few hours.”

“Tapes?” I knew I was sounding like a parrot, but there was nothing else I could contribute.

“We have all public places surveyed continuously.”

It sounded very Big-Brotheresque to me, but who was I to criticize? I didn’t live here.

“It’s been an eventful afternoon.” Cynthia finished her recitation and paused.

“How long have I been out?” I sat up and scooted back to lean against the

blue-stone wall, noting with relief that I was in Cynthia's clothing and that no one had felt the need to put me in something else.

“About five hours. Ryder's been with you the entire time. He only left the room a few minutes ago because Nick told him the high court needed to speak with him immediately.”

Poor Ryder, so used to being in control. My heart warmed. It was probably his worst nightmare to lose the ability to handle a situation where danger was afoot. More somberly, I figured this was particularly true, knowing what I knew about his sister. His sister. I couldn't even imagine what it would feel like to lose a sister. Did

you ever get over that? My mother was still alive, yet I still mourned her.

I didn't quite understand why any of them were worried, though. So what? I was asleep. What was the big deal?

I felt him before I saw him. Ryder. My dark, mysterious knight. Standing in the doorway of the bedroom, his body tense, his energy thrumming. There was a wild look to his pale eyes. They roamed my face searchingly, almost desperately, like he was assuring himself that I was okay. I barely noticed when Cynthia left the room, muttering about getting food put together. I wasn't paying her any attention. I just wanted to look at his face, memorize the lines of care and

concern.

This was addicting. This was dangerous. Tenderness warmed my heart, but with that came my warning voice.

I wanted him, but he had the power to hurt me.

I'd never wanted anyone before, but he was making me care.

Was I ready for this? I didn't seem to have a choice. I was enthralled by his intense, pale green gaze. It refused to let me look away.

But then he ruined the whole damn thing.

I could almost see the fear become replaced by anger. His voice shook as he growled, "What the hell were you

thinking?”

“What do you mean?” My mind was in such a different place, it took a moment for me to catch up.

“What the hell were you thinking, to put yourself in danger? You took on a Brausiiian warrior, Taylor!” He stalked the length of the room toward me, his body throwing off suddenly fierce energy.

“You’re mad because I stopped terrorists from bombing your marketplace?” Incredible. He was going to be mad about that? I glared at him, feeling my anger begin to simmer. What was wrong with him? He made no sense.

“Don’t be ridiculous! You know why

I'm mad."

He did that thing where he braced his hands loosely on his hips. It was such a guy pose, and really sexy, like calendar sexy. Even with his mad look on, where his eyes were, like, blazing at me, I was momentarily disarmed. It stalled the flow of irritation that I was ready to unleash on him because I was suddenly focused on his lips. They were great lips. Really kissable lips. All right. I had to admit it. I was E.Z.

I sighed. "You're being irrational." That was apparently a bad thing to say to an angry guy.

"I'm irrational?" His look was one of disbelief.

"Yes, you are. I'm sitting here

perfectly fine and no one died, but you're stomping around here, huffing and puffing—”

“Huffing and—”

“Puffing. Yes, that's what I said.”

“You don't get it!” He scrubbed his fingers through his hair in agitation.

“No, I don't.” It dawned on me that I didn't want to argue with him. There wasn't anything to argue about.

Normally I would have been all, “Screw you, pal, and the horse you rode in on,” but I just wasn't feeling it. More than that, I was confused. What was he really mad about? That was the part I was missing.

“Dammit! Was it rational to attack a

man almost three times your size when you didn't have a weapon or any training? I saw the guy, Taylor. Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I have some training," I protested, but more as a muttered aside, because I was still trying to figure out what was setting him off. Again, that seemed the wrong thing to say, because his exasperation became almost tangible.

"Your gym class with Rico isn't training. The heavy bag doesn't hit back."

"I tagged you out, didn't I?"

"Only because I didn't want to hurt you! You're a menace to yourself," he bit out. "Here comes danger, and there you go running for it!"

He was mad because I hadn't been cautious? His concern was me? My personal safety? That was the missing link. He was...maybe...starting to care for me? And just maybe, it had freaked him out to imagine the worst that could have happened, and maybe he just needed time to calm down and everything would be all right.

Was there really anything worth getting mad about? Could I be mad that he'd worried about me? No. I decided to try something new. Taking a deep breath, I pulled my legs up and sat cross-legged. Maybe we could just...talk.

“Ryder, will you please come here? Sit with me?”

He glared at me warily a moment, and I wondered if he was going to ignore my request. Then he closed the gap between us with one step and sat ultraclose, facing me on the bed. There were mere inches separating us. His voice quieted. “He had a knife on you, Taylor. He was going to fucking kill you.”

“But I’m okay.”

“You were supposed to let Cynthia alert security. They would have been there in seconds to handle the situation.”

“It’s over now.”

“You don’t understand. I had to watch you lie there, unmoving, for five hours. I didn’t know if you were sick or hurt. No one could tell me why you were

catatonic. I kept checking to make sure you were still fucking...breathing. There wasn't a fucking thing I could do. It was like you were..." He bit off his words, looking off to the side as emotion seemed to close his throat. I saw it working as he tried to swallow.

Emboldened by the knowledge that he'd been so worried about me, I reached up a hand to cup his whiskery jaw, compelled to touch him, soothe him. His eyes met mine with fierce emotion, remnants of anxiety keeping his muscles revved. Leaning forward, I pressed a gentle kiss to the side of his mouth and looked up at him. His breathing slowed. I kissed the other side of his mouth. His pale, green eyes

burned brightly, and he turned his sinful lips to my palm, pressing a kiss into it, which sent lovely tingles up through my nerve endings.

“What is it?” I whispered, still puzzled as to why he was so anxious. Not even Cynthia had been all that concerned. “I don’t understand. I’m not hurt. Everything is fine.”

In a quietly gruff voice, he said, “You were out for five hours. Not moving. It was like you were—” he paused a moment to take a steadying breath, scowling, “—dead. I couldn’t reach you. I tried to find you in sleep, but you were just...gone. I couldn’t feel your energy anywhere. I couldn’t find you.” He

looked briefly tortured, and my hand slid down to stroke his chest soothingly, wanting to take away that look from his face.

“You were trying to find me?”

“I needed to know you were okay.”

He released a breath of air, like he was letting go of some of his tension. Then his arms snaked around me fiercely, pulling me tightly into the warmth of his body. His hands ran up and down my spine in a way that seemed more to soothe his peace of mind than anything, which was all I'd really wanted all along. My body sighed into his as he shoved his face into my neck and took a deep breath. It was like he was grabbing a lungful of me. There had

never been a time when I'd affected someone in this way. I liked it.

"I'm okay." I stroked his back, tracing fingers along the muscles in his shoulders. It was so hard to believe that this was the same man who'd so coldly told me he was going to take me to high court for torture earlier. Frowning, I felt some of my pleasure dim.

Yes, he was that same guy.

But then he distracted me, and I forgot my line of thought.

He nuzzled my neck, rubbing his whiskers gently over the soft skin there. Oh... The rough, prickly hair along his jaw set off little nerve-ending explosions that made my blood thicken

and my breath catch. “Ryder,” I whispered.

“What are you doing to me?” he said roughly. “You make me...fear.” His lips took lingering, sensual kisses from my neck, the act making me feel weak and languorous. I couldn’t stop the soft sigh from escaping my lips. Butterfly wings set to flight in my stomach, and heat spread gently like warm molasses.

“I don’t know, but it’s happening to me too,” I admitted in a hushed tone.

His lips dragged up my neck, prickly whiskers marking the way with burning tingles of sensation. Our eyes connected for the space of a breath, a heartbeat, green into blue, smoldering. I could feel my energy reaching out to his,

intertwining, and I was drawn helplessly into the delicious abyss of need.

“Ryder, please,” I murmured, not sure what I was asking for specifically.

“I love hearing you say my name.” His deep voice turned husky. It vibrated on the air between us.

Caught in his spell, I could only watch his lips descend to mine with tingling anticipation. I needed to feel them on me. I’d been thinking about them, remembering them, wanting them. They paused a hairbreadth from touching, teasing me with a promise, but I didn’t have to wait long.

His lips took mine, and the heat sparked a breathy cry from my soul. It

was so hot. I was on fire. Ryder swept my mouth with his tongue, slanting his lips roughly, taking possession like a master, owning me, and the fire burned out of control. I was burning up. My womb spasmed, and I moaned with the wonderful, primal feel of it. I didn't want it to go away.

I wanted more. He'd teased me last night with a deep, hot kiss, but today, I would take.

Feeling bold, I got up on my knees and fisted my hands in his hair, to hold him where I needed him. My tongue lightly lapped at his lower lip in warning, loving the hot feel of him, before pushing inside, tangling with the heat of him. He groaned deep, which was a totally sexy

sound that got me freaking wet. His hands ran down my spine and found their way under my shirt, sliding up my sides, branding my skin with his touch.

A knock sounded just outside the room. I pulled away abruptly, my eyes clouded with desire, my lips swollen and heated from his kisses. I was back to shallow breathing. Ryder tightened his grip on my waist to keep me from pulling away any farther.

“What is it?” Ryder snapped over his shoulder, but he still looked down at me hungrily.

“High council needs you. They won’t be put off any longer,” Nick said firmly, not the least bit intimidated, though he

remained respectfully out of sight.

Cursing sharply under his breath, Ryder replied, "I'll be right there."

I did have at least one sane voice left in my head that was telling me this interruption was a good thing. Taking time to think and consider what was happening was smart. My sex kitten hissed at my sane person, and I had to ignore both voices and just breathe.

Ryder looked up at the ceiling with exasperation, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, as though he needed to get a grip. He exhaled and ran his hands over my arms, gently.

"You will be the death of me," he murmured gravely, looking down at me again.

“Me?” I gave a wide-eyed look of innocence.

“I have some comfortable clothes you can sleep in. They’ll be big for you.” He gave me an unexpected, crooked smile that snuck in under my guard. It was so rare to see him smile. My heart warmed, and my lips curled, mirroring him.

“Thanks,” I said quietly. I still wanted to understand his behavior from earlier, get some feel for how he could go from one end of the spectrum to the other in so short a time, from enemy to love interest, but now wasn’t the time to ask.

Maybe when we were alone again we could talk.

I was likely going to get hurt in this,

but there seemed to be a momentum building between us that was way beyond my control. Maybe the universe had a plan here, because I didn't. There was nothing usual about this situation in the least, and all I could do was have faith that I could manipulate whatever hand of cards I was dealt. I've always been a survivor.

In for a penny...

Chapter Twelve

I'd expected to feel sore after everything I'd been through the last few days—much less the last few hours—but as I got out of bed, I felt surprisingly good. Restored. Plucky, even.

“Call out if you need anything,” Ryder had stated, leaving reluctantly. I'd gotten an eyeful of his lean hips and gorgeous backside as he walked out, and I'd felt like giving off a bawdy whistle. My world was feeling A-OK once again.

The sex kitten in me mocked me. *See what a hot guy can do for you?*

Shut up, I replied, then smirked

because I was actually telling myself to shut up.

Besides, he wasn't just any old hot guy, he was Ryder. I'd been around other good-looking guys before. I mean, c'mon, I worked in Hollywood. But they'd never put me in such a strangely confused, overly emotional, unreasonably lustful state of mind before.

My summation made me smile. I guess I was feeling better.

The floor-to-ceiling window overlooked the forest below. Sunlight slanted at an extremely low angle across the sky, letting me know it was early evening, evidence that I'd truly slept a chunk of the day away.

This time, seeing the green canopy of massive trees didn't frighten me. Seems I was getting used to being there. If I stretched my imagination, I could even imagine being in a tropical place, maybe on vacation with Ryder in a rain forest back on Earth, just the two of us trying to get to know each other better.

That was a pretty far stretch, though. Curiosity got the best of me. Taking a moment to wander was too hard to resist. A big soft bed dominated the center of the room, with quilted covers making it ultrafluffy. I would kill to have a bed like that at home. It would be dangerous, of course, because I'd never want to get out of it. All I'd need would

be a TV and someone to bring me food.

Like the rest of the dwelling, the walls and floor were the same vibrant blue polished stone. It was calming. I liked it. Various floating shelves were nailed into the walls, holding books and knickknacks, and there was a large, floor-to-ceiling bookshelf built into a chiseled-out wall nook in front of Ryder's bed. Man, this guy really liked books. I found myself running fingers along the spines of the books, most of which were in foreign languages. I recognized ones in English and saw that others were in Spanish and French.

How many languages did he speak? And not just speak, I realized, but also read and—I assumed—write in? He

must have had to study for hours and hours. How unexpected. I guessed I could see him turning all that intense focus on his studies. For all his hot maleness, he was a pretty serious guy, not a party guy. He wouldn't have been the beer-bong-drinking, fraternity-pledge kind of guy on Earth.

One of the books that I did recognize, which totally stuck out because it was so different from the others in content and appearance, was a softcover edition of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Wasn't that interesting?

Gently, I pulled the book free. It seemed an old copy. The pages were yellowed and slightly brittle. It was

comforting to see something concrete that was from Earth. I couldn't help carefully opening the book, which made something fall out of the pages and flutter to the floor. When I picked it up, I saw it was a palm-size picture of a beautiful young girl with dark hair, green eyes and an infectious smile.

Written on the inside front cover of the book was the name Asily Rose Langston. Wasn't Langston his last name? A cold chill skated my spine when I figured this was likely a picture of his sister, the one who'd died, whom he was memorializing in one of her books. The book took on a sense of reverence. I could imagine a girl enjoying the beautiful romantic tale and

maybe doing a little daydreaming of her own future Mr. Darcy. It made me ache to think of that girl gone in so harsh and painful a way.

Tears pricked my eyes.

After taking an extra moment to look at her picture, imagining the fear and pain she must have gone through in her death, I put the photograph back in the pages and replaced the book without damaging it.

The picture was a harsh reminder that this was no vacation. Asily Rose Langston had died. According to Cynthia, she'd been raped and killed in this life-and-death struggle between peoples. Today, again, I'd almost gotten

killed. Gutted. As much as I thought I had nothing to do with what was going on here, somehow I seemed to have found myself in the middle of it all. And not only that, there was a feeling of rightness in it. I was serving my purpose.

Wait. Where had that thought come from?

Serving my purpose.

My memory felt as if a xylophone had pinged a true note, struck a nerve connected to a forgotten file of information. It wasn't a new thought. It rolled off my brain so easily. The feeling that there was knowledge sitting just out of reach on the edges of my memory taunted me, and the more I tried to reach for it, the more it slipped away. Damn,

but I was tired of feeling frustrated.

Not in the mood for analysis anymore, I shook it off.

Time to dress. No more poking around. Ryder was probably wondering what happened to me, at this point, and I was wondering how things were going to be different between the two of us, or if I even wanted them to be. Being objective was hard at the moment.

The clothing Ryder had found for me was, of course, extremely large. He'd provided me with a T-shirt and a pair of drawstring sweatpants. The sweatpants only stayed up because I cranked down on the drawstring, tightening the waist before tying a feminine bow. The T-shirt

was thin and ultrasoft. It smelled like him, and I know that, because I engaged in the purely girly activity of burying my face in it and taking a deep breath. I loved the way he smelled.

When I put the shirt on, it was a bit like a dress, so I loosely tied the bottom in a knot at my waist. It exposed some of my midriff, and I wondered if Ryder would find me sexy like this.

But if he did, what then? I felt an attack of nerves coming on at the thought. Flashbacks of embarrassing groping and disappointing conclusions popped up from experiences with my college boyfriend, and I had to wonder if I was just not sexual, which didn't feel right because all I had to do was picture

Ryder to get all hot and bothered. Hmm. Confusing.

My inner sex kitten batted her lashes and told me not to think about it so much, and given that I didn't know how to think about all the sudden changes in my life, I decided to relax and see what happened. No way was I going to figure it all out now. I had to admit to feeling excited, though.

I wasn't sure what the three-ring circus would have in store for me when I walked into the main rec room again, but I didn't have long to wait. As I came down the hall, I heard a whispered, angry conversation between Nick and Cynthia in progress. It halted as soon as

I made some loud, obvious noises, which consisted of me doing a bit of throat-clearing and scuffling my feet, coming down the hallway.

There was dead silence by the time I rounded the corner.

“You’re up!” Cynthia was the first to recover, and she plastered a cheerful look to her face. She swooped over, giving me a big hug, and started talking really quickly. “I knew you’d be okay. You’re too tough to stay down long. The medical team couldn’t find anything wrong with you, and of course I told them all that you have been under a whole lot of stress these days. In any case, you’re the big hero! Saved the day!”

“Well, we both did.” I pulled away, wishing I could find out what was going on with her. Nick was suddenly busy on an electronic gadget that he’d pulled out of his pocket, a heavy, dark look weighing him down.

Cynthia rattled on. “Hey, I stored some food in the fridge, so you guys don’t have to think about dinner. I’d stay, but you know, I have to check in with my mom. She’ll flip out on me if she finds out I’ve been back on Te’re and didn’t check in. I’ll come back tomorrow, ’kay? We’ll hang out some more, but no more trips to the mall. I think we need a vacay after what happened today.” Cynthia backed off toward the archway

across the room with an overly bright smile, using stylized language that she didn't usually and clearly trying to make an escape.

I didn't question it. "Okay," I replied. Who was I to judge? When you needed to go, you needed to go. Nick wasn't having it, though.

"I'll walk you out," he said firmly, putting his device in his pocket and clasping one of her elbows before she got too far away from him. I could see that her first reaction was going to be to yank herself away, but she didn't want to make a scene. Her eyes became chips of ice.

"Well isn't that nice of you," she said coldly, and she walked out with him,

which left a bit of a vacuum.

Alone and unsure of what I was supposed to do, I decided to look for Ryder. I took a quick walk across the rec room through the archway and saw the library with the stacks and stacks of books in bookshelves. He wasn't there. The beautiful blanket still was. With a feeling of dismay at the careless way I'd left such a treasure, I quickly refolded it, and I felt that odd buzzing sensation again. Threads of energy began weaving into my skin and up through my arms.

I dropped the blanket back onto the couch like it burned, staring at it uneasily.

"I don't even want to know," I

muttered to myself after a moment. There was enough newness I needed to accept without taking on more than I could handle. The feeling that there was yet something else significant, something else I couldn't quite remember, attached to the blanket frustrated me, but I deliberately blew it off. Hadn't I had enough drama for the day? I could always think about it later.

I wandered back to the archway of the main rec room to find Ryder had appeared and was setting out plates in the kitchen. He'd changed into a pair of sweatpants similar to my own, leaving his muscular chest bare. Without giving away my presence, I paused to stare in a purely primal, animalistic reaction. I

was in awe of the beautiful male before me. He had that amazing V-shaped body where the muscles in his stomach, arms and shoulders stood out, calling to the female animal in me.

I want him, whispered my mind, and my body quickened, reminded of the unfinished business we'd begun in the bedroom.

A smattering of dark hair sprinkled his broad pecs. It trailed down his washboard stomach, disappearing beneath the drawstring of his pants, where an interesting bulge made me crave exploration. I could almost feel my eyes go vixenlike.

Sheesh. Who was I turning into?

He sent a worried look in the direction of the bedroom, bracing his hands on his hips for a moment with a look of impatience. I loved that stance. It was so him. Then he got back to what he was doing, his muscles flexing with ease and grace as he moved. Grabbing a plate of something out of a small fridge, he tightened his lips and glanced toward the bedroom again. Was he worried about me?

I cleared my throat and stepped out from the archway. Immediately, his green eyes flashed to me; there was a hint of surprise to his expression, since he wasn't expecting me to appear on this side of the room.

The surprise in his eyes melted into a heavy-lidded look that lingered over my body. His nostrils flared, and he swallowed. I looked down and realized that not only was the neckline of the T-shirt low, weighted by the knot I'd tied at the bottom, but my nipples were peaked and perky, and my breasts were clearly outlined by the lovingly clingy material of the old T-shirt. I felt naked under his stare.

Heat swept my cheeks, though at the same time, my inner sex kitten purred, recognizing that he wanted me. This big, powerful man was having to check himself because he wanted to jump me. A flash of desire zeroed in at the top of

my thighs, making them clench. A warm pulse point developed there.

Ryder cleared his throat and looked away a moment, as though trying to gain some control, before looking back at me. “Where were you?” he asked softly, which was a direct contradiction to the intensity of his eyes.

“Library. Looking for you,” I replied.

A faint, crooked smile eased over his features, and he continued the task he was working on. My response pleased him, and I realized I wanted to please him.

“Can I help with anything?”

“I’ve got this covered. I made a couple of sandwiches. Nothing you haven’t tasted before, I’m sure.”

“No brontosaurus burgers?” I smiled nervously to cover the heat that felt like it was radiating off me.

He smirked. “Right. No brontosaurus burgers. Turkey sandwich. Chips. Soda.”

“Sounds pretty normal.”

“Thought you could use normal after what you’ve been through the last few days.” He looked up and our eyes clicked again, held. The power of the connection was unnerving, for both of us I think, because gruffly, he said, “Have a seat.”

Exhaling quietly, I replied, “O-okay.”

Sexual tension hung in the air in a way I’d never experienced before. I was

finding it hard to concentrate on what I was doing. Heck, I was finding it hard to breathe normally. My breasts felt heavy and full. My inner sex kitten was trying to assert herself, and I was fighting an internal battle of morality with her as he brought food to the square dining table and sat with me.

“Dig in.”

The sandwiches were delicious, but the silence was unnerving. On the outside, I tried to be calm, working through a few bites of food, but on the inside, my imagination was going wild. My body hummed with energy, wondering what was going to happen next. I pictured myself running my fingers over his chest, tracing the

narrowing pattern of hair toward his waistband. The thought alone had me taking a deep breath to control my uneven breathing. Energy was building through my body, gradually heating the air around me. I could practically see my fingers trembling with the rush of blood in my system as I reached to grab my cup for a drink of water.

Was I actually ready to go there? Memories of the two times I'd tried to have sex with someone sprang forth. Feelings of awkwardness, and some pain, continued to haunt me. Of course, I hadn't known what I was doing during those times, but then, I still didn't, so there was a high likelihood that I was

going to look foolish.

My insecurities reared their ugly heads.

Ryder wasn't just some fumbling boy; he was a man, likely used to women with experience. How horrifying it would be to humiliate myself with him. Was I really woman enough?

Hell yes!

But I hardly know him, I argued with myself.

You're being a coward, and if you continue with this behavior, you can no longer claim badass status!

I'm trying to be careful. There's a difference.

You've never felt this way before in your life. Why are you fighting it?

Don't you think it's time to face your fears?

He could hurt me—which was the real root of the problem, I realized.

But what if he doesn't? What if he's not going to? What if he really cares about you, and you're just dragging your feet because you're afraid?

But I should give us time.

Why? So you can talk yourself out of it? You know you want this. Grow up, be a woman and put your big-girl panties on. Or a thong. He'd probably dig your ass in a thong.

“Taste okay?”

I looked up from my plate to find his narrowed green eyes were watching me

closely. Only half of my sandwich was eaten, but I was full.

“This was great.”

“You aren’t eating much.” He reached across the table and gently swept his thumb across my lower lip, wiping crumbs off and lingering. My lips parted as I inhaled, feeling his touch all the way into my womb. Moist heat pulsed at the core of my sex, and I just barely stopped myself from moaning.

“It’s been an eventful week,” I said a little breathlessly.

“How are you feeling?”

*Turned on like nobody’s business.
Like I want to climb up in your lap and
devour your sexy man lips.*

I mumbled quietly, “Pretty good,

actually.”

“Good.” There was a heated, knowing look in his eyes, and I had the sudden realization he was getting a sense of my arousal. He was looking at me like I was his next meal, his pale eyes blazing into mine.

Pinpricks of warmth were stabbing at me again, right on point where I was sitting. Even my breathing was becoming a bit trembly, catching as I exhaled. This was so new to me, it was almost embarrassing! I wiggled in my seat to try and ease the discomfort from the growing ache.

Holy shit. What was happening to me? Who was I?

Ryder sat back and let his eyes drop to my breasts, looking as though he could see through the shirt, but here was the kicker. His wall dropped. He suddenly let me into his mind, and his need hit me like a giant wave.

Pure lust, like a sucker punch, overpowered me, burned over and through me, heating me from the inside as my sex throbbed, making me want to pant with the force of it. I suddenly had a mental preview of the path he wanted to take down the center of my body with his lips and tongue, and I wanted that so badly, I could almost feel it.

Oh, my God. My lips parted silently as I took air in sharply. My nipples

swelled in reaction and were so sensitized that even the T-shirt material rubbing against them felt stimulating.

The sex kitten overpowered my sanity and dropped my guard in reaction. There were a few breadcrumbs on his abs, and I let him see I was dying to kneel between his legs and lick them off. Tracing the sculpted muscles of his abs with my tongue was consuming me, as was the idea of seeing what lay at the end of the trail of dark hair under his pants. Was he wearing anything under there, or would I have free access?

I heard his sharp intake of air. My eyes jerked up. He was breathing shallowly and a new look of determination came over his face. A hot

blush rode up to my hairline, radiating off me. In this moment, I was painfully aware that I didn't know anything about men, flirting and what was cool and what was not. I was playing with fire, and I knew it.

One last, very small, sane voice in my head questioned if this was a good idea and suggested giving myself space to think about whether or not I was ready for the next step in this scenario.

"I'll take our plates to the sink." I quickly broke eye contact.

Standing quickly, wholly nervous, unsure and quivery, I grabbed plates and spun around. I already knew this was going to happen between us, and I knew

that I wanted it. I'd just set the plates down by the sink when I heard the deliberate scrape of his chair on the stone floor.

Ryder's body came up behind me; his arms caged me against the counter so his full length, large and muscular, surrounded me with luscious heat. His lips and teeth found my neck with savage sensuality, and powerful tingling sensations chased down my spine, making me shiver. My head fell back on his shoulder helplessly in surrender, giving him permission.

"You're so beautiful, Taylor, so soft," he rumbled, scooping my hair out of the way. Against my neck he said thickly, "Tell me to stop if you don't want this,

but do it fast.” His teeth bit at my soft skin, and I couldn’t stop the low moan that quivered through my lips.

“I don’t think I’m good at this. I haven’t done this much.” I felt the need to warn him, though my hands reached up of their own accord, over my head, to dive into his thick, soft hair, keeping his lips in place.

“Maybe I’m not either,” he replied, as he continued his assault on my neck and rasped, “Fuck, you taste so good.” Wet, suctioning kisses mixed with rough, scraping whiskers had me crying out softly. Sensation hit my groin like it was a target, and I couldn’t help bucking my hips involuntarily against him.

“Oh, God, Ryder.”

Flames licked at my veins, spreading like a wildfire through my body. My hands fisted in his hair in reaction. He groaned, pulling my hips firmly against his front, grinding his thick erection into my ass.

Oh, yes. I reveled in the feel of his heat pressed against me, wanting to see it and feel it.

“You feel so damn good,” he murmured.

His large hands, strong and powerful, slid up my slim rib cage possessively and cupped and kneaded my breasts through the softness of the T-shirt, rolling my nipples between thumb and

second finger. Instantly, a cry escaped my lips as arrows of sizzling sensation flew from my nipples to my sex, making it clench. My legs quivered from the impact.

Ryder yanked my T-shirt above my breasts. Excited, we both watched his large, bronzed hands cup them again. The round, pale globes topped by pink pebbled nipples thrust out against his palms, demanding his attention. He rolled them between his fingers again.

“Ah.” My cry was sharp, and I writhed, feeling like a cat in heat, unable to get enough of his touch. He could make me come like this. Oh, my God. My moans of pleasure were nearly perpetual. Liquid heat seeped between

my legs. It was coating my swollen lips. The feelings were so powerful, so all consuming. There was nothing civilized about this.

“Damn Taylor...so fucking pretty.” There was reverence in his rough tone.

I felt the heat of his stiff erection pressing against my ass and reached back to hook my hands around him, pulling him into me, rubbing against him, causing him to suck air through his teeth with a guttural sound of need from deep in his belly.

“Not yet,” he growled. “I don’t want this over too soon.”

“Oh, Ryder,” I breathed, wanting it all.

In a matter of seconds, my T-shirt was pulled off. His hands found the tie at my waist, and the sweatpants pooled at my feet, leaving me completely naked, but I didn't have time for self-consciousness. His hands were on my breasts again, causing me to melt in place, moaning with helpless need.

He shoved his thigh between my legs, separating them, opening me up, widening my stance. I could feel the cool air kissing me intimately and shivered with the new sensation. Then his hand was sliding down my stomach slowly, torturously, and I found I was holding my breath, my nails curling into my palms on the stone counter. I exhaled in a rush

when he reached his goal, moving over my mound of soft brown curls, sliding through the cream, rubbing expertly, deliciously.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he whispered with awe, his fingers tracing the slit of my lips and finding the nubbin of sensitized flesh.

“Ryder!” I gasped sharply, my hips jerking against his fingers, shocked by my own body’s reaction. I’d never felt so out of control before.

“Is this for me?” His breath was uneven. He spread my cream over my clit, making me whimper with burning need. My hips naturally rolled against his fingers.

“Yes.”

“Were you thinking about this over dinner?” His husky voice was quietly hungry. “I felt your heat reaching out to me. It was like a blanket of desire just for me.”

“I was.”

“What were you thinking?”

Too far gone to be embarrassed, I burst out breathlessly, “I wanted to run my hands over you. I wanted to taste you.”

He turned me around, pressed into me. My breasts crushed against his chest, so blistering hot was our skin-to-skin. My hips cradled his hardness through his pants as his strong lips claimed mine. We were voracious, tasting, biting, his

sensual lips slanting on mine over and over again, unable to get enough. I was practically on my tiptoes, my arms looped over his shoulders, fingers through his black hair, surrounded by heat that was making me frantic.

His hand pulled my thigh up to his hip, and his hard, jutting erection rubbed against my clit. Wanting to feel his skin, I found the tie at his waist and went to work on it, desiring so much to feel him against me. His pants dropped. He kicked them away, and his length was scorching hot against my stomach. He grabbed my thigh again, pulling it up to his hip.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he ordered, his expression almost savage

with need. With both of my legs locked around his lean waist, he walked to the bedroom, the ambient moonlight from the window enough to silhouette the shape of the bed. He tossed me on the center of it before following me down, trapping my thighs open under his weight. He came down between them, resting his hips there, his engorged cock branding the soft skin of my hip.

“I love how you feel on me,” I whispered in a sultry voice I hardly recognized.

“You drive me crazy.” He frowned down at me with sudden intensity. His eyes followed his fingers as they traced a path over my lips and neck and down

to a nipple that was alert and begging for attention.

“Don’t stop,” I half hissed and half whimpered.

Hungrily, his lips found my nipple and strongly sucked, his teeth raking it, licking it until I cried out mindlessly with the pleasure of it. Turning to my other breast, he lavished the same attention until I was moaning and crying out uncontrollably, rolling my hips beneath him, wanting what only he could provide, riding on a tide of need.

His fingers drew a line down my rib cage to my mound again. This time, he pushed two fingers in, stretching me, making my nerve endings tingle hotly. He began a rhythm with his fingers that

my hips answered involuntarily, bucking against him.

Oh...damn. "Ryder!"

"Easy, baby..." He pressed a gentle kiss to my neck.

His fingers were plundering me, first slow and easy, then harder. I gasped with the invasion, moaned with the pleasure cascading through me. The heat wound tighter and tighter, and the whole time, he watched me, his expression carnal as his fingers slowed their rhythm again.

"You haven't done this much?"

"No."

"Does this feel good?" He looked at me with that sexy, dark, predatory look.

“Yes.”

“You want more?”

“Yes,” I groaned. “Why are you stopping?”

“I want to make sure you’re ready.”

“I’m ready. I need you, Ryder.” I rocked against his hand, wetter than I’d ever been in my life.

“Taylor, you’re fucking beautiful.” His tone was roughly hoarse, and then his lips found mine again, his tongue sliding home, where I sucked it and caressed it with my own. His fingers were moving in me, but slowly, just enough to tease and frustrate. It just wasn’t enough. The need to reach the pinnacle had my entire body pulsing.

“Ryder!” I cried, straining against him. “I want you inside me.”

“Are you sure?” He pulled his fingers out, rubbing them against my swollen clit.

“Yes.” Taking the bull by the horn, I ran a hand down his chest and grasped his hot length, my fingers unable to enclose his girth fully. He was so big. I ran my thumb over the head, which already had a drop of moisture on it. Ryder closed his eyes, gritting his teeth before stopping my hand’s motion.

“Not now.” His voice shook.

His weight settled fully between my thighs, and my body sighed with the feel of him there, so right. He took a moment

to slide a condom on, but then I felt the engorged mushroom-shaped head at my entrance. He rubbed against my superslick opening teasingly, once, twice, three times. Then he drove in firmly to the hilt, stretching me, with a harsh, masculine groan. We were body to body, my hips rising to meet his first, deep thrust.

