# THE VEIL DIARIES BOOK FIVE

# WHEN EVIL COMES TO PLAY

B.L. BRUNNEMER

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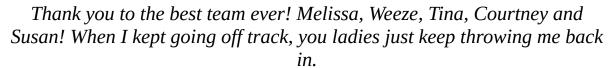
# WHEN EVIL COMES TO PLAY

## B.L BRUNNEMER

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And a huge thank you to the hubby, thanks for dealing with the insanity.

#### CHAPTER 1

JUNE

#### Wednesday

I have always hated going to the doctor. Dad had to practically drag me in just for a checkup when I was a kid. It still sucked at seventeen. I turned and paced to the other side of the sterile exam room. White walls, motel art paintings, health posters, and magazines. I hated these rooms, especially the smell of industrial cleaner. Of course, the reason I was here didn't help.

Rory watched as I walked across the small room again. "Lexie, calm down," he reminded me. Rory was a good-looking guy in his late forties; he had the Delaney copper hair, a friendly, open face and calm brown eyes. How could he be calm? Dr. Peltier had asked me to come in immediately, even scheduling the appointment after his usual office hours. That wasn't a good sign. Didn't Rory see that?

"Trying," I muttered as I turned and crossed the room again. "Why'd you have me do the damn scans?"

He sighed. "Because you were jumped twice since your last one," he reminded me. I cursed under my breath.

"Davis wasn't bad," I told him.

"No, but the bowling alley was," he shot back. I turned again. His eyes met mine. "We need to keep an eye on it, Lexie."

I shook my head. Yeah, I was probably going to die before I hit thirty. That didn't mean I needed to be reminded of it all the fucking time.

The door finally opened and Dr. Peltier came in. He was wearing his usual slacks and a button-down shirt. His white hair was short, and overall he looked a little rumpled from the day's work. He pushed silver-rimmed glasses up his sharp nose before he gave me a gentle smile as he closed the door. "How are we today?"

"She's a little tense," Rory pointed out. I rolled my eyes. No fucking shit.

"Lexie, have a seat and we'll get started," Dr. Peltier said as he pulled out a pen light.

Cursing under my breath, I sat on the exam table and tried not to squirm.

Dr. Peltier moved in front of me. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," I bit out.

He raised an eyebrow and met my eyes. "No bouts of exhaustion for no reason? No balance problems? Changes in your hand dexterity?"

I swallowed hard. "I get really tired and have to stop what I'm doing sometimes." But it was only after crossing the dead, and it was since I started taking more than twenty-five souls at one time. Well, sort of...

Peltier flashed the light in my eyes. "How often is sometimes?"

I gritted my teeth. "Twice a day for the last month or so." I was starting to need an afternoon cup of coffee just to get through school lately.

He nodded as if he expected it. He turned off the light and stepped back. "Well, first let's discuss your throat MRI." He tucked the pen back in his pocket. "Your voice clearly still hasn't healed. It looks like some of the nerve endings have died off from the continuous strain. Which means no more shouting and no more yelling. Shouting will just put even more strain on your vocal chords and cause more damage. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," I muttered.

Dr. Peltier moved to sit on the rolling stool and woke up the computer. "Now, your CT scan and head MRI." He brought up several images and turned to us. "The necrotic lesion on your cerebellum has grown, Lexie. It is now roughly the size of a small gumball." Everything went silent. The world stopped. Dr. Peltier kept talking. "This means there is more damage than before." His gray eyes ran over my face before turning to Rory.

It had grown. Yeah, I knew it would, but... not so soon. I stared at the image of my brain on the screen. And the black spot that was killing me. It shouldn't be this big already... it couldn't be...

"What... what are we looking at in the future?" Rory asked, his voice strained.

"If more dead tissue accumulates?" Dr. Peltier asked.

"Yeah," Rory said. I continued staring at the screen as they talked around me.

"If it continues, Lexie is going to experience balance issues, walking difficulties, and her fine motor skills will disappear. As more tissue dies off, her basic motor functions will go. Beyond that..." —the doctor sighed— "involuntary responses such as breathing will deteriorate until she will need a ventilator to breathe for her. Eventually her heart will stop, but by then the damage will be so severe that you won't recognize her as Lexie anymore."

"So, if the damage stops?" Rory asked.

"It depends on what stage Lexie is in when it stops," Peltier hedged. "We need to make some decisions about treatment; how aggressive are we going to be, where her limit is, what does she want to do? And we need to make them now." The guys... my chest burned.

"Last time you said there wasn't a treatment, what changed?" Rory asked.

"We don't know what is causing this. All her tests are clean. I have consulted with a neurosurgeon in Missoula about Lexie's case. He might be able to remove the dead tissue and stop the progress," Dr. Peltier explained. "It's the only treatment available that he thinks will have any kind of effect." I swallowed hard.

"How much time does she have to make these decisions?" Rory's voice was calm.

"This week. If she wants to try surgery we need her scheduled as soon as possible," Peltier explained.

No. No. No. This was not happening. My pulse pounded in my ears.

I started to shake my head. "There's gotta be a mistake, doc. I feel fine."

Dr. Peltier's gaze met mine. "There isn't." He moved to the side of the screen showing my MRI results. He pointed at the dot. "You can see for yourself. The lesion of necrotic tissue has grown."

"Then they made a mistake at the hospital," I tried again. "That's not my scan."

"Lexie..." Rory's gentle voice had me turning my head.

"No!" I snapped as I shoved off the table and stormed out of the room and then out of the office. This was not happening. It was not! Things were good for once! For the first time in my life, I haven't been miserable! I paced in the parking lot. It couldn't be happening so fucking soon. No way... I had more time!

Rory came out of the building with several pamphlets. I stopped and crossed my arms over my chest.

"Lexie," he said, his voice gentle. "There was no mistake—"

"There has to be," I insisted, my voice shaking. I looked around, desperate to get away. "Let's go home. I gotta..." I swallowed hard. "I gotta finish Miles' birthday present." I turned away and got into the truck without another word.

Rory didn't say anything when he got into the truck and started for home. The drive was silent. When we reached the house, I barely waited long enough for him to turn off the truck before I was out and heading for the door.

Hades jumped off the couch and ran to me. I reached down and gave him some love. The dog had gone through another growth spurt. His head was at my hip now, and he'd gained almost another fifty pounds. What would happen to my baby? My chest was on fire. I shoved the thought away. I started up the stairs.

"Lexie..." Rory's voice was strained.

"No," I bit out as I kept going. I waited until Hades came in and sat on the folded-up futon to close the door. It had finally gotten to the point where I needed a bed big enough for Hades to sleep on without knocking me to the floor. A few months ago, Miles had suggested a futon so I could fold it away during the day and still walk around my room. It worked perfectly.

I went straight to my desk and started pulling out my painting supplies. Miles' birthday was in a few days and I was planning on giving him a painted glasses case.

Pushing everything out of my mind, I picked up the simple blank metal eyeglass case from the store. I pulled up pictures of the Aurora Borealis on my laptop. Running through them, I found one that looked amazing and started painting. For two hours I focused on keeping my brush strokes precise as I painted the snowy mountains and the brilliant lights in the sky above them. My phone rang, making me jump.

"Yeah?" I answered as I checked the eyeglass case for damage.

"Hey, Lexie." Riley's voice filled my ear. "How'd it go?"

I hesitated to answer. Yeah, I had told Riley about the spot on my brain. But... this... I didn't want to talk about it. "Fine," I muttered.

"Fine?" Riley asked.

"My voice is still messed up," I admitted. "The other one was fine." I swallowed hard. I needed to change the subject. "So, when am I going to meet this guy you've been crushing on?"

She sighed. "When I know there's something there."

"You won't know until you try." I smiled as I started cleaning my brush.

"Neither will you," she reminded me.

My smile dimmed. "I'm fine, Riley. Don't worry about me. I want to hear more about this awesome guy."

She sighed. She must have realized I wasn't going to budge, because she started telling me about the guy she'd been crushing on for a month now. She was so into this guy that it made me smile. It was normal. And I desperately needed it right now.

#### ~

#### Rory

I CLOSED the door on the delivery guy and took the pizzas to the table where the pamphlets were spread out. With a heavy heart, I pulled out dishes and took them to the table. Only then did I realize that I had ordered enough pizza for the guys. I snorted. Those boys were usually here on pizza night. I hadn't even thought about it. In fact... I looked at the stairs. Maybe I should call them. I looked back at the pamphlets on the table. After our talk.

"Lexie! Dinner!" I shouted with a vise in my chest. This was going to be a shitty talk. I went back to the kitchen and pulled out the parmesan cheese and pepper flakes. By the time I walked back, Lexie was starting to sit down. I set them down and took my seat.

We were silent as we started eating. Lexie kept her eyes on her plate and off the pamphlets in front of me. She ate mechanically, as if she didn't even taste it. I hated to do it, but... "Lexie..."

She kept her eyes on the table.

"We need to talk about what you'd want if"—I swallowed hard— "if the damage gets worse."

"No," she stated, still looking at her plate.

My chest burned. Shit. "There wasn't a mistake—"

"I'm not doing this now," she growled quietly. She lifted her head and her eyes met mine. "I just... need time."

I weighed what Peltier had said with what she needed. It wasn't fair to make her talk about it now, but... time wasn't on our side. Then again, it was her body. Her life. "A few days. Then I need to know what you want to do."

She nodded before she got to her feet and took her dish into the kitchen. She silently took Hades into the backyard.

I rested my elbows on the table and buried my face in my hands. My chest was one deep ache. I took slow, deep breaths as my eyes burned. Lexie was going to die. Soon. I had to face it. She should have more fucking time! Hot tears rolled down my face. She was going to have to wear her beads all the time. It was the only thing that had ever worked before. Surgery might work, but only as a stopgap. We both knew it. I wiped my face and looked up.

"Henry, man," I whispered, hoping he'd hear me. "If you got any pull up there, use it. Your baby girl... she's struggling down here. And there's nothing I can..." I looked back down at the table as fresh tears flowed. I was going to lose her, too.

Knock it off, Rory! I cursed. She's the one dying, not you! She needs your help to deal with this. She's a fucking kid! I dropped my hands to the table and kept mentally yelling at myself. You can break later. Right now, Lexie's the one struggling. She doesn't need your shit too! That did it. I wiped my face and took several deep breaths until I had control. I looked out the doors and spotted Lexie lying on the dock, looking up at the sky with Hades beside her.

She was probably thinking her life was over. But she still had time. She wasn't alone. I pulled out my phone and texted Miles.

Rory: What is everyone up to tonight?

It didn't take long for a response.

Miles: Zeke is working, everyone else is at home.

Rory: Tell everyone there's pizza at the house, I ordered too much.

Miles: LOL. The twins will get there first.

Rory: I'll hide a couple pizzas from them.

Miles: I'll let them know.

I smiled. The guys would be here soon. I got to my feet and went out back. She didn't move as I came to sit next to her.

"Talk to me, kid," I told her gently.

"About what?" Her voice was rough.

"Anything," I bit out. What the fuck was I supposed to say? There weren't instructions here.

"Why now?" she asked in a whisper. "For years I expected it and it never happened. But now... now, I'm living my life. Things are okay. Why fucking now?"

"We never know when it's going to happen. You could still have years. You might have to slow down to get them, but... you are still alive now."

"I don't want to think about this, Rory," she told me.

"I know, but you need to soon," I said quietly. "I hate to say it, but you do."

"Just... not today," she said.

I nodded. "Not today." I squeezed her shoulder and got to my feet. "The guys will be here soon." I walked back into the house and picked up the pamphlets, staring sightlessly at them for a moment. I took them upstairs and placed them in her desk drawer. There was a knock on the front door. "Open the door, Miles!" I shouted as I started down the stairs.

The front door opened. Miles stepped in, uncomfortable about walking in as usual. The kid spent enough time here to have his own key, you'd think occasionally he'd use the damn thing. Those sharp eyes ran over my face and then grew blank.

"Is everything alright?" Miles asked carefully.

I gave him a grin and headed for the dinner table. "Yeah, fine. Pizza is here."

He eyed me, his lips moving into a tight line. "Where's Lexie?"

I met his gaze. "She's on the dock with Hades."

Miles moved to look out the glass French doors. "How was her appointment?"

"Ask her," I told him. His eyes shot to me, then he was moving out the door in a heartbeat. I grinned. I liked that kid.