“Son of a... Oh, babe, you’re so fucking tight.” His lip curled as he savored the feel of our bodies joined.

Then he moved, and nerve endings cried with the pleasurable friction. He guided my legs around him, and he pumped his thick length in, and it felt so full and right, his lips on my neck, his hand cupping my breast, squeezing and

plumping it as he held himself up on one elbow, face-to-face with me. His lips found mine again, savoring, sucking at them. My hands found his ass, squeezing his cheeks, pulling him into me.

He groaned huskily into my mouth, driving my pleasure even more, his strokes coming faster. Harder. Our bodies slapped together, punctuated by my breathless cries and his guttural groans.

I was flying higher, getting hotter, muscles tightening. The sensation was almost too much.

“Ohmygod...yes...more...”

Hands grabbing my ass cheeks, he started pounding into me.

“Ryder,” I panted, meeting his thrusts, my sheath tightening on him, “I’m going to come. Ohmygod.” My clit rubbed perfectly against his pistoning hips, and the blazing heat flashed through my body in powerful waves, curling my toes and making me explode, crying out, convulsing around his cock, squeezing him tightly.

Dimly, I heard Ryder come with a hoarse shout, his thigh muscles bunching, his hips straining to go as deeply as he could, and then his weight was on me, our breathing shallow, our hearts pounding, and our skin moist. Contentment blanketed us, and we were unable to move.

It was some time before I could think again, and I needed to only because Ryder's weight was crushing me.

"Can't breathe," I murmured.

His reply was a nonverbal grunt, though he pulled himself off me sideways and flung an arm around my waist, hauling me up against his chest. My butt rested against his cock, which was still semihard, and I felt safe and cared for, enveloped as I was by his embrace. It felt so intimate. It was a nice way to be. I'd never spooned with anyone before. I had to say I liked it. And I now understood the big deal with sex. It was absolutely mind-blowing. Bringing my own self to orgasm was just

lukewarm and not nearly as much fun by comparison. There were layers of sensation that I'd never reached. I hugged that knowledge in the darkness.

Ryder rolled away briefly to take the condom off, but then he was back, pulling the thick blanket over the two of us. His warm, rough hand stroked the soft skin of my belly while his lips pressed gentle kisses against the side of my neck.

"For the record, I think you did that very well," Ryder murmured languidly.

"It was even better than I remembered from my dreams," I murmured teasingly, feeling strangely shy in the darkness now that the fireworks had died down.

After a short stretch of silence, his

whiskers scraped my skin as I felt his smile on the back of my neck. “You aren’t mad?”

“I was at first, but truthfully, you made an impact. I’d never felt that way before. I always figured I just wasn’t a highly sexual person.”

“I knew I should have probably bailed from the dream, but...you were irresistible. I couldn’t leave. You were a living fantasy, made flesh. I’d wanted you for a long time.”

Wow. No one had ever said that to me before.

“Did I pull you into my dreams?”

He nodded. “It was a new experience for me. And there you were.”

“Oh, my God.” I covered my face. I could just imagine what he’d encountered: me, naked and tied up on my bed.

“No. Don’t be embarrassed,” he said shortly. “It wasn’t the first time I’d seen you in a dream.”

“What do you mean? Did I pull you into my sex dreams more than twice?”

“No. I mean—” He paused as though uncomfortable with what he was going to say. “I don’t know. I recognized you.”

“Like before you knew me?”

“Just déjà vu, I guess. I don’t know. I recognized you, so when I was pulled into your dream, it wasn’t a surprise but a gift. It was like you were there,

waiting just for me.”

A bell rang in my head. There was something important attached to this, but it was elusive, dancing just out of sight of my mind’s eye. Feeling a sense of fateful purpose on top of hearing his hesitant confession made the hair rise on the back of my neck. This was starting to feel spooky-strange.

“Which reminds me—” he rolled me onto my back, looming over me, so I could see his displeasure, “—you put yourself in danger back on Earth and in the marketplace here.”

“I wasn’t looking for trouble,” I protested, tracing my fingers over his knitted brow, soothing it.

“You were almost killed. Twice.” He

pulled my hand to his chest, glaring down at me so as not to be distracted.

“I’m fine.”

“I couldn’t protect you,” he insisted roughly.

“Well, of course you couldn’t. And you won’t be able to most of the time. We have separate lives.”

“Which is why it’s so important that you take every precaution. I couldn’t take it if anything happened to you. I barely arrived in time.” The look of pain crossed his face briefly, but he pushed it away almost immediately.

“Wait a minute.” I sat up wide-eyed. I knew there’d been something I couldn’t put my finger on about his rescue back

on Earth, and here it was. “How did you get to me so fast? At the restaurant. You know, my lunch with my boss?”

“What do you mean?” His eyes sort of shuttered, which made me feel like he actually did have something to hide.

I hated risking another fight and losing this new, wonderful feeling of intimacy, but I needed to know where we stood. I wasn’t a child and wouldn’t abide being treated like one. I wanted some answers.

“You know what I mean. How did you know what part of town to find me in? L.A.’s a big town, and I hung up on you without telling you.”

He took a deep breath, giving me his frowning, grim look. “Can we talk about this tomorrow? It’s late.” He lay back on

his pillow with sort of a guilty expression, scrubbing his hands over his face, but I followed him. I climbed over him, straddling his hips, and forced him to look up at me.

A hint of a smile played around his lips, telling me he wasn't taking me all that seriously, especially since his eyes were eating me up. His hands ran up my rib cage to cup my breasts, but I grabbed his wrists before they reached their target and held them down on the bed by his head, which I knew he was allowing me to do. Clearly, he was strong enough to overpower me.

This new position had interest flaring in his eyes, but I was not going to be

derailed.

“How?”

He gave a long sigh. “A tracking device.”

I stared at him a moment, uncomprehending. “A tracking device?”

“On your phone. I transferred into your apartment and attached one.” He watched me carefully, as though gauging my reaction by my facial expression.

“You put a tracking device on my phone?” I was incredulous, wondering how in the world he could have managed.

“But if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have found you. Bear that in mind before you get mad at me.”

Was I mad? Considering the

alternative (being in a ditch somewhere), I couldn't be a hypocrite and get on his case, but I didn't want this to become a habit.

“I'm not mad, but I don't want you making those kinds of executive decisions behind my back anymore. I want you to talk to me. I think I'm pretty reasonable about my own health and safety.”

With a more serious expression, he nodded. “Fair enough. But know that I need you safe.”

I rolled my eyes. “I've noticed. You were so worried earlier.” I shook my head, not understanding. “Why? I was fine. There was nothing wrong with me,

but you were still flipping out.”

He held his breath, and for just a moment I thought I saw a haunted look flicker there, but he forced himself to smile and relax. He wasn't giving anything away.

“I wasn't flipping out, I was just worried. It was a natural reaction.” I'd relaxed my grip on his wrists on the bed, and he suddenly reversed their positions and grabbed hold of my wrists.

Widening his arms while holding on to me forced me down so my breasts brushed his chest hair. That felt good, and I closed my eyes with a throaty moan, enjoying the pleasurable sensation, taking a moment to rub my nipples back and forth.

“I don’t want to talk anymore,” he murmured in a suggestive tone.

He was obviously trying to avoid sharing this, and I let myself be distracted as his mouth found mine, brushing soft, gentle kisses to my lips. His tongue lightly flicked their seam, tempting me to open my mouth, but instead, I pulled just far enough away to look down at him.

“Why, Ryder? You know so much about me. It’s only fair. You were in my mind, without my even knowing, long enough to learn all my secrets. Tell me one of your secrets. Help me understand a part of you.” Taking a shot in the dark, I asked, “Does it have something to do

with your sister's death?"

His lips tightened, and he looked deeply into my eyes, then closed his, shaking his head. It was like he had no idea what to say. Swiftly putting me off to the side away from him, he swung his legs off the bed and stood. He grabbed another pair of sweats from a drawer to put on, turning his back to me.

It pained me to lose our connection. My heart ached at the stretch of silence. I could only assume he was angry with me.

Was it wrong to want to know? Was it wrong to ask? We'd just been in each other's minds and bodies. Didn't I deserve to understand why he was so ready to fight with me about wearing a

miniskirt, and why he was so ready to cast me as his enemy and threaten me with imprisonment, as he'd done earlier? That one still kind of hurt as I thought about it.

“Ryder?”

“Do you want a cup of water?” he asked stonily.

“No thanks,” I said quietly. He left the room abruptly, and tears pricked my eyes.

Maybe I didn't have the right to know. Maybe I'd been right all along. Maybe he felt like this was a very temporary situation that we'd been forced into, and the difference between us was that he'd known it all along, and I had allowed

myself to have girly fantasies of dating, with wistful thoughts of hearts and flowers. Here I was sitting naked in his room, asking him questions like we meant something to each other, when he maybe saw me as a responsibility with “benefits.” Embarrassment lit my face, and feelings of stupidity lanced my chest.

What to do?

Shut it off. Go home. Figure it all out later.

Silent tears spilled down my cheeks, and I let the pillow catch them as I turned on my side away from the archway. No way did I want him to know that I was such a silly girl. I needed to get dressed and finish the night

out in the library on the couch, just as I had the previous night. Obviously I'd freaked him out with my nagging questions. I hadn't known the rules of this exchange, but I understood now, and they were not acceptable to me. I wasn't going to be a side of fries.

Happily ever after is for fairy tales.
If I could just remember that...

I sat up to look for my clothes. I thought I'd left the clothing from Cynthia draped over the bed, which meant it was likely on the floor at this point.

Good going, Taylor. Way to screw up the post-coital bliss. I couldn't help the sarcasm. I had tried to warn him I wasn't good at this stuff. More tears splashed

down my cheeks, but I stood, pulling the fluffy blanket with me, and grabbed for my clothing.

“What are you doing?” The rough voice startled me from the doorway, and my heart quick-timed a beat in my throat.

I took a quick breath to calm myself before answering, “Just getting out of your way.” I kept my back turned, but my tone was light.

“Why?”

Ignoring the question, I looked down at the blouse I’d picked up. “Look, I’m new at this, so maybe there’s a memo out there I haven’t gotten yet, and so, I’m sorry for asking so many questions earlier. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“Taylor.”

“No, I mean, who am I, right? We don’t know each other that well. Why should you want to share anything with me?” More scalding tears spilled down my cheeks, which was just humiliating and the reason why I wanted to keep my back to him. “I don’t belong here anyway, and I’m going back home soon. We’ll part ways, because we obviously, you know, don’t live in the same zip code. After a time, this will just be an adventure to remember.”

He came up behind me, encircling my upper body with the warmth of his. I loved how it felt in spite of it all, which just outlined how unfair life could be.

He rested his forehead on top of my head. "Please come back to bed."

"No. I mean, I really need to..." I took a shuddery breath as emotion welled. I couldn't handle his gentle voice. I had no defense against it. It hit me straight in the heart. "I can't keep doing this." I shook my head. "I'm not used to this. What do you want from me?"

"Please." The simple way he said it was enough. I just had no defenses against him, and I felt my head drop with defeat. I nodded and he took the blouse from my arms, tossing it away. I turned around, and he tilted my chin up. He saw the tears on my face and gently wiped them away, then pressed soft kisses to my cheek and neck, pulling me to his

chest tightly. As good as he felt, my feelings were hurt, and I was feeling raw. Alone.

He picked me up and set me in bed, blanket and all. Feeling deflated and somewhat petulant, I tucked the blanket around myself and turned on my side, away from him, but that didn't last long. Within moments, I felt Ryder's weight on the bed. He quite deliberately pulled up the side of the blanket that I was using, and I felt the warmth of his body spooning mine once again. He'd shed his pants, and his muscular arm scooped me tightly back against his chest, which, if I was being honest with myself, was exactly where I wanted to be. His hand

was covering my stomach, rubbing gentle circles.

“Look, I’m not used to explaining myself to anyone,” he rumbled into my ear.

“Yeah, well, now I’m here,” I said quietly, “and you are affecting my life now.”

“I know.”

“And you have to consider me.”

“I know.”

“I deserve to know what’s happening, especially when it involves me.”

Silence stretched for several moments. I was about to give up with grave disappointment.

“You looked dead,” he said quietly. “You were lying there so still, and I

thought you were gone. I couldn't feel your energy signature at all. That's rare for me." His arms tightened in memory.

"Oh, Ryder," I sighed tenderly. "But I was okay."

"You don't understand. There's never been a time that I couldn't feel someone's energy signature. It's a gift of mine. I can sense the energy of all living things."

"You couldn't feel my energy for the five hours I was asleep?"

"The only other time I lost touch with someone's energy signature was with my sister, Asily. When I found her dead."

The terrible truth of that hit me.

"Oh, Ryder!" I sat up and turned

around, wanting to comfort him.

His eyes were dark and shadowed with remorse as he looked into the past. He seemed hard, yet vulnerable, which made my heart ache for him. He was so strong and tough, keeping me safe, taking care of me—but seeing him like this made me feel protective. I slid onto his broad chest and nuzzled my lips into his neck, loving his spicy smell. Setting my head back on his shoulder, I tilted it at an angle to be able to see him.

“I’m sorry, Ryder. I didn’t mean to make you relive something so painful. I can see why you’d be so upset.”

He shook his head. Looking bleak with the weight of his guilt, his gaze met mine.

“It’s my fault she died.”

Chapter Thirteen

What?

His words had been spoken in a deathly quiet voice. I didn't understand what he'd said, because the idea of anyone being responsible for the horrific death of a sibling was incomprehensible, and I leaned up on an elbow to better see his face. He didn't meet my searching eyes, and instead, he stacked his arms behind his head. A somber resolve fell over his face, a curtain that masked his inner world, as he looked up at the ceiling.

I was blocked out again.

Disconnected.

“You wanted to know, so now you do, but I don’t talk about it. Ever,” Ryder said firmly, his eyes shuttering. I could feel him withdrawing from the conversation emotionally.

Though his face took on the now-familiar stony, implacable look, I could see the pain in his eyes, which was now unbearable to me. In spite of feeling like I was reaching into the lion’s cage, I stretched a soothing hand to his face, but he didn’t want to accept my comfort. He flinched away, catching my hand firmly.

“I don’t believe it.” My voice quivered. I pulled my hand back, hating the feeling of being rebuffed after the intimacy we’d shared, particularly since

I was still sitting with a sheet clutched up to my naked breasts. Besides, what had he expected me to do after making that kind of statement? Say “There, there,” and let it go? That’s not who I am, and yet I felt like I’d waded into some shockingly cold water.

He shot a look at me, and in a hard voice he said, “Just because you don’t want something to be true doesn’t make it untrue.”

Deeper water. Icy. “And by the same token, just because you think something’s true doesn’t automatically make it true.”

“Leave it alone.”

He turned away, punched his pillow and set his head on it, effectively

shutting down our talk. I was left staring at his back.

The Alaskan tundra might as well have been between us for the sudden freeze-out that took place. Being a girl without any kind of relationship experience or sense of self-confidence in my personal life, I lay there tense, feeling cold. It was probably the worst thing he could have done. Yelling at me is more tolerable than pushing me away. At least someone who's yelling at you notices you.

The bed suddenly felt so cold, and I wished I had some clothes on. Being naked made me feel vulnerable. I lay back on my side, faced away from him, and pulled the blankets up to my neck. A

flashback to my aunt's trailer and the remembered horror of being reliant on someone who didn't want me there cropped up to keep me company in the silence of the room. My aunt's not-so-quiet conversations about "little Miss Thinks-she's-better-than-everyone-else, just like her mother" had been common, along with "isn't she just such a smarty-pants smart-ass who just thinks her shit doesn't stink."

I'd frequently wondered what my aunt meant by that, because I always tried so hard to be helpful, cleaning up the trailer and getting a part-time job to help pay for bills, groceries or just whatever was needed. And still, I was always on the

shit list. My cousin was the problem. She was the teen getting drunk, staying out late, having boyfriends left and right, arguing constantly with my aunt, her mother.

My heart clenched, wishing for a place where I could find solace, just be me, and not have to constantly wonder if I could trust the people around me to not want to hurt me. I needed my own space. I needed to go home, but where was that? I just didn't know anymore. My apartment was no longer that space, having been violated by a burglar.

I felt small and alone in a way I hadn't felt for so long.

“Dammit,” Ryder suddenly growled. Abruptly, he turned over and scooped

me into a spoon again. I was enveloped in his strength, warmth, spicy scent and scratchy whiskers against my neck, feeling a sense of unwelcome rightness. Reminding me that he was listening in, he muttered, “You’re here because I wanted you here. Safe. Now go to sleep.”

Reluctantly, somewhat sullenly, I acknowledged the pleasure his actions brought me, but it was disheartening to realize how much I wanted him with me. How could this go well? It wouldn’t. I could sense things waiting out there in the darkness, just biding their time before they chose to come to light. Something was going to pop its ugly

head out, and I was afraid I wasn't going to be prepared for it.

“Don't overthink it,” he muttered with a gentle squeeze, and with no small amount of exasperation, I finally put my mental wall up so I could think my thoughts in peace. Sheesh. I still wasn't used to this new, superexposed life.

There were so many things I wasn't used to, and that included the relationship I'd found myself in. In the three years since I'd moved out from my aunt's trailer, I hadn't really had to answer to anyone, but now Ryder had expectations.

Wow. Expectations.

I was so unsure of what they were, where the lines were drawn, and what

was considered normal. I couldn't help feeling insecure, which made me question everything that was happening. And really, what was happening here?

What was so bad that he had to shut down? What had happened to his sister? If we were going to agree on this kind of intimacy, didn't I have the right to full disclosure? I could almost feel the unfinished energy surrounding him on Asily. She was the key to him and his behavior, and she was the reason why he was so adamant about my safety.

Just do it whispered through my mind.

Who'd said that? And what should I do?

Quietly, I listened for the whispered

voice, but I only heard the wind outside. It had picked up and was gently whining against the curvature of the cave dwelling. Ryder didn't seem concerned, so I relaxed.

It wasn't long before I felt Ryder's deep, even breathing.

He was so freaking confusing! Why was he so...so...moody? When he'd thought I'd dreamwalked into his dream a few nights ago, he'd been so angry. I hadn't meant to. I hadn't tried to. Then he'd turned passionate, hitting both ends of the spectrum in the space of ten minutes. This reality was so confusing. His world had layers that I knew nothing about, cultural norms that I had no ideas about.

Hold up.

Could I?

Should I?

Why, yes, I could, should and would.

It was easier to handle something uncomfortable when in an alternate state of mind. I'd learned that, trying to assimilate the idea of being on a new planet, for crying out loud. He'd joined me in enough of my dreams without invitation, the big hypocrite. Double standards were not acceptable.

The longer I thought about it, the longer a very Grinchy idea surfaced. And really, he'd pushed me into this by not being more forthcoming to begin with, because now I was in a position of

survival, wasn't I? He was not sharing something, of which the side effects directly affected how he treated me, when I was completely reliant on his good will.

It was time to take my life back and figure out what was missing from the picture I'd found myself in.

It was time to dreamwalk. If I had been able to do it by accident, then maybe it wouldn't be so hard to figure it out deliberately. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Concentrating on his image, I alerted to his energy signature, which my energy seemed to recognize naturally, and followed it to its source...

I was running through the woodlands with twigs and branches catching in my

hair. Huge, monstrous fernlike vines grew magnificently like ivy around the trees, topping them with colorful pink and lavender blooms. Coming to mind were postcard pictures of Hawaii, though this place did not feel humid and tropical. The leafy growth made the air feel cool and refreshing, and dappled sunlight slanted through the trees. Looking up through the canopy of flowers, I could see that the woods I was in were actually part of the foothills of the mountains that were straight ahead. As I looked up at them, they felt imposing. Dark. Foreboding. I shivered as I noted the sharp crags and crevices.

A flash of movement through the trees

reminded me that I was there to find Ryder, and I took off in that direction in a run. A young boy, maybe around twelve, with shaggy black hair, was dribbling around the trees expertly, in random directions, sometimes stopping to kick his ball at the trees so they'd bounce it back at him and sometimes just juggling it in place between his feet, knees, sternum and head.

Grabbing a mental image of myself at age ten or eleven, I morphed into my child self and jogged out of the brush. Child Ryder scowled at me. He looked a lot like adult Ryder when he did that.

Who are you? His tone was confrontational, not at all friendly.

Tay. I live around here.

He looked at me suspiciously through his lichen-green eyes. *No you don't. I know everyone who lives here.*

We just moved here.

No you didn't. No one submitted a petition of relocation at the last council meeting.

Sheesh. Who knew it was such a major undertaking to move? Added to that, Ryder was naturally an authoritarian. He was standing tall and assured, his hands braced on his narrow hips, which was also very like adult Ryder when he was getting ticked with me.

My parents are visiting with friends to see if they want to move into the

area.

Which friends?

Cynthia Rabek.

He weighed that for a moment, likely recognizing Cynthia's family name.

Apparently it wasn't unheard of for people to visit each other. *Where is she? Why isn't she with you?*

I wanted to come out and play, but she didn't want to.

He accepted this readily enough. With an apprehensive glance around, he gave a half-hearted smirk. *We're not actually supposed to be out today. There was a report of border disturbances. You should go back to the Rabeks' home.*

You probably should too then, I said pointedly.

I can handle myself. I went through ODM training already. He said this somewhat uneasily, with a glance up at the mountain.

ODM?

Retaining a superior expression when he looked down at me, he clarified, *Offensive-defensive-maneuverings training.*

Does everyone have to do that?

Of course not, he scoffed as only a twelve-year-old could. *Only boys.*

That's not fair.

He looked at me strangely, cocking his head to the side, his young face frowning in thought, then glanced up at the mountain again with unease.

Is there something up there? I asked this because I could feel his growing apprehension. Was something about to happen?

The prison, he muttered, setting a foot on his ball to keep it still. It looked like a regular soccer ball that would be found in any sporting-goods store back on Earth.

The prison is up in the mountains? Who's up there? Anyone dangerous?

We captured Brausiians.

Brausiians? How long have they been up there?

A few months. They attacked at the border to the north of here, killing a dozen of our soldiers.

What's going to happen to them?

Probably going to be executed. He looked up at the mountain again. I wish they had more security guards up there.

There aren't that many?

He shook his head. Importantly, he reported, *The mountain is mostly made of granite, which is an effective block for mylunate transfer.*

Granite?

He nodded. *They took a bunch of soldiers off prison duty because they wanted to spare as many soldiers for the border's defense as possible. There's only a skeleton crew on-site at the prison. There've been many attacks on the borders in the last month.*

It sounds like a bad idea, taking soldiers off prison-guard duty.

My dad knows what's best, Ryder stated firmly, probably more to convince himself than anyone else, since it seemed as though he was expecting something bad to happen. A shiver danced down my spine at the prospect.

A shrill scream rent the air.

Asily! The panicked horror on his face as he took off running through the woodlands had me following closely on his heels. Dodging around the maze of trees, turning left and finding no one, then right and finding no one, and spinning back around to run more was dizzying and terrifying. Leaves and

branches scratched at my face and caught on my clothes. Ryder was hoarsely shouting, *Asily! Answer me! Please!*

Another cry split the peaceful beauty with its ugly secret.

No! Don't! A girl's voice cried out before going silent.

Oh, no! Ryder stopped running. *It's too late.* He punched the tree directly in front of him once, twice, three times, sounds of anguish forced from his lips as he threw his body into each punch, making the blood run down his knuckles. Then he slid, boneless, down the trunk of the tree, bracing his head on his hands between his up-drawn knees. *It's too late. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.*

Ryder, tell me!

She's over there. I can't go over there! I can't look. I can't look again.

He was shaking with his fear.

I morphed into my grown-up body.

Ryder. It's me.

His tearstained eyes lifted up at the change in my voice from child to adult. In just a few seconds, he knew who I was. Moved to comfort him, I knelt and grabbed his young body in a tight hug, and after a slight hesitation, he accepted my hug and returned it, digging his face into my neck.

Asily is beyond the trees? I asked hesitantly.

Ryder pulled away, somehow still

stuck in his young form, seemingly unsure what state of mind to remain in. Confusion, grief and guilt were mixed together on his face, and it was like his feelings forced him to remain in his young mind. *I found her.*

What happened?

I can't tell you.

Please, Ryder.

You won't like me when I tell you.

Sorrow haunted his light eyes, making him appear so young and fragile, the evidence of his snarky side shelved in view of his grief.

That's just not true. Why would you say that?

In a quiet, juvenile voice, he said, *My dad stopped liking me.* He looked down

as though ashamed.

You can't believe that. There's no way this is your fault.

It is. I know it. There's a reason for strict discipline and complete obedience. Things happen when we don't meet expectations and rules of governance. I didn't follow my instructions. I was selfish.

Trust me, I said firmly. Please tell me what happened.

With a deep, shuddering breath, he said, *I snuck out to play with my ball. I was going crazy staring at the same walls all day, every day, for the last year while there was a quarantine, and I didn't think that anyone would know*

if I just stepped out for a couple of hours. I just wanted to be able to run around for a short time.

A year's a long time, I agreed. It was like he was trying to convince himself of his innocence in this, which was heartbreaking. Who would blame a child? I assured him gently, Anyone would grow crazy. I would go crazy after just a few days.

Ryder's green eyes were wide and trusting, wanting desperately to be convinced.

Asily knew I snuck out and came looking for me to force me to go home. I heard her scream, but I couldn't find her. He closed his eyes tightly, and his breathing grew harsh and uneven,

reliving the memory. As he did, right before my eyes, he stood and became adult Ryder in low-hanging jeans, a T-shirt and his motorcycle boots. His deep voice continued the story.

The sound echoed in the woods, but then it was cut off, and I couldn't pinpoint where she was. I was yelling for her, searching, but when I came across her body, it was too late... His lips tightened into a thin line, and his eyes glared straight ahead at an unseen nightmare that only he had access to.

Oh, Ryder. I stood but kept my distance, knowing he wouldn't appreciate my comfort at this point.

Brausiiian soldiers had escaped from

the prison. A traitor in our own community helped them, someone we never found. A diversion at the borders had been deliberately created so the prisoners could escape to this forest. They were camping out in the woods, hiding from our security forces. Asily came upon them in her search, and they attacked.

It seemed the worst was still to be confessed. His eyes grew moist and reddened as he took a breath. I barely heard his voice. It was like he was talking to himself.

She was so quiet. So still. I tried to shake her. I tried to yell at her, because she hated that, and I think I was hoping she would yell back, but there was

nothing. That's when I realized I couldn't feel her energy signature. Nothing. Her neck had been broken.

Her skirts... His voice became raw, and he paused to marshal his strength for the rest of what he had to say. Her skirts were still around her hips. She was raped. There was blood. Pain. I covered her, not wanting my parents to see her like that.

You haven't spoken about this before have you?

Who could I tell this to? I can't believe I'm sharing it with you.

No wonder he was so screwed up. He'd needed help not just coping with the tragedy, but with the fact that he'd

been the one to find her. It seemed his family had been too busy taking care of their own feelings. Thinking of a young, dark-haired boy with a lost, grieving look made me want to reach out and cradle his precious face to my breasts. Waves of pain and guilt weighed on him. What a lonely place to live in.

Let's go see her.

No, no. I can't. He shook his head adamantly, his eyes taking on a look of panic. *I couldn't face her like that again.*

Ryder, this is a dream. Picture her the way you remember her, in her best moments. I saw a picture of her. She was lovely. What would she have said to you? You have the power to make

this what you want.

I don't know. He looked haunted, uncertain.

She's over there, right? I'll just go that way, and I hope I get to meet her as you remember her.

He took a breath. *Okay.*

Before he could change his mind, I grabbed his hand and led the way through the thicket of trees to a little clearing by a still pond. Sitting on a colorful blanket cross-legged was the beautiful dark-haired girl I'd seen in the picture. Dressed in a short-sleeved eyelet button-up blouse with a shin-length, billowy, paisley-print skirt, she was delicately sewing doll-size

clothing. She looked up at us with a great big smile and jumped to her feet in a lively, energetic fashion.

Ryder! There you are. I've been waiting for you.

As though he hadn't actually believed she would be there, he froze. His pain-filled eyes just soaked her in, heavy with warring emotions. He was so overcome, he could only stand and stare at her with a mix of joy and pain clouding his face. His breathing grew more labored, making his chest rise and fall sharply.

My throat closed up as I saw him trying to make sense of what he was seeing. I attempted to swallow past the lump in my throat, hoping that this had been the right decision. Maybe he wasn't

ready for this yet? Maybe he didn't want this? Maybe it was none of my business? Who was I to force this? My doubts sneered their ugly thoughts at me as the seconds dragged by.

Thankfully, Asily broke the ice.

You're so silly. Come here already!

Matter-of-factly, she stomped over to him and slipped her arms around his waist for a good squeeze. *You're so big. Just like Daddy. You're just like him, you know.*

Asily, is this really you? His arms came around her gently, as though she were something fragile that would break into a thousand pieces.

Who else would I be? She pulled

away enough to look up at him with a soft smile. He reached out a hand to touch her cheek; it was shaking. He was testing his own sense of perception. She grasped his hand reassuringly, held it to her cheek, and his breath rushed out.

In an anguished whisper, with his green eyes filling, he said, *I'm so sorry. I can't even tell you how sorry I am. I should have listened to you.*

Ryder—

*Knowing that I caused this—what you suffered—*His voice shook.

You didn't cause this—

I let you down—

No, you didn't—

Fiercely, he said, *I couldn't find you. I tried hard. I tried so damn hard. Then*

*it was too late. Please believe me.
Please...forgive me.*

*Ryder, there's nothing to forgive.
Asily rubbed a hand over his cheek. It
looked moist. There was nothing you
could have done to prevent this.*

If I'd listened—

*I was planning to sneak out anyway.
You weren't the only one who did that.
I was going crazy being inside.*

But—

*I'm okay, Rye. I've always been
okay.*

But how can that be? I...saw you.

*Her face turned somber. I wish I
could have spared you that, but you can
see that the flesh only houses the spirit,*

and my spirit is happy. Truly. We're all part of the play, Ryder. There is no judgment. We all have the responsibility, duty, privilege of playing our roles. This was my part. It wasn't time for me yet, but don't worry. It will be soon. I have plans, Rye.

Asily. He pulled her tightly to his chest again. *I just can't believe it's you.*

Now you're just being flat-out rude. She gave him a final squeeze and pushed away from him with a brilliant smile on her face. *You're forgetting all about Taylor.*

Startled, I sniffed and stuttered, *H-hello. I'm glad to meet you.*

Aren't you silly? I already know you, Tay. I guess it isn't time for you to

remember all that, but you will. You promised to finish painting my portrait. You know my parents would just love that.

Of course. Sure. I nodded, bemused. Excellent. Until next time—

You're leaving? Will I see you again? Ryder's voice grew hoarse.

Of course. She included me in her gentle smile. Taylor will bring you back here. I've always loved this place. You guys should take a nice walk. Did you know there are apple trees off toward the meadow? She pointed to her left, and we looked automatically. When we turned back, she was gone. Only the beautiful vista was displaying its vivid

colors for us.

Asily, Ryder said in quiet protest, looking around quickly to see if he might spy her elsewhere. The longer he stared out at the landscape, the more his eyes lost the look of desperation. I felt his acceptance that she was gone when he took a deep breath. He closed his eyes for a moment and tilted his head back. The breeze caressed his face, ruffling his hair, drying his cheeks.

Are you...okay? I asked tentatively. I walked toward him, unsure whether or not he was going to be mad that I had so blatantly interfered. Was he going to tell me it was none of my business? Was he going to scorn me or hold me in contempt for sticking my nose in?

His eyes snapped open. They were still red with emotion, and he stared down at me intently. *I was held responsible for this. I've held myself responsible.* His jaw clenched as he gazed off into the distance again. It was like he was going back in time, looking at hurtful memories gone by. *My father never blamed me directly, but he always let me know that I was a disappointment for having such a lack of discipline. He's rarely let an opportunity pass.*

He made you the target for his grief. I reached a hand out to run down his arm until our fingers intertwined. He gave my hand a squeeze.

He was...wrong. Ryder frowned, as though testing the thought for the first time.

Yeah. He was. It was easier than dealing with his loss.

Yeah, well, he sent Shandria to live in seclusion for her protection as his sole remaining daughter, and he ignored me unless it was to criticize. I've felt the sting ever since.

None of this was your fault. You didn't do anything—

Logically, I know. He nodded. *It's not so easy to let go of a lifetime of guilt.*

Asily would never want you to feel guilt. It would hurt her.

I can't believe she was here. She was right here. She smiled. I miss her...spirit. He looked at me with a pained smile. His chest heaved, like he needed to take a swift breath, and I couldn't stop myself. I moved into his open arms while more tears welled from my eyes. He squeezed me tightly, his arms sliding around my back, his face pressed into my neck, breathing deeply of my scent. I felt like I was a source of comfort, but my doubt prompted me to question.