#### Lexie

SWEAT RAN DOWN MY NECK. This heat wave was killer and it was only the beginning of summer. I was so deep in my head that I didn't know I had company until I smelled wintergreen. Miles sat beside me and looked down at me. His face was lit up by the fading sun. His high cheekbones and angled jaw gave him a cute face. His wavy brown hair was curling again; he needed another trim. His emerald green eyes watched me from behind his black-rimmed glasses. He was leaner than the other boys, but his shoulders were still broad with some muscle to them.

"Are you alright?" he asked immediately, his voice a quiet timbre.

I kept my eyes on the mix of colors in the sky. "Yeah. Fine"

His eyes narrowed. "Whenever you say 'fine,' you're usually lying."

My eyes jumped to his. "What?"

He grinned sweetly down at me. "It's just something I've noticed. How did the doctor appointment go?"

I swallowed hard and looked back up at the sky. "My voice is still messed up, only permanently. Now we're just trying to stop any more damage."

"I'm sorry, Lexie," he said in that silky-smooth voice of his.

"Me too," I whispered, my eyes burning.

He reached over and gently took my hand off my stomach before holding it in his. "That's not all, is it?"

I fought back tears. "Not ready."

His hand squeezed mine gently before he lay down beside me on the worn wooden planks. His hand stayed in mine. Even though I was sweating from the heat wave, his shoulder pressing against mine was comforting. I wanted nothing more than to curl up in his arms and stay there. But then he'd know for sure something was wrong; right now he only suspected.

"When you're ready to talk?" he asked carefully.

"I will." When I was ready. The back door opened.

"Hey! What are you two doing? There's pizza!" Ethan shouted from the door.

"How did you get here before them?" I asked, turning my head so I could look at him.

Miles grinned. "I called them from the car."

I smiled over at him. "Go eat. I want to stay out here a bit longer."

His eyes searched mine. He had his thinking face on, the one that made the small wrinkle between his eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." I squeezed his hand and let him go. He got to his feet then quietly went inside.

I looked up at the fading light again, enjoying the quiet. For a whole three seconds. Ethan towered over me on the dock.

"Beautiful, let's go," Ethan told me in his smooth, smoky voice; it rolled over my ears like fog. Ethan was a cutie. His square jaw and straight nose made him good looking. His straight, black, jaw-length hair was back in a ponytail to keep it off his face in this heat. Five silver hoop earrings ran up the lobe of his right ear. His usual black jeans and shirt were now black cargo shorts, a black tank and his black army boots. I grinned up at him. He had to be roasting. Those chocolate eyes met mine and his smile faded. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I just feel like lying here," I said, turning back to look up at the sky. "It's a pretty sunset."

He looked up at the sky and then back down to me. "Yeah, but it's fucking hot. Want some company?"

I shook my head. "Nah, I'm good. Go eat. I'll be in soon."

He shrugged. "Alright." He headed back inside. I closed my eyes and listened to the frogs croaking. It was quiet for a few minutes.

"Red!" Isaac dropped next to me, shaking the planks beneath us. I smiled as he rolled to his side and braced his jaw on his fist. "What's up?"

Isaac. Isaac was... well, Isaac. As Ethan's twin, he had the same straight nose and handsome square jaw. Besides sharing the same athletic build, that's where the similarities ended. Isaac wore bright colors, his hair was a vibrant blue with darker blue streaks. He was going for a Cookie Monster thing.

"Nothing, just enjoying the sunset," I told him.

He moved to his back and looked up at the sky. "Huh, it is pretty." He pointed up to a streak of peach and pink light. "That streak is pretty nifty."

I smiled. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Yeah, but Miles said your voice is messed up for good," he explained. "I wanted to see if you're okay."

"I'll live," I muttered.

He bumped my shoulder with his. I bumped him back, starting to smile again. "You're gonna knock me off the dock."

He moved to his feet and squatted next to me. "Nah." He reached down, slid his arms under me and lifted me off the planks. Surprised, I squeaked and clung to his shoulders.

"Put me down," I told him as he straightened and headed towards the house.

"Nope," he chimed with a smile. "It's hot, and you're sulking, so you're going in with me."

"I'm not sulking," I muttered.

"Are too," he countered. I shot him a glare. He just grinned back at me. Okay, he might have a point. But I think I'm entitled to a little sulk today. There was no point in arguing, we were almost at the house anyway.

The back door opened and Asher walked out. His ocean eyes ran over me, and I mean ocean; he had light blue, dark blue and white flecks in his eyes. They reminded me of a wave crashing. Asher was your classic boy next door, only with model good looks, high cheekbones and a sharp chin. His sandy-blond hair was shorter than this morning. He must have gone to get a trim today. "Are you okay, Ally?" he asked in his rich baritone. His voice was like rich hot chocolate to my ears.

"Yeah, Isaac is being an ass," I told him.

"Yeah, but we keep him around anyway." Asher chuckled as he held the door open for Isaac.

Isaac ignored him as he walked in and put me down near the dinner table. "'Cause I'm awesome," he stated before taking a plate and sitting down.

"Yeah, that, and I'm a sucker," I shot back. Everyone chuckled as I sat down.

As the night went on, no one seemed to notice that I wasn't talking as much as usual. At least until Zeke showed up.

He was muttering under his breath as he walked through the great room. I was in the kitchen dishing up ice cream when he went to the sink.

"Hey," Zeke said in his deep, gravelly voice. Zeke was huge. There was no way to get around it, or him. He was a full foot taller than me; at least he used to be. In the last few months he'd grown a couple of inches and he'd bitched about it the entire time. With his wide shoulders and barrel chest he was hard to miss. A wide, strong jaw and wide cheekbones helped make him even more intimidating. Well, that and the fact he glared at everyone with those sky-blue eyes of his. His black hair wasn't very long, but it was

long enough that you could tell when he'd been running his hands through it. Even though it was roasting, Zeke still wore his black jeans, shirt, boots and wallet chain. I had no idea how he could stand it.

"Hey, want some ice cream?" I asked without turning around.

"Maybe later." He shut off the water and dried his hands with a paper towel. "How was your doctor appointment?"

I focused on scooping ice cream. "Fine." My voice had grown raspy. I sighed and took a drink from my now ever-present water bottle.

He turned and faced me then leaned against the counter at my side. "Fine?"

"Yeah." I finished the bowl I was making. I could feel his stare as I looked over my shoulder towards the others. "Isaac."

Isaac got up, came into the kitchen and took the ice cream bowl from my hand. "Thanks, Red," he said sweetly, giving my cheek a raspberry. I rolled my eyes as I began to make my own, while Zeke continued to stand there. He wasn't pushing, just waiting for me to tell him.

"My voice is permanently damaged," I muttered as I added cherry ice cream to the chocolate in my bowl. "Now we're trying to stop more damage."

He cursed.

"Pretty much," I muttered as I added Cool Whip.

"What about the other scans?" he asked, keeping his voice quiet.

I looked up and met his blue eyes. Lie or admit I'm not ready to talk? I had already told Miles, so... "I'm not ready to talk about it."

His brow drew down. His jaw clenched. Usually he would demand that I tell him right away. This was... new. It was several heartbeats before he took a deep breath. "Okay. When you're ready..."

"I'll tell you," I promised. Zeke pushed away from the counter and went to the dinner table with the guys, searching for the remaining pizza.

"How was work?" Rory asked Zeke.

I started looking for the chocolate sprinkles.

AFTER THE GUYS LEFT, I headed upstairs and took a quick shower. I pulled on a cami and cotton pj bottoms before I pulled out my futon. Hades lay down beside me, his head on my stomach so I'd scratch his ears. My head

was running in circles again. The guys had been a great distraction, but now... I picked my phone up off the desk and called Jake.

He answered on the third ring. "Hey, sweetness."

"Hey, sexy." I smiled. "How are things?"

"The usual," he grumbled. "Derrick is still flirting with anything that has tits."

I raised an eyebrow at that. "Still?"

"Yeah!" he snapped. "This time it was the chick at the freaking ice cream shop."

"What happened?" I asked. That didn't sound like Derrick to me. Whenever I hung out with them, Derrick only had eyes for Jake. Did something change?

"Girls are hitting on him all the time, and he's looking back," he grumbled. I had a hard time wrapping my head around that.

"Well, why don't you bring him down to the farmer's market on Saturday? I can see what you're talking about and yell at him," I suggested.

"Lexie, you brilliant vixen!" he gushed. "You're on!"

I smiled. Jake could always distract me. "So, tell me, what else is going on?"

Jake started talking about the gossip floating around his school in Dulcet; who was dating whom, who was hooking up, and who had been nailed for cheating. His school was smaller, but it seemed to have more drama than ours. It was like my own soap opera, and Jake knew everyone's secrets. After an hour of making me laugh, he had to go so he could call Derrick for their nightly goodnight talk. I hung up with a small smile.

As I lay in the dark, waiting to go to sleep, everything came back. I didn't want to deal with it yet. I tried to push it back again and again. It was too quiet, I needed sound. Sitting on the side of my bed, I opened the middle drawer of my desk and pulled out the sound machine Zeke had bought me months ago. I plugged it in and turned on the heartbeat setting. I lay back down; the sound filled my ears. I had to deal with it, I had to think about it. I knew that. But... tomorrow. I'd deal with it tomorrow. I fell asleep, curled up with Hades, to the sound of a heartbeat filling my room.

#### CHAPTER 2

#### THURSDAY

woke up late, but since it was the last day of school it didn't really matter. Not caring about the time, I stopped at the cemetery on my way to school anyway.

I parked my '89 Blazer near the Veteran's section and climbed out. Sweat immediately began running down my face. A large group of souls waited for me. I stopped once my barriers shook.

"Alright. We did thirty yesterday, let's do thirty today," I announced.

"Why only thirty?" someone called.

"Because I almost passed out yesterday. Let's keep the brain damage to a minimum," I countered. Then I stilled. I had been joking about that for months. Now it wasn't so funny anymore. As a group, the souls moved forward and made a line. I went to the front.

An elderly woman who had to be in her nineties smiled at me. "Hello, dear. I'm Rosa." Her eyes ran over me. "You need to eat something, honey. Oh, I wish I could make you some of my spaghetti bolognese. It'd put meat on your bones."

I smiled at her. She was a sweet old woman. "I'm Lexie, it's nice to meet you. I had some pizza last night so I need to work that off today."

She chuckled and shook her head. "You kids these days." Her need to move on slipped through my barriers. I needed to get started.

"Everyone hold hands," I announced. "If you let go, the person next to you won't make it." I still didn't know if that was true, but I wasn't going to take chances. I focused on Rosa's need to move on. That gold ribbon of will moved out from me and wrapped around her wrist before it serpentined

through the line. It grabbed each soul before moving on to the next. Once everyone was attached, I dropped.

I landed in the Veil in a crouch. As I got to my feet I counted the souls. Thirty. Good. As golden doorways formed, I walked through the small, growing woods. The grass was now a rich green. Wildflowers grew everywhere. The old, burnt stumps were gone now, and there were several small saplings around waist high in their place. And of course, Sophie's apple tree had grown even larger. I placed my hand on the slightly rough bark and smiled. Whenever I saw this tree I missed Sophie. Yeah, she wasn't *my* sister, but she had become a friend. For some reason, touching the tree made me feel better.

I patted the trunk and turned back in time to watch Rosa waddle over to her door, where a young man in trousers, suspenders and a white shirt waited with open arms. The closer Rosa walked to the man the younger she grew, her silver hair turning black and her wrinkles fading. I smiled, watching as Rosa jumped into the man's arms and he spun her around, before the door closed. Who was going to come for me when it was my turn? I shoved the thought away. I was okay. I wasn't having that many issues. The lesion was only the size of a small gumball. Rory had once told me that Claire, at the end, had a black spot the size of a golf ball, so I really shouldn't be too worried. I knelt in the grass and smelled the flowers. I had to get to class. I closed my eyes and pulled myself out.

When I opened my eyes I immediately regretted it; knives of pain were being driven through my head. I dropped to my butt in the grass and pulled out my tissues, holding them to my nose as I tried to get my breath back. Okay, I had to admit it; the trips to the Veil were getting worse. The more people I took, the longer it took to recover. Hot liquid ran down my neck on both sides. I used my tissues to wipe away the blood trailing from my ears to my neck. Just that action took all the energy I had. I lay down in the grass, my arms and legs limp. I closed my eyes again and waited. The fact I was this tired just from crossing souls over... it was taking everything I had at times. Now I knew why. I was doing more damage. Fuck. I needed to pull back somehow, but... could I? There were so many souls left to cross.

I couldn't hide this from the guys forever. They were going to figure out something was up eventually. I watched the sunlight shine through the leaves. I just... I needed some time before I told them.

Feeling stronger, I sat up and rested my arms on my knees. I was tired, worn out. I checked my tissues. They were soaked. I pulled out some more and cleaned up. I needed to get the Veil open, soon. But first, I needed lots of iced coffee.

t was the end of the day when I started pulling my old books from my locker. Normally I wouldn't have any books left, but these were the books Serena had sold me, along with a few of my own. Ever since Tara had found out about my ability to see the dead she'd been snooping around. I had even caught her in my bedroom a couple of times.

I wiped the sweat off my face before tucking another book away. The heat had my denim Bermuda shorts and gray V-neck shirt sticking to me. I couldn't wait to get home and throw on a tank top and shorter shorts.

I reached in and grabbed another book.

"Hey, Red, what's taking so long?" Isaac called in his rich, honey-like voice. The twins came around the corner and I had to take a breath. There was no getting around it - my friends were hot. As in sexy as hell and not just sweating.

"I'm getting my books," I reminded him.

"Is Tara still snooping around your room?" Asher asked as he leaned against the locker next to mine. He was trying to beat the heat in cargo shorts, a white tank top and an open, button-down, blue and white plaid shirt. It did good things for his arms.

"Yep, and now she's graduated to rifling through my drawers," I grumbled.

"Can you put a lock on your door?" Miles asked as he joined us. Miles was sweating it out wearing blue jeans with his white Star Wars T-shirt.

"I have one, but she keeps getting in," I answered.

"Then we need to get you a better one," Ethan suggested.

I stuffed another book into my bag. "I was thinking about it, but I need to ask Rory."

"Ask him, and I'll bring one over," Zeke said in his deep, gravelly voice as he joined the group.

"Okay, I'll ask tonight," I muttered as I put another book in my bag.

"What is taking so long?" Zeke demanded before he stepped behind me to look over my head and into my locker. He'd been doing that a lot since January. After my abduction and assault, we learned that Zeke was more likely to trigger a flashback than the others. Since then it's become his habit to let me know he was behind me. I don't think he even realized he did it anymore.

"I was stashing a lot of books and research," I pointed out. My bag was taken off my arm. Before I could say anything, a large hand turned me around. Zeke bent down and I was suddenly over his shoulder, hanging upside down with his thick arm across the back of my thighs.

"You're going too slow. Isaac, get the rest," Zeke ordered.

I pushed up off his lower back to watch Isaac all but topple the books into my bag. "Be careful!"

Isaac ignored me as he zipped up the bag and shut the empty locker.

"If he tore any of them I'm coming after you," I warned Zeke as everyone started down the hallway. "Now, put me down."

"No way. It's the last day of school," Ethan stated. "You took too long emptying your locker. It's roasting and we're going swimming." I started to squirm, trying to get down.

"Okay, but I can walk you know," I pointed out, laughing.

Zeke slapped his hand down on my butt, making me squeak. "Stop wiggling. If I put you down, you'll just find something else to stall going swimming."

My face red, I reached down and smacked him on the ass. My hand stung. Damn glutes of steel. He chuckled at my feeble attempt.

"I'm just worried about your eyesight!" I countered.

"You're not that pale, Red," Isaac reassured me. "You've gotten some sun in the last month"

I rolled my eyes. Isaac clearly had never known a red head before. "And since summer started I have put sunblock on every four hours. That's why I'm not a lobster."

"Lexie, you can wear shorts and a shirt if you're that worried about it," Miles reminded me.

"Nope, she has to wear a swimsuit," Ethan declared.

Everyone walked out of the hall and into the student parking lot. I started to sweat even more. I hoped it dripped all over Zeke.

"Okay! But when you go blind, don't say I didn't warn you," I threatened, though it was undermined by my current position over Zeke's shoulder. The guys started laughing until they reached my Blazer. Zeke carefully put me down on my sandaled feet.

I narrowed my eyes at them playfully. "If I turn into a crustacean, I expect you guys at my beck and call for aloe on my back."

The twins both raised eyebrows.

"Rub goo all over your body anytime you ask? Okay," Isaac agreed with a smirk. The guys burst out laughing. I rolled my eyes. There were just some things you couldn't say to a group of guys. Still... I loved my guys anyway.

I finished rubbing sunblock onto my legs and feet. Straightening, I looked in the mirror and eyed my two-piece swimsuit. The small black boy shorts and sapphire halter top kept me covered more than most swimsuits, which I liked. I bit the corner of my lip and ran my eyes over my body. Not bad. My body was toned, the soft lines hinting at six pack abs. My skin had a tint of color. For the last two weeks I'd been slathering on the sunblock and sunbathing alone, hoping to get some color without burning. The end result was my summer pale; not quite as pale as winter me. Yay me! I picked up my blue towel and sunblock before slipping my feet into my flip-flops and going downstairs.

Shouting outside drew me to the back door. My jaw almost dropped.

All of them were in board shorts. Every one of them was muscled in their own way. And the definition...

Stop drooling, Lexie. Out of all of them, only Zeke was wearing a shirt with his black board shorts. Isaac and Asher tackled Zeke, taking him into the water with them. I smiled as he came up sputtering and cursing at them. Miles shook his head before he dove into the water and came up ten feet away. Ethan was sitting on the deck next to Hades, still spraying sunblock on his arms.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and stepped out into the backyard. I swear, if one of them yells 'the beacons are lit' they're going to die. Heads turned. Asher smiled, Isaac whistled, Miles squinted in my direction.

Zeke's face was blank while Ethan shouted, "Hey, sexy!"

Zeke's eyes snapped to Ethan a second before he reached out of the water, grabbed Ethan's arm and pulled him in. The splash hit Asher in the face.

Ethan came up laughing. "Worth it!"

I was shaking my head when I reached the dock and slipped off my flip-flops. "Zeke, he was the last one dry," I chided. "I still need sunscreen on my back."

"I've got ya, Red." Isaac swam to the metal ladder and climbed out. He wiped the water from his face as the sunlight glinted off his pecs and eight pack. I sat beside Hades and began to pet him to distract myself. My big ball of love was panting away in the heat.

Isaac moved behind me and sat on the deck. I held the tube of sunscreen up over my shoulder.

"You're not as pale as I thought you'd be," he said as he took the sunscreen from my hand.

"I've been trying to get a little sun every day, carefully." I gathered my hair over my left shoulder and held it. Isaac squirted some lotion into his hands and began to rub it into the back of my shoulders.

"Good idea, we wouldn't want you too burned to go to the end of the year party tonight," Ethan said as he turned over to float on his back.

"Who's throwing this party anyway?" I asked as Isaac moved to the middle of my back. His gentle touch surprised me. It wasn't like he was ever too rough with me, but I hadn't expected him to take his time.

"Aaron Cooper," Miles answered, still squinting at me.

"Miles, can you see at all?" I asked, smiling.

"A little, mostly blurry shapes," he admitted, with a small shrug.

Isaac's hands moved to my lower back.

I shook my head and went back to the topic. "Who's Aaron Cooper anyway?"

"He's graduating tomorrow and his parents aren't home from Europe yet," Ethan supplied, "so it'll be the last big summer party he throws."

"This is a bad idea," Zeke grumbled. I met his eyes and gave him an understanding smile.

"I'll have Hades and one of you with me at all times," I reminded him.

He shook his head. "I still don't like it," Zeke said. I couldn't blame him. I've had flashbacks and panic attacks at parties since April. None as bad as the beach, but they still bothered him.

"Zeke doesn't want to go to a party. Big surprise." Isaac's voice was thick with sarcasm. "You're done, Red."

"Thanks, Cookie Monster." The words were barely out of my mouth before Isaac was lifting me off the dock and tossing me into the water. I came up, pushed my soaked hair off my face and flipped him off. Asher started moving towards the shore. Zeke started moving toward the dock ladder. Isaac saw, turned, and ran. Zeke climbed the ladder as Asher reached the shore. Isaac ran past Asher and onto the grass. Zeke ran down the dock after them. I stayed in the water, laughing with Ethan and Miles. They disappeared around the house. I dunked myself and slicked my hair back.

"So, are we leaving from here?" I asked them.

Miles swam closer so he didn't have to squint as much. "I believe that's the plan."

I moved to float on my back. "Sounds good to me."

There was yelling. I looked up to watch Asher and Zeke carrying Isaac between them. He was yelling and apologizing as they walked down the dock.

"One," Zeke said as they began to swing him between them, "two, three!" They let go; Isaac flew off the dock. He hit the water hard and made a big splash. I was still laughing as he came up sputtering. Zeke and Asher were cracking up on the dock. Isaac flipped them off.

"Hey, who can make the biggest splash?" I asked. Everyone pointed at Zeke.

Zeke flipped everyone off. We burst out laughing.

Asher moved the end of the dock. "Let's find out."

The next half hour had everyone jumping off the dock. Eventually, the guys were challenging each other to flips and dives. Miles surprised the hell out of me with a perfect backflip.

Asher had just come up from a dive when the back door opened. Expecting Rory, I turned to smile. Only it wasn't him.

My cousin Tara was there with three of her girlfriends. All with towels. I repressed a groan.

"Hi, guys!" Tara chirped cheerfully. There were mumbled replies as Tara took off her sandals. My cousin was pretty, there was no doubt. Long, light-blond hair, big blue eyes and a pretty smile. Too bad she was a bitch to me most of the time. "Do you guys know Callie, Christie, and Cathy?"

"Who is who?" Isaac asked.

"I'm Callie," the pretty, dark-blond girl said as she took off her shirt to reveal her pink bikini and the body to pull it off. Great.

"I'm Christie," the brunette said in a high-pitched voice. Asher winced at the sound. Christie pulled off her wrap to expose another great body, this time in a white bikini.

"And I'm Cathy," the strawberry-blond girl announced before she pulled off her shirt and uncovered a blue and white striped bikini.

"Nice to meet ya?" Isaac said awkwardly.

"We thought we'd join you guys," Tara said as she pulled off her wrap and showed off her already tanned body in a red bikini. What the hell were they doing here?

"Free country," Asher muttered. My cousin and her friends moved down the dock. Cathy and Christie jumped in immediately. Callie and Tara sat on the edge of the dock and started putting sunblock on.

"So, what were you guys doing?" Cathy asked, her eyes on Asher. My heart ached.

"Just jumping off the dock," Asher said as Christie moved near Ethan. The ache grew bigger.

"Cool, can anyone do a flip?" Christie asked while eyeing Ethan.

"Not me," Ethan answered, moving away to float on his back.

Tara and Callie finished with their lotion and slipped into the lake. Callie moved towards Isaac while Tara moved between me and Zeke.

"How's your week been?" Tara asked him. Zeke looked at her as if she'd grown another head.

"Do you guys remember that game we used to play?" Miles asked, getting everyone's attention.

"Which one?" Asher grinned.

"The one where we swim out, dive to the bottom, grab a large rock, and carry it as far as we can to the shore," Miles reminded them.

"Yeah, I remember kicking all your asses," Isaac announced. The guys shot him a look.

"We'll see about that," Zeke stated before swimming further out. He dove under. Tara's friends tried to get the guys talking by flirting with them. Zeke came up around nine feet closer than where he started.

"Not bad," Asher said before swimming out. I shook my head and kept treading water as the guys continued to push each other. Miles kept outdistancing everyone.

When Zeke went under for the fifth time, Tara swam up next to me.

"Can I talk to you in the house?" she whispered.

I eyed her. What did she want? "Yeah... sure." We turned and swam to the dock and climbed out. I wrapped my towel around my waist before slipping my flip-flops back on and heading inside. Hades followed closely.

Tara closed the door behind her then turned to me with an annoying smile.

"What did you want to talk about?" I asked as I used the towel to dry my hair.

"You're staying in the house," she announced.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "I am?"

"Yeah. I'm trying to get to know Zeke, and you're just distracting him." Tara tucked a hair behind her ear.

I started laughing. "I'm... I'm distracting him? Really?"

Tara's eyes narrowed at me. "Yeah, and now you are going to hang out in the house."

I shook my head and started towards the door. "Yeah, sure, Tara."

I had just opened the door when she said, "If you don't, I'll tell Cathy, Callie, and Christie that you can see the dead. Or at least that you think you can."

I stopped in my tracks. My temper sparked as I turned back to her. "You're blackmailing me?"

"If I have to, yes." She moved to the other side of the open door. "So, unless you want to be known around town as the crazy girl, stay inside." I eyed her. Was she serious?

I met her eyes. "This is fucked up, Tara," I told her, trying to figure out if she was serious. "We're family."