Are you mad?

At you? He pulled back and shook his head. *No. I'm...overwhelmed. I'm not sure how I feel. Part of my brain is*

already questioning if this really happened. Will I remember this? Tomorrow?

Probably not, I sighed. Any dreams that involve the Gods' plane or the Great Spirits become a mist that dissipates before I wake up.

Then I want to make sure I tell you—
his eyes were steady, clear and content
—thank you.

Oh, Ryder... I pressed my face into his chest, and he held me there, tightly, cupping the back of my head, running a hand along my spine. The bond of connectedness thickened, and I squeezed his waist harder, overcome with emotion. To care about someone was so wonderful and so frightening, all at the

same time. To feel so close to someone was amazing and powerful. I didn't want it to go away, this feeling of warmth and intimacy, but it probably would.

Was this going to be okay? Was this going to come back to bite me?

Even if I'd known it would, I wouldn't have changed anything. I'd have wanted to have experienced that beautiful time with Ryder. I would have chosen this.

What is it, lin'de? He looked down into my eyes with concern. *I can feel your upset.*

I thought you would be mad.

I'm not mad. He smiled warmly down at me. *I'm grateful.*

My chin quivered, but I didn't want to cry anymore. I looked off to the side, taking in the landscape, trying to take hold of my crazy emotions. Sheesh, you'd think I was on my period or something. *Do you want to go see the apple trees?*

I hate to tell you this, but we don't grow apple trees in this province. There was humor in his tone.

What? You're kidding me! No apple trees? My eyes widened as I realized what had just happened. *What a funny girl.* And just like that, I was grinning cheek to cheek.

She always had a great sense of humor. Ryder smiled fondly. I was so

glad to see the dark shadow of self-contempt had drifted off. It made him appear...contented. Relaxed. Carefree. I wanted to see more of this side of him and wondered what would get him feeling playful.

Will you take me to your lake? I think it would be fun to go swimming...

His lips stretched into a slow, calculated smile. His pale eyes gleamed. He whispered, *Close your eyes.*

I did.

Now open them.

And just like that, the crystalline water glimmered in the sunlight. The grasslands drifted off into the mist. I felt the episode with Asily leaving my consciousness and gave it permission to

do so. I didn't need that now, not when faced with the beauty before me.

Besides, it had served its purpose.

This is it. Ryder grinned down at me, and for a moment I was struck by how beautiful he was and how it gave me a sense of joy to see him so lighthearted. I'd never seen him look this way.

I noted he was already in swim trunks, and when I looked down at myself, I gasped to see that I was already in a totally skimpy bikini. I looked up at him archly, only to find his eyes were moving slowly over my body, growing heated. An answering need fluttered deep in my belly. I loved this new facet of myself. It was like Ryder had opened

a new door to my own sexuality.

Feeling the devil come over me, I cast him a calculating look from under my lashes and ran toward the water. I was pleasantly surprised to note that it was warm, and I struck out about five yards. Facing the shore, Ryder was standing there watching me, looking happy and...mischievous. Deliberately, I untied my bikini top and held it up above the water. Then I threw it and began swimming out toward the middle of the lake.

I heard the splash from shore. He was coming after me, and my excitement built. I swam for all I was worth, but Ryder wasn't going to let me get away. I could feel his predatory intent.

Within moments, he was with me, grabbing my ankle and pulling me to a stop. With a jerk, he pulled me back in his arms, my breasts mashed to his chest. His lips crushed mine, hot, carnal. He swept my mouth with his tongue, tasting me as our tongues stroked velvet on velvet, stealing my breath away powerfully.

But I was in charge of this foray. I bit his delicious lower lip, and he grunted, his hands fisting in my hair. Then I sucked on it to soothe it, and I pushed away. He was breathing heavily as he watched me, and I gave him a siren's smile. *We have all night.*

His breathing slowed, and his sexy

smile came easily. *All night*, he promised, keeping his distance, but not for long.

I kicked away, and to my delight, much horseplay ensued, a first for me in the water. Splashing, diving, floating, stolen kisses. Other things were stolen too, like my bikini bottoms, while Ryder was pretending to show me how to properly do the crawl, so I looked at him (this was a dream where I could make anything happen) and imagined his shorts in my hand. I looked down and, with a giggle, noted they were there.

His eyes widened with surprise, and I tried to get away with them—not very rigorously, I should add—and wasn't unhappy to be caught. Our warm, naked

bodies slipped against each other in the water. We stared into each other's eyes. It was like we were seeing each other in a whole new way.

I'm glad you're here.

So am I.

The longer we floated in the warm water, wrapped in each other's arms, the more our energies intertwined and strengthened. It was perceptible. There was something more at work here, an invisible tether that was bonding us and creating a sense of belonging. It gave me peace.

You feel it? There was a look of wonder on his face.

What's happening?

I'm not sure. I've never felt this.

It feels so good.

Like you're a gift to me. He looked intently into my eyes. *Like you're mine.*

I felt the same, but I was afraid to voice it. I'd never felt such a powerful feeling before, had never imagined I could feel this sure of the truth of what he was saying. I was his and he was mine. I'd never belonged to anyone but myself before. It was such a precious feeling. My eyes welled, and my throat closed up. I couldn't tell him how I felt, but I could show him.

My lips found his, softly, gently, trying to let him know that I felt the same beautiful connection. He was my gift.

Mine.

I woke to the decadent feel of skin on skin, the weight of a strong, masculine leg entwined with mine, and whiskery prickles moving languidly over my sensitized neck. It was rough and sexy. It was hot and tingly. I had to catch my breath, hold it, feel the sensations whispering over and through me. Ryder's mouth was tracing the line of my throat, the heat of his moist kisses sending warm flutterings through all parts of my body.

He pulled back and looked down at me, his eyes dark with intent. "Before the night is through, I want to feel every inch of your skin."

"Yes..."

Our lips met lazily at first, teasing touches, light nips, smiles, nibbles and quick forages that were stoking a deep fire in my belly. The heat was building as we added fuel to the fire, and before long my fingers were fisted in his hair, and we were feasting on each other, straining for more, mastering taste and texture.

My heart was pounding crazily. I couldn't breathe properly, each breath I gasped coming tremulously.

His hand was curved around my ass cheek, holding me against him, his thick erection already hot and pulsing against my belly. Bending my knee, I luxuriated in the contrast between my softness and

his hardness, my hips rubbing against his cock in slow, deliberate circles. With a deep moan, he braced his elbows on either side of my head, and I watched him sink into the pleasure as he gritted his teeth, staring down at me with his beautifully male visage. We were both breathing heavily.

I craved his strength, loving the weight of it, the feel of it surrounding me. Holding his beautiful pale eyes with my will, I lightly dragged my nails from his muscular shoulder down his broad back and curved them over his ass. Simultaneously, we rocked into each other, rubbing exquisitely, grinding perfectly, point on point, over and over again, and I cried out with the flash of

heat, which joined his rumbling growl.

“Ah...Ryder, you’re driving me crazy,” I whispered shakily.

“I want to make you crazy. I want you going nuts until you lose control.”

His rough voice made promises that I wanted him to keep, but I wasn’t going to be the only one.

I rolled over, pushing him down on his back, which took him by surprise. I found the hollow of his throat with my tongue. I nibbled and licked a line up over his jaw, and by the time I reached his lips, his hands were on my ass, squeezing roughly. With my teeth nibbling and sucking his delectable lips, my nails scraped down his chest, traced

the cords of muscle in his stomach, which jumped under my touch, and reached my goal.

My fingers closed over his hot length, and I was rewarded with a deep, sexy groan.

His lips were parted, his breathing was rough, and I felt a surge of power that was heady. His cock was silky and hard at the same time, and I gently ran my fingers over it, loving how it felt. With tentative strokes, I pumped my hand a couple of times.

“Fuck, Taylor—” He hissed.

“Does that feel good?” I whispered, and I pumped my hand a few more times, loving the tortured ecstasy on his face. I wanted to learn his body. I wanted to

know what made him wild.

“Shit, Taylor!” His lips were parted, his breathing harsh, and his hips moved in rhythm with my hand. I took a moment to dip my tongue in his mouth, and just that quickly, he became a wild man, sucking my tongue, squeezing my ass, and pulling my legs apart so I was straddling him.

“I need to be inside you,” he growled, and he slipped his fingers into me. With satisfaction he said, “You’re so fucking wet,” while his thumb rubbed at my clit.

“Oh!” I arched my back, feeling so close. “Now, Ryder. Now. Please!”

He slid a condom on and settled me over his hips so his cock slid into me

easily on a deep, guttural moan. Flexing his hips sharply, he hit the top of my sex in one hard stroke, and I cried out with the pleasure of it.

We both stilled, feeling the perfect fullness of the union, staring into each other's eyes, seeing the pleasure, heat and joy reflected there. But it wasn't enough, and we both needed to move.

Putting my hands on his chest, I moved slowly up and down. Ryder reached to fill his hands with my breasts, plucking at my nipples as I drove us toward the inferno. Heat unfurled in sizzling waves between my thighs when his hands changed position. Bracketing my hips, he worked his thumbs against my clit as I moved on him, building friction and

heat.

As the demand grew, I rode him harder, feeling him pound clear up in my womb, spasms gripping me as I got closer and closer. My climax hit hard, and harshly, I cried out.

“Ryder!”

My sex closed around his cock, squeezing him with hot, delicious convulsions. He stilled as I collapsed on his chest, but only long enough to roll me over to my stomach and lift my hips, driving into me from behind.

With the new position, head down and ass up, new nerve endings were exposed, and in a short time I was back to gasping in need, meeting him thrust for

thrust. One of his hands reached around to my clit and worked it, making me crazy with white-hot pleasure radiating out through my core. I was on fire, needing to come again. I was getting wound tighter and tighter, my pleasure almost painful, when lightning heat broke over me, causing me to come like I'd never come before, crying out as sensation after sensation rolled over my body.

Ryder was with me, shouting his own release before lying over me, careful to hold the majority of his weight on one arm. Rolling us both to our sides, he remained deeply embedded in me, running a hand up to cup one of my breasts, simply holding me against him

gently.

“Christ, Taylor. I can’t fucking get enough of you,” he murmured sleepily in my ear.

And it was with a sense of contentment that we fell into a deep sleep, still connected.

Chapter Fourteen

“*Lin’de*, you need to wake up.” The deep, rumbling voice vibrated warmly against my ear, and my lips curled sleepily, knowing exactly who it was.

“Let’s go back to the lake,” I protested, enjoying the feel of Ryder’s warm body pressed up to me, skin to skin, snuggling up to me from behind. I wiggled my ass a bit and enjoyed feeling the answering heat of his arousal and hearing his quick intake of air.

“We don’t have time for this,” he said huskily, though his breathing got heavy and he didn’t stop my movements.

Rather, his scruffy whiskers tickled my ear as a soft kiss was placed on my neck, which gave me wonderful tingles and sent almost instant gentle heat waves of pleasure to the apex of my thighs. Such a wonderful way to wake up, my body already eager and wanting Ryder. I couldn't help grinding against his arousal, wanting to feel it pumping inside me again. I also loved the growl of approval that told me this little interlude might be a go.

“You feel so good.” He nipped my ear just hard enough for me to yelp, but his lips soothed the spot. I had another ache that needed soothing too.

“Are you sure there's no time?” My smoky, languid sex voice was making a

comeback.

“Maybe just a little,” he muttered, letting his hand run down my back and curve over my ass until he reached my sex from behind. Pushing his knee between my thighs, he opened my legs.

I could feel I was already wet with anticipation, which just made me feel wonderfully wanton, and when his fingers found me so, he groaned deep and low. He moved his fingers gently around my folds. Then one slipped inside me, and he rubbed softly in a place that made me gasp.

“You’re so wet.”

I panted and moaned softly, feeling the urge to move my hips for more friction.

His fingers continued their gentle torture.

“You’re soft everywhere, *lin’de*,” his voice whispered against my ear. His finger slid out and rubbed around my clit, spreading moisture and making me tremble with need.

“I want to feel you.”

“Where?” he asked innocently.

“Inside me. I want to feel you there.” I felt like I was pleading.

After taking a moment to slide a condom in place, he ran the head of his erection over my swollen sex lips, spreading the creamy moisture, and shoved into me, overcoming my soreness from the previous night with the delicious feeling of fullness.

“Ah, damn, Taylor,” he said through

gritted teeth. “You feel so good. Open your mind to me.”

Tearing down my mental barrier, I let him feel my spiraling heat, the slow burn that was sweeping over me. With a slow pump of his hips, he made me moan with the sharp pleasure of it. Caressing my shoulder and neck with his lips, he pumped his hips again, building a steady, slow rhythm that was sweet and hot and beautiful. His fingers curled around mine, palm down on the sheet, and we held on to each other, riding the crest of the wave.

“Ryder...”

“I know...” He pumped harder, and I could feel the buildup, the tightening. We

were riding the edge, and it was so close and so hot and so good.

My muscles bunched, my toes curled, and I spun a beautiful free fall. I cried out as the ripples of pleasure swept through me. Ryder growled his own release, but he continued to pump into me softly a couple more times, breathing in deep, primitive grunts. Then he was covering me, pulling me powerfully into the curve of his body, still attached, so he could press a lingering kiss to my neck.

“You are...precious to me.”

Blossoming joy unfurled in my heart at his tentative admission. I sensed they were words he hadn't said to many, if any. Tears pricked my eyes, and I

couldn't help but say, "I care so much about you too, Ryder. This is all new to me."

He pressed a fervent kiss to my neck, leaving his lips there like he was trying to soak me in. "I'm glad I got to show you the lake last night. It's meaningful to me."

"Does that mean I can come back to it with you?"

"I would love to take you there in person."

"Can we go skinny-dipping?"

I felt his grin against my neck. "I'll hold you to that."

I wiggled my ass against him again and said, "You can hold me to that any

time.”

Ryder chuckled, a sound that was like beautiful music to my ears, making my heart melt. “That can be arranged. But right now, you need to get dressed. I need to take you to the high court.”

It took only a second for my reaction.

“I have to do what?” I couldn’t help the slightly screechy tone that came out of me as I sat up, clutching the sheet again. The bloom was off the rose as panic set in. “Wasn’t that where you were going to take me for, like...torture?”

The sheet pooled at his hips as he sat up and languidly leaned against the blue stone wall behind him. The sight of his washboard stomach distracted me. I still

hadn't traced the ridges with my lips and tongue. Definitely a pleasure I wanted to indulge in at some point.

"Don't look at me like that," he warned with a sharp look. "We need to get moving or we'll be late. And just so you know, I wasn't going to take you to the high court yesterday."

"You were trying to scare me," I deduced with a scowl. It had worked. I'm not big on pain.

"Look, Taylor. I think you have a better sense of the history of our survival now. It wouldn't be unheard of for someone to do anything to infiltrate our ranks and breach security, including enlisting Earth humans. We're always at

risk.”

“Okay, okay.” I did know. I had actually experienced one of those breaches in security at the marketplace.

“Can I assume they just want to know what happened yesterday?”

“Yes. I also insisted they keep it informal. Instead of using the high-court chambers, we’re going to meet in my father’s office.”

“That’s right. Your father is going to be there. Did I understand correctly that he’s in charge of the high court or something?”

“Probably both of my parents are going to be there.”

“No problem,” I muttered. No stress here. I just had sex like three times with

their son, was contemplating another quickie in the shower, and still had to look them in the eyes.

“Don’t worry. You’ll do fine.” He gave me a crooked, heartwarming grin. “I’ll take you up on the shower idea later.”

I answered his grin with one of my own. I hoped he would.

The cool thing was that I actually had clothes and shoes that fit. Cynthia had left them for me from our purchases of the day before. My confidence was boosted in that I was dressed appropriately, and attractively. The drape of the cottony pants was actually elegant, and the blue blouse was soft and

fitted. Cynthia was right that it made my eyes pop.

After a quick, solo shower, I dressed, fluffed my hair and nervously took note of my overall appearance to see if there was anything missing. I didn't have any makeup, but I didn't usually wear that much of it anyway.

"You look beautiful," Ryder said from the doorway. He was wearing his usual: jeans, T-shirt and boots. He was also back to wearing his closed, inviolable look, which made me nervous. It was like he was somewhere else. I had a sense that he wasn't entirely comfortable with going to the high court, and I wondered if it had to do with me.

"Thank you." I walked toward him

hesitantly. “Everything okay?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Answering a question with a question. Was he stressed? I didn’t have time to ask, because a beeping sound prompted him to snag a device from his pocket that fit into the palm of his hand. In a clipped voice, he said, “Ryder.”

“We’re coming,” Nick responded just as shortly.

“We’re ready. Out.”

“Out.”

A few seconds later, Cynthia and Nick pushed through the narrow passageway from the private transfer room. It was that quick. We met them in the main rec room. Cynthia was wearing

a floral tunic in a light material, while Nick wore a uniform of black pants, long-sleeved shirt, boots and armed utility belt.

I no longer sensed anger between them, but kind of a delayed anticipation. Cynthia was being closemouthed about it, and I had too much to think about, what with facing some very official-sounding people, so I just gave her a hug and was glad to see her.

“You look fantastic.” She smiled. “I knew that was a good color for you.”

“I trust your fashion sense, Cyn,” I offered, trying to find the behavioral rhythm I usually had with her. “You always manage to look superchic.”

“Why, thank you.” She bowed her

head in teasing acceptance of my praise.

“We ready to go?” Nick broke in impatiently.

What was his deal? I stole a quick look at Cynthia, but she was rolling her eyes with exasperation.

I was about to affirm I was ready when I realized something was missing, and it sent me into a panic. My mother’s bracelet. I hadn’t seen it since work a few days before.

“I’ve got it,” Ryder offered, reading my thoughts. With an indulgent smile he added, “The latch got caught in the blanket two nights ago. You were drunk, so I took it off to keep it safe.”

“I was not drunk,” I replied teasingly,

“and if I was, it was entirely your fault.”

“Yes, you were drunk, and yes it was my fault.”

“I’d love to wear it now. Is that okay?” I didn’t want to break any cultural codes or rules of conduct in public or whatever.

Nodding, he answered, “It’s fine. I’ll get it.”

Again, I know my mother was a drunk and a drug addict, but for some reason, her bracelet helps me feel strong and confident. Maybe it’s because it represents evidence that at some point she’d been healthy and in love. The fact that she gave me this bracelet that was so important to her is also the proof I need that shows me she used to love me.

Any way I look at it, it just makes me feel good.

Ryder put it on me, his expression softening as he clasped it. Lifting my delicately boned wrist to his lips, he pressed a kiss to my inner skin that sent small tingles up my arm. I met his eyes with an open mind and heart. Whatever he saw there made him still. We were in our own world, trapped in each other's eyes, feeling our energies reaching out to twine and braid together, surrounding us with warmth and a humming energy that vibrated with life. It felt so intimate.

“We need to go.” Nick scowled, looking down at his boots. Cynthia was looking at us slack jawed.

“Remember to guard your thoughts,”
Ryder warned me as he drew me into a
tight clasp. “Let’s go.”

I threw up my trusty-dusty brick wall,
wanting to make sure I didn’t commit a
faux pas that was likely the equivalent of
showing up without pants.

It was no sooner suggested than we
were all emerging from a bright blue
light, standing in a cavern chamber
underground where no ambient light
filtered through. Lit by large trinium
wall sconces, it was probably the size of
my apartment, and it had a common
worktable in the center and a number of
built-in nooks where private office
spaces were set up. Three-dimensional

computer projections had me gawking in several of the offices. Earth had nothing over these folks in technology. Fingers moved quickly and furiously over completely smooth keyboards on the desk, kind of like touchpads, only the workers were manipulating the images and words in the projection three-dimensionally, directly in front of them.

“You haven’t seen these before, have you? Cool, isn’t it?” Cynthia whispered in my ear as Ryder stepped off to speak with one of the soldier guys.

“How can you guys have better technology?” I whispered back.

“We’ve managed to snag the best scientists from different parts of Earth. We actually have a committee that

researches the latest innovations.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“And by the way, you owe me deets. You’re holding out on me.”

“You’re a fine one to talk.” I smirked.

“Definitely need some girl time. Soon.” She muttered the last word and gave Nick a dark look. His eyes were watching her coolly, assessing. He definitely had some plans in the works for Cyn.

“Senior officer.” A young man stepped out from one of the office compartments and gave Ryder a formal bow. He was dressed in a uniform similar to Nick’s.

“First officer.” Ryder acknowledged

him. “Are they ready for us to enter?”

“Yes, sir. They’ve been waiting for you in your father’s office.”

Ryder took my hand and led us down a lit pathway deeper into the cavern. I was glad not to be claustrophobic, or I would have really been in serious trouble, because I was already feeling fingers of trepidation clinging to my mind over just the meeting. We got to a heavy wooden door that was built to custom-fit the large archway, and my butterflies set to fluttering in my stomach with a vengeance. I slowed to a stop and took a deep breath, trying to calm them. Ryder paused and looked down at me questioningly.

“You okay?”

“I—I think so,” I said.

“I’ll never let anything happen to you.” His green eyes burned into mine, and I nodded as though appeased, but that deep sense of dread was only growing worse. There was a feeling of inevitability, and I didn’t know if that was good or bad, but I felt like I was heading down an invisible road, and all I could do was hang on and trust that I would be able to handle whatever was coming.

Ryder pushed open the door, and we entered a beautifully warm room. It was carpeted in a deep moss. Trinium lamps in vibrantly designed glass shades warmly lit the chamber, along with an

overhead light that was too brilliant to stare at. Being that we seemed to be deep underground, a lot of light was needed.

A few small desks were housed in natural nooks and corners of the room but were currently empty. Most impressive was the large, imposing desk with family pictures framed and displayed proudly at the front, facing outward. I felt energy pulling me in that direction, which was weird because no one was there, but I ignored it, not knowing what the hell was about to happen. All this energy stuff was still new to me. I didn't know where it was actually coming from, and I didn't know what to do with it.

Just in front of the desk was a large, round conference table. Both pieces of furniture were built in beautifully gleaming dark wood. It was the kind of room that, if it were aboveground, would be in a setting like Oxford University.

I could feel myself going pale, sort of shrinking from the wealth and privilege that was before me. I was out of my league. Deep under water. I found myself playing with my charm bracelet, seeking strength. Why in the world would Ryder be interested in little old trailer-park me?

It didn't help that, though polite, the dozen or so people crowding the office

were distinctly chilly. Not a one of them cracked a smile in my direction, which only worked to further alienate me. They didn't even see me.

I tried to remember what Cynthia had told me, which was that these folks had been in office for twenty years or more, so they'd seen a lot of pain and anguish in their people's lives due to outsiders. Still, I had to actively do my best not to feel hurt, which wasn't really working.

I tried to stay out of the way, by the door, but Ryder spotted me and pulled me toward an attractive older woman who looked chic with her mahogany hair in a bob. She was wearing a linen-and-silk version of what I was wearing.

“Mom, I want you to meet Taylor.

Taylor, this is my mother, Counsel Judiciate Miara Langston.” Her pale green eyes, which I saw as she glanced at me somewhat sharply and analytically, were a mirror of Ryder’s. Those alone could have told me she was his mother.

She held out a hand to me professionally. “Nice to meet you.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” I replied, and I shook her hand firmly. There wasn’t time for any other small talk, which was a relief to my nerves, as everyone was called to the conference table.

“Have a seat, and let’s all introduce ourselves to the newcomer,”

commanded a voice from the table.

As Ryder led me to a seat at the table, I knew I would have recognized his father in a lineup. He was tall and broad, like Ryder, with deep, blue-black hair, though his had a few streaks of gray at the temples. He was also a bit more filled out with age, had a few more lines, and had bright blue eyes, but his deep voice and compelling gaze were the same.

His brow knitted, and he looked me over with a hawklike stare before turning his look on Ryder. In a cold voice, he remarked, "I see you dressed for the occasion."

"Always," Ryder responded with much the same tone.

“Earth seems to be rubbing off on you.”

“I hope so.”

They stared at each other in a silent battle of wills that made me, and everyone else at the table, uneasy. What was wrong with Earth, by the way?

After that, it was time for business.

Once everyone was seated, introductions were made. Because my brain scrambles when I'm feeling stressed, I immediately forgot all their names except for Ryder's father's. He was Talon, senior representative of the province Milak and the nation, Sunan.

Talk about stress. I was on overwhelm with all eyes on me, feeling

like I was the freak show of the room. Looking around the table of representatives, I saw there might have been one or two faces that were neutral, but most were eyeing me with downright suspicious looks, which was really hard to accept. Besides that, being the center of attention was not my thing, particularly when I felt like I was being analyzed, judged and found lacking.

Recognizing their treatment of me was helpful, though. It got my inner bitch to wake up. I don't cower for long, and the badass in my head suddenly smacked me hard.

Screw these people. They can kiss your ass. They should kiss your ass, because you're the reason they aren't

mourning the deaths of hundreds. They should be smiling at you, thanking you, warmly shaking your hand and grateful that their marketplace didn't become the site of a new memorial. I took a deep breath and coolly looked everyone squarely in the eye. I had nothing to be ashamed of. They were the ones lacking in manners.

I felt triumphant when Ryder's mother gave me a small smile of approval.

Still, I appreciated it when Ryder's hand found its way to my thigh under the table, which also gave me a hit of warmth. I squeezed his hand gently in thanks.

Not so strangely, Ryder's mother

seemed to pick up on our body language and continued looking between us searchingly, as though she suspected there was something going on. I flushed guiltily, knowing exactly what was between us. Her green eyes widened slightly, as though she'd just had her thoughts confirmed, and I looked away quickly.

If I clicked my heels three times and said *home, home, home*, would I find myself there?

“Images of the marketplace have been compiled,” Talon told the group. “The purpose of this meeting is to review the images and clarify any questions we might have over the incident. It will allow us to better evaluate the case and

make necessary decisions.”

There were nods of assent all around.
At first, it all went smoothly.

The cool, 3-D imaging technology came out of a small metallic box, of which each corner was made of glass. Four different projections allowed everyone to watch from their own angles as Cynthia and I walked down the aisle of vendors toward the transfer location. The images, which were voice controlled, were stopped along the way numerous times. There were a number of questions about how I was able to pick up on the emotions, being a newcomer, when no one else in the marketplace had noticed anything. How was it that I could

bypass mental shields, which everyone agreed were impossible to pass through. Did I believe I was more gifted than the rest of the people of Sunan in mind reading and perception?

The questions were borderline hostile, and I could feel Ryder tensing. Not knowing what he would do, I tried an experiment. I tried to hold my shield, but I sent him a reassuring mental blip, letting him know I was okay. That may or may not have been the reason he kept his seat. It didn't stop his anger though, especially toward his father. His eyes kept finding the man seated almost directly across from us, his jaw clenched.

I kept explaining to the best of my

abilities that I didn't know what anyone else could do. I only knew that in that moment I was able to locate the two terrorists, though it had taken a lot of effort and concentration.

“Cynthia, did you feel the energy that Taylor is speaking of?” Miara asked her.

“Only after she was able to find the general location of where it was coming from, and only in small quantity.”

Cynthia had gone quiet over the course of the questioning. Her toffee eyes were like round saucers, telling me that she hadn't expected this meeting to go quite this way. “The truth is, she is very powerful. She was able to tap into what they were thinking despite their shields,

something I couldn't do.”

“Is that right? Can you bypass shields?” One of the other representatives was looking at me, aghast.

Ah. So it was my abilities that made me suspect.

“Not all the time. In that moment, a hit of power seemed to boost me, and I don't know where it came from.” I shook my head to show my own befuddlement over it all. “For some reason, in the heat of the moment, I could see the bomb in my mind. They wanted to plant the bomb right next to the transfer units and transfer out before the bomb went off.”

A few gasps sounded around the table, along with murmurings about how

mylunate from the transfer area would have created an explosion several times more lethal. No one would have survived.

I continued delivering my information. “The smaller one, the one that got away, was actually feeling horrified and coerced into doing what he was doing. He was holding the bag with the bomb in it over his shoulder, and both he and the large one were arming the bomb.”

Miara frowned her concern. “So what happened next?”

“I just knew that there was no time. Somehow it came to me. They were going to do this horrible thing, and only I knew about it. Then the smaller one

said..." I closed my eyes to better remember. "The smaller one said that the marketplace would be our tomb. The larger one, though, he was out for blood. He felt a personal stake in this. He wanted revenge for a terrible wrong he felt was done to him by your people."

"We wronged him?" one of the others sputtered. "That's rich."

"We lost close to a thousand in their attack twenty-five years ago," one of the more elderly council members protested.

"Animals!"

"Subhumans."

A general din of disapproving statements, comments and exchanges filled the room until Talon held a hand up for silence.

“Let’s finish watching images before we decide on the punishment for the Brausiiian warrior.”

Punishment? Was this like...a trial?

The images played on, capturing my attention again. There were a few horrified gasps from the round table as I ran at the hooded pair, throwing my shoes. I had the grace to roll my eyes at my own actions, though there hadn’t been anything else I could have done in the moment. I hadn’t exactly had the luxury of time. I smirked and happened to glance at Ryder, which was a mistake. He had a dangerous look on his face. He was not amused. Well, if he didn’t like that, he was definitely not going to like

the next part. Wait for it...

The Brausiian warrior unleashed his roar of fury as his partner escaped and began his mad rush at me with his knife drawn. I heard Ryder's sharp intake of breath, and his hand tensed on my thigh. I tried to rub it soothingly, reminding him that I was here and okay, but he wasn't eased. The warrior's crushing embrace, where he was yelling at me to transfer him, only lasted a few seconds. Then the warrior collapsed in anguish, and I fell into a deep slumber. End of images. Another barrage of questions began.

"What did he want?" a representative near me asked.

"He wanted me to help him escape."

"And you resisted," a representative

on Ryder's other side stated with some awe. I decided to omit that my resistance was less by choice than by lack of knowledge. Who knows what I would have done if I'd actually had the knowledge. He was a scary guy.

"What did you do? Why did he let go?" Talon turned to me speculatively.

"It's hard to explain." I looked at Ryder, who seemed shaken by the images he'd just seen. This was clearly his first time viewing them. "I sort of went Rocky Balboa on the guy. The warrior's mind was mostly open to me, like he was new at shielding and forgot to do it. I just imagined a hurtful power, allowed it to build strength, and bombed

on him mentally. I thought of a huge fist delivering a powerful left hook.”

“This isn’t new. We just never found it to be effective,” one of the other members said.

“It appears to be highly effective,” Talon responded, eyeing the still again. “This small woman was able to bring down one of the warriors.”

I decided not to mention that burst of power I was given from somewhere again, because I just didn’t want to have more questions that I couldn’t answer, which would bring more suspicion down on me. So I remained silent and let the council speak among themselves.

The general consensus was that this did appear to be effective, and following

that, there needed to be experimentation done to see where they'd gone wrong in the past.

“She’s slight and was capable of bringing down the warrior without bloodshed.”

“More study of this must be done. It’s effective in the short run, but look. She became immediately incapacitated.”

“Perhaps we can experiment. It might become a weapon of choice if we can increase the lethal force and control for the effects.”

“Of course he’ll be executed, but perhaps first we could experiment on him?”

What? Executed? Is there not going

to be a trial? I'd felt the pain the Brausiian was in, the grief and fury over what he'd perceived as being done to him. Would he get no say? Didn't he deserve his day in court? To defend himself? He wasn't evil, and he hadn't succeeded in his attempt. Didn't he deserve, like, a prison sentence or something?

“Let us reconvene for our final decision during the morning session,” Talon interrupted. “If there are no further questions, let us adjourn.”

Immediately, the representatives began making their way out of the room, a few of them coming over to shake my hand formally and wish me well, which was better than the suspicious sideways

glances I'd received earlier.

"We'll see you later." Cynthia gave me a quick hug, following behind the last of the representatives. "I promised my mother I'd have lunch with her."

"All right."

"You're okay?" She arched a delicate eyebrow.

"Good, fine." I pushed a quick smile at her, not letting her see the inner turmoil I was feeling. She left with Nick, who shook hands with Ryder and gave me a measured nod. He seemed to have developed a grudging respect for me and my badassness. Then we were on our own. Ryder's parents had made their way to the magnificent desk deeper in

the room and seemed to be discussing a file.

“If you even consider doing something like that again, I’ll lock you up myself,” Ryder growled quietly, for my ears only. There was a tremor to his muscles, as though he was barely containing his emotions.

“All’s well that ends well,” I snapped, and I pulled my arm out of his grasp.

“What’s your problem?” He scowled, looking thoroughly pissed off.

He was about to have company with that emotion.

Chapter Fifteen

“What the hell was all this about?” I motioned toward the now-empty table.

“It was a briefing. Most of the evidence was captured in images, which is why our public areas are under surveillance.”

“So a person accused never has a chance to speak, if their actions were caught on tape?”