She snorted. "Just because you're my cousin doesn't mean we're family."

My heart dropped. Wow. If that's the way she wanted to play it, fine. I was too tired to put up with this shit anymore. "Go ahead and tell them." I gestured for her to walk through the door. "Go, tell your friends that your cousin sees the dead, or at least thinks she does. Let's see what happens."

Her eyes flashed at me. "I'll do it, Lexie."

I smiled. It wasn't my nice one. "Go ahead. Just remember, while you don't think of me as family, the rest of town knows I'm your cousin." I tilted my head to the side. "How do you think that will make you look?"

"It won't matter, everyone knows me," she said. "They know I'm not crazy."

"Yeah, they do. But opinions change. And you care a lot more about other people's opinions than I do. You'll get texts, Facebook posts, memes made of you. Believe me, I've dealt with it all before. And it won't bother me one bit." I ran my eyes over her before meeting hers again. "Do you really think you can handle that?"

She glared at me and opened her mouth, then quickly closed it and put on a pleasant smile.

"Ally, we're going to head out," Asher announced as he came in the back door and stood next to me. The other guys filed past and headed for Rory's room. Each of them shot looks at Tara as they went by.

"Why are you leaving? We were just starting to have fun," Tara asked cheerfully.

Asher frowned down at her. "Well, everyone has something to do before the party tonight," Asher lied before he headed to Rory's room.

When the door closed she turned on me. "Which party?"

"The big bash Aaron Cooper is having," I said before I walked across the room to lean against the back of the sofa where Hades had sprawled out.

Tara moved to stand in front of me. "I'm going with you and the guys."

"You can go, but you're not going with us." I chuckled. "You just tried to blackmail me."

"Lexie, I'm going whether you like it or not. So you might as well take me," she told me again.

I grinned. "Why don't you ask Zeke if he wants you to go with us?" She smiled brightly. Oh, the poor girl. Did I feel guilty? Nah.

The door to Rory's room opened. Zeke came out with his bag and closed the door behind him. His gaze passed Tara and went straight to me. His mouth was a tight line as he came toward us.

"Zeke, I hear you're going to the Cooper party tonight," Tara said, her voice annoyingly cheerful.

Zeke glanced at me, his eyes promising retaliation. I fought a smirk. He turned back to Tara. "Yeah..."

Her smile dimmed around the edges. "I thought we could hang out."

Zeke's face grew hard. "I don't think so." He turned to me. "Don't go swimming without one of us here."

I sighed. "I can go swimming, Zeke."

His eyes narrowed on mine. "Do the wards go out that far?"

Shit. "I'll stay out of the water," I grumbled.

"Thought so," he stated. I shot him a look. His lips twitched as he headed for the door. "See ya later."

"Bye." I turned back to Tara.

She was frowning at me, her face pinched. I looked down at Hades and scratched his ears.

The guys came out in a trickle, each saying they'd see me later. Ethan kissed my cheek, Isaac gave me his usual raspberry on the other. Miles said he'd pick me up later, while Asher just winked as he passed.

When the door closed behind them, Tara turned on me. "You're taking me to that party."

"He just said he doesn't want to hang out with you," I pointed out. "Go hang out with your own friends."

Tara blew a gasket.

Ignoring Tara's ranting and annoying demands, I headed upstairs with Hades. After locking my door behind me, I opened my book bag and started pulling out the books I had stashed in my locker. I put them back on the bookshelves and returned to my bag. I checked the door again before pulling out my other supplies; black salt, tar water, a small jar of red-brick dust. All to keep the dead away. I opened the bottom drawer of my desk and stashed them there with my other jars of dried herbs. Wishing I had a better lock, I put my bag away in my closet. I had been spending a lot of time over the last few months studying herbs, stones, and oils. I figured since the betony outside was working, and our charms were working, that there might be other things that worked too.

I pulled out several bottles and some cloth. Miles had said he wasn't sleeping again, so it occurred to me that a sleeping sachet might help. I cut a small, round piece of cloth and sprinkled in several herbs, smelling it now

and then to see if it was a good mix. When I was done I closed the little bag with a string. Hopefully it would help, otherwise I had bought the herbs for nothing. I started going through my research books and realized I was missing one. Fucking Tara...

The front door shut downstairs.

"Hey, where is everyone?" Rory shouted. I put my stuff away and headed downstairs. Rory was at the dinner table sorting mail. Tara was in the living room area watching TV. And right now, I didn't care. I needed to tell Rory.

"Hey, Rory," I greeted as I moved to the table.

"Hey. Where are the boys?" he asked. "I figured they'd still be here swimming."

"Oh, something came up," I lied. "Listen, I need to talk to you about something."

"What's going on, kid?" He turned to me.

I stopped chewing the corner of my lip. "I need a better lock on my door."

He raised an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"Someone has been getting into my room and going through my supplies," I explained in a whisper.

"Tara?" Rory snapped as he turned around and crossed his arms. I sighed and turned too. "Have you been going into Lexie's room and going through her things?"

Tara looked innocent. "I just wanted to borrow some books."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really? Why are you interested in a journal from the 1920s?"

"Is that what she took?" Rory asked.

"It's missing from my room," I offered.

Rory turned back to Tara. "Tara, what the hell? You're going into her room and taking her research stuff?" he snapped, his voice hard. "Get your ass upstairs and bring back her things."

"I just borrowed a book," she said, her eyes rolling.

"Next time, ask! Get her stuff or you'll be grounded for the next two weeks!" he shouted. I looked down at the ground feeling slightly guilty. That's not really how I had hoped it would go.

"Fine!" she snapped and stomped her feet up the stairs. I sighed. This was going to backfire, badly.

"Rory, I really need a better lock," I told him earnestly.

He sighed. "If she does it again then you can have your lock," he promised. "Let's just see if she'll listen."

I doubted it was going to happen. Maybe I should store some stuff in the Blazer? Actually, that didn't sound like a bad idea. Or would she break a window? Maybe Miles' house?

"Alright," I agreed. A door slammed upstairs.

"There! She's got her stupid book back," Tara shouted before another door slammed.

Rory sighed. "I think it's a Chinese food night."

"Sounds good to me."

I had just finished changing into a clean pair of shorts and a black, Y-back tank top when Miles knocked on the front door. I shook my head as I slid on my sandals.

"Just come in, Miles!" Rory shouted. I smiled as the door opened downstairs. I tucked the sachet I had made him into my pocket and took a look in the mirror. My copper hair was back in a ponytail and my heart-shaped face had minimal makeup. I didn't bother tonight because it would just melt off anyway.

"Lexie! Miles is here!" Rory shouted. I picked up my water bottle and opened the door for Hades. He hurried downstairs, eager to see Miles. By the time I reached the living room, Miles already had Hades on his leash. He had changed into jeans, sneakers and one of his Zelda shirts.

He looked up from Hades and smiled. "Ready?"

"Definitely." I turned to Rory. "Curfew?"

Rory thought about it. "You'll get until midnight tonight."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yeah, just don't make me regret it," he warned.

I smiled. "Thanks, Rory!"

Miles handed me Hades' leash and held the door open. I hurried out, grateful to get away from the house and Tara, who was blaring music in her bedroom.

Miles got in the driver's side of his sedan while I let Hades in the back and climbed in the front.

He pulled away from the house while I adjusted an air-conditioning vent for Hades, then myself. When I had air blowing on me, I turned to Miles. "So, how big is this party going to be?"

"It's usually rather large," he said. "People from Northridge and Dulcet end up coming down."

My brows went up. "Really? That big?"

He nodded and his brows drew down. "Yes. Are you sure you want to go?"

I thought about it now that I knew how big the party would really be. "Will there be room to go outside and breathe?"

He glanced at me. "Yes, the property is enormous. The house is rather large. There is usually a bonfire, a dock for fishing on the lake, even row boats if you want to go out on the water."

"Wow," I said, impressed. "So, there's room to go out and take a break." He chuckled. "Yes, there is."

Miles pulled off the road and into a long, wide driveway. We found a line of cars and parked at the end, on the right-hand side. We were far enough away that we couldn't see the house.

Before we got out, I said, "I have something for you."

He turned to me with a small grin.

I smiled as I shifted so I could reach into my pocket. I pulled out the sachet and handed it to him. "It's to help you sleep. Or at least, it's supposed to help you sleep." I shrugged. "I figured since the betony is working on the house that it was worth a shot."

He grinned as he smelled it. "What did you use?"

"Lavender, chamomile, and some rosemary," I explained. "Anything that is supposed to help with sleep." My face warmed. "It might not even work."

"Even if it doesn't, thank you," he said softly. I turned back and met his eyes.

"You're welcome."

He smiled down at me before putting the sachet on the console. Pushing open the door, I got out and let Hades out of the back.

We started up the driveway. The woods were thick along the driveway, the trees making it at least five degrees cooler. It was nice. Miles' phone rang.

"Yes?" Miles answered. Hades pulled to the side of the road. He led me through the cars to a tree and lifted his leg.

"We've parked, but I don't see the house yet," Miles said. I smiled. It was probably Zeke wondering where we were. Hades put his leg down.

"Good boy," I told him and gave him some love. He wagged his wrinkly butt. I walked back to Miles' side and we started walking again.

"Alright." He hung up. "The guys are on their way."

"Is everyone here already?" I asked as we walked.

"Yes."

"Isaac has already been drinking, hasn't he?" I asked, my voice quiet.

He sighed. "It sounded like it."

"I'm worried about him," I told him. "He's been so... I don't know... over the top lately."

"I am too," he admitted. "But there's nothing we can do until he's ready to talk about it."

The sound of an electric motor was coming towards us.

"So, we just wait and try to stop him from doing something stupid?" I asked, not quite believing it.

"Unfortunately, yes." He turned to me and met my eyes. "We've tried to talk to him about it, we've tried to get him help, but if we bring it up he just shuts down."

I hated that he was right.

The electric motor grew louder. A white four-seat golf cart came into view. Asher was driving. I grinned.

Asher pulled to a stop next to us. "Want a lift?"

"Hell yeah." I let Hades climb into the back seat. Before I could climb in, Miles joined him. I shot him a playful glare that had him smiling before I climbed into the front with Asher. "Where is everyone?"

Asher did a three-point turn and headed up the driveway. "They're watching Isaac."

"How long has he been drinking?" Miles asked.

"A half hour." Asher glanced at me. "Ally, I hate to ask, but you're the only one who has ever been able to stall him."

"I'll take Isaac duty when we get there," I promised.

"Thanks," he muttered.

Asher drove around a bend in the driveway. My jaw dropped. This place was enormous. As in, as large as Miles' house. The stacked log walls and

large alpine windows made it look like the biggest ski lodge I'd ever seen. Every light was on in the house. Music was blaring and the place was packed.

"When you said packed, you meant packed," I said quietly.

"We can still leave if you want?" Miles reminded me. I took a breath and let it out slowly as we reached the parking for the golf carts. Four others were already parked there.

We climbed out, Miles handing me Hades' leash before he got out. We followed Asher into the foyer, the oiled timber walls and random artwork added to the ski lodge feel. That was all I could see. Every room Asher led us through was full of people. At least the crowd parted for Hades; I was the only person in the room not crowded. I bit back a grin as Asher brought us into a game room. Video games were being played on several large TVs, a game of poker was happening in one corner, there was beer pong, air hockey, quarters - every party game you could imagine was being played.

Asher led us through it all to the bar at the back of the room. Zeke came into view first. He was, after all, giant and easy to spot. When the crowd parted for Hades, I found Isaac at the bar playing quarters with a dark-blond guy. He wasn't bad looking. I remembered seeing him around school sometimes. Asher moved to stand with Ethan and Zeke. I followed.

"Hey," I said as I watched Isaac pound down a shot. "How many has he had?"

"Three shots, two beers," Ethan listed, his voice boiling. Without looking, I reached out and took his hand. He squeezed my fingers gently.

"Okay, keep your phones on, guys," I told them.

"Are you sure you want to handle this?" Zeke grumbled. I sent him a smirk over my shoulder as I headed for Isaac.

I walked up behind Isaac with Hades clearing the way.

The blond boy noticed me first. "You must be Lexie." He tapped the quarter in his hand on the bar. "Isaac has told me a lot about you."

Really? I raised an eyebrow at Isaac. He grinned.

"That's me." I turned back to blond boy. "And you are?"

He gave me a smile that rivaled Asher's. "Aaron Cooper, nice to meet you."

"You too. Your house is nice." I turned to Isaac.

"You should see my bedroom," Aaron said with a leer. Isaac's head snapped up. Oh, not good.