“Exactly. Their actions speak for themselves.”

“So the guy has no chance?” Horror made my voice shake.

“A chance for what?” The look of

incredulity on Ryder's face said it all.

“Are you kidding me? What kind of place is this?” I couldn't help that my voice hiked. I was aghast. “He doesn't get a chance to defend himself?”

“What's the problem?” Talon's voice reared up from behind his desk.

I paused a moment, my mind debating in the space of seconds whether to say anything, and I knew that even if it meant cutting my own throat, I needed to. This was a man's life at stake, and I had had a hand in this sentence. “I was told you were a just society, but then you deny someone their day in court? Doesn't the warrior get the chance to defend himself?”

“Were any of you in the marketplace

going to be given a chance to defend yourselves?” Ryder answered. “His bomb was going to level the marketplace. His knife was ready to eviscerate you.”

“But he didn’t actually do anything, and you don’t know that he was going to follow through with it. I felt him! I was in his mind! He wasn’t a monster. He was betrayed. Something horrific happened to him that he believed was caused by your people! Don’t you think that’s worth questioning?”

“He was going to fucking kill you, Taylor! The son of a bitch is lucky he’s in lockup, because given the chance, I’d tear his goddamn heart out. Don’t you

dare defend him to me.”

“Ryder, calm yourself,” his mother snapped, her eyes narrowing on him.

“There’s no reason to speak this way to Taylor. She is not from here. She doesn’t understand.”

“Who is she to you?” Talon demanded of Ryder while looking at me.

“Not your concern,” Ryder returned tightly, partly, I imagine, because he still hadn’t recovered from seeing me attacked by the large Brausiiian warrior in the images, and partly because it was his father who’d asked.

“Everything that happens in Sunan is my concern.” His father raised his voice angrily and stepped out from around his desk to approach. “Haven’t you done

enough? When do you start listening to those around you? When do you become accountable?”

“Talon, not now,” Miara warned, following her husband.

“Yes, now! He makes poor choices, and we all suffer for them!”

“We all thought she was lovely. She had us all fooled,” Miara countered.

“You can’t hold that against him or you have to hold it against us all.”

Was this an ex-girlfriend they were talking about? And was I now being lumped into the same pile as her? The one labeled Bad Choices? The pain of that pierced my heart with a hot blade. The idea that I wasn’t good enough for

Ryder wasn't a new one to me, but it wasn't one I thought would have been said to me in an outright manner. The familiar feeling of shame, like I was wearing whore's clothes in the castle, hung over my head. It made me pale with a sense of disappointment so deep, I thought I'd never climb out of the darkness of it.

“I can blame him for refusing to allow proper punishment. She was found in your office, among your files. She deserved imprisonment!”

“It's time to let that go, Talon.”

“Not when he continues to act foolishly!”

“Can't have it both ways, old man,” Ryder said snidely. “Either she's a hero

for saving the day or I shouldn't have brought her. Which is it?"

"You think to become involved with someone *other*?" The idea was obviously abhorrent to Talon. My self-esteem was taking a real beating in this conversation. Another wave of hurt splintered quietly through my mind. I winced.

In a menacing voice, Ryder snarled, "I will be done with you."

Energy suddenly crackled around me. Power surged up through my feet. Adrenaline spiked and I felt myself capable of seeing through the mental barriers around me. I could feel Miara's anger that I was causing further strife

between her husband and son when she had to work so hard to keep peace between them during moments of calm. They were rarely in the same room together anymore, and it broke her heart, a heart that still ached for the empty room in her home that she'd left as it was, filled with Asily's personal things. Every once in a while, she sat in that room with the delicately embroidered floral bedcover, when her day had been particularly challenging.

Ryder and his father had locked horns. There was anger and sorrow swirling through Talon, but he was refusing to acknowledge it. It was as though he'd made a deal with himself that if he didn't think about it, it wouldn't be there. By

turning off his heart, he'd not only blocked out his daughter's death, but the joy of remembering her and of sharing a full life with the rest of his family. He kept his focus on trying to bring his son to heel. In turn, Ryder's bone-deep resentment radiated from him.

The emotions in the room were overpowering.

Sorrow that I had a hand in this weighed heavily. I wished I could have just shut up, backed down, left the room. I didn't want to cause more pain for Miara or any of them. These were Ryder's parents, his family, and I was forever going to damage their view of me, but this was no small thing. It was a

man's life, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I knew I hadn't done everything I could to stop this madness from plowing forward without thought or care.

The energy flow surging through me steadily grew in strength. It was dizzying. The mental door whispered open, briefly, in my mind again. The all-knowing, overwhelming energy that had come to me in the marketplace returned. In the same way I'd known the terrorists needed to be stopped, I knew that this moment in the timeline of Sunan was crucial. Feeling as though a sudden burst of freezing wind whipped my face, I saw the future unfold into two potential branches, all in a fraction of a second, in

my mind's eye. I gasped with the clarity of the vision.

One way would lead to bloodier warfare than either the Sunan or the Brausahad ever seen or could predict. They would both have access to Earth's technology, and combining it with their own would lead to a war the likes of which could shake the very foundation of human sustainability. The shrieks of pain and terror from that reality had barely faded before I peered down the other possible path, which showed a cautious truce between the two peoples that had the potential to lead toward peace.

The Brausiian warrior was the key. He was of great importance to his

people. To kill him would set in motion events the likes of which could destroy the fabric of both societies. The power of the vision left me breathing heavily, sweat breaking out on my brow and upper lip. What did this all mean?

As though no time had passed for him, Talon spoke to me. “We’ve experienced horrors the likes of which you will never understand, which is why we’ve had to develop a system that may seem harsh and unjust, but which keeps us alive.”

On a shaky note, I asked, “But at what expense? You’re just going to execute the man?”

“It’s the least of what he deserves,” Talon ground out.

“This will lead to war! I’ve seen it!”

Miara frowned at this.

“We welcome the opportunity to exterminate their pestilence for all time!” Talon shouted.

“You can’t! This is wrong!” My voice took on a shrill note. The door whispered closed after sharing the terrifying vision, leaving me tired and fragile. At a gut level, this was making me ill, and I turned away, holding a hand to my stomach to calm the roiling nausea, but the anger continued between Ryder and his father.

“We don’t allow outsiders to come to Sunan,” Talon intoned sharply. “There’s a reason for strict discipline and obedience. Things happen when we

don't meet expectations and rules of governance!"

Where had I heard that before, the talk about discipline and obedience? About rules and following them or something? I opened my mind and tried to peer into my memory, but I found myself inundated with the emotions swirling around us all—the rage, the sorrow and the deep familial love and loyalty that was leaving them all conflicted and confused.

"I needed to keep her safe." Ryder confronted his father with anger that was vibrating off of him almost violently. Why such a strong reaction? Toward his father, no less? I didn't sense that his father was a bad man, just hurt and confused, though he covered it up with

his force of will.

“Why wouldn’t she be safe on Earth?”

“There were men trying to kill her.”

My mind was being tickled. Flashes of imagery—woodland with dappled sunlight—teased the fringes of my mind without allowing me to fully grasp their significance. When had I been kicking a ball through the woodlands, dodging trees? What was that?

“How does this become our responsibility?” Talon demanded of Ryder.

“Talon!” Miara said sharply.

“Because Ranik is trying to kill her, and he’s our responsibility.” Ryder’s teeth were clenched.

Don't let this happen anymore, Taylor. Help them. I knew that sweet voice whispering desperately in my mind. Her energy was calling to me, needing me, pulling me so sharply that I couldn't resist.

In the next moment, I was in the woodlands, sitting on a blanket with Asily, drawing a picture of her on canvas. I was using charcoal and could see that it was mostly done. When had I completed so much of it? Curiously, I asked, *Why haven't you gone to them? Let them see that you're okay.*

I can't. They have to come to me. You can help them with that. This is your gift. You'll grow into your power as

you practice with it. You have to help them access the Gods' plane. Not now, but soon. Promise me. When the time is right.

“Taylor!” I felt like I could hear Ryder’s voice from far, far away. He sounded frantic as he said, “Mom, I can’t feel her! Her energy signature is gone!” I looked around with concern, expecting to see him.

Why can't he remember you? We were all together in the same dream.

Spirits can't interact outside of the Gods' plane, Tay. You're going to have to help him remember this one.

Oh. So last night wasn't just a regular dream.

Of course not, or you would have

remembered it.

How will I remember this one?

I can help you, but you're going to need to concentrate on this memory as you go back. Focus yourself.

Focus myself. Got it.

Now go back. Asily smiled sweetly, and just that quickly I felt my weight on my feet. I nearly stumbled from the unexpected pressure, but Ryder was grasping my arms.

“Dammit, Taylor! What happened?”

“I was on the Gods’ plane,” I breathed, blinking my eyes back into focus. The flood of dream detail, the horror and the bleak pain that continued to poison them all, played through my

mind.

“What are you talking about?” Talon was clearly taken aback. “How would you know about that? Why were you brought here?” Just like that, his anger, now mixed with confusion, was directed toward me.

I realized this drama had nothing to do with me being here or my questioning of authority. This was a family still grieving over the tragic loss of their daughter. This horrible argument was a refusal to accept and grieve in a healthy, meaningful way, which meant they had never been able to move on and live freely. It was hurting all of them. Asily could see this, and she wanted to see them all heal.

The memory of Ryder's young, grieving face shamefully confessing his guilt for something that was not his responsibility seared my heart. This was the root. Ryder, the child, was counting on me to protect him, and as I thought of his smooth-cheeked visage bowing his head in shame, my own anger bloomed over the injustice.

Though I tried to find a calm place in my mind, the punk in me was glaring daggers at Ryder's father, wanting to bitch-slap him for turning his grief on a defenseless child. As it turned out, I didn't have time.

The office door opened suddenly. A young man in black uniform entered

swiftly, carrying a hand-size black felt bag, like a coin bag on a rope, something that could be worn around the neck.

“What is it?” Talon demanded, his voice cracking with the effort to regain control.

“Sorry to interrupt, Senior Representative, but there was a problem with the Brausiiian prisoner.”

Frowning, Talon asked, “What occurred?”

“We missed this object when we caged the prisoner. We tried to retrieve it this morning while he was investigating it, and he flew into a rage. Several officers were injured and have been transferred to the medic ward.”

“Will they recover?” Talon asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, what is it? Slide the contents out on my desk.” They walked to Talon’s desk, and I trailed Ryder to bring up the rear.

Here was that frightening sense of inevitability again. I almost didn’t want to know what was about to happen. I was afraid, but I walked toward the desk with everyone else anyway. There was a tug of energy from the pictures framed across part of the desk. In one picture, the profile of an older woman holding an infant caught my attention. Somehow I recognized her and was drawn to her, which was impossible because this was Ryder’s family, and I obviously didn’t

know anyone but Asily.

And yet it was like she was reaching out to me, soothing me, telling me it was going to be okay.

Why did I need soothing? The feeling of dread doubled, and I suddenly wished I could be anywhere but right here.

Hadn't I been through enough? Couldn't I just go home and pretend none of this had happened? I'd already accessed the damn Gods' plane! I wanted to be done.

The officer tipped the bag sideways. As though in slow motion, out tumbled an aching familiar heart charm that made me draw in breath. *No, no, no more!* I couldn't handle all this volatile emotion. No. I didn't want to know anymore. I'd had enough! Please!

My chest tightened. My breathing grew heavy. My vision grew tunneled. Blood rushed loudly as I tried to deny what I could see with my own eyes. It couldn't be.

“Is that all?” Talon asked skeptically, dismissively.

“What is that?” Miara asked, picking up the charm. “It’s familiar to me. It must have significance. I’m sure it does.”

“He’s an animal. What significance can anything have?” Talon said with disdain.

“Taylor, are you okay?” Ryder was grasping my arms. “You’re like ice.”

Tell them, Taylor.

“Dreya?” I whispered shakily, hearing

her voice in my head and suddenly knowing just who it was. Like a baseball bat to the head, dream memories slammed into my mind. For a few precious moments, it was like I couldn't breathe, trying to gulp at the air like a fish out of water. The picture called to me, and my eyes were soothed as I saw Dreya's profile on the edge of the desk.

"Dreya, is that you?"

"My grandmother?" Ryder asked.

"How do you know her?"

"Is she talking with you now?"

Miara's face was a study of shock.

Tell them. This is your part to play. You understand this truth now, don't you?

"No. Please." I whimpered as panic

boiled over, and I shook my head, rejecting the evidence before me.

“Why?”

“What is it, *lin'de*?” Ryder pulled me around to face him, looking concerned.

“What’s wrong?”

You must. You know this.

“No!”

Your mother will be in danger if you don't do this. You don't have time to lose.

Silence stretched. Once again, all eyes were on me, with varying degrees of awe and confusion. I covered my face with shaking hands and felt on the verge of a breakdown. My world was being ripped apart, the pieces put back

together in a random collage that was leaving me reeling, without any sense of self or foundation.

Taylor?

“Yes, I understand,” I whispered, and the other proverbial boot hit the ground with a magnificent, booming echo. The truth—the sick, awful truth of the charm, and its very telling meaning—hit home with a vengeance.

“Taylor, what’s happening? Why is my grandmother talking to you?”

With tears welling up in my eyes, fearful of what this news would bring, I looked back at the charm. Pulling my arms free of Ryder’s grasp, I gently took it from Miara with shaking fingers and cradled it in my palm, holding it before

him. “My mother told me it’s a love charm. The hearts represent each married partner, and the pearl in the center is the newborn child protected by their love.”

Ryder’s eyes turned sharp. He went from having an expression of bewilderment to staring at me with fierce intensity, his look telling me that he was remembering the last time I’d shared this with him. He knew there was something important to this exchange, something he just wasn’t seeing.

“I’ve heard this.” Miara’s eyes snapped to me sharply. “When a child is born, a Brausiian child, this is the gift from the warrior to his life mate. I saw

one of these. Long ago.”

“During the movement for peace?”
Ryder asked.

His mother nodded, narrowing her eyes on me.

Tears spilled down my cheeks because I felt the significance. I looked up at Talon. He remained coldly impassive, staring down at me, but there were shadows there as he waited. I recognized them, now that I’d seen them on Ryder’s haunted visage.

“I was in his mind. His wife and child were killed in what he thinks of as an attack by the Sunan, and he holds you all responsible. He wants revenge.”

“But how would you know the symbolism of the charm?” Miara asked

quietly. I sensed a core of strength in her to match Ryder's and Dreya's. They were good people just trying to survive. We were all survivors, but that didn't mean we were all going to be friends, especially with the information I was about to share.

I looked up at Ryder and held out my arm, my mother's bracelet glinting under the lights. Shiny and bright, the love charm that always brought tears to my mother's eyes when she looked at it hung there. Clearly, the two charms were identical.

"It looks like my dad was a Brausiiian warrior. He gave this to my mother when I was born, and before she disappeared,

she gave it to me.”

Ryder’s face transformed almost as soon as he understood what I was saying. He stepped away. Angry dismay curled his lip. “What the hell are you saying? You don’t know what you’re saying. You have no idea about this.”

“Your mother received this charm from your father? You are Brausiiian?” Talon’s tone was low and menacing. He pulled his mechanical device from his pocket. To do what with, I didn’t know.

“Yes.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s saying,” Ryder ground out.

“She’s our enemy,” Talon responded contemptuously. “Isn’t it obvious in the way she was arguing for the animal’s

life?”

“I haven’t done anything to you,” I protested on a choked sob. My lungs squeezed with emotion, but I still backed away from him. “How could I be your enemy?” But it was so clear now. *The animal*. I was just poor white trash. I was trailer park. I was alone.

“Talon,” Miara said sharply. “Leave this.”

“We must protect ourselves! Our children!” Talon turned to the young soldier and commanded, “Make a cell ready. Take the prisoner.” The young soldier turned to me and grasped my arm with a firm grip.

“No!” I yanked on my arm to be free.

The soldier's fingers caught on my bracelet, and it broke. All of the charms scattered like confetti. I gasped. For several seconds, the silence echoed through my mind as I stared at the lifetime of dreams so carelessly scattered on the floor.

“No, no, no.” My anguished whisper came from the depths of my soul. The pain burned in my chest as I saw the representation of my mother's heart and spirit scattered like rubbish.

Ryder growled through clenched teeth, backhanding the young man. He flew back on his ass. Ryder roared, “Do not touch her!”

Miara's voice rang sharply. “You forget yourself, Talon. It's not your

place to assign imprisonment. Our laws shepherd the way, and as the judiciary, I can say that she is free to go. She is not a citizen of this world and has done nothing wrong.”

“Miara!” Talon scowled down at her, his expression so reminiscent of Ryder that my heart ached just seeing it. He was just another lost, angry male.

“You’re wrong, Talon. In this you are wrong. She put her own life in jeopardy to save our people. Be at peace. Come. Let’s give them a few moments to collect themselves.” Miara led the way out with the young soldier following. Talon exited reluctantly. A look of disdain shadowed his face.

Ryder didn't wait long. Breathing heavily, his face flushed with rage, a crazed look in his eyes, he beheld me from a distant place and asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know," I cried insistently through my tears. Letting him see the truth of my heart and mind, I opened to him completely. I wanted him to stop hurting. He'd hurt enough. We'd all hurt enough.

"How could you not know?" Disbelief punctuated his words. "How could you live for more than twenty years and not know where you come from?"

Desperation edged my voice as I laid

heart bare and explained. “I don’t know anything about my father. My mother never told me. She left before I could ask her. My aunt doesn’t know. My grandmother is dead. There is no one who can tell me. I c-care about y-you, Ryder. I w-would never lie to you!”

“I know you wouldn’t lie,” he said heavily, standing with his hands braced on hips, his shoulders so broad and strong, the sight of him aching familiar in that stance. His anger was draining, but the moment was a ten-ton weight on his back.

“Then what’s wrong? I thought this was...precious...to you.” My breath hitched on the word as my throat choked, unable to finish the painful thought that

maybe I was just now too flawed for that to be true anymore. He'd overridden my defenses and made me crave his care and the feeling that I was connected to this life in wonderful ways.

“That’s not the point.”

“Not the point? What is the point? I’m the same person I was last night and this morning. I’m that s-same p-person that you found to b-be precious. Please, Ryder, listen to me! Hear me!”

I was begging for love. Pleading, just the way I would go to bed at night, crying into my pillow, wishing for my mother to come back. And here I was, at it again! Wasn’t that what this was? It was me being pathetic and small,

needing someone, and having that important person turn me away again. My spirit was being crushed, just as I'd known it would happen.

He didn't respond, and instead turned away. He was rejecting me. My mind cried in protest, wanting to keen with the perfect grief that was wrapping around my heart, but I held it in as the silence stretched between us.

"All my life I have hated the Brausa. I've imagined killing them all, torturing them slowly with joy in my heart for all the pain they've caused, and to find that you are one? Brausians are the enemy, Taylor."

"No..." That statement had sounded so final.

“All my life I’ve sworn vengeance for my people, my parents and my sister. Brausian animals ravaged her! She was a sweet...child!” His voice broke in memory.

“I know this. I saw it.” I thought of Asily sitting on the blanket and knew that I needed to give that to him.

“What?” He looked to me sharply.
“How could you know?”

“I went with you into your dreams last night. I followed you into the grassland to find Asily. I took you to her on the Gods’ plane.”

“How... You followed me? What gave you the right?” he thundered. “Why would you do this to me? That was none

of your business! You had no right!”

“She called to me! She wanted me to bring you there! She wanted you to see the truth.”

He bit off a curse and took several deep breaths. “How can that be?” he asked almost fearfully, his green eyes searching mine.

“They blamed you. It was wrong. You knew it then, and you know it now. You protect your family from the truth, hiding it away, even from yourself, but it makes you boil with resentment. They blame you and you allow it. There is no blame! This was the path she was meant to walk! I’ll show you.” Asily’s energy touched mine, letting me know she was encouraging this. It was time for Ryder

to forgive himself.

Closing my eyes, I brought forth the woodland scene where Asily was smiling while sewing dolls' clothes for her little sister, and Ryder was hiding, unable to shoulder the weight of everyone's pain, his young voice confessing that he was no longer liked by his father. I pictured Asily giving him hugs, smiling her mischievous smile, telling him she was fine and that this was all part of a larger plan.

"No." Ryder closed his eyes, his head tilting back as the images slid across his mind.

"She called to me and I answered. She wanted you to stop torturing

yourself.”

“Taylor.”

“Your family has torn itself apart with grief. That’s what hurts her.”

“No,” Ryder whispered gruffly. He turned away, his head hung with emotion. “You took me to her. I saw her. She was beautiful. I...remember.”

“She wanted your family to heal.”

When he turned back, his eyes were bright with moisture but gave nothing else away. There was nothing he could say.

“I’ll take you home.”

Home? This was it? Brief hope had sprung in a secret place in my soul that giving Asily back to him would change things, make him see that I was still...me.

It hadn't. I was his enemy.

The anger, the hot feeling of betrayal, was surprising. I'd done nothing wrong. I'd put myself out there, ripped open my heart to show him my sincerity, and it hadn't mattered. I didn't really matter. That was the bottom line.

I closed my shop, reinforced my mental walls and let my head drop. There was nothing more to say.

Yes. It was time to go home.

After all, I was part animal to him now.

You know there is more left to do?

"I know, Dreya," I whispered. "It seems there is always more to do. Please be safe. Goodbye."

We'll meet again, love. Hold on to your strength and courage. You received those traits from both your mother and your father.

A dry sob threatened. In a choked voice I said, "Thank you."

With new resolve, I bent to pick up my mother's charms. They were truly precious to me. The thought of leaving even one behind was abhorrent, but I knew I wouldn't find them all.

After a moment of watching me crawl, Ryder bent to help, and I snarled at him, "Don't touch her things," which caught him by surprise. I grabbed what I could see immediately and held the charms tightly to my heart as I stood.

“Taylor...” Ryder looked at me but was unable to speak.

“Take me home,” I said coldly.

Chapter Sixteen

And though I was heading back from another planet, which was weird enough to be able to say, my surreal, wild ride was not yet coming to a halt.

First, I tried to request Cynthia for the ride back, but Ryder insisted on taking responsibility for me, which was all he said to me as I gathered my clothing and my purse, not wanting to leave anything of me behind. I even offered to give him the blasted mylunate off my toe, but with a carefully blank face, he just looked at me in silence and told me to hold on to it, given the danger of the situation I was

in. The transfer itself was less dramatic, as I was expecting the strange suffocating sensations. I worked hard to remain passive in his strong arms as he clasped me during the process.

I thought I might have felt a whisper of his lips on top of my head, but I figured it was just fanciful thinking, and because thinking about never being close to Ryder again was making my lungs seize and my body want to expel the ball of hurt through a crying jag, I had to push it all away. No way was I going to give him that. Not again.

It was late morning when we began our ride back through town. There was some traffic, but the morning-rush-hour nightmare traffic had diminished, which

allowed us to cruise comfortably along the Pacific Coast Highway, smelling the salt air. It only took forty minutes of travel to get back to the apartment. To keep from remembering how good he felt as I wrapped my arms around his waist, and how good he smelled, I started trying to solve my more immediate problems. I was determined not to focus so much on how tied I felt to a guy who wanted nothing to do with me.

Everything was up in the air. Someone was trying to kill me, which meant I couldn't go back to my apartment and would likely have to do some crawling to get my aunt to let me stay with her for a while. As far as I knew, I still had my

job, so that was good. Maybe offering to pay my aunt's bills for the next six months would persuade her to have a heart.

Because it was a weekday and most of the residents had gone to work, parking was wide-open. We were able to park the bike right outside the gates. It felt surreal being back on Earth, where everything was familiar. I looked across the street at the apartment complex and had a fleeting thought that Mrs. Myrtle had had to walk to school on her own the last few mornings. I hoped she was all right.

Stiffly, I took my helmet off, and keeping my eyes on the task of scooping the straps neatly back into the helmet, I

said, "Thank you for the ride, and for protecting me. I really do appreciate what you've done for me." Carefully trying not to touch him more than necessary, I swung a leg off the bike, wanting simultaneously for this moment to be prolonged and for my immediate escape, so I could start my self-medicating crying jag. I know. It didn't make sense, but nothing in my world made sense anymore. Everything that I'd thought I could count on was altered.

Ryder got off the bike and took his helmet off, running his fingers through his black hair in a purely masculine gesture. I turned my gaze away, remembering how soft his hair had felt

in my grasp and desperate to forget. He took both of our helmets and put them on the bike before turning to me. Clearly something was on his mind as he scanned the immediate area.

“It’s not safe for you to be here.” He was looking around the neighborhood rather than at me.

“Yeah, I figured. I’ll work it out.” I nodded, hugging my waist.

“How?” He confronted me dead on, his cool green eyes watching me steadily.

“Don’t concern yourself. I’ll be fine. I’m not your problem.” I said this evenly, firmly, up until the last word, when my voice cracked and I had to take a calming breath. How could anything

hurt so much? It was like my whole body needed to weep in great gusts. There was an open wound bleeding profusely in me, and I needed to see to it, but he wasn't letting me escape.

“Thinking of going to your aunt's?” he asked calmly.

“Maybe I am. It's none of your business.”

“The abusive one?”

“Better that than dead.” I smirked.

“That's not acceptable,” he said grimly.

“Who are you to judge?” At least with her, I wouldn't get blindsided.

“I'm the guy who's going to protect you.” He stated this in firm tones.

“Whatever, dude. Have a nice life.” I spun off and pushed through the security gate, for once glad to see that someone had propped it open with a rock, because I didn’t want to have to dig my keys out. Of course, as soon as I went through the gate and started up the stairs, I realized Ryder was right behind me, which was making me furious and excited at the same time.

Dammit!

“What do you want?” I snapped, stopping on the stairs. We were eye level with each other, since he was a couple of stairs below me.

“Pack a bag. You’re staying with me.”

“No.” I snapped this almost gleefully,

enjoying denying him the ability to feel like I was his responsibility. No more do-gooding with me. He'd had the opportunity to care for me and had squandered it, looking at me like I was shit on his heel. His parents, too. They could all go take a flying leap into Dysfunctionland. To remind us both, I coldly stated, "I believe your last words were that I was your enemy."

"It was a fucking shock, Taylor. I didn't see it coming." His voice was low, but I could sense a tone of rawness. He was in as much emotional upheaval as I was, but that was his problem. He didn't want my help. He didn't want me.

"I'm not talking about this with you."

"Fine. Pack a bag."

“What good will that do? You’re right next door.”

“I’ve got a place in Venice Beach that’s a more permanent residence when I’m here.”

“So the apartment you moved into next to mine was only so you could keep a better eye? Spy better?”

He remained quiet a moment, staring at me with a serious, unreadable expression. “That was part of it.”

“Part of it.” I realized he was being deliberately evasive and that he wasn’t going to tell me the other part yet.

“Yeah, well, screw that. I’ve always taken care of myself, and that’s not going to change now.”

“You tell him, sister,” one of the middle-aged frat boys called from his front porch on the first floor, not too far away. Realizing we’d been providing a floor show for the frat boys had my face heating up. It was barely noon, and the guy was already nursing a beer with his roommate.

“Dude, shut up.” His roommate scowled, not so far gone yet. “That dude’s fucking huge.”

I realized Ryder was giving them a menacing look and that he was in a state of mind in which one more comment might set him off, and then there would be bloodshed. Inevitability. Again.

“Dammit! Come with me.” I grabbed

Ryder's arm. Reluctantly, he allowed me to drag him to my apartment door, thereby saving frat boy's life. I managed to dig my keys out and was glad that at least my apartment hadn't been broken into again. It was still fairly well cleaned up, but it was freaking hot and stuffy, and something had gone south in the kitchen.

The trash was rank. It needed to be taken out. And seeing Ryder in my stank, stifflingly oppressive apartment, when I knew he was used to so much better, and when I knew that he thought me beneath him, was enough to just deflate me.

"Leave me alone. Just let me be," I whispered plaintively. "Why can't you just do that?"

“I don’t know.”

“I’m tired of being your job. I don’t want to be your job. I’m my own responsibility.”

“Taylor, you’re not just a job,” he said quietly, releasing a long breath of air. “I need to know you’re safe.”

“Why?”

He looked at me steadily. “Because someone’s trying to kill you.”

“I’ll take care of myself.”

“Not while I’m here.”

“Why?” I needed to know.

“Do you always need to question everything?” He said this with some irritation.

“Yes! I do! People who are close to

me seem to want to fuck me over all the time, and you're no different."

"That's bullshit!" he growled, scowling at me.

"Then tell me why you need to be here!"

"I don't know!" He prowled the room and muttered again, "I don't know. I don't understand it. It's...you're inside me...somehow." He paused in front of me, reaching a hand out to grasp my waist. "Come with me. Let's solve this together, and then maybe we can talk?"

No, no, no! There was nothing to talk about! But the hint of vulnerability in his pale green eyes and the warm familiarity of his deep voice—part of what made me feel connected to him—were my

undoing. I could feel my resolve crumbling. I'd felt so sure before, but the longer he stood there, so proud and strong, reminding me of what we'd gone through together, protecting me to the point of putting his life on the line for me, the less I could tolerate seeing him walk away and the more I wanted to cling.

I was going to agree to go. The idea of being apart from him stung so painfully. I'd never been so foolish over a man before, but I just couldn't separate myself from him. This was going to be my greatest mistake to date, because I was making it knowingly. I was that stupid female on the talk show who said

“Because I love him” when asked why she kept going back to the bastard for more pain. But the difference was Ryder wasn’t a bastard. I knew he was a man of integrity, which was maybe why this hurt more.

“Okay. I’ll go.”

He released his breath. I imagine that he’d figured I’d put up more of a fight, but truthfully, I was scared and unsure of the outcomes. The bottom line was, I did trust him with my life, if not my heart.

“Good. Let’s get this done. The sooner we’re out of here, the better I’ll feel.”

My thinking was a little frazzled, and I did my best to grab a couple of work outfits and my war chest of cosmetics,

which equaled a small case. I grabbed a shower and changed into summer clothes, feeling like I was burning up in the pants and blouse I'd been wearing on Te're. In no time, we were back on Ryder's motorcycle, heading for the coast, and I secretly allowed myself to indulge in the pleasure of resting my cheek on his strong back. I wished things could be different, but they weren't. My father had been one of the enemy, which I wasn't ready to think about just yet.

I would need to think about it soon though, according to Dreya. I closed my eyes to better focus my thinking. Somehow, something really terrible had happened to my father, and whatever it

was had caused my mother to spiral into depression and out of reality. So how would I find my mother after having no contact for more than thirteen years?

The air cooled as we got closer to the beach, which was welcoming. Ryder pulled into an alley, parked behind a building and shut off the motor. He held out a hand to help me dismount, and I took it, ignoring the automatic warmth that fluttered in my gut whenever we touched. *Nothing good old antacid wouldn't fix right up*, I told myself firmly.

Ryder took my helmet from me to strap onto the bike before unstrapping my sports bag and carrying it for me, leading me through a back entrance to an

elevator of an all-white building.

“Sy Clark shares this place with me,” Ryder explained briefly, pulling his keys out in the elevator when it stopped on the second floor. “You’ll like him. He’s a laid-back kind of guy. He’s the tech guy on my team.”

“How many on a team?” I asked more to keep my mind on the details and off of how masculine and sexy Ryder looked as he stood in the corner of the elevator, watching me.

“Usually three or four, depending on the situation, but Sy’s a permanent member. Tech guys usually are. You build trust over time. Everyone else gets rotated.”

Expecting to see some straight-laced, maybe even nerdy, FBI-looking individual, I couldn't have been more surprised. Sy turned out to be more like a California beach native, with sun-streaked, shaggy blond hair and cute dimples in a bronzed, handsome face. He was lounging, comfortably shirtless, in surf trunks amid throw pillows on the couch, and he was playing video games on a huge, flat-screen TV. Very real-looking animated soldiers were engaging in urban warfare, with state-of-the-art surround sound that gave it just that extra "real" effect. I almost felt like I needed to take cover. It sounded like bullets were zinging over my head, which was

unnerving.

“Hey, Ryder, hope that’s you, buddy,” Sy called over the sound of sporadic shooting. He’d obviously heard the door open and close, though he hadn’t looked away from his game as he nimbly worked buttons on a control pad. In a darker, deeper, more dangerous-sounding voice, he added, “Slimy motherfucker’s in the tree. Goddamn sniper’s already killed half my men...”

“Watch your language.” Ryder scowled, taking up a position in front of the screen.

“My language?” Sy was still trying to see around him, though his expression was perplexed.

“We’ve got company.” Ryder reached

down and hit the power button on the TV and video-game console, plunging the room into sudden silence.