"No thanks, I've got an allergy to bad pick-up lines," I said with a straight face. Aaron chuckled. I turned back to Isaac. "Hey, Cookie Monster, walk with me?"

Isaac glared at Aaron. "Sure." He took my hand, got to his feet, and led me through the house.

When we stepped outside I took a deep breath of the pine air. Isaac walked beside me. The backyard was huge. The swimming pool was full of people, and so was the hot tub. Further back in a corner a fire was going. Isaac led me through the crowd to a dirt path through the trees.

"How long have you been here?" he asked as we walked deeper into the trees.

"Just got here." I stepped over a downed branch.

His hand squeezed mine. "And they asked you to babysit," he grumbled.

I shot him a look. "I'm not babysitting. I'm not getting paid. I'm hanging out with one of my favorite people in the world." I let go of his hand and wrapped my arm around his hard waist.

He half smiled and wrapped a tense arm around my shoulders. "Sorry, Red." He gave me a squeeze. "The guys have just been on my ass about everything."

"That's what she said," I said instantly. He chuckled. I squeezed him back. "They're just worried about you."

"I know," he grumbled. "They shouldn't be."

"Why not?" I asked quietly. "We love you, so we worry about you."

"You shouldn't," he repeated. "I'm fine."

"Really?" I asked, my voice quiet. He nodded. I grinned up at him. "Okay, I'll take your word for it." I leaned closer until I was nose to nose with him. "But I'm still hanging out with you."

He gave me a smile that reached his eyes; his body relaxed.

"Want to head back?" I asked.

"This path is a loop," he explained. "We'll come out on the other side of \_\_\_"

Hades pulled on his leash, jerking me away from Isaac. I caught my footing and held him back. "What's wrong, baby?"

The large bush beside a tree moved. Isaac stepped closer and a little in front of me as he took my hand. Dylan came out of the bushes fastening his jeans. His sapphire eyes lifted and met mine. His mouth dropped open.

"Uh..." He swallowed hard. Even the stunned look on his face couldn't detract from his good looks.

"Dylan, wait for a sec. I can't find my panties," a girl's voice called from behind the bushes. I raised an eyebrow, eyed him, and fought back a laugh. Wow. In the bushes? Really?

"Lexie..." Dylan's eyes were pained, his face burning red.

"Enjoying yourself?" I asked, trying not to smile.

"I..." Dylan couldn't seem to say anything.

Isaac squeezed my hand. "Come on, Red." He tugged me along to start us walking.

"You're with Isaac now?" Dylan asked, his voice sharp.

I shot him a look over my shoulder. "I wouldn't be talking, bush boy."

"Hope you kept an eye out for poison oak!" Isaac shot over his shoulder. I snorted as we walked around the bend in the trail.

When we were out of earshot, Isaac whispered, "Are you good?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, I'm just glad he hasn't started calling since the restraining order expired."

He squeezed my hand. I squeezed back.

"Are you nervous about your match?" I asked in the quiet.

"Kinda," he admitted. "I haven't fought for months. Sparring, yeah. But it's different when you've got someone doing everything they can to take you down."

"I think you're going to do okay," I told him. "Just don't let him knee you in the face..."

We both started laughing. Getting a concussion from a knee to the face was enough that Isaac's mom had yanked him from fighting months ago.

"Yeah, I know," he muttered. "I've been looking at video of all the fighters who are registered. Trying to find weaknesses, mistakes."

"Did you find any?" I asked, looking up at the trees.

"Some, but I don't know if it will be useful. I still don't know who I'm fighting." He took my hand again.

"Keep to your technique, keep moving, and be patient," I said, repeating what Dave, my trainer, always told me. "And don't lose your temper."

He grinned down at me. "I know."

I smiled. "Sorry, I'm just worried something bad will happen."

He squeezed my hand. "I know."

We both grew quiet and enjoyed our walk.

## Zeke

I GROWLED under my breath as I moved through the damn crowd. Why the hell was I here? Some asshole ran into me. I glared at him. His face grew pale as he moved away. I kept moving through the crowd, hating every moment. How did anyone deal with this? My shoulders grew even more tense as I finally found my way out the front. Grumbling under my breath, I turned to walk around the house. This was fucking ridiculous.

I was almost around the corner when—

"Zeke!" Tara's voice shouted. I gritted my teeth and kept walking. What the fuck did I have to do to get her to leave me alone? I quickened my pace. "Zeke! Hold on!"

I didn't bother stopping in the side yard. I was sick of being nice.

She hurried down the deserted yard to walk beside me. "I thought we could get a drink and talk."

"No," I bit out before picking up the pace.

She hurried to stay with me. "Look, Zeke, I want to get to know you better—"

"Stop," I bit out as I stopped and turned to her. "Just back the fuck off." "Zeke-"

"I. Don't. Like. You," I stated clearly.

"You don't even know me. That's why I want to hang out—"

"I fucking know enough," I growled. "I don't need to know more." I turned and started walking again.

She snorted as she followed. "You only know what Lexie says."

"You're spoiled. You're jealous of Lexie. And you're the kind of person who blackmails her cousin," I stated, my voice hard.

She stopped walking. "Sh-she told you!"

"Asher fucking heard you," I growled as I kept going. "Now, fuck off." I walked around the corner and towards the backyard. I was going somewhere Tara couldn't follow.

#### Lexie

BY THE TIME we got back the party was getting rowdy. People were jumping off the diving board into the pool, one guy was doing a keg stand. It was chaos, but good chaos. Isaac led me through the crowded house and found Ethan with his bandmates.

"She's all yours," Isaac announced before kissing my temple.

"You mean I get to keep her?" Ethan asked, his face hopeful. The guys chuckled,

"You don't want to keep me, I'm a lot of upkeep," I warned Ethan. Ryan and Oliver laughed. Brooklyn, their new singer, watched me from the corner of her eye. She had a sweet angel face. Her blue eyes were ringed in black, her hot pink hair reached her shoulders in a choppy haircut. When we first met I had tried being nice, but she just watched me. Like she was watching me now.

Isaac gave my shoulder a squeeze before he ducked into the crowd. I pulled out my phone and texted the guys.

Alexis: Someone else is up.

Asher: On it Alexis: Thanks.

I tucked my phone back into my pocket. Brooklyn was still watching.

Ethan got to his feet and took my hand. "Come on, Beautiful. I want a dance." I smiled as he pulled me through the house to the living room, where the speakers were blaring. I told Hades to stay in the corner while we danced within his sight. Ethan smiled, spun me under his arm, and brought me back. As we danced I relaxed into him. We moved to the music. When a slow song came on, Ethan pulled me close. I draped my arms over his shoulders and took a deep breath of his spicy cologne.

"Thanks for dancing with me, Snoopy," I said softly.

His hand moved up my spine slowly. "Always, Beautiful."

"How are you doing?" I asked.

His chocolate eyes met mine. "Better, thanks to you."

"I just listened," I reminded him as warmth washed through me. "You could have called any of us."

The corner of his lips lifted. "I don't see myself calling Zeke in the middle of the night because I need to talk."

I smiled at the image. "You'd probably get cursed out and lectured at the same time."

He chuckled and held me closer, his hand running slowly back down my spine. My heart raced. Our dancing slowed.

"You know you can call me any time, right?" he whispered.

"I know." I ran my eyes over his serious face. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "I just had a bad dream last night. Don't worry about it."

"What happened?" I asked.

His eyes ran over my face, his arms held me tighter. "I lost you," he said, his voice just over a whisper. "You died. In front of us. We were all there, trying to get to you, and we just couldn't..." His eyes filled with shadows. My heart ached.

"Hey, I'm okay," I reminded him. "I'm here, I'm safe."

His eyes met mine again. "I know, it was just a bad dream." He tried to smile as if everything was fine.

I hugged him tight. "I'm okay," I whispered in his ear. "I'm not going anywhere." Please don't let me be lying. My heart ached as I shoved the thought to the back of my mind.

He squeezed me back and took a deep breath.

We were still dancing when his phone went off. He checked it and cursed. "I need to go watch Isaac." He texted back while I got Hades' leash.

"Who's got Lexie duty?" I teased.

He chuckled. "We're meeting Miles." He led me through the loud crowd. The music was starting to make my head hurt. It was roasting with so many bodies in here, not to mention the smell of so many sweaty people. Was everyone drunk already?



## Miles

I HANDED off the controller to Chris and headed toward the doorway of the game room to meet Lexie and Ethan. The party was getting rowdy and people were bumping into each other everywhere. That's not going to be good for Angel. The thought had me moving through the crowd faster. I

finally spotted them waiting in the hall just outside the door. She was leaning against the doorjamb of the glass French doors, her fingers rubbing at her temple with her eyes closed. A headache? Ethan and Hades were between her and the crowd. Good, less chance of her getting bumped. I finally reached them.

"How's your night going?" I asked them.

Ethan smiled. "I got a dance; it's awesome." Lexie smiled a tired smile. Ethan chuckled before he leaned down and kissed Lexie on the cheek. I looked away from them to the crowd, my fingers tapping on my thigh. How were the twins so sure she wanted to be touched? How did they know without her telling them? I envied them that skill.

"I'll see you guys later." Ethan's voice had me turning back to them. Ethan slipped into the crowd.

"What would you like to do?" I asked.

Lexie wiped the sweat from her face. "Can we go outside? It's hot and loud in here."

"Sure." I took her hand that wasn't holding Hades' leash and started walking her through the crowd. In the hallway it was even louder than the game room. I was trying to get through when Lexie jerked her hand from mine. I was turning to her when Hades growled and barked.

A drunk guy's hands were up. "Sorry, just a bit dizzy," he said, his eyes on Hades.

Lexie had moved a step back from him into a defensive position, her shaking hands were up in fists. I moved to her side, slightly between her and the drunk.

"H-heel," she told Hades. The guy stepped back into the crowd with a small smirk on his face. I ran through my memory looking for a name. Thomas Avery. I turned to Lexie, her face pale as she took a deep breath. Without thinking, I wrapped my arm around her and began moving her through the hallway. The crowd parted, allowing us to get through. I opened one of the doors to the backyard and guided her out.

The backyard wasn't quite as busy, but after that scare she'd want quiet. Keeping my arm around her, I walked her down to the lake. She continued taking deep, calming breaths. We reached the end of the dock, as far from the house as I could get her. She slipped off her sandals and sat down, dipping her feet into the water. I sat beside her, watching her carefully. She

looked down at the water and took several more deep breaths. My body grew tense.

"Are you alright?" I asked, keeping my voice gentle.

She nodded. "I think I'm going to stay outside for the rest of the party." Her voice was quiet and shaking around the edges. She didn't seem to be having a flashback...

"Whatever you need," I promised. If she wanted to leave, we'd leave. If she wanted to stay outside until dawn, we'd stay outside until dawn.

She sent me a small smile. "Sorry."

"I'm not big on parties, Lexie," I told her as Hades sat beside me and I started scratching his ears.

"But you go anyway," she pointed out, her voice quiet. I met her eyes. "Why?"

Because *you* do. I couldn't say that though. Could I? Maybe I should tell her how I felt? The agreement with the others popped into my mind. Why did I put that up for a vote again? Looking into her beautiful eyes I couldn't remember. I shouldn't tell her. I'd be betraying the guys, not to mention, if she didn't... I'd been quiet for too long. Say something!

"Sometimes I'm the only one Isaac will listen to, at least I was before you came along," I told her. It was true, I'd just never said it out loud before.

She nodded. "That makes sense." She looked down at the water and started making small waves with her feet.

"What happened in the hallway?" I asked, needing to know.

"That drunk guy ran into my back." She shook her head. "I didn't even see him coming."

"You had a flash?" I asked carefully. She licked her lips and nodded. I made a mental note to have a word with Thomas before the end of the night. That smirk as he moved back into the crowd didn't make it seem like an accident. "I'm sorry, Lexie."

"It's not your fault," she reminded me. I reached over and took her hand. She gave my fingers a small squeeze.

"Are you still having nightmares?" I asked, carefully choosing my words. I didn't know what was too personal a question in this situation, so I was feeling my way through it.

"A couple times a week," she admitted. She tilted her head and leaned down to look in the water, her hair slipping over one shoulder. "Hey, fish!"

I leaned forward and looked down. She was right, there were a few tiny fish below our feet. "I believe they are baby perch. At least that's my guess in this lack of light."

She smiled. "You know everything, Miles."

Everything but how to tell you the way I feel. I looked up at the sky. I needed to change the subject. "There's Cassiopeia."

She looked up at the stars. "Where?"

I pointed. "Right there; that W of stars."

She shook her head. "I'm still not seeing it."

"Alright." I leaned closer so I could point accurately. "Do you see it now?"

"Nope," she chirped.

I rested my right hand on her back, leaned further, and tried again. "See the one slightly brighter than the other?"

She chuckled, then scooted closer and leaned over until she was resting her back against my chest and shoulder. My heart slammed, my fingers tingled. "Okay, now show me."

I carefully moved my right hand to her hip as I pointed over her shoulder so she could see along my arm. "You see this star?"

"Now I do."

I smiled as rosemary tickled my nose. "Now, follow my finger." I brought my finger diagonally down and to the right. "Do you see the star I'm pointing at now?"

"Yes."

I moved my finger to the next, moving diagonally again, this time upwards. "How about now?" I asked quietly.

She nodded.

I moved my finger again. "Do you see it?"

"Yeah. How big is this constellation?" she asked.

"One more star." I moved my finger diagonally again. "And that's it."

"Oh, it really is a W. Nifty," she said, her smile in her voice. I dropped my arm.

"And right behind that," I said, my voice soft, "is the Milky Way."

"That stretch of stars, right?"

"Yes." I smiled to myself.

She stopped leaning against me and smiled at me. "That's pretty cool." She looked back up at the sky. "That strip of stars is the rest of the galaxy.

It's beautiful."

I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her eyes were sparkling. She was smiling a big smile that I rarely saw. Something settled inside me, making me wish that this moment wouldn't end. "I think so," I said as I watched her. I wanted to tell her. It was the perfect time. But she might not be ready to start dating again, she might not be interested, and... there was the 'no dating Lexie' agreement with the others. I shoved my feelings down and tried to keep my face blank. I looked out at the water; one of the row boats was coming in.

Eventually, Zeke came into sight as he rowed toward the dock. He maneuvered the boat next to the dock, got to his feet, and tied it off to a pylon.

"Have you been hiding out on the lake all night?" Lexie asked, her voice laughing at him.

Zeke ran his hand through his hair. "Maybe." He began setting the gear on the dock. "I borrowed the Coopers' gear and went fishing." After he finished unloading the boat, he carefully stepped onto the dock. He looked down at us. "What are you guys doing out here?"

Lexie looked back down at the water and the fish. "It's really crowded inside."

Zeke met my gaze with hard eyes. I subtly nodded. He clenched his jaw as he looked at Lexie and ran his eyes over her.

Speaking of the hallway... I got to my feet. "I'm going to get a drink. Would you two like anything?"

Lexie shook her water bottle. "Some water, please?"

"Of course." I turned to Zeke. His gaze shot to me. He knew I was trying to keep him here. He looked to Lexie then back to me.

"A soda," he all but bit out. I nodded and walked down the dock towards the house. Zeke would stay with Lexie as long as she needed.

Inside, the party had gotten louder. I moved through the house with one thought on my mind. Thomas Avery.

It took a while, but after searching the house, I found him out the front. He was leaning against a tree and talking to a girl.

"Thomas," I said, my voice cold.

Thomas stood up straight and turned around. "What do you want, Huntington?"

"Why did you run into Alexis Delaney?" I asked, my voice calm.

He grinned. "Didn't mean to, it was crowded in the hall," he said, his voice smug.

"Really? No else seemed to have that problem," I pointed out.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I was dizzy from drinking."

I eyed him before I turned to the girl. "Would you please excuse us?"

She sent me a shy smile before heading back to the house. When she was gone, I turned back to Thomas. "You were dizzy from being drunk and yet a half an hour later you're fine?" I eyed the beer can in his hand. "While still drinking?"

Thomas's face turned pink as he stuck one hand in his pocket. "Yeah."

I stepped closer and met his eyes. "Try again, and this time the truth," I said, my voice icy.

He shrugged. "It was just a prank, man."

"A prank?" I asked carefully, keeping my calm.

"Yeah," he admitted. "Everyone knows that Lexie chick is jumpy since that crap with Ordin. So... some of the guys thought it would be funny to bump into her and see what she'd do."

Anger burned in my chest. "They thought it would be funny?" My voice was cold enough to give someone frostbite.

He shrugged. "It was a harmless joke."

Calm, calm, calm. I needed more information. "Who are these friends of yours?"

He scratched behind his ear. "Um, they're not really friends. They just paid me to bump into her."

The world grew silent as I found that quiet spot inside me that kept me calm. "They paid you?"

He cringed and nodded. "Yeah, now that I'm hearing it out loud, it does seem messed up."

"I can't imagine why. You just ran into a girl to scare her. A girl who has PTSD from an assault that left her with a crack in her skull and put her in the hospital. For money."

He winced. "Oh, yeah. That's bad."

"I want names," I told him.

He reeled off the names of four football players. People Asher knew. I turned around and left him there. I needed to find the others.

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## CHAPTER 4

#### Lexie

MILES WALKED down the dock and towards the house. I made little waves with my foot.

"Come on," Zeke said. I looked up at him over my shoulder. "Help me put away the fishing gear and we'll hit the fire pit."

That sounded good to me. I got up and slipped my shoes on. When I took a pole from Zeke I got a whiff of him. "Whoa, you stink."

He smirked. "I've been fishing. I'm going to smell like fish."

"I didn't realize that fish smelled that much. Unless you burn them at least." We started down the dock. He led me to a large, four car garage. "So, did you catch anything? Besides fish smell."

He grinned. "A few small mouth bass and some trout." He opened the door to the garage and flipped on the light.

"Where are they?" I asked, confused, as I followed him to a rack of fishing poles.

"Catch and release," he said as he put the tackle box away before taking the pole from me and setting it on the rack. "There's no point in keeping the fish if I'm not cooking it."

"I didn't know you liked fishing," I said as I walked out the door.

He closed it behind him. "I like the quiet." We walked to the corner of the yard where the fire was starting to burn low. The logs were empty around the fire. Zeke went straight to the wood pile and picked up several pieces. I sat down on the grass and leaned back against a large log. Zeke added more wood and a handful of dry pine needles to the fire. It wasn't long before he had it roaring again.

He sat down next to me in the grass. Hades moved to his side and flopped over Zeke's legs on his back. Zeke chuckled as he lifted the big lug into his arms and rubbed his belly. I smiled. Hades knew a sucker when he saw one. For a while we just sat there watching the fire; listening to the music from the house.

"How's your research going?" he asked, his voice quiet as he shifted Hades a little.

"Not bad, I'm getting supplies now, so that should help," I said. "Or at least, they're supposed to." Hades leaned his head back until he was looking at me upside down. He licked my chin. I chuckled and wiped his slobber off.

"You haven't tried anything but getting rid of ghosts?" he asked.

"I made a sachet to help Miles sleep today. We'll see if that works," I replied.

Zeke looked down at me, his ice-blue eyes running over my face. "How are you really doing?"

I looked back to the flames. My scan results popped into my mind. No... "I'm doing good. I have a couple weeks left of therapy."

"How's that going?" He shifted Hades until the dog was laying his head on his chest, and his butt in Zeke's lap.

"It's okay." I started to peel the label off my water bottle. "Next session she's going over what problems I should expect in... you know, the future."

"Good," he said softly. I needed to change the subject.

"After my last session we should go for ice cream." I peeked up at him. His face was hard as he watched the fire. His eyes were dark.

"Whatever you want, Baby." His voice was low and rough.

"Tough Guy," I whispered. He turned to me; his face worried. "Does that mean you'll take me fishing this summer?"

The corner of his lips twitched. "If you want."

"Yes!" I threw my arms up in victory.

He grinned. "You're going to end up smelling like fish though."

I dropped my arms. "Well, at least we'll smell together."

He chuckled as his arm moved over the back of the log. His hand found the back of my neck and squeezed gently. Warmth filled me at his touch. He gave me one more squeeze before taking his hand back.

We sat in silence, watching the flames dance.

"You've been quiet lately," I whispered.

"I have a lot on my mind," he muttered.

I leaned over and rested my head on his arm.

"I'm fine," he reassured me. I sat up and met his eyes. He gave me a half grin that made me smile.

We were quiet as we went back to watching the fire, the music from the house floating over us.

Ethan stepped into the light of the fire holding a bottle of water and a bag of marshmallows. He handed me the bottle of water. "Zeke, Miles needs you for a bit."

Zeke stiffened next to me. He glanced down at me then back to Ethan. "Are you staying?"

"Yeah." Ethan held up the marshmallows.

Zeke hesitated before sighing deeply and getting to his feet. "Where is he?"

"The game room," Ethan told him before handing me the bag. "I'll get some sticks for roasting." Ethan went to the tree line and began looking.

I looked up at Zeke. "Zeke," I said with my sweet voice. "Can I borrow your pocket knife? I left mine in the Blazer and we need one to make roasting sticks."

His lips twitched before he fished it out of his pocket and held it out to me. "Be careful, I just sharpened it this afternoon."

"Gotcha," I promised. When Ethan came back to the fire with several stick choices, Zeke headed towards the house. I turned to Ethan as he sat down on the log. "What's going on?"

Ethan made himself look busy and avoided looking at me. Oh, yeah. Something was up.



I PACED in the hallway in front of the game room. Those fuckers were inside at the poker table. I knew those assholes. I played football with those assholes! I rubbed my neck as I took a deep, calming breath. It was still hard to believe someone could be such a dick. Especially to Ally. It's not as if the entire school didn't know that Ordin beat the hell out of her. Everyone saw the fucking bruises when she came back!

Needing a distraction, I turned to Miles, who was standing next to the door, waiting patiently. "Are you sure we want Zeke with us on this?" I asked for the fifth time.

Miles' eyes were icy as they met mine. "Yes, I'm sure. There are four of them and we can't put Ethan into a position where he could hurt his back more."

Okay, when he put it that way, it made sense. But... "Without Ally we can't stop him if he loses it."

"Sure we can," Isaac said from his spot against the wall across from the door. "We can just drag his ass out like we have before."

I shook my head. I didn't know why I was arguing. These guys needed their asses kicked for scaring Ally. For fun! Who does that?

Zeke strolled up the hallway to us. "What?"

Miles started tapping his fingers against his leg. "Thomas Avery ran into Lexie in the hall as we were going outside. It wasn't an accident."

"Then what the fuck was it?" Zeke growled, his eyes burning.

"It seems a few of the football players thought it would be funny to scare Lexie. They paid him to run into her," Miles announced.

Zeke's jaw clenched and unclenched. "Who?"

"Stuart Hopkins, Kyle Debbins, Blake Price and Nick Harris," Miles said calmly.

"All football players," I bit out.

"What the fuck are we waiting for?" Zeke growled.

Miles was disturbingly quiet as he turned and led us inside. The crowd parted as we walked through the room. When the assholes spotted us Harris turned pale, Hopkins shook his head, while Debbins and Price focused on their cards.

We spread out in front of the table. "So, who thought it would be amusing to scare Alexis Delaney?" Miles asked, his voice cold.

Hopkins snorted. "What's it to you?"

Zeke grabbed the back of his head and bashed his face into the table, then held him there as he bled. "Wrong fucking answer," he snarled.

The others' eyes grew wide as Hopkins cursed at Zeke.

"Again, whose idea was it?" Miles asked. The others put down their cards and got to their feet.

"You really want to fight over a fucking joke?" Price asked with a scowl on his face.

"You paid someone to scare Lexie," Isaac bit out as he stepped towards Price. "You bet your fucking ass we do." I moved across from Harris. Tension rose and the crowd around us backed up. My phone rang. What the hell? I was going to ignore it, but it was Ethan's ringtone.

"A little busy."

"Get back out here," Ethan snapped. Everything stopped.

"What's wrong?" I asked instantly.

"Just get out here now." Ethan hung up. I met Zeke's raging eyes.

"What happened?" Zeke snapped.



#### Lexie

I KEPT PESTERING ETHAN, asking him over and over what was going on. I finally pulled out the big guns. I pouted. He gave in. After he told me what the others were up to, I went back to my marshmallow. My headache was finally gone and I wasn't really worried about the fight. Sure, the guys were going to beat the crap out of someone, but I trusted Miles to keep it to a black eye.

Ethan was laughing as he brought his roasted marshmallow back from the fire. "You pout as well as Sophie, Beautiful."

"She had a good pout?" I asked with a smile.

"It was awful," he said as he took his marshmallow off the stick. "She had the big eyes and lip quiver down pat."

I chuckled as my marshmallow caught fire. I turned the stick so the flame would go all the way around. "Zeke must have been screwed."