“Company?” Sy glanced over his shoulder questioningly. He saw me standing there, and after a split second of what seemed like surprised recognition, he looked over at Ryder, as though asking a silent question. Ryder seemed to give a barely perceptible nod. Sy quickly stood. The entire exchange happened in only a few short seconds, and was that a devilish look that briefly crossed his face? They were definitely doing some kind of silent man speak that I wasn’t supposed to understand, which made my brow knit. I didn’t have time to

think more on it as Sy approached and turned on the full force of his charm. I have to say, I liked his energy immediately.

“The beast arrived with beauty.” He smiled winsomely, his dimples deepening boyishly. “Nice to meet you.” His bright gray eyes couldn’t help doing one of those purely male inventories of my daisy dukes and tank top. They warmed appreciatively during his quick scan, though he was definitely putting out more of a friendly, brotherly vibe than an interested-male vibe.

“I hope you’re not suggesting I’m a beast.” I offered a friendly smile.

Sy gave a quick bark of laughter. “Hardly. Brains and beauty. She’s a

keeper, Ryder.” He winked, taking my hand in a warm clasp between his own.

“Sy, this is Taylor. She needs to stay with us for a while.” Ryder’s voice held a tinge of impatience. He crossed his arms, emphasizing his muscular biceps and broad chest, which were outlined by his T-shirt. Though he appeared to be leaning casually against the built-in entertainment unit, his gaze was razor sharp, watching us.

“Hallelujah! There’s going to be a woman in this man cave. I guess I’ll have to stop burping and scratching now.” Sy continued to hold my fingers, rubbing them gently with his free hand, something that Ryder zeroed in on with a

scowl. Sy continued on, happily oblivious. “Don’t worry. I’ve had all my shots, so I’m harmless.”

“Thanks for letting me impose on you.” I tried to reclaim my hand, but he continued to hold it tightly, even massaging it a bit, though winking as if to let me in on a joke.

Was he trying to piss Ryder off? Because it was working.

“You are welcome. And if you need anything, please let me know. I want you to feel comfortable here. Our casa is your casa.”

“She’s got the idea. Back off, Clark,” Ryder warned gruffly, his expression taking on a killing look.

Sy must have had a death wish,

because he only laughed. “Two words, Ryder. Buzz. Kill.”

“That’s fine. We’ve got work to do.” Ryder pushed away from the edge of the shelving unit. “This thing is coming to a head, and we’re running out of time.”

I wanted to believe there was a hint of jealousy going on, but really, it was more likely that he just wanted this episode of *Taylor’s Madhouse* to get resolved so he could get his life back without feeling like he was compromising his integrity. If nothing else, I could definitely count on his sense of right and wrong.

The tone of the conversation shifted. “Ranik?” Sy’s carefree expression

became alert and sober instantly. It was an unreal transformation to observe. There was a hard edge to his features that matched Ryder's.

"Yeah. He's trying to take her out. Hired guys to grab her off the street a few days ago."

"He's a slippery bastard."

"We need to coordinate information. Get Wes out here and see what he's got. I can feel we're close, but something's missing. Something critical that we're not seeing."

"Tech room, ten minutes?" Sy reached for a T-shirt that he'd draped on the back of the couch and slipped it on.

"Yeah. Let me get Taylor settled, and I'll be up."

“On it.”

In the next moment, I found myself being pulled down a hallway and through a door to what was obviously a master suite, as the room was large and a few items of male clothing were draped across the bed. Ryder snatched them roughly and tossed them into a doorway that was likely a walk-in closet.

Easily twice the size of my room in my apartment, Ryder's had a king-size bed that graced the center of the room, which had a wonderful view of the ocean. The opposing wall was mostly made of glass. It reminded me of Ryder's room on Te're, which brought a

host of other memories that I wasn't ready to deal with. I had a brief impression of caramel-colored wood floors with beautiful, moss-hued Persian rugs, cherrywood furniture and pale, neutral walls before turning my attention back on Ryder, sensing aggressive energy. He tossed my bag on the rumpled, unmade bed and faced me, scowling.

There was something on his mind, his black eyebrows drawn together, giving his chiseled features the impression of being even more angular and rough-hewn. He wasn't a pretty boy like Sy. No one would mistake him for being a pretty male model, but he was so damn hot in a rough-looking way, and he just

exuded power, strength and dominance. His vibrant eyes held me. There was danger behind them. I was ashamed to admit they still excited me without having to do more than flick over me. I didn't know if he was going to pin me to the wall and ravish me (which, stupidly, I would probably have let him do, if the tingles in my womb had anything to say about it), or if he was angry about something.

He grimaced, his sensually curved lips flattening into a tight line.

“What?” I asked warily, wondering what was coming next.

“Nothing,” he said flatly, though his eyes still held a burning intensity. I

could see him mentally backing off, shutting down. “Make yourself at home. Closet is through there and bathroom is through there.” He motioned toward the two doors in the room. “We’ll be on the third floor, if there’s an emergency.”

And then he left.

Chapter Seventeen

It was all so abrupt.

I just stood there looking at the empty doorway for a moment, feeling somewhat abandoned and thinking, *WTF?* He was just going to dump me off here with a bad attitude and leave, like I was just some kind of bothersome bug or unwanted relative. Not that I needed him to take care of me, but I'd only been in his house five minutes, and he was already out the door.

I knew things were going to be weird. I was an animal, after all, right? Brausa were animals. My breathing hitched a

moment as I considered that. Now that he wasn't in the immediate vicinity, I could think more clearly. I could truly ask the question of whether this was the best solution. Who knew how long it would take to actually catch Frank, Ranik, whatever his name was, and I didn't want to live my life in limbo. Maybe I needed to find a new apartment. Start over in a new town. A new state. A new country, even. No, not a new country. I'd be forced to learn a new language, and I just wasn't good at that.

Dammit! *He* had invited *me* here. I hadn't asked to come here. I might have had limited options, but I would rather have risked my apartment and just called the police for protection than been

treated like an imposition. I'd been made to feel like one all my life. I hated it.

On top of that, he was assuming I was going to sleep in his room. It hadn't even occurred to him that I might want to discuss this, that I might not be comfortable playing house. Which probably meant that he likely thought I was just some easy ho-bag who would go along with his wishes in a docile manner. Why? Because he was a big man with a deep voice? Or maybe he was used to women who simpered and sighed and batted their eyelashes at him all day because he was a big strong man. Well, whatever the case, he had another trick coming. That was for sure.

Riding the wave of my own indignation, I grabbed my bag and walked back down the hall. There was another bedroom, smaller, with a queen-size bed and cute little side tables. I dumped my bag on the bed and looked around. There were two other doors in the room, one of which was a small walk-in closet. Nothing was in there, so I figured this was likely a guest room. The other door, when I cracked it open, revealed a large bathroom. It connected the master bedroom and this room. I'd have to remember that and lock both doors when I went in to shower.

Feeling proud of my initiative, I unpacked my work clothes and hung

them in the closet. I cursed as I realized I'd left some shoes and accessories behind in my apartment that I would need for the next few days. And I needed my car, so I could get myself places without having to beg a ride from Mr. Stony Face.

Shit, shit, shit! My car!

It happened to have been left overnight for two nights now, around the corner from the Ivy. It had likely been towed at this point, which meant another few hundred to get it from an impound lot. That was an extra few hundred I didn't have! They would probably need all my insurance forms and registration. I wondered if those were still in the glove box or back at my apartment. Couldn't

anything go my way? Even a little thing?
Something?

Feeling completely overwhelmed with defeat, I had tears burning my eyes, and I needed to sit on the bed as waves of mental fatigue ambushed me. How much longer? When could I come out of the rabbit hole and know that all was well again? I had never complained that my life was boring. I had never been one to seek adventures. I was feeling so done!

But giving in to despair was truly a luxury, particularly for someone without money, so I rubbed my eyes, took a deep breath and stood up again. It would only get done if I did it, was my motto. If I

needed to figure out public transit from this location, then that's what I would have to do, no matter how much that would suck.

It only took a few minutes to finish putting my things away in the closet and bathroom. Below the double porcelain sinks were cabinets where one side was virtually empty, so I stuck my makeup bag and blow dryer in with a few other odds and ends. I walked back through to the living room and took a deep breath, looking around to see where it was I would be staying for a few days.

The condo had a great open floor plan encompassing both dining and entertainment. The kitchen was all stainless steel, with granite counters that

had veins of blue and gray running throughout. Tiles on the backsplash behind the stove picked up the blue color, while the entire flooring throughout the condo was the same beautiful hardwood. A rustic wooden table sat on a light-colored throw rug that had an intricate pattern of blue threads running through it, and of course, the large sofa with the soft brown, buttery leather faced that gigantic entertainment center that took up most of the north-facing wall. To top it off, another amazing view of the ocean could be seen out of a set of sliding glass doors that led to the balcony.

I decided to investigate.

The blue undulating waves continuously rolled toward the shore. The soothing view mixed with the fresh salty breeze, and I was able to relax somewhat, considering there was still a guy who wanted to kill me. I was able to forget about all that briefly, watching the activity taking place just two floors down.

The boardwalk in Venice was always packed with a combination of tourists and bohemian personalities, but it was particularly true in the summertime. People were three and four deep, gathered around outdoor shops that lined the beach selling all variety of things, from tie-dyed T-shirts and berets in

reggae colors to music, incense, jewelry and art. A man in all-silver clothing and body paint danced robotically to loud funk music from an old-style ghetto blaster for tips, while another man did on-the-spot caricatures of patrons in chalk and pastels.

Bermuda shorts—wearing, souvenir-toting foreigners with digital cameras had a good time watching and taking pictures, while in the distance, hundreds lined the beaches, laying out in next-to-nothing bikinis to catch that perfect shade of seasonal bronze on their skin. Occasionally, mixed in with the coconut tanning oil was the smell of reefer.

Ryder and Sy owned the second and third floors of the three-story building I

was in. The first floor, however, was one of the permanent businesses on the boardwalk. It was a little French-inspired coffee shop, and if smell was anything to go by, it was probably delicious, which reminded me that I was definitely ready for some food. My stomach had begun growling sometime after twelve in the afternoon, and it was now almost two. In the excitement of the morning, I'd forgotten to eat.

I did, briefly, think about poking through the fridge, but PTSD kept me from actually doing it. People say things like "Make yourself at home," but really, it's easier said than done. I had my hand slapped too many times by my aunt or

grandmother on a number of occasions as a child, because I dared to “make myself at home” when I lived with them. I’d always had to ask permission first.

So you could understand why, even though I was totally starving, I would never go into Ryder’s fridge, particularly after he acted like he couldn’t get away from me fast enough. Honestly, this was likely not going to work out. Maybe I could call my cousin and see if she had any familial feelings toward me. At least enough that I could hang with her until this problem got resolved.

But I was starving! I needed to go out and get something.

Unsure of what to do and unwilling to

be helpless and reliant, I figured it wouldn't take long to run downstairs to the little restaurant. In fact, I could be helpful and properly appreciative of the protection and support Ryder and Sy were providing by getting us all sandwiches and coffees. I could just leave a note or something.

I grabbed a paper towel from the roll in the kitchen, grabbed a pen from my purse and wrote a quick note that I left on the granite counter. It would have to do. Snagging my purse and phone, I started to pack my smartphone into its holder when I realized it needed to be charged. I hadn't charged it the previous two nights, being that I was on a

different planet and all, so I needed to plug it in now, which I did. There was a plug next to the nightstand in the guest room, and I was able to leave it there, where it was already programmed to serve as an alarm tomorrow morning for work. My everything phone. My one luxury. I loved it.

I slung my purse over my shoulder and went downstairs.

The restaurant was very quaint, rustic and casual. Small, bistro-size tables graced both inside and out space, each containing miniature glass vases with a fresh rose. The glass case had all kinds of this-will-equal-more-time-at-the-gym pastries and sweets that were calling to me. Evil things! Pure evil! My good

angel must have been prostrate with hunger on my left shoulder, totally failing me, because my little devil took over on my right shoulder, telling me that I needed to grab a chocolate croissant as dessert for later. I got in the line, which felt extraordinarily long, but which also gave me time to thoroughly analyze the menu options. A black chalkboard behind the cashier sported a simple menu of sandwiches, wraps and salads, all of which looked tasty. I chose some turkey-and-cheese sandwiches, thinking that would be generic enough for everyone's tastes, and I happily paid for it with my credit card.

It took fifteen minutes for all of the

food to be ready, so I took a quick stroll along the boardwalk to peek in at the different shops and vendors, wanting a few moments of normal before reentering my alternate reality of other planets, mind reading, dreamwalking and people trying to kill me.

When the food was ready, I liked the ambiance of the restaurant so much that, figuring the guys were probably still working in their secret room, I went ahead and decided to eat comfortably at a table on my own. I hadn't had any alone time in days, and I needed the peace. Letting down my wall to see if being completely open helped me to be successful, I practiced my telepathic abilities—shamelessly listening in on

thoughts and feelings, justifying it by telling myself that I needed to practice, that I wasn't doing any harm and that I needed to experiment with this amazing ability. Yeah, right. It was actually just fun, but no one was giving up any good gossip, so I started thinking about my to-do list.

My car had to take priority. Was there anything I could sell? Did I have anything valuable? Maybe I could put up a few of my nicer shoes and clothes for sale online. It wouldn't have to be too many, as I only likely needed a couple hundred dollars. Was the car even worth it? Would it just be easier to use public transportation? That would save me gas

money, insurance and registration fees. Hmm. Verifying where the car was would probably be most important. Maybe I could call the police for that. I did have to get back to work tomorrow. It would do me no good to get fired at this point.

Feeling like I could breathe again, I grabbed my purse, trashed my sandwich container and grabbed the food bag for the guys.

I was feeling pretty good again, in control, until I went back upstairs.

Sy met me at the door with fiercely drawn eyebrows that eradicated his dimples completely. He looked worried and impatient. Obviously, something was wrong. “Taylor, where have you...”

Sy broke off with a groan. "I can see where you've been. You went down to get food."

"I left a note."

"You did?"

"On the counter. Where's Ryder?" I glanced around with a sense of foreboding. He felt gone.

"Out looking for you."

"What? Why? I went to get sandwiches. I haven't been gone all that long. Maybe forty minutes at most." I sounded defensive to my own ears. My blood pumped with a frisson of alarm.

I was enveloped in feelings I hadn't experienced since the last time I was living at my aunt's house, reliant on her

lack of goodwill. PTSD once again. Ryder wasn't like my aunt. I knew that, but even knowing that, I couldn't make myself breathe evenly.

“He tried to call you, but there was no answer.”

“I left it on the charger.” I set the bag of food on the counter in the kitchen, bewildered by the circumstances. It wasn't my fault my phone needed charging. It hadn't been my idea to haul me off to another planet without my full consent. It hadn't been my idea to have me come here.

“I'll call him, let him know you're here.” Sy grabbed his phone off the countertop and stepped away.

“Where did he think he was going to

find me? Where the hell would he even start to look? How absolutely ridiculous! I'm a grown woman!" But I was talking to the air. Sy had dialed the number and was speaking quietly by the hallway opposite the one where Ryder's room was located. I wondered if that was Sy's wing of the condo.

After a moment, he stepped back with a tense smile on his face, which clued me in that Ryder was likely not a happy camper. "He's coming back. So...uh...what did you bring?"

Now I was really nervous.

"I hope you guys like turkey and Havarti." I pulled the takeout containers out of the bag, setting them on the dining

room table to keep busy.

“You won’t find me complaining. Thanks a lot.”

Sy grabbed one of the containers and took a seat, but his attitude was highly circumspect. It was like he knew I felt like a big, sloppy, emotional mess on the inside and didn’t want to get splashed by it. He grabbed up half the sandwich and bit into it heartily, which was somehow calming for me. Still, he kept a watchful eye on me, like he was analyzing me.

“I wanted to do something to show my appreciation of you guys letting me crash here. I really try not to impose on anyone for anything, you know? Can I get you something to drink? That was something I forgot to pick up.”

I was talking too quickly, and too brightly, but I couldn't seem to help myself. The wait was building back the stress I'd just released. I could sense a big blowup coming. My aunt and my grandmother had been pros at stringing me up for something or nothing, depending on the kind of day they were having and whether or not they needed stress relief, which usually looked like unleashing tirades at me or put-downs against me, my mother or both of us simultaneously. So many times I wished I could have been wherever she was, not at all blaming her for not wanting to be around, though I missed her terribly.

There had never been a kind or caring

moment with my grandmother or my aunt, almost literally, which was why I eventually learned how to shut down emotionally when they started in on me. I spent years feeling like a roach in the kitchen, feelings hurt, dejected, yada, yada, yada. *Stupid, thoughtless girl. Think you're better than the rest of us because you're pretty? Just like your mother, not caring about anyone but yourself,* I heard too many times to count. It all went into the do-not-open box in my brain.

I wouldn't be able to do that with Ryder. He meant something to me. I'd let him in. He knew too much. It was really going to hurt when things went down tonight. This was so not a good idea. I

knew better! Maybe I could leave before he arrived?

Coward! I heard myself say reproachfully. *You aren't a child anymore. Stop hiding! Be the strong woman you want to be.*

“There are water bottles in the fridge, if you wouldn't mind.” Sy's gray eyes were somberly watching me. Funny how his whole flirtatious persona was gone. He was very chameleon-like, and not as innocuous as he might want everyone to perceive him to be. I could see how he would be great at covert work. No one would think anything other than “surfer guy” if they were hanging out with him.

“I'll get you one.” I went to the fridge

and opened it, finding it full of all kinds of food fixings, which seemed to be mocking me. There was enough food to make several meals for multiple people. Grabbing a water bottle from the side door, I set it on the table next to Sy and took a seat across from him, awkwardly silent, not knowing what to do with myself.

“Thanks.” He took a deep swallow.

The table itself was rustic looking, made of some kind of distressed wood, and my fingers lightly traced the nooks and crevices. *Shit, shit, shit.* The food I'd just eaten was now sitting heavily at the bottom of my stomach. I could feel it burning a hole in my gut. And the silence was starting to get on my nerves. I tried

to think of something to say, some light conversation that would keep my mind occupied.

“So how long have you known Ryder?”

“About ten, twelve years. Since he saved my ass from a beating I didn’t deserve.”

“What happened?”

“When I was about twenty, a dumb girl was trying to make her boyfriend jealous and came on to me. I didn’t realize she was playing me until I found myself surrounded by three guys who were drunk and wanting to beat my face in. Ryder, who wasn’t much older than I was at the time, had seen the whole

thing. He tried to talk the guys down, but they weren't having it. They threw the first punch, but then Ryder and I cleaned up."

I thought about the guy at the club who'd tried to make a grab for my ass. "I've seen him take someone out before. He can be ruthless."

"Ryder's a good guy to have on your side. He's a guy who doesn't put up with bullshit. Never has."

I nodded, seeing the truth of those words.

"Listen, Taylor." Sy grabbed one of the napkins from the takeout bag and ran it over his mouth. "Ryder's intense, and he can maybe seem overwhelming, but he's the best guy I know. He's real."

What you see is what you get, and he's loyal to a fault. He lives his beliefs, and just so you know, he's not a big ladies' man who goes out trolling for women. He doesn't ever bring women back here. You're the first."

"What does that mean?" I asked, taking a deep breath. Hearing Sy defend him was helping calm the churning, emotional roller coaster my brain was taking me on.

"I don't know. What do you think it means?" He challenged me with a firm, unrelenting stare.

"I don't know! I know he's had me under surveillance for a while."

"Six months."

“You were in on this investigation too?”

“From the beginning, until he decided to make a move to get closer to you, and he needed to be more covert.”

“Sy, a lot’s gone down that you don’t know about.” A lot I didn’t want to have to talk about just yet. “I know this doesn’t really mean anything to him in a personal way. He’s just worried about me. He wants to catch Frank and whoever is helping Frank with this mylunate terrorism.”

“So you don’t have any feelings for him?”

“I’m not saying that...” I looked down at my hands, surprised to find them

nervously shredding a napkin. Memories of the passion we'd shared on Te're rose to mind, and I remembered riding him, panting and moaning at the same time that my entire body was strung with need and hunger. I came apart to the sound of him shouting his pleasure, our bodies slick with sweat, heat and triumph.

“Christ, Taylor, have a little mercy here.” Sy shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

“What?” I blinked, coming back to the moment a bit flushed. That's when I realized Sy could see and feel what I was thinking and feeling, which was absolutely mortifying. Ducking my head, I quickly erected my mental wall,

mumbling, “So sorry.”

“It’s okay. Not exactly a prude, but don’t want to be a Peeping Tom. At least not with my best friend. With anyone else it’s open season.” He grinned, his dimples making a quick appearance before he took another bite of sandwich, chewing thoughtfully. “The point I was trying to make was that he feels connected to you, which I’ve only seen him do with one other female, and she turned out to be an opportunist. I’m just saying take care. He seems like a big beast, I know, but see if you can look past that.”

Another female? Hmm. The thought made me unhappy, but I didn’t get to

dwel on it.

Suddenly, a blue, oval light filled the room, almost too bright to even look at and more brilliantly beautiful than I'd ever seen before. I gasped with the suddenness of it all and flashed a panicked look at Sy, but he ignored it and kept eating as though nothing were happening. When the light dimmed, Ryder was standing there, larger than life. I'd forgotten how big he actually was until he appeared, seeming to shrink the space around him. My eyes drank in the sight of him greedily. His black hair looked mussed, and his green eyes were dark and grim as he caught sight of me. As nervous as I was, my body still reacted to the sight of him, heart pinging

against my chest and flushed
breathlessness descending on me.

“She brought us sandwiches,” Sy offered in a cheerful tone, though his eyes remained serious and watchful.

“Where’s your phone?” Ryder ignored Sy’s comment, his voice sounding dangerously calm. He stalked across the room, grabbed the chair next to mine and yanked it out to sit on it, crowding my space with his large form.

Falling back on old habits, I didn’t back away. I learned early in life never to look scared, because that’s when you got punked. In fact, I chose to cross my legs, which I have to say looked absolutely fabulous in my daisy dukes,

and I swung the top one nonchalantly to show that I was cool as a cucumber, though I wasn't. Bravado. It's my knee-jerk reaction to dealing with any stressful situation. I pretend my way through it.

"It's in the smaller bedroom, recharging," I replied evenly, refusing to show that I was feeling intimidated, though I was. I mean, shit, he was much bigger than I was and was likely twice my weight, not that I thought he was going to hurt me. I'm just not used to having big men invade my space.

"Why didn't you let us know you were leaving?" He was beginning to emphasize his words individually, as though I were a simpleton who had

trouble understanding spoken language, and that had my anger stirring. What an ass.

“You said to interrupt if there was an emergency. There was no emergency other than I was hungry.”

“You could have interrupted us any time.”

“I didn’t feel comfortable doing that.”

“Why didn’t you just grab something from the fridge?”

“It’s not my house.” My tone became snappier. Ryder was treating me like a child, thinking it was his place to question me about my activities, and Sy was watching us with growing amusement, which was completely

embarrassing. It was making me feel like I was just the “silly little woman,” which I hate.

“I told you to make yourself at home.”

“Yeah, just before you ran out of the room like your ass was on fire. How strange that I didn’t feel comfortable after that!” My voice was beginning to drip sarcasm, and his eyes narrowed darkly.

“I didn’t *run* out of the room. I left to get started working. I’m trying to keep you from being killed, remember?”

“Whatever, Ryder. You say tomato... What’s the point of this? I was hungry and went down to get food. You have no right to sit here and question me.”

“Some guys almost grab you off the

street, and I go through the trouble of saving your ass, and you think I don't have the right to question you when you do something irresponsible?"

"I wasn't irresponsible. I left a note. And just to remind you, I'm not a prisoner. I can walk out any time I choose."

"Just try it," he growled.

"Oh, yeah?" I stood with purpose. Adrenaline kicked in. It raced through my system on overload, making me feel powerful.

Ryder did the same. We glared at each other, him looking down and me looking up, both of us breathing heavily.

"Yeah." There were mere inches

separating us, and he was just waiting for me to make a move.

“You don’t own me, pal. I’ll step out into traffic if I want to,” I snarled.

“Cut it out,” Sy said sharply from the other side of the table. He stood.

“Stay out of this,” Ryder growled, not breaking eye contact with me.

“The hell I will. Back off unless you want her to knee you in the nuts. She wanted to grab us food. Excellent. And Taylor? He was worried about your safety. Is that wrong? Surrounded by goddamn children,” he muttered. He snatched up his empty food containers and stalked off to dispose of his trash in the receptacle under the sink.

We continued to glare at each other,

but after a moment, I just felt like crying. My sense of helplessness and anxiety overwhelmed me. This really sucked. I couldn't do helpless and reliant. I knew for certain that I refused to be Ryder's problem, but already he'd been out looking for me, likely cursing me for the trouble. I was used to that from my family, which was why I worked so hard to insulate myself. I couldn't bear the thought of him feeling like I was just a pain in the ass.

I knew it would really be better for me to go back to my apartment and let whatever happened happen. Some people were lucky and others were not when it came to the lottery of whom you

were birthed to and the kind of support you had from loved ones. I'd always been a pragmatist when it came to viewing my lot in life, and it was no different now.

"You got me a sandwich?" he murmured after a moment of silence.

"I did." I released pent-up air and felt my eyes burn. Quickly, I tried to blink the moisture away.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry you were worried. I left a note on the sink."

"Didn't see it. Please keep your phone on you."

"I usually do, but I couldn't plug it in last night."

I could practically see the memories

parading through Ryder's mind as his eyes turned sensual and his lips relaxed from their tight line. "I'm hungry."

I wasn't sure if he was talking about food, but I pretended he was. "Yours is on the table."

And so he sat and ate, which allowed me to regain my equilibrium.

Sy decided to play video games, and I sat at the table with Ryder, who kept watching me with his intense green eyes. I thought about Sy's comment that Ryder was drawn to me but wasn't sure what to do with that, knowing that if he was drawn to me, it was grudgingly. Resentfully. I watched Sy's video-game character hide behind a building and

wait for the sniper to appear. He finally managed to take the sniper out and hooted in success.

“Now that’s how you do it!” He looked over his shoulder to the dining table and winked at me, his playful self once again evident. “You like video games, Taylor?”

“I do, but I don’t know how to play that one. I guess I’m kind of old-school. I need a joystick and a button. That looks confusing.”

“We’ve got others, but this one’s pretty cool. I’ll be glad to teach you.”

“Okay.”

“Great. It’s a *date*. Have a seat next to me.” He patted the couch.

“No, it’s not,” Ryder stated firmly.

“She’s about to be busy.”

“She’s got a few minutes while you finish eating.”

Ryder scowled. “She doesn’t know you like I do.”

“Geesh,” I said with some exasperation. “She can answer for herself, and what she wants to do is play a video game.” I got up and sat by Sy, uncomplicated Sy, who pulled up a video game where we could race around San Francisco in sports cars. Ryder looked on like an agitated bear, which Sy took as a green light to further aggravate him.

“By the way, what Ryder forgot to tell you is that I’m an amazing technological

wizard, long-distance swimmer, basket weaver and tango dancer,” he said loudly in a stage whisper as we began to play. I was controlling a virtual red Corvette, which was likely the closest I would ever get to actually driving one.

“And major player,” Ryder muttered brusquely.

“I think of myself as being a lover of women,” Sy corrected. “Anything is worth trying, if I can meet beautiful women while doing it.”

“Basket weaving?” I arched an eyebrow, then winced because I crashed my car under an overpass, taking a turn too quickly. It took a moment for the car to regenerate and begin racing again.

“There were a lot of women in the

class.” He smiled with a blissful look on his face, as though reliving a lovely memory. I decided not to ask. His inattention allowed me to speed ahead of him, and he frowned in concentration again.

“That’s the reason our place is so well decorated,” Ryder stated darkly.

“Tango?”

“I thought it would be a great way to meet sexy women.”

“Did you meet sexy women?”

“A few, but they were spoken for. I’ve decided my next attempt will be coed beach volleyball.”

“Aren’t *you* like our favorite cartoon coyote.” I shook my head with mock

admiration. “Try and try again.”

“I *am* like good old Wile E. One day I’ll meet Mrs. Right.”

“She might not like all of your Ms. Today’s,” Ryder said pointedly.

“Then there’s that.” Sy shook his head with mock shame.

“I imagine there are a number of beach-volleyball babes that are hotties just waiting for you to show up,” I offered, grinning. Between his good looks and charm, I imagined he was devastating the local female population and knew it. Falling like bees to honey.

Sy chuckled. “I like her, Ryder. She gets me.”

“Yeah, well, don’t like her too much, and we’ll be just fine,” he grumbled, and

it didn't make sense to me. He was sounding possessive, but I'd seen his face when he realized who I was this morning. Shit. I was going to start crying if I thought about that moment anymore. My badass self turned my tenderhearted self around in my mind, so I stopped seeing his disdainful look. While I was distracted by my dopey thoughts, Sy sped on.

He pulled across the finish line first, and I came across, pitifully, in fourth place. He gave another hoot for winning, which prompted me to throw one of the pillows at him, causing him to chuckle.

"That sucked." I shook my head. "I want a rematch. I think you cheated."

“How can I cheat? It’s a car race on a video game!” He threw the pillow back at me.

“I don’t know, but I think you did.”

“Play again?”

“Let’s do it.”

But as I started to make my sports car go, I was suddenly airborne. The control pad fell harmlessly onto the couch, and Ryder was holding me in his arms, striding to his bedroom.

“What the hell? What are you doing?” I sputtered, catching sight of Sy’s look of triumph over Ryder’s shoulder. One would think he’d been trying to engage Ryder’s anger deliberately.

“We need to talk.”

“Okay, fine. But most people in polite society don’t just grab you and haul you off.”

“I never said I was part of polite society.” He kicked his door shut behind us and tossed me down on the bed.

“What’s with all the he-man antics?” I sputtered, making my way in an entirely ungainly fashion to the other side of the bed.

“Stay away from Sy.” Ryder’s deep voice had a steel edge, and his eyes were like granite.

Chapter Eighteen

“What?”

I actually needed a moment to comprehend what he was saying, and when the full import of his words hit, I wanted to throw him out the window. If I wanted to be treated like shit, I could just call my aunt. She'd be delighted to tell me what a horrible individual I was.

“I'm just warning you not to get your hopes up for him. I know he's good looking, and he's a helluva lot nicer than I am, but he's not serious when it comes to women.”

“You're warning me not to flirt with

him?” I was offended on so many levels! Anger started simmering as my blood pressure rose.

He must have had a sense of my impending wrath, because he got this stubborn look on his face, and in his growly voice, he said, “I’m just saying, don’t let his charm fool you. He likes to fuck around.”

“So you think that even though I was with you last night, when I’ve only ever had one other partner, like, once, I’m likely to get together with your friend tonight? In your house?”

“Taylor—”

“I can’t even imagine what you must think of me, and I don’t want to know. You are impossible. This is just not

going to work.” I stormed off through the bathroom into the guest room I had taken over earlier, feeling wholly justified in my anger.

“Don’t walk away from me,” he snarled, following me into the guest room and pushing through the door I was about to whip closed.

“Oh, no you don’t,” I snapped, backpedaling away from him as he stalked me across the room. The wall halted my progress, and I held a hand out to stop him from coming any closer.

“Just leave me alone! I’ve had to put up with nastiness from my relatives all my life, but I’m not going to stand around and be insulted by you.”

“I wasn’t trying to be insulting,” he said darkly, grasping my arms and pulling me close to his chest. “Would you just listen?”

“That was you *not* trying to be insulting?” I yanked free of him and took a few steps away. I didn’t want to be touched by someone looking down on me. “You just do it well naturally? Nice talent to have. And by the way, your good friend was actually taking time to tell me what a swell guy you are. Don’t you find it absolutely ironic that you think just the opposite of him? What I didn’t tell him was that you’re probably counting your blessings that you found out who I was before anything got too

serious.”

“He does know who you are,” he stated quietly. “I told him. I don’t care about that.”

There was remorse in his voice, but I didn’t want to hear it. I wanted to vent my pent-up anger over all the bullshit that had gone down that was not my goddamn fault. “Don’t lie to me! I saw your face. It’s etched into my mind. I was disgusting to you!”

“That’s not how I feel. We were all surprised!”

“Yes, we were. But I became the nonhuman in the room.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“I’m the animal!”

“Taylor!”

“You wouldn’t even listen to me!” I was surprised to find tears filling my eyes again as the memory arose. “I was practically begging you—” They spilled over, but I slashed them away with the back of my hand impatiently.

“I heard you, Taylor. I heard you. I can’t even tell you how sorry I am. In the moment, I felt like my world was crashing around me.” He looked into my eyes steadily. “I didn’t know how to handle the situation. It felt crazy, and then there was Asily...” He shook his head, as though he didn’t know what to say.

“Yeah, well, you weren’t the only one having a moment. I found out who my

dad was for the first time.” I rubbed a hand over my eyes, still unable to process the information. Part of me felt like I’d just found out my dad was a loyal Nazi Party member or something.

“There was so much going on, and I lost the ability to think clearly.”

“I get it,” I said in a quiet voice, though I didn’t really. I couldn’t be mad. Everything he’d just said was reasonable, but it still didn’t fix anything, which brought me back to the original point. “You don’t want me jumping in bed with Sy. I’m your sex buddy, and you don’t share. You obviously think I’m a trailer-park skank, but I’m not such a skank that I’d go for your friend after being with you.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Why are you saying this?”

“Because you aren’t saying anything, so I’m left guessing about what you think and feel. And now you’re accusing me of something, and I don’t deserve it. I’d rather just go home and take care of myself. I don’t need anyone.” I jerked the door of the closet open and grabbed my empty bag out of it. “I don’t know how you guys do this on your planet, but ...”

“On my planet?”

“Relationships.” I dumped the bag on the bed and turned to him. “I’m probably considered evil for sleeping with you when we’re not married, or something

like that.”

“No, you’re not. If you lived on my planet, I would ask your family for permission to court you.”

“You need permission from the woman’s family?” I asked with some snarkiness.

“Yes.” He tried to hold my gaze. “To show respect for both the woman and her family. It’s a promise that you’re going to protect her and care for her while she is with you, away from the safety of her family.”

“And then what?” I asked curiously, crossing my arms. It sounded a lot like what he was doing with me.

“And then I’d be allowed to be around you, take you places...like what

you would do on Earth with a boyfriend, but more formal.”

“What would you do with a girl who didn’t have a family?”

His eyes burned into mine. “I’d ask her if she would consider allowing me to be in her life. Taylor, don’t go.”

“Ryder...” I turned away uncertainly, a mixture of tenderness and fear clogging my throat.

“Please, stay.” He came up behind me and curled his body around mine, his front to my back, his strong arms gently encasing my rib cage. His rumbling voice was soft against my ear. “Tell me I can be in your life.”

“Why?”

“I need you.” He paused a moment and nuzzled the side of my neck, inhaling deeply, which made goose bumps trail delicately down my arms. He rested his forehead against the back of my head before answering in his deep voice. It seemed vulnerable and naked. “I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you. It’s making me crazy that your life is in danger, and it threw me for a loop that you were tied to my world and the world of my enemy, an enemy that I’ve warred against for my entire lifetime.”

Reluctantly, I allowed myself to acknowledge that I understood that. I couldn’t fault him for that.

“I don’t see you as an enemy.” He

nuzzled my ear and squeezed me close to his hard body. “I see you as an innocent. I don’t usually lose control like this. I don’t recognize myself. I can’t seem to control my emotions when I’m around you.”

I didn’t know what to think of that, except that it was working to warm the cold chill that had invaded my heart. “Then what’s this about? Why are you picking a fight with me?” My voice was softening, my spine bending, fitting into the curve of his body almost naturally.

“He was looking at your legs. And you were smiling at him.” Ryder sighed.

“Who is ‘he’? Who are you talking about?”

“Sy.”

“You’re saying Sy was looking at me, and I was smiling at him? So what?”

“I wanted your smile, and you’d stopped giving it to me,” he said simply, as though his actions made perfect sense. “It made me mad. And it was making me nuts that he was enjoying looking at your body.” He said it so logically that I had the sudden urge to giggle, though I tamped it down.

“Is this about you being jealous?”

“I don’t want anyone, which includes Sy, being near you.” He nipped at the side of my neck for emphasis, which made me shiver and feel warm at the same time.

“You know that’s unreasonable,

right?” I breathed deeply, trying to remain on topic.

“I know. I don’t think... I’ve experienced jealousy before. I’ve never...cared about anyone as much as I care about you.” He kissed the spot he’d nipped, and more sparks of warmth zinged me, branching out to my breasts, which began to feel fuller.

“You aren’t handling it well.” My voice had acquired that sexy, breathy, I’m-getting-turned-on tone as my heart tapped a quicker beat against my chest. I knew he could hear the change in my tone.

“I’ll do better. And I’ll try not to kill Sy in the meanwhile. You are mine.” He had that gruff, rumbling voice vibrating

with raunchy suggestion next to my ear, making my toes curl with expectation.

“Oh, Ryder.” And just like that, warmth blossomed in my heart, and I turned around to face him. His beautiful green eyes were glowing with intensity, and a sense of completion that I couldn’t quite verbalize settled over me. The truth of his words was reflected back at me, and with that, I was done in, a tender smile curling my lips. He saw it, and it was like a weight lifted from his shoulders.

A sinful gleam with a smile to match slid over his face, making his eyes focus in on me with pure, lascivious intent. A sweet ache pulsed gently in response

between my thighs, and I realized that in just two days, he had my body trained to respond to a look with sweet anticipation. Day by day, he was becoming a master of my body, learning it intimately and knowing just what buttons to push to make me crazy.

Purposefully, deliberately, he grasped my hips, his fingers digging firmly into my flesh, and he walked me back two steps against the wall, caging me there. His green eyes burned into mine, and he captured my lips in a deep, hot, soul-stirring kiss. It made my blood pound like a bass drum and my senses reel instantly. He was declaring himself, claiming me, owning me, and I welcomed it, wanting to be his. Ryder's

woman. "I love your lips," he growled against them. "You taste so good."

"You can have them." I nipped his scrumptious bottom lip and teased him with the light touch of my tongue, inviting his invasion, his dominance. I craved him. Our energies swirled and braided together, adding to the feeling of heat and desperation.

His tongue was like rough silk as it swept through my mouth, and I sucked on it, refusing to let him go. I felt his deep, guttural moan of pleasure and his sudden loss of control. His arms curled around my back roughly, one hand sliding down to palm and squeeze my ass, curling me into his stiff erection. I found myself

crushed against the wall, feeling every inch of his body pressing into mine.

“Your legs have been driving me crazy,” he growled against my lips, and he slid his hand from my ass down my thigh to yank my leg up around his hip, grinding against the apex of my thighs deliciously.

“Oh, Ryder,” I whispered with awe. There was the perfect alignment of his hard cock rubbing against the seam of my shorts, setting off sparks of sensation. “That feels so good.”

“You like that?” He circled his hips slowly, and I held on to his arms as my legs shook, my blood beginning to pool thickly in one major spot.

“Yes,” I exhaled sharply, my lips

parted, trying to breathe through the fire building.

He continued the slow grind. "I've been visualizing you wrapped around my waist all afternoon. I just want to be deep inside you right now."

"Yesss. I want that too." My sex swelled, and more damp heat had me aching and needy. I knew my panties were going to be soaked.

He let go of my leg to peel my shirt off, and seeing the lacy cups of my bra, paused to admire. His eyes flared as he traced the pattern where my nipples stiffened through the transparent, silky material with light, teasing fingers. It was just a light enough touch to make me

moan with the sizzling heat that attacked my womb.

“Do you have matching panties?”

“You should find out.”

His eyes were fiery, watching my face, while his fingers undid my button and zipper, dropping my shorts to the ground.

“Damn, Taylor...so fucking hot.” His eyes devoured the white lace of my barely-there thong, running his fingertips over the front of the triangle. I yearned for his fingers to touch me. Helplessly, my hips curled against his hand, feeling such incredible need pumping through me. It was like a thirst that needed immediate quenching.

“Ryder...” I went to yank his shirt

loose, but he snagged my hands and manacled them in one of his large ones above my head, arching my breasts out.

“This is a good look for you.” His eyes raked over me. “I want to watch you come,” he murmured, and he ran his fingers down the front of my panties.

“Here?” I gasped, heat from his fingers on my sex making it burn hotter.

“Right here.” He nipped at my ear again. “You’re so fucking wet, I can feel it. So fucking wet,” he rumbled in my ear, gently rubbing the lacy material.

With his strong thigh between my legs, the denim rubbing sensuously on the soft skin of my inner thighs, he used his knee to push my legs farther apart. His fingers

pulled the flimsy material of my thong aside and rubbed gently, caressing my hot, sensitive folds. My legs were open to him, my back arched against the wall, and all I could do was moan and writhe as he watched, circling and circling the most sensitive group of nerve endings on my entire body, his heated expression looking darkly satisfied.

A finger found my opening, pumping slowly in and out, and my hips thrust out at him involuntarily. I gasped as fine nerve endings grew hotter, wound tighter and kept me feeling strung with short, choppy breaths of air. I picked up the rhythm as he joined another finger, my muscles beginning to tighten around him. His expression was raw, sensual and

demanding that I stay connected to him as he controlled my body. It was so intimate.

His fingers moved harder, the heel of his hand rubbing my clit as we moved together.

“I want to watch you come,” he rasped.

“Yes,” I moaned, and when he stretched me further with a third finger, I went over the top, crying out, my body jerking against him with the force of my orgasm. He captured my cries with his mouth, his lips rubbing against mine as the tremors in my body lessened and subsided, leaving me sensitized, my nerve endings humming.

It took a moment for me to find my scattered thoughts.

“What about you?” I asked shakily, holding onto his shoulders when he released my hands so I wouldn’t just collapse in a puddle of gelatin.

“We’re not done yet,” he replied thickly, and he picked me up to lay me gently on the bed. I sat up on my knees and helped him pull his T-shirt over his head, enjoying running my fingers over the swell of his pecs and along the ridges of his amazing six-pack. Feeling brave, I trailed my hands down to the waistband of his jeans, something I’ve never done before to anyone, and slowly undid each button on his button fly. The

lower ones were hard to undo because his cock was hard and full, tightening up the material. My knuckles brushed against his hard flesh, teasingly.

“Taylor,” he groaned, deep and guttural, stilling my hands. “I need to get these off.” He worked to remove his black motorcycle-riding boots and kicked off his jeans and boxers before joining me on the soft bed, his erection thick and prominent. I was lying back, enjoying the show.

“You have such a beautiful body,” he murmured, running his fingers lightly over my stomach, around my breasts, around my belly button, seeming to enjoy feeling my skin.

He leaned over and stared into my

eyes, fierce heat and tenderness reflecting back at me. “You’re so beautiful and delicate,” he murmured, “I feel like I need to be careful not to break you.”

“I’m pretty sturdy,” I whispered, loving the feel of his body covering mine, his hot length prodding my hip. He held most of his weight on his elbows, but one of his thighs was resting between my own, stimulating my most sensitive flesh yet again.

“Your eyes are like the wildflowers by the lake on Te’re, so blue I could stare at them forever. Let me in, Taylor,” he demanded gently, his eyes softly holding mine.

He was making love to me with his words, and emotion roiled chaotically through my mind. I felt such longing that I couldn't help but open my mind and let him see my deepest thoughts, darkest desires. He was so noble and fine, thoughtful and courageous, that I couldn't help but feel warmth surging through my heart. I could actually feel him in my thoughts. His delicious male energy seemed to surround me with carnal heat and wicked intent, amplifying my own emotions.

Slowly, he bent and brushed his lips back and forth over mine, his black hair falling forward. "So soft and sexy," he whispered huskily, taking a nibbling bite

of my lower lip. His lips brushed along my neck and collarbone, his tongue coming out to taste my skin, sucking gently, and I felt shivers of heat lick my veins once again. When his mouth reached my breast, I heard myself moan, arching to give him access. Freeing it from its material so it was propped up to him, he scraped his teeth over one of my pink nipples. How could I recover so quickly? The hot moisture of my arousal seeped through to the lips of my sex once again.

But I wanted my turn. I wanted to do the attacking. Managing to catch him off balance, I shoved him onto his back and straddled him, loving the feel of powerful man between my legs.

“I want to have my way with you,” I purred, running my hands over the ridges and swell of tanned muscle.

“What do you want to do?” His sensual smile wrapped around my heart as he reached to cup my breasts once again, rubbing his thumbs over the stiffened peaks. Lightning fired down to my sex lips, making them swell and heat with more juices. Gasping with the pleasure of it, I grabbed his wrists and pulled them away, knowing he would end up distracting me.

“You have to leave your hands here,” I breathed heavily, still feeling the tingles from his touch. I placed his hands on the wooden slats of the headboard,

curling his fingers around the wooden bars. “Don’t move.”

Lightly raking my nails down the inside of his arms, over his nipples and down his slatted abdomen, I traced the outline of rigid muscle, wanting to know his body as he knew mine. Placing my lips over one of his flat brown nipples, I let my tongue taste his skin. Edging closer to his straining cock, I let my lips roam, planting random wet kisses over his tight stomach, tracing the grooves as I’d been longing to do, loving how his muscles jumped at my touch and how his breathing was now shallow and rapid. I could feel his shaft prodding my breast as I worked down his abdomen. It had grown significantly as I played with his

body, and when I got to it, I wondered how he had ever fit inside me. Thicker and more distended than before, his cock stood swollen, a small pearl of fluid cresting the top.

I wanted to taste him. His breathing became more labored. I looked up to see the muscles of his arms bulging as he gripped the headboard, his eyes on mine. I'd never done it before. Was there a wrong way?

"You don't have to," he said heavily, seeing into my thoughts.

"I want to." Tentatively at first, I grasped his cock. I was surprised to feel how hot it was and to feel it pulsate beneath my fingers. Bending over him, I

licked the moisture off of the head like it was a lollipop, enjoying the scent and salty taste of his essence, and Ryder groaned at the sensation.

Emboldened by his response, I took him in to my mouth and sucked at him, bobbing over the crest of his head. He pumped his hips involuntarily, a tortured expression on his face. I licked the side of his shaft from base to tip before enveloping him again, this time using my hand and mouth to make him crazy. Up and down, I surrounded him, absorbing his sounds of pleasure and feeling his cock lengthen even more. I felt sexy and wicked, playing with his cock.

“Babe, you’ve got to stop,” he said through a hiss. “I want to get there with

you. Condoms are in the drawer.”

With a final lick, I crawled back up his body and reached over him to snag a packet from the small nightstand. Unable to stop himself from touching what was an inch from his face, he let go of the headboard and cupped my breasts, laying one plump orb on his hot, open mouth.

“Ryder,” I moaned, needing to pause and grind my wet folds against his shaft. “Let me put this on you.”

Reluctantly he released me, and in a guttural voice that was nearly a growl, he said, “Make me so fucking hard.”

I moved quickly to cover his cock with the condom. I sat poised, holding

the pulsing head of his shaft at my wet opening, rubbing the head along my folds, when I caught his eyes. “Let me in, Ryder,” I whispered, opening my mind to him. After a moment’s hesitation while a hint of feeling shadowed his green eyes, he gave in.

His desire hit me like a blast of heat that made me gasp and almost come immediately. My heart rate kicked up, and I had to pant to bring enough air to my lungs. Aching, shivering, hot and needy, I felt the sensations wash over and through me, making me feel even more desperate for release.

I sank onto his shaft. He filled me up, stretched me. Driven to prolong the delicious sensations, I braced my hands

on his strong shoulders and pumped my hips slowly, feeling the slick friction, the hot slide of his cock setting off fires along nerve endings.

Images and feelings came to me as I moved on his shaft. I felt an overwhelming surge of warmth and care, heat and lust. His longing to meet me as he watched me move about in my day-to-day life, his admiration that I worked so hard to pull myself up in the world, his gut-wrenching fear that someone was trying to take me out of the world, and his...love. No one had ever loved me before.

Thick emotion mixed with carnal need made my eyes fill with a sense of how

beautiful and perfect this was, and I picked up my rhythm, trying to pump my hips faster along his length. I was in his heart and mind. And he was in mine.

Winding tighter and tighter, spiraling hotter and hotter, needing to reach the pinnacle, I just couldn't go fast enough, hard enough, and I was almost sobbing with the need for release. In a sudden move, Ryder took charge. He rolled me over and pushed into me, his features harsh, his jaw clenched. My legs wrapped around his hips, and he slammed into me again and again, both of us crying out. My hips rose to meet each thrust, my clit sliding and rubbing against him with each stroke. Harder and faster he pumped. Our lips fused,

feeding each other moans and gasps. Higher and higher we climbed, our minds melded, our needs multiplying. We rode the edge of the cliff, nearing the jumping-off point.

“I’m going to come so hard,” he ground out, slamming into me again and again.

“Yes!” I cried, breathlessly, and then I felt myself go off with a heat explosion, breathless arch, scattered mind, as spasms of pleasure rolled over me.

Dimly, I heard his harsh shout. We were engulfed in waves of turbulent release that left us shaking, our bodies quivery. It was a few minutes before I realized he had collapsed on the pillow

next to me, though one of his legs was still between my thighs and one of his arms was curled around my midriff.

“Lin’de,” he murmured roughly.

“You’re going to kill me.”

“Not if you kill me first.” My lips curled into a smile as I basked in the warm glow of our spent arousal.

It was long moments later that I realized what I thought I’d picked up from being part of his inner world. It was the first time he’d ever pulled his wall down for me, and I thought I’d seen... Was Ryder in love with me? My throat burned as my mind was captured by the question.

“Yes.” He turned his head to look at me, his green eyes clear and steadfast as

he read my thoughts. “I am.”

A thick ball of emotion choked my throat. I didn’t know what to say.

How...?

Using a gentle finger, he traced the moisture down my cheek, wiping the tears that had begun trickling after such a beautiful revelation, and smiled gently.

“But how...when...” Full, coherent sentences seemed impossible, as tenderness and warmth made my thoughts fuzzy.

“How could I not?” He kissed the tip of my nose. “You were so beautiful and thoughtful, and strong and kind...”

The warm timbre of his voice poured over me like a gentle waterfall. Hurt

places that I didn't know about, deep places in my subconscious, were suddenly filled with healing warmth.

“You got all that from...watching me? I mean, how did this all start?”

“You want to know how I ended up on Earth? Investigating you?”

“I just want to understand. I need the big picture.” I wanted to believe. This was all too good to be true, and life had already taught me not to trust things that felt good.

He pulled me closer, onto my side, facing him, so one of his muscular thighs rested between mine, and my soft lower stomach cupped his still semihard shaft between us. Taking a deep breath, with his large hand languidly tracing shapes

along my back and spine, as though he couldn't stop touching me, he started. "It began with the investigation. Sy had been able to find Frank, using new technology he'd developed. We have communication devices. We refer to them as satellite links, or sat links for short. Anyway, for the last few years, Sy has tried to design programs that would recognize when one of the sat links was being activated on Earth, but with very little success."

"Why is that important?"

"We need to monitor who's coming, who's going and their movements."

"Doesn't that impinge on their rights or something?"

“Coming through the mylunate transfer is not a right. Those who are allowed to come through know and agree to the monitoring, because they recognize the delicate nature of traveling between planets. We need to ensure that anyone who comes is going to acclimate and fit in immediately. And still, as much as we police the transfers, there are those who have managed to find ways and means of coming here through illegal channels.”

“Like Ranik?”

“Like Ranik and a few others who are currently under investigation. About eight months ago, Sy had a breakthrough. He found what he was looking for. Each sat link has a digital signature embedded

in its transfer while in use that no Earth technology contains. That's when Sy was able to locate where Frank was, and I came immediately."

"How did that connect you to me?"

"We were able to find Frank whenever he used his sat link. Unfortunately, he wasn't using it that frequently, and he moved around a lot, so we lost him several times. He managed to elude us over and over again over the years, somehow knowing what our moves were going to be before we did. A few months ago we saw that he was spending more and more time with your boss."

"And so you started watching me?"

"We didn't know who all was

involved, helping him. I also rationalized the idea because I'd be able to get information from the inside. Find out what was going on, where he was holding up. Reggie was easy to find, but not easy to talk to without drawing attention to myself. I didn't want to scare Ranik off just when I thought we'd get him. You were more accessible, so I could see what you were up to more easily, and as his assistant, you likely knew more about what was happening behind the scenes. Assistants always know more about what's going on."

I had to acknowledge that was likely true. "Why not just take Ranik out when he's with Reggie?"

“We needed to take things slowly and be careful. That’s most important on Earth. I don’t think you can fully appreciate the delicate nature of the relationship we have with Earth. If taking extra time ensured a better result and kept the secret of our existence safe, I was okay with taking extra time. Imagine how Reggie would have reacted if we’d just grabbed Ranik while they were out and about.”

“He would have tried to beat you down.”

“Right. We couldn’t attract attention to ourselves or risk having the police get involved. We just wanted to find where Frank was calling home and grab him

there, but he was smart enough to keep moving. He never stayed alone. He made friends everywhere, some innocent, some not.”

“He moved in with Reggie just over a week ago.”

“But now he likely knows we’re on to him again and will have moved on to hide under another rock somewhere.”

“So you were watching for him to find a pattern of movement and were hoping I would be able to provide you with the background details?”

“I was content to sit back at first, let Sy befriend you. I figured you were like every other woman in Hollywood, trying to get discovered. I had no interest in finding out anything else about you. Just

wanted to gather my data and move on to capturing and securing Ranik. It was fortuitous that you worked for the company that Sunan owned.”

“My cousin turned me on to it.”

“She did?” He seemed surprised.

“We don’t usually advertise.”

“I figured she knew my aunt was about to kick me out just when I was about to graduate from school and wanted to do me a solid by helping me find work. She was already working as a receptionist somewhere in the industry.”
Hmm. As distasteful as it was to think of calling her—the idea really made me cringe internally—maybe it was worth a call to my aunt to shake her down a bit

for some information.

The idea put a bad taste in my mouth, but I knew it was a good first step. Now that I was looking back, it did seem odd that my aunt, as much of a pain in my ass as she was, would agree to house me until the very last quarter of college, only to kick me out unexpectedly. Hmm.

“So why didn’t you guys continue with your plans to have Sy befriend me?”

“Because I wanted you for myself, though I didn’t verbalize it at the time. I only knew that you were a beautiful woman with a tender heart, and I didn’t want Sy laying a hand on you. We initially came up with a plan for Sy to start watching you in the morning,

looking for ways to legitimately meet you.

“On the day he was supposed to start, he was caught on something that he couldn’t put down, and I decided to watch you instead. You stepped out looking amazingly beautiful with your hair all up, showing this soft, elegant neck.” He feathered his fingers over my skin near my collarbone and ear, giving me goose bumps. “And you were wearing this sort of ’40s-style dress that wrapped around you, and somehow tied in a bow at your side.”

“I know the one. It’s red with a V-neck.” I smiled, unable to stop the joy from spilling out onto my face. He’d

remembered a dress I'd worn months ago.

"I remembered it because I wanted to untie the bow and strip it from you. That dress has starred in a few different fantasies I've had about you."

"I'll have to wear it for you," I murmured huskily. I was rewarded by a squeeze.

"I would love that." He ran his hand down my back and over my ass, his fingers nearing my sex, which made my breathing alter. His touch was ambrosia.

"So why didn't you ever come up to me?" I asked, somewhat breathlessly.

"You were forever busy. You worked all the time, and I didn't want to just be one of the guys at the bar that you

suffered. At the gym, Rico was prowling. Many times I wanted to beat him to a bloody pulp for touching you.”

“Touching me? When did he touch me?” I frowned, trying to think of a time Rico had ever put his hands on me.

“He’d show you a proper stance, squaring your hips the right way for you, or fixing the angle of your leg when you kicked or your glove when you punched.”

“Sheesh, Ryder.” I giggled. “You’re a tough customer.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t say I was proud.” He gave me a chagrined look. “Anyway, there was never a time that I could legitimately meet you, so when the

apartment next to yours went vacant, I took advantage.”

“So seeing me in my dress is what did it?” I rested my cheek on his biceps, loving that I had the freedom to be close to him and touch him.

“No. Seeing you in that dress just meant that I was like any other guy who sees you and wants to bend you over anything handy and fuck you until you see stars. What made me stop and look closer was when Mrs. Myrtle came out.”

“My neighbor?”

“You took such care to make sure she got safely to work. You weren’t doing it to make points with anyone. No one was watching you. You just did it because you cared. And you were pissed that her

own family was being careless with her.”

“Well, she’s darn near eighty years old and so frail looking.”

“I didn’t want Sy near you after that. All your thoughts and emotions were right on your sleeve, which let me see what a beautiful, strong person you were.”

“All my thoughts and feelings?”

“Also your fears and...fantasies.”

“I bet you were surprised to be drawn into my sex dreams.”

“That’s putting it mildly. I didn’t want to cross any irreversible lines with you, but you were too tempting. I wanted your passion. You were all soft and pink and

ready and waiting. I just had to touch you.”

“It was amazing.” I nuzzled his chest and neck, reveling in his spicy scent. He was so gorgeous; it was hard to understand why he’d been single so long.

“Dating anyone on Earth is frowned upon,” he answered my thought. “You can imagine why. Someone would wonder about where I come from, and then things would get weird because I would either have to lie or tell the truth.”

True. That would get weird. “Was there never anyone on your own planet?”

Ryder’s look became solemn. He met my gaze for a few moments. “There was a girl, someone I met during my training

years ago. We were close for a couple of years, and I thought she was what I wanted. Then she demonstrated that it wasn't really me she was interested in, so I ended the relationship.”

A couple of years. Wow. That was a long time. “Why did you break up?”

“She had personal issues. She was found trying to locate files in my mother's office one day, claiming I'd sent her to do it. As you can imagine, my father had a field day with that. He wanted to banish her to another province and strip her of her credentials. I made a case for her to work in security on Earth, so she could move on with her life and use the training she'd learned.”

“That was thoughtful.” I chewed on my bottom lip, thinking about how I would feel if someone I’d gone out with for two years had betrayed me, even if it was years ago. “So she does what you do down here? Security stuff?”

“Some of that. She monitors visitors of a nearby region, and she’s helped out on teams. She’s a good soldier.”

Okay, now it was my turn to feel some jealousy. Wasn’t that interesting? I still couldn’t stop the questions, even recognizing I was being overly nosy. I was just proud of myself for not asking about a picture of her to see if she was prettier than me. Dopey, right? “Do you still see her around?”

“Sometimes.”

“What’s her name?”

“Jory.”

“Did you love her?”

“No.”

I could now breathe a sigh of relief. I was satisfied.

Chapter Nineteen

When we resurfaced, it was dark, it was late and we were looking for a quick snack before settling in for the rest of the night. We had toaster pastries on the balcony followed by gentle conversation and the very mundane chore of toothbrushing, which was more interesting for once because we actually did this together.

How weird. Like a real couple.

And with work coming up, I had some very everyday kinds of things to do. I got my clothes ready, checked appointments on my phone, double-checked that the

alarm was set and crawled into bed beside Ryder, curling up next to him while he looked at some report on his mechanical thingamajiggy.

I wanted to remember to ask him about it later, because it was really cool and maybe girlfriends could be issued these kinds of cool things, but for the first time in a long time, my body was able to so completely relax that I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The ringing of my cell alarm brought me back to wakefulness too soon, though I did find myself deliciously, protectively spooned by Ryder's big body. His thick, muscular forearm was anchored across my waist, making me have to stretch to shut off the offending

sound in the quiet of the room. I settled back into his warm body once again, wiggling my ass against his cock, as was becoming my custom, and appreciating the growing stiffness I could feel there.

“Stop that,” he groaned against my ear, but he still ground his hips to my backside. “We don’t have time. Or do we?” His arm slid from my waist up to my rib cage, his rough palm caressing and cupping my soft breast.

“We could multitask,” I gasped. Heat shot from the point where he was rolling my nipple between his fingers to my sex, in waves. “Come take a shower with me.”

“Anytime.”

I wasn't exactly late to work, but I definitely had to rush. It began playfully enough—me washing Ryder and treating his cock like my own personal lollipop while his face took on a look of torment mixed with ecstasy, and then him washing me, his mouth on me like I was the best flavor around, making me buck against him involuntarily with moans. Before long, my legs were wrapped around his waist, and he'd barely slid a condom on—how smart he was to snag one on our way to the bathroom—before he was pinning me to the wall with his thrusting hips.

Technically, I was on time in that I was in front of my office building at

eight o'clock in the morning, though Ryder was still plundering my mouth with his goodbye kiss. Or was I doing the plundering?

"I better go." I pulled away.

"Reggie's probably going to be upset because I didn't show yesterday." I took a mirror out of my purse and did a quick lipstick check, wiping away the smudges caused by our lip-lock and reapplying before snapping the compact shut and putting it all away.

"I still don't see why you need to go to work," he began, but I didn't let him get far.

"I told you. I need my job."

"No, you don't—"

"I do." The thought of being entirely

reliant on another person was frightening enough to make even my inner punk give me that *Scream* face. “I’m not going to sponge off you—”

“It’s not sponging.”

This, for me, was nonnegotiable.

“Look. Who knows when Frank is going to surface again, and I can’t be that girl that sits at home eating bonbons and watching Judge Mathis. Seriously. He probably knows that I’m with you, and not only that, from what Cynthia told me, I’m working in an office run by the Sunan elders. I’m probably safer than you. I’m going to be fine today.”

“It makes me uncomfortable.” He frowned after a pause. “I can’t protect

you if something happens in there.”

“I’ll call. I’ll text. I’ll keep you in the loop throughout the day.”

“Taylor—”

“Just trust me.” My voice was nonsense, and I willed him to really look at me and see me. “I’ve been looking out for myself a long time.”

His pale eyes looked into mine steadily before he gave a long-suffering sigh. “All right. I’m agreeing to this because I see your point about the safety of being in the building and because you’re agreeing to update me on things. Regularly. Frequently.”

“Right.” I grinned, though he was still hesitant to let go. Teasingly, I added, “Good progress, sweetheart. We’ll take

this in baby steps, and before long, your control-freak tendencies will be a thing of the past.”

“Taylor...” He looked at me with a warning glint.

“I know, I know. Someone’s trying to kill me. Blah, blah, blah. You know I’m totally kidding. I’ll be careful. I promise.”

Reluctantly, his lips quirked. “Anyone ever tell you you’re a smart-ass?”

“Yes. You.”

“At least I’m consistent.”

I noticed he’d smiled a lot more in the last forty-eight hours. Feeling like maybe I had something to do with it made me feel good. Or maybe it was knowing that

he loved me. But did I love him? I hadn't said it aloud and wondered if he recognized that. I wasn't sure. It was something I wouldn't say lightly, and definitely not if I wasn't completely sure I meant it. I mean, I'd only known the guy a week. Was it possible for me to fall in love in a week?

"I'm patient, Taylor. I'm not going anywhere." Ryder let me know he still had access to my thoughts. I almost put up my mental shield but decided not to. I didn't want to hide anything from him.

"This is all new," I stated quietly.

"I know. I understand. I'm hoping that when all this is over with Ranik, we'll have some time to get to know each other."

“Yes.” I breathed easily, though I still had concerns about his family.

“They have nothing to do with us,” he said firmly.

“I don’t want to be the thorn that keeps you guys apart,” I said anxiously. “I couldn’t do that to you or to them. You’ve all suffered so much as it is.”

“Then it will be up to them to make sure we all get along.” He kissed my cheek gently, mindful of my freshly applied lipstick, before getting all bossy and directive again. “I’ll be in contact at lunch. Don’t leave the building before then and make sure your phone is with you no matter where you go.”

“I’ll keep it with me even in the

ladies’,” I assured him. I put my mental shield back up, strangely becoming accustomed to protecting myself from *mind reading*. Who’d a thought?

Concern for my work attire and careful coiffure had prompted Ryder to borrow Sy’s sports car. After getting out of the car, even with the threat of a Reggie-style thrashing hanging over my head, I sauntered into the building with a big grin on my face.

Thankfully, Reggie wasn’t in sight, and I was able to get myself organized at my desk once again. Apparently, Reggie hadn’t come in the previous two days either, and there were nearly a hundred messages and voice mails to respond to. Some of them I could handle, as they

dealt with business I was responsible for, and the rest I updated on the phone list, which I was eventually able to print out and place on his desk. I went through the mail, I phoned in orders for scripts to be copied and I messengered client samples from our video and script library. This was hours of catch up, during which I promised myself I would never be absent again.

It was nearing noon before I realized that I still had not seen nor heard from Reggie. No wonder I'd been able to accomplish so much in such a short time. A feeling of strange creepiness crawled over my skin. Why wasn't he here? And why hadn't he called me? That was

absolutely not like him. I called our human-resources manager, Elaine.

“Any word on Reggie? Is he sick or something?”

“Not sure, Taylor.” Elaine’s crisp, usually no-nonsense monotone actually sounded concerned. “He was gone the last two days, he hasn’t called in and he isn’t picking up at his home or on his cell.”

“Maybe he got hurt at home. Do you think the police should do a quick check on him? Make sure he doesn’t need medical attention?” Part of me was afraid the police would find a body at his residence.

“That’s a very good idea. I’ll let you know if they find out anything.”

I felt better after having done that. I grabbed my cell phone to call Ryder and update him, and I noticed my newly charged phone had updated to include a missed call. Someone had called me while I'd been on Te're. Tapping the various touchscreen options, I was able to pull up Reggie as the missed call. My phone was indicating that he'd left a message.

Double creepy.

“Taylor, I won't be in for a few days. Take care of Paul's meeting, and I'll get with you later.” His voice sounded serious. Heavy. Or did it? Was I reading into it because of my own frightening experiences? But I also knew that

Reggie never took time off.