He snorted. "Oh yeah."

I blew out my now burned marshmallow before carefully taking it off my stick.

"Why do you like them burnt?" He grinned down at me.

I popped the gooey burnt goodness into my mouth and grinned at him. "Because it's tasty," I pointed out, as if it were obvious.

He shook his head as he put another one on his stick. "I don't see it."

"Have you tried it?" I asked, snagging another marshmallow from the bag.

"Yes, but never on purpose." He smiled. "Come here, you've got marshmallow face." He reached over and gently wiped some burnt goo from the corner of my mouth. His eyes were warm as he brought his finger to his lips and ate it with a smirk. I met his gaze, a small smile on my lips. The silence stretched. Warmth that had nothing to do with the summer filled me. I couldn't seem to find anything to say. Not with those chocolate eyes on mine.

Hades barked. I turned to where he was barking, not sure if I was glad for the interruption or not. Travis and Keith came into the firelight. We had met the two when they were ghost hunting in an abandoned hospital in April. Travis was the shorter one, with dark hair that was a little long and falling into his gray eyes. Keith was the taller, leaner one with blond hair and brown eyes. Hades moved to sit between me and them.

"I told you she'd be here," Travis told Keith before turning back to us. His eyes went to the marshmallow in my hands. He smirked. "I thought you were diabetic."

I met his eyes and let him see my irritation. "What do you want?"

"Look," Keith said, stepping between me and Travis, his hands out. "We really need your help. Otherwise we wouldn't have come to this freaking party."

"I can't help you," I reminded them. I was starting to think we should have left them in the hospital with the Shadow Men.

"I don't care if you're hiding abilities, and right now it doesn't matter," Keith said. "But there's a six-year-old girl who is waking up with scratches she didn't go to bed with."

I went still. "What?" My eyes went from Keith to Travis and back. Keith pulled out his phone and came around the fire. Hades growled; Keith froze. "Heel," I told him. Hades lay down next to me, still eyeing the newcomers.

Keith handed me the phone and backed up from Hades. "Those pictures were sent to me by her older sister. She found our website and called for help."

I looked at the photos. There was a kid's back with four scratch marks running diagonally across her back from her shoulder blade to her ribs. Long, deep scratches. I went to the next one; more scratches, lighter, but still four of them on an arm. I flipped again. This time it was teeth marks into the meat of her shoulder. The bite was big enough that I was sure it was an adult's.

"Have you ruled out abuse?" I asked as I flipped to the next picture. This time the scratches were barely visible as they ran down her neck.

"Their dad's a minister," Travis informed me.

I looked up and met his eyes. "That doesn't mean shit."

"Yeah, we ruled out abuse. Their parents were out at some church thing when she was bitten." Keith answered. "Another time she was in the backyard alone. This latest attack was when her mother was the only one home with her." I nodded. That certainly ruled it out, unless they were all in on it. Which I kinda doubted.

I turned to Ethan, his eyes on the picture of the little girl with scratches on her leg. His eyes lifted to meet mine.

"Call the guys," I told him. He got up and walked out of earshot. I turned back to Keith and Travis. "You might as well sit down." They both relaxed. Travis might have been an ass, but he looked just as relieved as Keith. They took the log across the fire. "Did you guys do an investigation?"

"Yeah," Travis said. "We got a lot of video. Most of it was nothing, but some of it caught something." Keith came around the fire and took his phone from me. He opened files before handing it back.

He sat on the log above me and pointed to a video. "That one."

I hit play, then made it full screen. It was a bedroom at night - a little girl's room.

"Watch the closet," he told me. I found it in the shot and watched.

It slowly opened.

"Where is the kid when this is happening?" I asked. Ethan came back and sat on my other side to look over my shoulder.

"She's in her bed in the shot," Travis said. I looked and found her bed against the wall in the upper corner of the frame.

Movement caught my eye. The chair at the desk moved out and spun around as if someone was planning on sitting in it. The chair then pulled closer to the girl's bed.

"Look at the fabric hanging from the bed," Keith said. I watched as the dust ruffle moved, almost swinging in a breeze. Instead of focusing on that, I noticed something else. I zoomed in on the girl's face. Her breath was coming out in a fog. Shit.

I stopped the video and showed Keith. "Did any of you notice that?"

"Get the fuck away from her." Zeke's growl had me looking up. Zeke stepped over my legs, grabbed Keith by the shirt, and jerked him to his feet. He was shoving him away from me when the others reached us.

"Zeke, let him go," I told him as I looked back down at the phone and hit play. I turned up the volume so I wouldn't miss anything.

"Why?" Zeke demanded.

"Because I didn't have Ethan call you guys out here to beat the shit out of them," I told him before I heard a voice. It was quiet and deep; it sent shivers down my spine. But I couldn't make out the words. I looked up to find Zeke hadn't let Keith go. "Zeke!"

Zeke growled and let him go, then walked behind the log I was leaning on. Probably pacing. He'd been doing that a lot lately.

Miles stepped closer to the fire. "What's happened? You called."

I looked up and met Keith's eyes. "Tell them what you told me." I held up the phone. "Did you get what it said?"

Keith shook his head. "We couldn't figure it out."

Isaac walked around the fire to Travis. "Tell us what?"

I went back to the video and scrolled it back. "Ash, can you come listen to something?" Keith began explaining to Miles and the others.

Asher moved around the log, and probably Zeke, to sit on the log beside me. I held the phone up to him. "Hit play and listen. It's really faint." Asher hit play, held the video close to his ear, and listened.

He frowned and brought the phone down. "I heard it, but I couldn't make out words. How far back did you go?"

"Forty-five seconds." I watched as he moved the video, pressed play, and brought it to his ear again. This time he plugged his other ear. His eyes grew wide. I knew he heard it again.

He was frowning as he brought it down. "I'm going to kill your family in front of you. Slowly." His eyes met mine. "What the hell is this?"

"Video of a little girl's room," I explained as I took the phone back and hit play again. "She's getting scratched." I watched the rest of the video. At the end, the little girl woke up screaming. I looked up. Keith was still explaining to the guys. I turned to Travis. "How did you get this video anyway?"

"Their parents were on church retreat for a night and we were able to set up cameras," Travis explained.

"Any other videos I should see?" I asked as I held up Keith's phone.

Travis nodded as he eyed the guys around me before moving to my side. He brought up another video. "This is downstairs in the kitchen."

Zeke stepped closer behind Ethan, watching over our shoulders probably. A knife came out of the knife block on the counter and slowly moved across it. Cabinets opened and banged shut, over and over. When it was finished Travis was still standing there, waiting next to me.

"Any other voices?" I asked.

Travis shook his head. "We only had the cameras up one night."

I tapped my finger on the side of the phone case as I thought about what they had said. Those scratches came to mind. Shit. Keith finished explaining the situation to everyone.

I met Miles' eyes before I turned to Keith and Travis. "We're going to need a minute to talk." I got to my feet. "Will you guys wait by the pool?"

Keith and Travis shared a look.

"Yeah, no problem," Keith said. They walked out of earshot to the pool and sat down on a couple of chairs.

I looked at the guys. "I have to help."

Asher shook his head. "Ally, they'll tell everyone what you can do."

"Agreed. They want to prove ghosts exist. You'll hand them the proof and they'll announce what you can do to the world," Miles said.

Isaac walked around the fire. "Red, we don't know them. We can't trust them."

"It's a kid," Ethan told them. "A little girl."

"She's getting scratched and bitten," I told them. Each of them looked troubled. "How can I not help her?" I brought up the pictures and handed the phone to Miles. Miles flipped through the pictures, then passed the phone to Asher. Asher cursed and passed the phone to Isaac. Isaac looked up from the phone and met my eyes. "Tell me how to say no to stopping that?"

The guys exchanged looks.

"I don't want to sound heartless," Miles said, "but if they tell people, your life here is going to get more difficult."

I sighed. He wasn't wrong. There would be paper ghosts hanging from my locker, people making fun of me, I'd be that crazy girl again. I thought about that little girl being hurt and not knowing what was causing it. I met Miles' eyes. "I can deal. If you guys can't—"

"That's *not* my concern, Lexie," Miles told me instantly. "I'm worried about *you*. You've had a hard time for months and I'm worried about you going through this sort of thing."

I nodded. I understood what he was saying, but... "I know, sweetie, but I have to be able to look at myself in the mirror."

Miles' eyes met mine. Then he looked at the others. "Let's put it to a vote. Raise your hand if you are against Lexie doing this."

Isaac cursed and raised his hand. "I'm against it, Red, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't." I sent him a small smile.

"Same here," Ethan said. "But it's a kid. That changes things."

No one else raised their hand.

"If you do this, then we need to take steps to ensure they keep it to themselves," Miles said.

I wasn't even going to argue. I nodded.

"Majority rules," Asher announced. "We'll back you up."

"You guys don't have to do that—"

"We're going to be there," Zeke snapped as he came around the log. I met his shadowed eyes. He really didn't like this either.

"I'll get the guys," Isaac muttered as he got to his feet. He walked towards the pool. I stayed between Asher and Ethan. Asher's hand went to my back.

When they reached us, I began to tell them that I would help, but Miles started talking first.

"First, you'll sign a confidentiality agreement. You will also not record anything with Lexie, or us. That includes audio." Miles' voice was hard and cold. It sent chills over my skin. "If you can't agree, then we walk away."

Keith and Travis looked at each other, then at Miles.

"No problem," Keith said.

"As long as the kid gets help," Travis added.

"Give me your numbers, and I'll text you mine," Asher told them. "You'll get a hold of Lexie through us."

"Okay, guys." I met Miles' eyes then Asher's. "Chill out." I turned back to Miles. "I'm agreeing to the confidentiality agreement." I turned to Asher. "They can contact me directly."

His ocean eyes ran over me. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I know how to block calls if it gets bad," I reminded him. Asher didn't like it, but he didn't say anything about it.

I pulled out my phone and I exchanged numbers with Keith and Travis. Then the boys promptly demanded they have their numbers too.

"How soon can you get to her house?" Travis asked as he tucked his phone away.

"Tomorrow?" I offered.

Keith nodded. "Okay, I'll talk to her sister tomorrow and see if their parents are leaving."

"Thanks," Travis said before they headed back towards the house.

"Anyone else have a bad feeling about this?" I asked.

"Yes," they answered in unison.

I smiled to myself. "Anyone ready to go home?"

"I'll take you," Asher volunteered.

I got to my feet and started towards the house. "Night, guys."

"Night," they said in unison.

Asher took my hand and led me around the house.



## Asher

I PULLED in front of Rory's house and put the truck in park.

I hesitated only a heartbeat before turning to her. "Ally, do you think I don't want to help this kid?"

Her head snapped around to me. "No." Her eyes ran over my face. "I know you do. I just figured you were worried about them having my number."

I rubbed the tension out of my neck. "I am." I looked out the windshield. "I never want you to pick up the phone and hear some creep's

voice again."

She reached over and took my hand. I turned back to her.

She gave me a soft smile. "I won't," she said, her voice quiet. "I don't think those guys are a threat that way. They seem pretty scared of you guys."

I chuckled. "Keith about shit himself when Zeke grabbed him."

"I think they're more likely to tell people what I can do. That's why I agreed to the confidentiality contract." Her brow drew down. "Did-did I snap at you?"

"Not really," I admitted. "I just wanted to make sure you knew why I tried to keep your number a secret."

She smiled up at me and her eyes lit up. "I know why, Superman." She squeezed my hand. "You don't have to be perfect, you know."

I smiled down at her. "I know." She didn't need to tell me that anymore, but I still loved it when she did. "Want me to walk you to the door?"

"Nah, I'm enjoying the new 'no flashes' yard and house." She opened the door and got out. "Thanks, Ash." She hit the lever on the seat to fold the back forward, letting Hades hop out.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said before she closed the door. I stayed put until Ally was inside and the door closed.

Sighing, I took the truck out of park and headed home.

Ally was on my mind the entire drive. It was getting to the point where her smile made my mind go blank. I grinned as I drove through town. She always knew when I was 'trying to be perfect' and she always called me on it. She was doing better; less flashes, fewer flashbacks. They still happened, but she had figured out her triggers and made sure we knew about them.

I stopped at the stop light. She's almost done with therapy. Maybe... maybe I should ask her out one night? Take her to the movies. Then after... I could tell her how I felt about her. The guys popped into my head. I sighed.

The light changed. She hadn't mentioned anything about being interested in someone. Then again, she might not tell us if she was. With the way Zeke almost took Keith's head off just for being near her tonight, it seemed likely that she wouldn't say anything if she did.