My desk phone rang, pulling me from my thoughts. Taking a deep breath, I answered, “Reggie Mason’s office,” for the hundredth time in the day already.

“Taylor? Is that you?”

“It is. Who is calling?”

“It’s Paul.”

“Paul!” The Paul whose family was friends with Frank. I felt a sense of caution as I asked, “What’s going on? Reggie’s not going to be here this week, but he asked me to hold the meeting anyway, so we can sign off on the contract for legal.”

“Yeah. That’s what I’m calling about. I need to meet sooner.”

“Sooner? You mean like sooner than

two o'clock?" I frowned.

"I mean like right now. I'm going out of town for a while, and I'm not sure when I'll be coming back."

"Oh. Well, I'm limited in how far I can go. I don't have a car available to me right now."

"Why don't I pick you up, and we'll grab some sushi down on Sunset?"

I was immediately uncertain. Where did Frank figure into Paul's life? When I tapped into Paul's mind during our lunch meeting, he'd felt pretty innocent. Did I trust my intuition? I did. I truly didn't think Paul was an evil guy. I knew that Ryder had told me not to leave the building, but I also knew how important

it was to Reggie to sign this guy. And he'd asked me to handle it all in his absence. I didn't want to screw this up because I still needed the job.

"You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Okay. When are you coming by?"

"I'm already outside the building."

"Wow. You don't mess around. Let me get your file and make some copies of the contract, so I can go over it with you. Can you wait for five or ten minutes?"

"Sure."

I tried calling Reggie, but he didn't pick up. Quickly I left a brief message regarding the change of plans.

Knowing that Ryder was going to

protest and try to make me wait for him to arrive and accompany me or something silly like that, I sent a quick text telling him what was happening and where I was going to be. His response was almost immediate.

Wait for me! I'll go with you.

Rolling my eyes, I responded by texting him that there was no time and that I needed to head out. I had let him know what restaurant I was going to be at, though, which I figured was a good compromise. I didn't mind if he joined us there. My phone buzzed again with his response, but I ignored it. I just wanted to get this done, and I was not about to engage in a texting argument with

my...what? Boyfriend? Lover?

I smiled as I thought about what to call him, feeling okay with the designations for the first time ever. Life really was looking up.

Typing in names and dates, I printed out one of our standard contracts and created a client folder to be added to the file cabinet. It was only as I stepped outside of my office building that I realized I hadn't asked Paul what kind of car he was driving. Scanning the street, I figured it wouldn't be hard to spot him, especially since he was watching for me and supposedly already there. But no one honked. And I saw no one who resembled Paul: tall, dark blond, lean, sort of scruffy clothes. I walked back

toward my office building and leaned against one of the stone pillars in the shade, trying to stay out of the direct heat of the summer sun, and contemplated my predicament.

Now what? Nothing. That was what. Did I need to go back up and call him? Maybe I had him on my smartphone calendar app with his phone number. That would be just like me. I could be seriously organized when I wanted to be. But what was up with this sudden trip?

The longer I stood there, the longer I had time to entertain some misgivings. How was it that I nearly got snagged off the street, Reggie turned up missing and Paul needed to get out of town

immediately? I didn't think such things were coincidental, and we all had the same terrorist as our lowest common denominator. Was I truly being foolish? If this was a movie, would people be screaming at me from the audience to get back in the building? I was starting to freak myself out. Life was seriously getting too spooky for Casper.

Just when I was getting ready to head back in, a large hand grabbed my arm in a strong grip and yanked me behind the pillar.

I yelped my surprise.

"It's just me." Paul gave me a half smile that seemed altogether forced. He looked past me and scanned the street as though looking for someone.

“Everything okay?” I offered the question hesitantly.

“Dandy.” But his smile had become a grimace. “I’m parked around the corner.”

Around the corner was a euphemism for nearly half a mile away. I could feel my feet chafing in my heels, as these were not shoes made for long distances covered quickly. I was on the verge of complaining, feeling where a few blisters were going to bleed soon, when he said, “I’m right there.”

A black luxury SUV was parked midblock.

Sitting felt wonderful, though the silence that followed as we drove

through the streets felt awkward. Keeping my shield in place, I opened my mind fully to Paul, trying to get a sense of what was happening here. Waves of fear and anxiety rushed through him and crashed over me, engulfing me, almost like heavy weights on my shoulders. He was on the run. Flight. But he didn't want to give up completely on the dream he'd finally found for himself. Writing. He wanted to somehow preserve that, keep that foot in the door. His thoughts were scattered and rushing without sequence, making it impossible to follow what was happening with him.

I began to have my second set of misgivings about this meeting, but I reminded myself that we were going to a

public place. Everything was going to be fine.

“I hope Sushi on Sunset is okay with you,” he murmured.

“Fine.”

“It’s quick, and at this time of day, it will likely be a little quieter. We can do business, and I can make my flight.”

“Where are you going?”

“Here we are.” He pulled into a space on the street, ignoring my question. I’d seen the answer, though. He was going to the Cayman Islands for a while, so he could lose himself and whoever was going to come after him for what he’d done.

What had he done? That was the

million-dollar question. I knew I needed to let Ryder know what was going on, so I took my phone out and immediately saw the text he'd left me before I ran out of the office.

Wait for me!

Feeling guilty, I texted him as we got out of the car while Paul fed quarters into the meter. I let him know in shorthand script that I thought Paul was in trouble and that he was on the run. I told him that I was sorry I didn't wait. I told him again what restaurant I was at. He didn't get back to me, which had me believing that maybe he was on the way, but it would take time coming from the beach. Traffic was a bitch no matter what time of day in L.A.

The back table, away from the crowd, was what Paul requested. He did another scan around the restaurant and looked out the windows, which was starting to get me worried. Who had he pissed off? What retribution was he expecting?

“Two waters,” Paul told the waiter who approached and looked at me expectantly. “Know what you want?”

Actually, I hadn't even looked at the menu. Good thing I'd been to the place a time or two. Obviously, Paul was ready to leave like five minutes ago. I ordered udon with shrimp and vegetables.

“Make that two, and bring the bill immediately. I'm going to be in a hurry.”

“Yes, sir.” The waiter moved off

quickly, reacting to Paul's sharp tone.

"I get that you need this to happen now. I have the contract here. I can go over it with you."

"Let me sign it."

I put the file on the table and quickly explained the major points before pointing to the few places he needed to initial and sign. Reggie wasn't here to sign, so I couldn't get copies to him yet. Paul was fine with that and handed the paperwork back to me.

Food arrived at the same time as the bill.

"Okay, so how do I get in touch with you?" I asked, trying to eat quickly.

"I'll send you a post-office box when I'm settled. I'll be moving around for the

next few years, so I'll just check in with you every few months, either by email or by phone."

"Paul, what is going on? Why are you in such a...a...panic?"

He looked at me a moment, as though stuck for what to say. And that's when I got the goods. The memory of a conversation between his father and Frank came tumbling out of his mind.

"This is the big time," said Paul's father. He was an older man with slickly styled gray hair that was smoothly combed back, wearing a beautifully tailored business suit. Almost giddy with delight, he paced behind his desk in his large, opulent

office with dark, rich wooden paneling and large windows overlooking downtown Los Angeles.

A wide grin split his face as he ran a nervous hand over his receding hairline. “And you’re sure this deal is going to go through? I need this, Frank. My business is fucked beyond repair. People will come after me. I owe people, you understand. I didn’t know the market was going to drop. I didn’t have enough time to pull out.”

“The money’s been confirmed. It’s awaiting transfer. First, the clients want to see proof of the mylunate’s potency as an explosive. Then they’ll wire twenty million to our offshore account.” Frank was sitting calmly in a

comfortable wingback chair in front of the desk.

They obviously thought they were alone.

They weren't.

Paul had come to surprise his father for lunch. He'd paused, just out of sight, hearing that his father was in a meeting. His plan had been to back out without interrupting until he heard what his father was saying. He could see the two men reflected in a gilt-framed mirror mounted on the wall.

"All you have to do is show them that video from your home planet, right? Will that be enough?" The mention of "home planet" gave Paul pause as he

listened.

“We’ll have to see.”

“You’re sitting there without breaking a sweat, Frank. These guys are terrorists. How can you trust them?”

“I understand them.”

Paul’s father paused, and as though suddenly struck with a thought, he said, “You know they’re likely going to target cities in the United States. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“You’re too emotional, Rosser. This is business. When this is all done, you’ll have more money than you’ll know what to do with. That should take care of your conscience.”

“You can’t be as cold as you

pretend.” Rosser scowled, showing a hint of discomfort, as though seeing him for the first time. “This country has provided for you in so many ways.”

“Who do you think set off the mylunate bomb in his own hometown?”

The intercom on Paul’s father’s desk buzzed. Impatiently, he pushed a button, snapping, “What is it?”

“Sir, I just wondered if you wanted me to make any reservations for you before I left for lunch.”

“Why? Did I ask you to?”

“You always ask me to when Paul comes by.”

“When did Paul come by?”

“Isn’t he in your office? I thought he

went in nearly ten minutes ago.”

Rosser was silent a moment.

“Thanks, Sue. I’ve got this.” He clicked off his intercom and stepped around his desk. As he moved around the corner of his office, he spotted Paul standing just inside the door in the foyer.

“Nothing’s going on.” Paul gave me a quick smile and took another bite of soup. “I just need a change of pace, that’s all. I have a need to feel anonymous for a while.”

He wasn’t done thinking about this, though. I saw that Paul had somehow found the stash of mylunate his father and Frank were planning to sell. Frank had hidden the ore in their basement. Paul took it and hid it in some outdoor

location that only he was aware of. I could see it seemed to be in a desert. Where was there a desert in California that was close enough for Paul to have traveled to in a day?

I also saw that he feared they would catch him before he could leave the country. In his mind, there was no way he would allow anyone to commit atrocities. Not when there was something he could do about it. He remembered the horror of 9/11, and he didn't want anyone to have to suffer that kind of soul destruction. But he couldn't go to the cops because he didn't want his father to go to jail. His feelings and thoughts were all confusing and

contradictory, and it wasn't all thought through.

Perspiration was dotting Paul's upper lip and forehead. He was truly afraid.

"I'm fine," he said sharply, and I realized I was still staring at him.

"Sorry." I shook my head slightly. "That was probably uncomfortable."

"It's fine. Look, I'm going to the men's room. When the guy, the waiter, comes back, will you handle this for me?" He stood and dug through his pockets hurriedly but clumsily, pulling out his wallet, keys and change simultaneously. With fumbling fingers, he tried to juggle it all, but he only managed to drop several coins as he tried to dig out bills. He'd pulled out

more than needed and tried stuffing a few bills back in before dropping his keys.

Stilling his bumbling motions, he closed his eyes and tilted his head back, as though asking for help from a divine presence. I could see that his hands were shaking, which alarmed me after having experienced him as a suave, cool and collected guy just a few days ago. I was sure this was a strange state for him to be in.

“I’ve got this.” I grasped his hand supportively, surprised to note that his fingers felt like ice even though it was at least a hundred outside. I tried to give him a reassuring smile. “Go take care of

business.”

“Okay.” Exhaling with some exasperation, he tossed his wallet and loose bills across to me. “I’ll be right back.”

Gathering up the pieces, I pulled out the appropriate bills, putting everything else back neatly. He’d left his keys on the ground where they’d fallen, so I reached over with my toe and pulled them closer so I could grab for them without having to get up. I even managed to eat more of my udon, which had cooled enough that I wasn’t going to get severely burned. The vegetables were crisp and delicious, and the shrimp just popped in my mouth with pure goodness. No way did I want to miss out on this

when someone else was footing the bill, and Paul was likely going to request to go as soon as he came back from the restroom.

“Everything okay?” The waiter, a middle-aged Asian dude with thinning hair, was small of stature and wore a friendly smile on his face.

“Great,” I replied absently, and I handed him Paul’s money with the bill. As he walked away, I realized that Paul had been gone awhile and frowned. Had he taken off? But no, his keys were here. Maybe his gut was really bothering him. He had been looking a little worse for wear.

Trying to be helpful, I grabbed up his

wallet, keys and contract and made my way toward the front door of the restaurant. He was probably anxious to get going and would likely resent having to wait.

It was only as I turned toward my purse to answer my phone when it rang that I caught sight of the commotion outside the window. Paul was struggling with three men, one of whom I recognized as one of the guys who'd tried to grab me the other day. The other two had thick dark hair. Panic, fear and heart-thumping adrenaline overwhelmed my nervous system at once. For a second, I froze. Then I ran out the door in time to see Paul get shoved into a black luxury sedan that shot away while

the door was still being closed. I managed to make eye contact with Paul for a moment as the car sped by and I saw his pale, terror-filled face against the side window.

What to do?

I looked around, but no one seemed to be paying attention. What was it with people? So self-absorbed they couldn't be bothered to take a break from their goddamn cell phones long enough to help a guy out.

Before I thought about it, I ran to Paul's SUV, which was parked a short distance away at the curb. Unlocking it through his key fob, I jumped in, threw his stuff on the passenger seat, revved

the motor and took off, hoping to follow where they were going. Scanning ahead two and three blocks, I thought I saw a black luxury car driving erratically on Sunset and tried to dodge in and around cars to catch up. The moment of heartbreak was when I did finally catch up, only to find that it wasn't the right Mercedes. A woman with fake blond hair, a fake tan, fake boobs and only one hand on the wheel as she chatted on the phone was simply driving negligently. Chances were, Paul's kidnappers had turned down a side street before I could catch up.

Why hadn't I thought of that? I should have been looking...harder. I don't know.

Now I had no idea where Paul was being taken or what would happen to him. I decided to head for the condo. With Reggie gone from the office, potentially a missing person, no one was going to miss me. And if they did, I could always say that Reggie had asked me to handle some things for him. Besides, with all of these people turning up missing, it just seemed better to get back to Ryder. He'd know what to do.

I pulled my phone out of my purse to call Ryder and let him know the change of plans, but when I tried to connect, the phone suddenly lost all bars and the message No Service Available was displayed.

What. The. Hell. I shoved my phone into my bra and prayed that I wasn't stepping into a trap.

Chapter Twenty

“Are you Taylor?”

I'd just pulled into the alley behind the condo when a beautiful brunette with long flowing hair and golden eyes stepped out of a low-slung sports car. She was wearing skinny jeans that clung to every curve, chunky sandals and a figure-hugging T-shirt with a smiling white cartoon kitty, which allowed me to feel somewhat superior for having on a chic pair of linen trousers paired with a well-tailored, fitted blouse. Her expression captured my attention. It was edgy and somewhat panicked, like she

needed me to hurry.

“Who are you?” I asked cautiously, pulling the long strap of my purse over my head diagonally and closing the driver’s side door.

“My name’s Jory. I’m an old friend of Sy and Ryder’s.”

Recognizing the name, I quickly said, “Yes, I know.” Geesh. He hadn’t told me she was beautiful. “You were his girlfriend?”

“Years ago. He and Sy are just good friends of mine now. I hope you understand, though this might seem kind of weird. They’ve helped me out over the years, as you’ve probably heard.” She looked sincere, her eyes wide and her voice subdued. She seemed like a

perfectly lovely girl. Damn.

“Were you looking for them?”

“No. I was looking for you.”

That got my attention. “Me?”

“Ryder can’t get through to you. He needs you. He just had an encounter with Ranik—”

Damn my phone! Nervously, I asked, “Is he okay?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. I think he had to take Sy to the hospital.”

“Oh, my God! Sy was hurt?”

“I think so.”

“Which hospital?”

Jory’s eyes were distracted by movement over my shoulder. I heard a car pull up and the protesting creak of a

heavy door sliding open. Glancing back, I felt my heart drop. No... It couldn't be...

The same two guys who'd tried to grab me off the street jumped out with determined, angry looks on their bruised faces. My heart went from doing double time to doing quadruple time instantly.

No! Fucking A, could I catch a break here? On a rush of adrenaline, I spun and ran. I was ready to put the pedal to the metal and go hardcore out of the alley and back to the strand at the front of the building. I could get lost in the crowd. I could run into the little French bakery. I could damn well run straight out into the crashing surf!

I only made it a few steps. My arm

was expertly hooked and twisted sharply up behind my back, and my body got shoved chest first over the hood of Paul's car. Pain radiated from my shoulder. My ribs protested being slammed into the SUV. I took a gasping breath.

What happened?

I looked back at Jory and saw that the concern she'd displayed was now covered over with impatience as she restrained me effortlessly. What was happening here?

"Jory?" My voice felt small. I couldn't get air.

"Took you long enough," she snapped, directing her comment past me, and I

realized she'd been stalling me this whole time. She'd been giving the two thugs time to arrive. Oh, my God. We were hidden back here in the alley. There was no one else around. It was restricted parking, not where tourists would be found, my phone wasn't working and Ryder was likely at the sushi restaurant. I was so screwed.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” The bald guy stepped up and snagged my arm in his meaty grasp. “Nowhere to run?”

“No boyfriend to save her this time.” The crew-cut guy sneered. “I hope he shows. Bastard kicked teeth out of my mouth. I want payback.”

“Cut the chitchat.” Jory’s tone was suddenly hard-edged, and I swung back

to her with surprise. Her sweet-faced, grateful-ex facade had been replaced with a cold expression. “Get her in the van. We have people waiting for us. Frank doesn’t want them to be kept waiting. We need her with the other one.”

“You!” I gasped. “You’re the traitor!”

“I’m sure I’m not the only one,” she said dispassionately.

“Did you break into my apartment?”

“Looking for the mylunate you took from Ranik,” she said, and gave me a quick scan as though looking for it.

“Broke into your car, too, though I couldn’t find it. I recommend you give it up to Ranik. He can get mean.” She

started to turn away but paused and looked back. “You might want to just give it up to me. Trust me, you don’t want them looking for it.” She gave a nod toward the men holding me from behind.

I knew the mylunate could maybe get me out of this. I needed to think. I couldn’t just give it up. “I don’t have it.” She’d also said something like I was joining the other one. Did she mean Paul?

Jory sighed and shook her head. “If that’s how you want to play it.” She nodded to the men.

That’s when the rag was shoved in my face. Horrified, I got a lungful of something pungent and chemical. I

struggled against the darkness but had no chance of escape. My shattering scream of terror was trapped, echoing through my mind...

...I came to when my head smacked the side of the van during a sharp turn, aggravating the pain that was already pounding there. I hissed. It took several seconds for me to remember what had happened, but when I did, my eyes snapped open blearily.

The bitch had betrayed me!

My hands were tied behind me, stretching my shoulder muscles painfully. I saw that I was on the inside of a van and it was all metal, having been gutted. Jory had lured me out for

easier abduction, and I had played right into her hands. She'd obviously been following me with all of this planned out. I could see part of the leg of one of the men from my vantage point, the camouflaged material looking old and worn. Wasn't he the one who'd killed the Vietnamese girl? Taken her from her family back during the war?

I was nearly incapacitated with the onslaught of panic. My breathing became quick and shallow, my pulse pounding in my throat painfully.

I was being driven to Frank. There was no way I could escape this time, and Ryder would be frantic, not knowing where I was. He wouldn't be able to ride up on his motorcycle and save me

this time. There would be no near miss. This was it.

An acute, painfully poignant longing made my heart ache. I knew that I wouldn't see him again. It was like my soul cried out, shaking me clear through my bones.

The image of Ryder's rough-hewn features, his pale green eyes smiling down at me, came to mind. Remembering his tender words of love squeezed my heart, making it difficult to breathe. I struggled to pull air in to my lungs and squeezed my eyes shut, needing to hold his face in my mind and heart. Regrets clawed at me painfully from inside my own mind. The last time

Ryder and I were together, he'd told me he loved me, and I'd been too afraid to say it back. Fear. Why had I allowed it to rule my life? I could see the yawning chasm of what my life had been, the careful distance I'd kept from everyone around me, how I'd never sought out deep or meaningful relationships before. I'd always looked on others with suspicion, keeping them at a distance, and it had been to my own detriment. I'd lost out. I could see that.

Why had I questioned and doubted until my opportunity to grab hold of something good and whole was gone? I loved him. It was so clear. Why was it so clear now, when I would never have the chance to tell him? Coming to this

deeply meaningful realization at a point when I could do nothing about it struck me as horribly unfair. Fate had handed me shit cards for too long!

Silent sobs beat against my chest from beneath my breasts, wanting to come out. *No noise. None. I don't want them to hear me. Oh, God. Please!*

I wanted the chance to tell him. I wanted the chance to begin a life with him, so I could start a new chapter, a new adventure. I wanted to know happiness. I wanted to understand the intimacy of trusting another with my innermost self. I wanted it.

Life had sucked for so long!
Abandonment, grief, unrelenting hard

work, no love, no friends, not a soft place to speak of, and just when I was ready to explore this new and beautiful relationship, I was going to be killed. I'd had to work twice as hard to get half as far, and I'd been willing to do it, but where was the payoff? Where was the goddamn payoff! Didn't I deserve a payoff? Wasn't it my turn to win? Just once?

Dammit! It was my turn, and I was going to take it.

I wasn't dead yet. I didn't know how long I'd been out or how long I had before we arrived at our destination, but I needed to think.

Anger replaced my grief, and I felt rage at the injustice sweep through me. I

stopped feeling sorry for myself and began taking stock of what I might be able to do to get out of this mess. I remembered my badassness. I'd never relied on anyone else to get me out of trouble, and this time was not going to be different. Though I'd never sparred before, I had enough confidence in my kickboxing abilities that I was sure I could knock somebody's block off, at least long enough to run away efficiently. I hadn't taken those classes with Rico for nothing.

Don't forget. You come from a proud Brausiiian warrior, Taylor. The words were a faint whisper in my mind. It sounded like Dreya, but could she

communicate from so far away? I listened intently once again and heard nothing but the tires on the road, rhythmically spinning.

Mylunate!

How did the stupid mylunate work? Was it still on my toe? Ryder hadn't taken it from me. He'd told me to hold on to it because of the danger that surrounded me, but what to do with it? How did it work? There'd been warnings, precautionary rules or something.

I tried to think back to the night he'd told me about it. It seemed that you had to try to imagine a place to go, but there were restrictions, weren't there? How much and how far—and things from that

night were fuzzy because of the alcohol. Damn! Cynthia had also given me information, but I was so uncertain. What was the worst that could happen? I hadn't really found that out.

And what about Paul? Was he there too? Could I just leave him without trying to help? He was a nice man trying to do a good thing. Could I live with myself if I didn't try to find him? I could always find my way out of wherever they were taking me and send for help. But who knew what might happen if they got me fully enclosed in some space?

The van jerked to a stop sooner than I'd anticipated, while my thoughts were still contradicting each other.

A meaty grip took hold of my arm. My survival instinct kicked in.

With as much strength as I could muster, I reared up on my left knee and did a roundhouse kick that would have made Rico proud. My foot connected solidly with a mouth, knocking Crew Cut off of me long enough that I could jump out of the van and run.

Ignoring the stabbing pain from my kicking foot, I jammed on the speed and ran up what looked like a long driveway, trying to go all out despite the fact that my arms were behind me.

My breathing was harsh and heavy. Adrenaline roared in my ears. I only made it fifteen yards before I was

tackled from behind. A heavy body slammed into me, and I felt the air leave my lungs in a whoosh. I landed hard, smacking my head against the ground in a whiplash effect. Stinging pain stabbed my body, and hitting my head scrambled my brain for a moment.

“She’s a live one, is she?” The amused British tones carried on the breeze, clear as a bell, to where I lay under one of my attackers. My right shoulder and arm throbbed, my forehead stung and I could feel a trickle of what was probably blood dripping down my temple. The sting of failure was sharp. Lying on the ground, breathing through the pain, I saw that the van was parked in front of a Mediterranean-style

mansion, likely somewhere in Malibu or Pacific Palisades or something. I hadn't even made it halfway up the driveway. Was the hidden mylunate cavern nearby?

"Damn it. Another tooth," I heard Crew Cut snarl somewhere behind me. "Someone's gonna pay."

"Back off, Pen. You'll be paid well enough to get your teeth fixed and then some." Frank's silky tones turned steely. "Bring her inside. We have work to do."

Baldy got off me, grabbed my arm and yanked me upright. Stabbing pain shot through my foot and shoulder, and the world seemed a bit off-kilter, and then I was being shoved toward the sliding glass door of a large estate where Frank,

aka Ranik, stood in all his silver-maned glory, wearing yet another sharp, sleek suit. He was large, and he emanated a feeling of power and dominance.

“Why am I here?” I asked shakily, but he said nothing, gave me a silky smile and led the way in. With a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction absolutely spilling from him, Pen shoved me inside. I nearly tripped over my own feet.

My heels clicked against the shiny marble floor. I was pushed through a high-tech entertainment room, a state-of-the-art kitchen and a dining room. Our final destination was just beyond there, through an archway into a sunroom. A luxurious seating area faced the backyard, which was visible through

two sets of double glass doors that ran the length of the wall. The juxtaposition was odd—my heart-pounding fright against the calm infinity pool shimmering in the background, like a macabre vacation scene or the setting for a horror movie.

“We’ve brought you a friend,” Frank, who was leading the way, called into the last room we entered. His voice tinkled lightly across the air, as though he were saying something humorous.

That’s when I saw him.

“Taylor?”

“Paul!” I couldn’t help the horrified tone of my voice. Someone had gone to town on his face. He did not look well.

His flesh was swollen and purple to the point of being unrecognizable, blood smeared on the floor around his feet. Tied to a straight-backed wooden chair, his arms looked pulled to the straining point and likely numb in that position.

“Why the hell is she here?” Paul demanded, his words slurred as they passed through his misshapen lips. “She doesn’t know anything!”

“But *you* do.” Frank smiled his cold, reptilian smile and motioned to have me placed beside Paul. With a rough shove, I was shown the floor, where I barely caught myself on my knees, gasping with the pain of landing on my kneecaps. I slipped on the blood and was horrified that so much had pooled under his chair.

“Are you all right?” Paul tried to lean toward me, but the ropes held tight.

“You’re bleeding,” he noted, which was totally a surreal and absurd moment, considering he looked like a piece of pulp. Blood had dried in a thick, dry crust over his face, with splatter on his T-shirt. It was sickening. My stomach churned, and I had to take a deep breath.

“What happened to you? Who did this?” My voice sounded small.

“I have associates.” Frank quirked his lips, answering for Paul. “They’ll be back soon, wanting a completion to our business as quickly as possible. We were just waiting for you.”

“I’m so sorry. So sorry...” Paul

murmured with a heartfelt sadness. He let his head fall back on the top of the chair, like he couldn't hold it up anymore.

“Isn't that sweet.” Frank grabbed the one spare wooden dining chair that had been pulled into the room and placed it before Paul. Taking his time, he sat in a genteel fashion and gave Paul a saccharine smile. “You care for her? That should make this even easier.”

“Bastard,” Paul muttered.

Had I just become leverage? I shivered, feeling so cold suddenly. I reached out to search Frank's mind for any hint at what he was planning to do with us but encountered blankness. Not even a smidgeon of feeling was coming

through. He was a master of constructing a mental fortress.

Footsteps sounded from one of the other rooms. We listened silently for a moment as the steps grew louder amid angry-sounding voices.

“Back off, Rosser! I’m not in charge,” I heard Jory say sharply. She rounded the archway in her cloglike sandals.

“Why have you taken him? What the hell is happening here?” The older male voice sputtered angrily from somewhere behind her.

“Not my business,” she hissed over her shoulder as she appeared in the archway. She seemed upset, which was strange. There was nothing being done to

her. No one was threatening her life.
Damn bitch.

“Paul! Oh, God, Paul!” The gray-haired man I’d seen in Paul’s memory appeared and blanched at the sight of his son. He tried to rush across the room toward him, but after a nod from Frank, Crew Cut and Baldy grabbed him and shoved him back. He struggled with urgency to get past them, but they held firm.

“Get off me, you sons of bitches!” Rosser demanded, stalling his efforts to pull away.

“Rosser, your son has been a bad, bad boy.” Frank shook his head. “He won’t tell us the location of the mylunate.”

“So you beat him? Please! Let me take

care of him! He's my son! He needs medical care!" Rosser's voice cracked.

"Not until he spills the beans," Frank said pleasantly enough.

"Pauly!" Rosser renewed his struggles, only to have Baldy thrust a fist into his gut, causing him to grunt and gasp for air, stilling his resistance.

"I'd stay put if I were you," Frank offered helpfully.

"Dad, what the hell were you thinking?" Paul asked tiredly through his swollen lips. "How could you make plans with terrorists?"

Tears of helplessness began dripping from Rosser's eyes. He loved his son and couldn't handle seeing him like this.

With gasping breaths, he said, “Pauly, Pauly...I didn’t want you to know... I’m so sorry... The business was in trouble... I’m in trouble... I acted on tips I was given and sank the whole ship. I’m going to jail if I can’t cover the loss.” To Frank he yelled, “Do you have to keep him tied up? He’s not going to hurt anything!”

“Wrong,” Frank replied coldly, calmly. “He’s feeling a bout of patriotism, humanity, call it what you will, and despite numerous attempts at persuasion, he won’t come clean.”

“Tell them where the mylunate is, Pauly,” his father pleaded. “Then I can get you out of here.”

“They’re terrorists, Dad. They’re

going to kill people! I just...just can't believe that you...would do this." The depth of Paul's disappointment, his sudden comprehension of who his father was, was almost painful. This was an intimate conversation between father and son that was happening with an audience.

"Goddammit! You don't fuck around with these guys! They're going to kill you!" Rosser's voice rose in panicked distress.

"I know. I'll die with a clean conscience."

I looked up at Paul from my position on the floor, soaked in the violence that surrounded me, and realized that he truly

believed that he was going to die. He'd given up. I could only imagine what all had been done to him, and he'd spent his time here making peace with himself.

“But what about your father?” Frank pulled a gun out of his side pocket and aimed it at Rosser, who was visibly startled to see it pointing in his direction. His face flushed.

“What the hell is this? Who the hell do you think you are to come into my house and start making demands on people? I've been here for you almost twenty years now! Where's the loyalty? The appreciation? Put that goddamn gun away!”

“Rosser, I am loyal to myself. Loyalty to anyone else is foolish and only brings

pain,” Frank stated grimly.

In that moment, gone was the facade of levity, and in its place were the cold-blooded eyes of a killer. We all got a good look into the dark depravity that was Ranik Grayson. Even Baldy and Crew Cut cast nervous glances at each other before looking back at Ranik. He had secrets. Secrets that had twisted him.

Silence fell as Rosser looked into Frank’s eyes and saw the coldhearted truth. He looked down at the gun that was pointed directly at his chest, and his anger drained. Terror was born.

Rosser’s pleading eyes turned to Paul. “You’re going to let him shoot me? All

you have to do is tell him where the stuff is!”

“Dad, do you really think he’s going to let us out of here alive even if we give him what he wants?” Paul shook his head sadly, sorrowfully. “You signed our death warrants. Take a good look around. We’re all dead. Every single one of us.”

And that included me. That’s when my shivering started. I was truly terrified.

“I’m out of here,” Jory muttered. “You know where I am.”

“Until later, Jory, love.” Frank’s icy voice came out softly. Then he turned on Paul. “So where is the mylunate? And let’s be clear that this is the final time I will ask you before I shoot your father.”

“Pauly! Please! I’m your father!”
Rosser’s breathing had become quick and shallow with fear.

The horror of the moment swamped my senses. Paul was resolved, but waves of shock and scalding pain were clenching his insides. He was remembering a warm, loving time when his mother and father had still been together, and they’d had a lovely beach holiday in some tropical place. He could remember his father chasing him down the sand, letting him get away, but just barely. They were both laughing, enjoying the game. I could feel what this was doing to him viscerally and could only wish for a miracle intervention that

wasn't going to come.

“What am I supposed to do?” Paul choked on his words. “You want to take money for killing innocent people. Who are you? I don't know you.”

“Not me, Pauly! I'm just a go-between guy!”

“Same difference.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Rosser shook his head. “I can't fix it.”

“It's too late. For all of us.”

“Pauly, no!”

Paul's look was full of pain, his eyes moving over his father's face intently, as though trying to memorize the details. “I love you, Dad. I'm sorry. I grew up to be the man you always wanted me to be. I can't be responsible for innocent people

dying. And I don't think you want me to, either. We'll see each other again. Soon."

He was staring into his father's eyes as the bullet entered his father's chest. A soundless scream came as Rosser's mouth opened in protest and nothing came out. The loud report of the gun seemed to echo in the vast emptiness of the room, and it was like time slowed.

"No!" My reaction felt delayed. He'd actually shot him! Death was here. Present in the room. He was claiming a soul before my eyes.

Rosser could only look down at his chest as crimson spread across his white button-up shirt. Then his legs buckled,

landing him on his knees, and his face creased into lines of pain. A single deep, guttural sob tore from Paul's chest. He closed his swollen, purpled eyes with an anguished sound trembling on his lips.

It had really happened. Rosser was dying and no one was going to help him. This wasn't a dream to wake up from. Oh, shit! Oh, my God! I gasped for breath after breath, horrified and mesmerized by the sight all at once. Sweat broke out across my face and neck.

In the next moment, all thoughts fled as cold fingers of fear dug in to my mind, gripping it firmly. My thoughts swirled around a single question.

Was I next?

Frank sighed, tilting his head to the side as though looking at a small curiosity, and watched Rosser collapse to his belly, his breathing labored, heavy and slowing little by little. It wasn't like in the movies. This wasn't fast. It was slow and agonizing. Frank was taking a certain amount of pleasure in watching Rosser suffer his final moments. A light of satisfaction gleamed in his eyes. That was more frightening than anything. It was so inhuman.

Rosser took a final rattling breath and released it, only to be silent once and for all.

Gone. Done. Not coming back. Paul was right. None of us was going to

survive.

I'm so sorry, Ryder. I'm so sorry I didn't listen to you. Or would it have made a difference? Maybe we would both have been taken, both of us facing death. No. This was best. I wouldn't have been able to handle seeing his death. And maybe this was going to be my death, but I wasn't going to make it easy.

Frank was not going to let me out alive willingly, but I still had my lunette on my toe. When I had the chance, I was going grab hold of Paul, somehow, and hopefully get us both the hell out of here.

“Hog.” Frank turned to Baldy. “Why don't you go out and let me know when our guests arrive? And I do hope you'll

have a different answer for them, Paul, when they ask for the mylunate this time. As you know, they are experts at torture. And while you might be able to handle the pain, I don't think Taylor here is made of the same stuff."

"Is that why I'm here?" I asked shakily. "To force Paul to talk?"

"That is a good question. A very good question." Frank chuckled as he pondered it. It was like he was trying to decide whether or not to tell me something. With a look like he was indulging in a guilty pleasure, he said, "You are about to be very surprised, Taylor, dear. You see, your name is not really Taylor."

“Wh-what are you t-talking about?” This wasn’t exactly what I was expecting to hear, but I suddenly got goose bumps. What did he know about me? I was starting to get that weird, fated feeling again.

“What am I talking about? I’m talking about loose ends, my darling. You are a loose end.”

“A loose end?” Shit, this felt surreal.

He smiled charmingly, becoming giddy with his game. “Do you know who your father is?”

The door from the Gods’ plane opened in my mind, a calming breeze sifting through my heart and soul. This was Dreya. She was with me. I could

feel her energy signature, even if only a little.

Back was the feeling of inevitability, where all roads led to this one destination in time. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I was supposed to be here at this moment. I knew I was meant to have this conversation with the devil.

“What do you know about him?” I managed the question in an even tone.

“He’s from another world,” Frank said dramatically. He motioned his hands wide, encompassing the universe in a grandiose gesture. When all I did was continue to stare at him, he seemed disappointed and added, almost sulkily, “You don’t seem surprised. Either you

already know, or you don't believe me."

"I know, and I believe you," I said quietly.

"His name was Chagin Battler."

Chagin. The name echoed through my mind, rolling around a few times as I tried it out in the privacy of my thoughts. Finally, I had a name to put to my father, even if I didn't have a picture. I was the daughter of Chagin. I didn't know what that was supposed to mean to me. I looked inward and didn't feel any particularly good or bad thoughts.

"Would you like to know your real name?"

"My real name?" I frowned.

"Your parents named you Tayla, after

your father's mother. She's still alive, you know."

Tayla? I had a grandmother who was still alive? "Where is she?"

"She works as a slave to Ral'e, the warrior king of the Brausa." He shook his head with silent mirth, making his lips tremble.

"Why is that funny?" I asked, almost afraid to know the answer.

"I was paid by Ral'e to kill her son, and now she's made to serve him that ordered the assassination—the warrior king."

"Why? Why did this leader want my father dead?"

"He was a traitor."

Chapter Twenty-One

This was a front-row seat to a show I'd wanted to see for years. I couldn't believe I was actually hearing about my father, if Frank was to be believed. It didn't feel like he was lying. He had no reason to lie at this point.

“The irony is, your father paid me to bring him to Earth to escape execution by his own people. In turn, they paid me to kill him. In essence, he paid his own executioner.”

The upsurge of anger I felt was surprising. Thinning my lips to keep from mouthing off, I asked, “Why would

they call him a traitor?”

With a narrow-eyed stare that seemed to take him back in time, Frank took a few seconds to consider the question before he replied. “He was protesting the heavy-handedness and corrupt policies Ral’e was beginning to implement, and some of his people were starting to listen. There were whispers of revolt, talk of the peaceful movement their previous king had tried to move forward with. I must give it to him for having the courage of his convictions. He knew this would bring heavy censure, but I don’t think he believed his own leader was so corrupt that Ral’e would fabricate evidence against him.”

“So his king made up evidence against

him and got rid of him.”

“That is correct. He was accused of infiltrating the ranks to help the Sunan people and sentenced to execution. In any case, he came to know that the warrior king was going to have him killed. He approached me and asked me to help him escape.”

“If you knew he was being set up, how could you kill him?”

Frank’s empty, soulless eyes looked down at me, and he tut-tutted, as though I were a foolish child. “Taylor, darling, why would I care about the Brausiian people? They’re filthy animals.”

I felt the sting of the comment, though I still frowned at him, frightened by how

he could be so ruthless. I'd never been around anyone who was so conscienceless before. "So you helped him get to Earth and then killed him?"

"Not immediately. He was clever. There were years where I lost track of him. Your mother helped him. I don't know how or when they met. Together, they very nearly managed to disappear. In time, they married and had you. Likely, your father thought I'd given up. I imagine he'd convinced himself to start over, begin a new life and forget his home planet."

"Why are you telling me this now?" I asked, finally understanding why my mother might have had a breakdown. She'd never been able to talk about any

of this. Who would have believed her? They would have thought she was nuts, especially considering there was likely no record of my father on this planet. Perhaps over time, she had convinced herself she'd imagined it all. It might have been easier than facing the reality.

But I was part of the reality, a little hurt voice spoke up in my head.

“Hmm, why am I telling you this now, you ask? Maybe I like a good romance?” Frank replied with a winsome smile.

“But you killed him.”

“Of course I did. It was business, Taylor. Nothing personal. And when I finally kill you and your mother, I will have fulfilled my contract to Ral’e, who

wanted all associated with your father, who knew the truth of the fabricated evidence, to be eliminated. You, however, are still useful to me alive at the moment.” Arching a thoughtful eyebrow, he added, “It has always bothered me that there were loose ends to that contract. The devil’s in the details, you know. It’s important to be professional. Your word has to mean something in this life, don’t you think?” His lips quirked up into a half smile, like he was just being playful.

He was nuts. Psycho. And he was going to kill me. I needed to get the hell out of here. Pronto! But how? I couldn’t manage the knots behind my back. I wondered if I could pull my arms under

me, sort of work my body through the middle, and bring them to the front. Then I could use my teeth on the blasted knots, grab Paul and see if I could make this shit on my toe work properly. But I'd need to be alone. Somehow I doubted they were going to let me be alone.

I gazed out at the infinity pool, trying hard to think of a plan of action. That's when I thought I saw movement. My eyes scanned the landscape frantically, desperately, but nothing seemed to be moving. It was just my wistful imagination.

“Alas, story time is over.” Frank stood, pocketed his gun and headed toward the dining room. “By the by,

where is my mylunate, Taylor? I've been in sore need of it. Very inconvenient not to have it. Jory was not able to find it for me."

"Ryder confiscated it," I said quickly.

It was hard to tell if he believed me or not, but I was going to hold on to my mylunate, because even if I couldn't make it work, at the very least, I had a onetime mental weapon I could unleash on whoever tried to hurt me. Of course, then I might pass out for five hours, but at least I wouldn't be awake for the pain.

Coldly, he murmured, "Is that so. I could have simply plucked the information I need from Paul's mind if you hadn't taken it. You know, I'd only just hidden my ore in the kitchen drawer,

so Reggie wouldn't find it on my body and begin asking questions."

Reggie! That's right! Where was he?
"Did you kill Reggie?"

"No, and I'm afraid that he has become another of my dreaded loose ends. He realized I was skimming funds from his accounts and shut them down before disappearing. I will have to kill him, though I will be sorry to do so. He was truly enjoyable. He enjoyed being mastered."

This was not information I wanted to dwell on. Reggie was alive, and while I didn't think he was a terrific example of a human being, I didn't think he deserved to be murdered. Hopefully, I would get a

chance to warn him...

“I’m going to wait for my clients to arrive. I leave you in good hands.” He motioned to Crew Cut. “Do what is necessary to keep them in line, would you? With any luck, I should be back soon with reinforcements.”

“No problem.”

Crew Cut gave me a sickening grin as Frank exited. He was leaning against the wall on the far side of the room. His eyes roved over me as he relived his crimes from Vietnam, which continued to be in vivid detail in his memory. Above his fleshy cheeks, his lids grew heavy with his arousal.

Oh, my God. I had to put up my mental shield against him to keep the images

from feeding into my mind. They were tragic and sorrowful. I needed to think. I didn't have the time be horrified.

“I got plans for you, buttercup. You and me are going to have some fun.” Crew Cut pushed himself off the wall and slowly walked toward me. My blouse stuck to my back and the middle of my chest as droplets of sweat gathered.

No, no, no! I needed to stop him. “You’re going to have to wait your turn,” I offered quickly. “Frank’s not going to appreciate you screwing with me before he’s ready.”

“I won’t hurt you. Yet.” He sniggered and crouched beside me. He smelled

like a mixture of stale cigarettes and body odor. My stomach protested, wanting to heave. He had reached his hands up to the collar of my shirt, like he was going to rip the buttons away, when inspiration struck.

“You ever do time for killing that Vietnamese girl?” I asked smoothly.

His eyes showed surprise. He obviously figured he’d gotten away with it. “What the hell are you talkin’ about?”

“You know what I’m talking about.” I forced myself to grin tauntingly.

In a menacing tone, he growled, “I didn’t do nuthin’.”

“You took the girl from her family. She was barely fourteen. You like doing little girls? You a child molester? Can’t

get a real woman to fuck you?”

“What the fuck are you talkin’ about?”

He stood swiftly and swung a kick at my leg with his steel-toed boot.

Pain crashed through my system, numbing my leg. I couldn’t help the cry that escaped my lips, but I didn’t let up. Maybe if I just kept him angry...

In a faint voice, I kept on. “I guess you’d need to be a real man, wouldn’t you? I bet you have one of those little penises. I bet some girl laughed at your little bitty piece of junk, didn’t she, and now all you can do is force little girls?”

“Shut up!” he raged, his face flushing as he kicked me again. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

I tried to ignore the pain, though tears shimmered in my eyes from the sickening throb.

“You probably covered up your crime, didn’t you? How many other little girls have you done over the years? Does Frank know? What about your partner, Hog? It’s okay. Leave it up to me. I won’t leave out a single detail when I share.”

“Shut the fuck up!” He came at me again, and I braced myself for the violence. I preferred being hit to being raped. His arm swung back. I squeezed my eyes closed... I waited... Nothing.

“*Lin’de,*” the aching familiar voice rumbled near my ear.

“Ryder!” My eyes snapped open in disbelief. My heart throbbed in my throat at the sight of him, making it hard to talk. I spotted Crew Cut crumpled on the floor behind Ryder. “What...”

His strong arms encircled me, crushing me to his hard, muscular chest. His lips found my neck, seeming to inhale my scent quickly for reassurance before pulling back.

“Scared the shit out of me,” he grumbled fiercely. “I have things to say to you, but there’s no time now. We have to get you out of here.” He slid his hands down my arms to undo the knots in the ropes.

“Is he dead?” I asked.

“Very.”

“How did you get here?”

“Remember I put a tracking device on your phone?”

That’s right! Thankfulness smacked me straight on like a powerful wave. I’d stuck the phone down my shirt in the car, which was goddamn bloody brilliant of me, if I did say so myself.

“Did I ever thank you for that?” I asked with a watery smile.

“I don’t remember that being your first reaction.” He smirked. He managed to get the ropes untied, and the pins and needles shot up my arms. They’d gone numb being in that position for so long. With a hiss of pain, I let Ryder help me

to my feet.

“Get rid of your shoes. I don’t want to make any more noise than is absolutely necessary.”

Without question, I slid them off, feeling the cold marble against my bare feet.

“Is he alive?” Ryder nodded toward Paul, taking a moment to rub my arms back into usefulness.

“He was twenty minutes ago. I hope he just passed out. He took such a beating!”

Ryder quickly checked the pulse at his neck. “He’s alive, but he’ll have to wait. We need to secure the perimeter.”

“Who’s with you?”

“Sy and my father’s personal team of

six from Te're.”

“His personal team?” My eyes widened.

“I’ll let him tell you.” Ryder stopped the line of questioning as he pulled me toward the sliding glass doors. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Then came the part that *really* felt like a horror movie.

A powerful arm snagged me from behind, yanking me firmly from Ryder. It was like a slow-motion dream. I could feel the pressure of being pulled away, the slow slide of our outstretched fingers sliding off each other. Ryder’s scowling confusion became savage ferocity, and an all-too-familiar voice spoke silkily.

“Too late, boys and girls.”

With a gun trained on my temple, I could do nothing but freeze. My blood turned cold. I felt my face drain of color. Frank was more than capable of killing me. Rosser was only a few feet away in a pool of his own blood. That could be me at any moment. I looked to Ryder, my heart pounding in my throat, and wanted to scream my frustration. Was he about to witness my execution?

“Ranik.” Ryder spat out the name, gnashing his teeth.

“Did you hurt Pen?” Frank shook his head sadly, looking down at Crew Cut. “And to think. All he ever wanted was to fix his teeth. He will be missed.”

“I thought you were waiting for your guests,” I snarled, tired of feeling thwarted. When the hell was this going to end? This episode was supposed to have wrapped up. Wasn’t the half hour over?

“A little birdy warned me that trouble was brewing on her way out. Seems she caught sight of some blue light. Now I need to leave the party early. It’s a shame, really. I was so close to concluding my business here.”

“The shame would be in you not leaving,” I taunted him, my frustration finding an out.

“What do you want?” Ryder growled, his eyes telling me to shut the hell up.

“There’s nowhere for you to go. The house is surrounded.”

“Mylunate.”

“Done,” Ryder agreed. He reached into the neckline of his crewneck T-shirt and brought out the quarter-sized vial I’d seen there before. It made me angry to see Ryder have to give it up. Such beautiful craftsmanship had been made especially for him, to represent his energy, his spirit. It was wrong to think of Ranik’s filthy fingers touching something noble and pure.

“No! I have some.”

“Taylor!” Ryder glared at me.

I’m sure my expression read *What?* as I looked at him sharply.

“Oh, Taylor. You lied to me earlier.

You are a bad girl. Now give it to me. Where is it?" His voice had lost its charming edge and was now just hard and uncompromising.

"On my toe."

"Get it carefully. And, please, Senior Officer. No heroics. I'd hate to be jostled and accidentally pull the trigger. Would be a great big mess, don't you think?" The barrel of the gun was still digging into my temple.

Ryder's lip curled in reaction, his eyes boring holes into Frank's.

I slowly knelt to pull the metal off my toe. It was like the thing had sunk roots into my brain or something, because I gasped in pulling it off. It was painful,

like separating something that was a part of me, that had its tendrils wrapped around me, anchored into me. I had to grit my teeth to keep from crying out, but I did finally pull it loose. I hadn't quite regained my equilibrium before Frank began a story.

“This piece of mylunate has history, Taylor. Your father found a small cache of the ore that was deep within one of the Brausiian Trenches and managed to get a piece of it for himself and a few close friends.”

“This piece was my father's?” I asked, suddenly pained to hand it over, but Frank grabbed it and shoved it onto his own finger. After a moment of resistance, the metal liquefied and

conformed to him.

A devilish smile slid across his face, and he demanded, "I'll take the other bit as well, Senior Officer."

Ryder clenched his teeth, his lips pressing into a firm line.

Shit. That was why Ryder had protested my stating I had any. We were going to be left with none, and then he'd be able to kill us both and get away quickly. Ryder hesitated in pulling his necklace off, obviously stalling for time, so Frank shoved the gun into my temple, hard. I winced with the discomfort.

"Don't fucking hurt her," Ryder growled. "I'm giving it to you."

Reach for it, Taylor! The Gods'

*plane is yours by right. Reach for it.
The power is here.*

I was surprised by the voice in my head. *Dreya?*

Reach for it! There's no time!

But the mylunate is off my toe!

You can do it! The Gods' plane exists everywhere!

Okay, okay!

Taking a deep breath, I opened my mind, encouraging its fingerlike tendrils to seek out the energy signature that would lead me where I needed to go. It took a moment to find without the battery boost of the mylunate, but after fumbling desperately, I found it. Holy cow! Without the mylunate! I felt the warmth, the connectedness, the power.

“Thank you.” Frank had his fingers around the necklace. He took aim at Ryder. He was going to shoot him!

I unleashed mental shrapnel with ferocious intensity into Frank’s brain, and when the gun blasted, it went wide. His face was etched in pain as I unloaded on him with all the power of the love I had for Ryder. The necklace dropped to the ground.

Quick as lightning, Ryder smacked the gun away. It skittered across the room.

“Fucking murderer!” Ryder growled. He became a wild man, unleashed. He connected a set of combination power punches, his muscular body moving with grace and agility. With grim

determination, Frank backpedaled, trying to block and dodge the attack, absorbing some of the hits with guttural grunts of pain. He was being propelled across the room toward the sliding doors, away from me. And away from the gun, I was glad to note.

I wanted to grab it. Secure it. Keep Ryder safe. But I couldn't move. I was fighting off black smudges of unconsciousness that wanted to shut my mind down.

Frank was obviously trained, or he would have gone down in the first five seconds. With surprising speed and strength, he ducked a punch and came up with a knee to Ryder's gut, taking him by surprise.

No! My inner cheerleader turned fearful.

Frank took advantage of Ryder's lapse and twisted sharply. Swinging an elbow, he caught Ryder in the cheek, knocking him back a few feet and leaving him gasping for a quick breath. Ryder's rage only intensified. He whipped a device from his pocket.

"Dear boy," Frank gasped, quickly propelling himself to take up position behind Paul's inert body. "I believe I'm going to take you up on the sparring match another time."

"Fucking murdering traitor." Ryder swiped a trickle of blood from his cheek where his skin had split, keeping his

device steady on Frank. "You are the reason my sister is dead."

"Those are harsh words, young man." Frank was breathing heavily, grimacing as he held a hand to his side. He took a moment to wipe blood from his own lip. He snarled in a low, angry voice, "Especially considering what your mother has done. You think you're all so lily-white in this? You're all such wonderful martyrs, enjoying your pain so perfectly."

"My mother has done nothing."

"Perhaps that is a more apt description." Frank sneered cryptically. "I wonder. Does it make you equal to the criminal when you know of the crime and do nothing about it?"

“What does that mean?” Ryder growled in a low tone.

“Who is the real monster here? The product or the creator?” His eyes took on a crazed look. “Who must take responsibility for the outcomes? The consequences?”

“You hold my mother responsible for your treachery?”

“Your mother. The courts. I’m saying follow the trial, Ryder Langston. There is more than meets the eye.” Ranik allowed an evil smile to crease his lips. “What do they say? An eye for an eye? I will see it done. The spirits of Te’re will be crushed.”

Shoot him! I tore down my mental

barrier and implored Ryder silently.
Take him out!

“He can’t, Taylor,” Frank grinned, having read my thoughts. “For that magnificent radiation laser he’s holding, he needs a clear space for accuracy. You see, he probably has it programmed for full power, and when he pulses me with it, all of my veins will hemorrhage in spectacular fashion. I’m sure he wouldn’t want to hurt Paul by accident. Innocent Paul. He was trying to save the world, you know.” Frank’s chuckle sounded strained.

“You won’t be allowed to leave here,” Ryder stated firmly.

Frank’s bloodshot eyes darted frantically around the room for an

escape route. He had blood coming from his nose.

“Taylor, move! Get over here!” Ryder commanded.

Energy depleted from the mental assault I’d delivered, I could just barely stand and, ever so slightly, shake my head, feeling helpless. It was taking all my strength to simply continue remaining upright, but my will was greater than the black void that threatened to drag me down. I needed to know that Ryder was safe.

“She’s quite done in, isn’t she? Poor thing can’t even talk,” Frank mocked, though even his voice sounded weak. “But no worries. I have other plans.

You'll have to excuse me from this conversation. Shall I give my regards to your mother, Taylor?"

What?

"Follow the pitiful cries of the children, Senior Officer."

With that, Frank lunged toward me. Ryder cursed furiously. With a harsh shove, Frank threw me toward Ryder, who caught me safely, not letting me hit the floor. Almost immediately, Frank was engulfed in vibrant blue light and disappeared.

The wave of exhaustion swept through me, as it had the other time I'd unleashed a major mental attack. *No!* I fought it, trying to stay conscious. My legs were wobbly and my mind beckoned the

peaceful bliss of darkness. I saw Ryder scoop up his necklace and pop it over his head in one smooth motion as he came to me.

Rest, lin'de. Don't fight it.

But Ryder...

We'll talk later.

I don't want to leave you.

You won't. I'll take care of you.

Always.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Is she all right?”

I remembered the imperious voice well. This was not how I wished to wake up after a long, healing sleep. I opened my eyes to see I was comfortably ensconced in Ryder’s bed, overlooking the ocean at Venice Beach—not that I could see the water, as it was pitch-black out. I was sure tired of losing time.

“She’s still out,” Ryder replied quietly, though I could detect the strain in his tone. Ryder and his father sounded as though they were right outside the

door.

“Are you sure she’s all right? Does she need medical care? She’s been unconscious for quite some time.” His father actually sounded concerned. Weird.

“This happened last time,” Ryder replied. He paused a moment, and new relief sounded in his tone. “She’s back. I can feel her energy signature again. I’ll see if she’s ready to visit.”

Ryder came through the door, big and dangerous looking, taking up all the space in the doorway, and paused. He just looked at me with a burning intensity. Grim with emotion, his pale eyes held mine in thrall. Silently, he approached and knelt by my head,

gathered me in his arms and buried his face in my neck, breathing deeply. It was like he needed the reassurance of my scent, which touched off an ache in my heart.

He really and truly needed me. Me. This big, powerful warrior wanted me. Yeah, he was now in a position to do me emotional harm, but I was in the same position with him, and all either of us could do was trust. Looking at his head, bent in need to me, I knew I was ready to do this.

He pulled far enough away to stare into my eyes, and I felt a powerful sense of gratitude, relief, residual trauma from his fear of my potential death and a love

so strong it washed over me with warmth and contentment. He couldn't speak, and instead was letting me into his mind.

Tears welled up with the surge of tender emotion that threatened to close my throat. I reached up to caress his jaw, my fingers loving the rough feel of his dark, scruffy whiskers. He leaned into my hand, briefly closing his eyes.

“Don't cry, *lin'de*,” he murmured gruffly, though it seemed as though his own eyes were suspiciously moist. “Everything is going to be all right now.”

“I wasn't sure I would ever see you again,” I whispered tremulously. The tears traced in rivulets toward my

temples, and Ryder gently wiped them away with his thumbs. He then framed my face delicately and stole a soft, lingering kiss that took my breath away.

“I would never let that happen,” he uttered fiercely, staring into my eyes.

Love, happiness and contentment layered me in a warm, comforting blanket. I pulled him down for another kiss, wanting more time to say the things I needed to say, but knowing his father was waiting for us.

“Why is your father here?” I asked against Ryder’s lips.

“He wanted to speak with you.”

“Not here to kill me or anything?”

“I can confirm that.” He gave a shaky

grin.

I was wearing the camisole and sleep pants I'd brought with me from my apartment. Ryder must have dressed me, which was a naughty thought I hoped to pursue at a later time. After slipping on Ryder's robe for modesty's sake, I found Talon standing by the sliding doors, looking out over the night, listening to the crashing waves. He turned as I appeared and gave me a smile reminiscent of his son's, which helped to alleviate some of the butterflies I felt in my gut. I had no idea why he would want to see me. He was dressed in his nation's version of military fatigues.

"I'm glad to see you're all right, Taylor," he stated kindly.

“Uh, thanks.” I gave him a tentative smile. “Would you like to sit? Have a drink?”

“Thank you, but today, I’m short on time. I have an apology to make. Miara nearly took my head off after our last meeting, and she helped me to see I was wrong in my treatment of you.” With a thoughtful frown, he paused to look down at the ground, as though gathering his thoughts. “You put your life at risk to protect hundreds of our citizens, but instead of properly honoring you, I ran you off. I’m ashamed for that, and I won’t offer excuses. The people of Te’re would like to thank you for your sacrifice in person. I also wanted to

make sure you had these.” He held out the charms that I’d left behind from my mother’s bracelet.

“You want me to come back?” I asked, taking the charms gratefully. It had hurt to lose even one. They were all I had of her. I was otherwise in silent shock, watching a distinguished, naturally imperious man eat crow.

“I’d come to Ryder’s home to invite you personally. Fate deigned that I arrive as Ryder was preparing to depart, ready to battle for you.”

Fate. Wasn’t that an interesting way to view the events?

“Thank you for helping to free me.”

“It was only a small way I could offer my gratitude for your service to us, and

we were able to apprehend villains who would have used the ore for harm against your people.”

“The terrorists? Had they arrived?”

His nod confirmed that.

He turned to Ryder. “Please bring me your report on this incident. It appears, once again, we were close to capturing Ranik, but he slipped through our fingers.”

“Of course.” Ryder gave a slight bow of his head. I could sense a lessening of his animosity toward his father. “I’ll see if I can return within the week.”

“That would be fine. I’d better get back to your mother. She’ll want to know why I’ve been gone so long.”

“Please give her my love.”

“Certainly.”

“And...thank you...for your help,”

Ryder offered with all humility and sincerity. “Taylor means the world to me.”

“I understand.” Talon offered his hand, which Ryder readily shook.

“You’re my son. I’ll always help you.”

Before long, Talon departed in a flash of blue light, presumably to the transfer unit in the Malibu canyon, where he would then be able to transfer home.

Insisting that I eat something, Ryder made us a light snack. Briefly, I told him about the information I’d learned about my mother and father. I wanted to find

my mother and see if she could find refuge on Te're for a while. Ryder insisted that I go back to bed when we finished our snack, which had me eye-rolling, as I'd just had a four-hour nap. My bruises were freaking him out. I only agreed when he said he would join me there. That arrangement had more appeal for me.

“Where’s Sy?” I asked, shrugging out of my robe and climbing back under the covers.

“Looking for Jory.” He yanked off his T-shirt, which allowed me to appreciate his fine, muscular chest. Remembering the trail I’d blazed with my lips on his chest the other night, I felt the beginning of some tingles. The stirrings continued

as he dropped his pants and slid into bed wearing boxers only. Yum. Very distracting.

“She was your girlfriend, right?”

“She was.” He got comfortable on his pillow, facing me. “And before you ask, I have no idea why she would be helping Ranik.”

That answered my next question, but I had a few others.

“How did you know something was wrong so fast?”

“Sy was out checking the waves and saw you and Jory pull up to the condo. You weren’t here when he came back to get his trunks, and then I couldn’t get you on your phone.”

“I know! I paid the bill, I swear it.”

“Jory was using a signal jammer on your phone.”

“That bitch!” I scowled. “She totally played me.”

A flash of anger touched his eyes. “I was afraid I would be too late. Will you listen from now on? Do as you’re told? This wouldn’t have happened, had you followed my directions.”

“Yeah, but then Paul would have been killed along with his father, and you guys wouldn’t have been able to find out about the stash of mylunate he hid. At least now he’ll have medical care, and you have your ore back.”

“I care about you.”

“I know, but maybe it’s like your father said. Maybe fate is the master puppeteer, and one way or another, your father was going to be here to provide support to you because I was going to be abducted in order to help prevent Paul’s death and the spread of terrorism on this and your planet.” He was looking so serious, I just couldn’t help myself.

“Ohhh, see? The butterfly effect, but with fate. We’re all interconnected. We could be out on a hike, and you could, like, sneeze, and that could scare a bunch of birds out of the brush, right? Then that causes a breeze that lends itself to a windstorm, which would then be strong enough to travel thousands of

miles and maybe wipe out a whole village, see? But it would be like fate gave you that cold because it was time for that village to rebuild itself and join the new age of technology.”

Ryder wasn't amused.

“Yeah, well, maybe you could have just as easily been killed.” He gave me a good scowl, not ready to concede any point, probably because I still had bruises on my face.

“Even if it doesn't all make sense to you, it's making sense to me. I can feel it. We're all...interconnected.”

“Dammit, Taylor.” He sat up against the headrest with a scowl. “I just care about you. Stop putting yourself in life-threatening situations.”

I sat up against the headboard to face him. “I’m just saying that maybe when it’s our time, it’s our time. Control is an illusion.”

“Whatever. Just be more careful. At least say it. Put my goddamn mind to rest.”

“I will, I will. I will be more careful. Does that help?”

“Yes.”

Unable to help myself, I ran fingers through his midnight-black hair. Brushing it off his forehead, I said, “Don’t be mad.”

“But you...”

I settled a finger against his firm lips, effectively stopping his words. “There

are so many more interesting things we could do. Don't you think?"

"You aren't going to sleep, are you?" His grin was slow in developing.

"I don't think so." I gave him a gamine smile and let the spaghetti strap of my camisole slip off my shoulder, exposing part of the curve of my breast. "You a boob man?"

"I can't decide with you." His large hand swept over my breast, thumbing my nipple, and I sighed into the familiar warmth that heated me from the inside. Then he slid down to cup my ass. "I like all of you."

"Who says you need to decide?"

His cock was stirring against my belly, and my fingers were gentle when

they grasped his hot, silky length beneath the waistband of his boxers. His groan of pleasure was encouraging and arousing, and our lips met with gentle passion, sweetly, with teasing nibbles. Heat built on heat as we moved together, removed clothing, kissing skin with passionate reverence as it became exposed. We exchanged soft gasps and throaty moans, gentle caresses and soft cries of pleasure. When he did ease into me, our eyes held, and I was overcome with the beauty of our completeness. His elbow was braced by my head, and he was looking down at me, his eyes burning with love and need while he slowly moved in long, steady strokes

against me. I was caught by his green eyes and the veins of gold running through them, just the way I had been the first day I saw him in the courtyard of my apartment complex. I couldn't look away. I couldn't hide. It was raw and intimate, and with our minds open, we were totally exposed.

The storm grew, and our breaths mingled as we climbed higher, heat building, muscles quivering, tightening, our intermingled cries becoming more insistent, more desperate.

“Ryder...” I could feel myself teetering on the edge.

“Are you close?”

“Yes!”

“Come with me,” he whispered, his

tone rough with need.

“Yes,” I cried.

And like magic, we both cried out as wave after wave of powerful, white-hot heat enveloped us. I was left feeling hoarse and shaky. Ryder collapsed with his head on my breast, and my hand shook as I lifted it to run through his hair. I wanted him there. Over my heart.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whispered. “I never want to lose you.”

He nuzzled his face into my breast and lifted his head, his eyes dark with emotion. “I love you, *lin’de*. I’m never going anywhere.” Overcome with emotion, I was surprised to realize my cheeks were moist, but then, being with

Ryder was more beautiful than I could have imagined, and I had almost lost the chance to know that. It was like I was overflowing with feeling, knowing that I absolutely adored this man.

“What is it?” he asked gruffly.

“Something that I realized when they first took me.” I had to pause, because my voice trembled. Remembering the terrifying moments was making my throat close up. “I would have had only had one regret if they succeeded in killing me. I wouldn’t have had a chance to tell you how I feel.” Tearfully, I looked steadily into his eyes, wanting him to see the purity of my heart.

“How do you feel, *lin’dé*?” His eyes caressed me with fierce tenderness.

I made sure my mind was wide open, so he could see the beauty I was feeling, the light of truth shining from my own heart and soul. They were finally at peace, putting my demons to rest.

“I love you, Ryder. I love you so much.”

I was ready to embrace the future and whatever joys and sorrows it held.

* * * * *

About the Author

Danube Adele wrote her first romance novel at the age of seven when she penned the sweet story of her dogs falling in love and having puppies. She's been dreaming up romantic tales ever since.

A lifetime resident of Southern California, Danube spends time playing at the beach, camping in Joshua Tree National Park and hiking Mammoth Mountain. Always a lover of adventure, she and her husband took their sons on a cross-country road trip to Florida and back in an old Volkswagen Westfalia that had no AC, in the month of July, and

still, it continues to be the best trip they ever took. Extensive travel and trying new things has kept the creative spark alive.

Danube lives in Claremont, California, with her biggest fans: her loving husband, amazing and wonderful identical twin sons, and a teddy bear of a rottweiler.



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