I pulled up and parked in front of the house. If I told her, would I just be making a fool out of myself? She hasn't really acted differently towards

me... I climbed the porch steps. She doesn't really flirt. Then again, I couldn't see Ally flipping her hair or anything like that.

Then there was that agreement with the others.

When I tried to unlock the door, I realized it was already unlocked. I turned to search the street for Jessica's car. There was only the usual neighbors' cars, plus a blue Pontiac. Oh, shit.

Dread filled my chest as I turned back to the door. Hoping I was wrong, I opened the door and walked in. The lights were on and the television in the living room was playing the late-night news. Shit. He always left the damn TV on. I walked through the foyer and paused at the kitchen door. There he was, sitting at the kitchen table. His sandy-blond hair was turning white at his temples, his skin pasty as usual. He looked up with the same weird blue eyes I had.

"Hi, Dad."

His eyes ran over me, then he looked at his watch. "What were you doing out this late?"

I took a deep breath. "I was at a party with my friends. Today was the last day of school for the summer." I looked over the table at the bills that I had sorted earlier today. Now they were scattered here and there. The house checkbook was open in front of him.

"Where's your sister?" he demanded.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "Probably at a party."

He looked up at me. "It's almost midnight; your curfew is at eleven."

I put my hands in the pockets of my shorts. "I took a friend home. And Jessica doesn't really listen to me."

"Sit down," he told me. I sighed and sat down. He looked over the checkbook again. "Why are you spending so much on car insurance?"

Was he serious? "I left you a message in February telling you that Jess had been getting speeding tickets and not telling me."

He grumbled. "That shouldn't have brought the rates up."

"Then you talk to the insurance company," I countered.

His eyes shot to me. "There are a lot of questions I want answered. And I'm only here for a short time."

Well, surprise, surprise. He was running off again. This must be a new record.

His gaze ran over me. "I left you in charge, Asher. Can you explain why Jessica barely passed this semester?"

My temper broke. "I'm not her father," I snapped. "If you want to know why Jess is having problems, then why don't you stick around and find out?" I got to my feet and headed for the door.

"Asher! Get back here," he shouted.

I turned around. "Why? So you can lecture me on the way things should be? When you can't even be bothered to come home for Christmas? No."

"You are still living under my roof," he bit out. I stopped. Fuck. "Now, get your ass back in that chair."

I took a deep breath, walked back into the kitchen, and sat down.

"Answer my questions," he told me.

I answered his questions and ignored his lectures. The entire time my mind was on the emancipation forms in my desk upstairs that Miles' lawyer had put together for me. It was a long night.

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## CHAPTER 5

#### FRIDAY

omething wet touched my face. I groaned and rolled away. Right into the wall. Ow! I opened my eyes and glared at Hades. The dog was happily panting away and hogging my pillow. I was going to have to get him his own.

"Why did you wake me up?" I grumbled. He whined at me and wagged his tail. "You have to go out, don't you?" He barked. "Ugh. We need doggy doors." I shoved my covers off and worked to get to the side of the futon. He jumped down and went to wait at the door. I rubbed my eyes and tried to wake up. It seemed like I had just closed my eyes a minute ago. Grumbling to myself, I went to let him out.

When I reached the first floor, I smelled coffee. Oh, thank God. I zombie-walked to the back door and opened it for Hades. He ran out. I left the door open to go to the coffee pot that Rory probably brewed this morning and poured myself a mug. I was adding cream and sugar when Hades came back in. I closed the door and refilled his food and water bowels, then sat down with my cup of coffee.

A door shut upstairs before Tara came downstairs in her pajamas. She ignored me as she walked into the kitchen and made her own cup of coffee.

"Are you dating Zeke?" she asked casually.

I cringed internally as I finished my sip. "No, I'm not dating him." I set my coffee down.

"Then you're screwing him," she announced as she turned and leaned her hip against the counter. "It's the only explanation for last night."

"What happened last night?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

"Zeke told me to fuck off," she replied with a confused look on her face. "He said he didn't like me and told me to leave him alone."

My eyebrows went up. "And from that, you've decided I'm sleeping with him?" Wow. I shook my head. "Tara..." I looked up and met her eyes again. "Zeke doesn't play games. If he says he doesn't like you, he doesn't like you."

She looked down her nose at me. "First Asher, and now Zeke?"

I sighed deeply. "Oh my God. Tara..." I didn't know how to make it clear to her. I was just... too tired for this shit. "If they liked you, I'd be the one telling them to go for it because they're my friends and I want them happy." I got to my feet with my mug in my hand. "If they don't like you that way it's not my fault, so stop fucking blaming me." I started for the stairs and went up them without another word. I needed to pack up my research books and hit the cemetery. I felt like I hadn't slept at all. I was just... done. I didn't have enough time to deal with her bullshit anymore.

I folded up my futon and sat down, taking the time to wake up and drink my coffee. My alarm hadn't gone off yet, so I had the time. Hades climbed up and flopped down happily.

As I woke up, I started going through my drawers to decide what I wanted to take to Miles' house.

When I opened my top drawer, I paused. Several pamphlets were on top of my supplies. Rory must have put them in here.

I reached in and pulled them out. A pamphlet about having brain surgery. I flipped to the next one. Support Groups for the Terminally Ill. My lungs grew tight. Next. What is a DNR? My eyes burned. Next. In Home Care or Nursing Home? There were still more, each worse than the one before. I slammed them onto the desk face down and took a deep breath.

It hit me.

This was really happening...

Being tired all the time, crossing the dead and dropping... I was already down the path I'd been dreading my entire life.

After a long shower, I started packing up my research materials. I was almost done when I called Miles.

"Hi." His voice was cheerful and wide awake.

"Hey, did you get any sleep?" I asked as I continued packing the bag.

"I did, actually," he said.

I stopped. "You did?" It worked?

"Yeah, I actually fell asleep quickly last night. I was surprised." His voice was more awake than I'd heard in a while. I smiled.

"I'm glad it worked," I told him. "Let me guess, you're working on something?"

"Um, yes." He hesitated. "I'm working on my RPG game."

"When you finish I get to play it, right?" I asked as I wrapped a glass vial in a sock before adding it to the bag.

"You will," he assured me.

"Good. 'Cause you'll never hear the end of it if I don't." I closed the bag. "Miles, do you mind if I stash some of my research stuff over at your house?"

"Of course I don't mind." He didn't even hesitate. "Rory didn't give permission for a better lock?"

I sighed. "No, he told Tara to knock it off and wants to see if she listens. I'd rather not lose my best supplies in the meantime."

"Yes, bring over whatever you like." His voice was warm. "You have a bedroom here, after all."

I smiled again. "Thanks, Miles. I'll see you after my climbing lesson then."

"I'll be here," he promised before hanging up. He really was in a good mood today. I quickly changed into my climbing workout clothes; black capri leggings and a black Y-back tank. I grabbed my bag and headed out. Thankfully, Tara wasn't downstairs when I left.

I HIT the top of the intermediate wall, my arms already shaking. Looking over my shoulder down at the floor, I spotted Asher.

"Coming down!" I shouted. Asher nodded and then I let go. I dropped only two feet. I lay back, out of breath, as my arms and legs burned. Asher lowered me to the mats slowly. I dropped to the mat on my back and didn't bother to move.

Asher bent down and smiled at me. "You made it."

"At what cost?" I grumbled. "I don't think I'll be able to move for the rest of the day."

He chuckled as he reached down to me. "Come on, Ally girl."

I cursed as I took his hands and he pulled me up to my feet. I groaned deeply. He bit back a grin as he let go of my hands. We walked over to the benches, which I promptly lay down on. He was still laughing at my antics when he brought me my street shoes. I sat back up and started unlacing my climbing shoes. Asher straddled the bench and sat down. He had been quieter than usual. His smile was gone, his eyes shadowed. The bags under those eyes drew my attention.

"You okay?" I asked. "You're kind of quiet today."

He licked his lips before meeting my gaze. "My dad came home last night."

I stopped untying my shoe. "How did it go?"

He scoffed and looked back down at the bench. "It went the same as it usually does."

"How does it usually go?" I asked, my voice soft.

He swallowed hard then looked at me. "Not great." His shoulders were slumped, his jaw clenched. I'd never seen him like this.

I reached over and took his hand, getting his attention. "Hey, I'm your only appointment this morning, right?"

He nodded.

"Then let's go get some coffee." I started taking off my climbing shoes.

"Uh, yeah, sure. We have a break room," he said. I quickly pulled on my shoes. He got to his feet and picked up my climbing shoes as I finished tying my street sneakers. When I stood up, he led me through a door that said 'Employees Only.' We walked down a bright hall and around a corner.

"Hey, Asher." A pretty, light-blond girl in the center's blue uniform shirt and a pair of gray capri leggings was putting her stuff away in the break room. "Are you done with your morning appointments? We could..." Her voice trailed off as I stepped into the break room behind Asher. Her light brown eyes shot to me, then back to Asher.

"Brittney, this is Ally," Asher said as he walked towards the coffee maker.

"Lexie, actually, only Asher calls me Ally," I offered with a smile.

Brittney raised an eyebrow. "Um, we're not allowed to have clients back here."

Asher opened a cabinet and pulled out a couple of coffee mugs. "She's one of my best friends."

Brittney smiled. "Oh, just didn't want you to get in trouble," she said before leaving the break room. I stepped up beside him as he poured coffee. He silently handed me a cup before he poured his own. I put cream in mine and stirred it with a stirrer. Asher picked up his mug and moved to the couch. I followed, tucked a knee under me, and sat down facing him.

"I thought you guys didn't have coffee," I said with a grin.

He snorted. "We didn't. Everyone got on the manager's back about it. We finally got a coffee maker last month."

My grin faded. "Tell me what's going on, Ash."

He sighed and lay his head back on the couch. "Every time he comes back it's the same." He lifted his head and looked down at his coffee. "Why are you paying this much for that? Where is your sister? Why are her grades off?" He turned to me. "Even when I call and tell him she's ditching, or that her speeding tickets upped our car insurance. It's like he just... he doesn't even check his messages."

"But he blames you anyway?" I asked, already hating this guy.

He nodded. "Every time he leaves, I'm glad to see him go," he admitted quietly. "And after a couple of months, I hope when he comes back it'll be different."

"And it never is,"

He swallowed hard. "Right. It's always the same."

I set my mug down on the floor and moved my arm over the back of the couch so my hand rested on his shoulder. He looked down at me, his eyes rough. He moved his hand over to my knee. Ignoring the tingles running up my leg, I wrapped my other arm around his and rested my cheek on his shoulder.

"It's not your fault, Ash," I reminded him.

He nodded. "I know."

I tilted my head and looked up at his face. "Do you?" I asked in a quiet voice. His thumb moved in a figure eight pattern over my leggings. "Your dad is an ass." He turned to look down at me. "Seriously. He's an ass. *He's* her father, not you. He's dumped his responsibility onto you, and to see you handling it when he ran like a bitch…"

His lips twitched. "I know you're right, I do. But if I don't try then she'll..."

"You don't want to let Jessica down," I guessed.

He nodded. "She's all the family I've got left."

I squeezed his arm. He looked down at me. "You have more family than just her."

The shadows in his eyes lifted some as he gave me a small grin. "I know, but I'm all *she* has."

"And she's lucky to have you," I told him. "Even if she doesn't know it."

He let out a deep breath before he leaned down and gently kissed the top of my head. "Thank you," he whispered.

I opened my eyes and met his. "For what?"

"Listening. Reminding me."

I lifted my cheek from his arm. I'm always here for you, Ash."

His eyes ran over my face. "I know." He slowly turned his mug in his hands. "So, what are your plans for the rest of the day?"

I gave him another squeeze before letting go of his arm and picking up my coffee. "I'm stashing some of my research materials at Miles' before we go shopping for job hunting clothes."

Asher smirked. "Miles is going clothes shopping with you?"

I smiled. "Yeah, the poor guy."

Asher burst out laughing.

"What?" I asked, trying not to laugh. "I don't know what this 'business casual' is." That didn't help. Asher continued to laugh.

After that, the subject changed to lighter things. I managed to make him laugh enough to chase the shadows from his eyes and put a smile on his face before I left.

WITH MY KNOTTED STOMACH, Miles drove me over to the only tattoo shop in town. Dragonfly Tattoo was in a nice brick building on Main Street. Miles took a parking spot a few doors down from the shop. He put the car into park as I took a deep breath.

"You'll do great," Miles reminded me.

I gave him a small smile and looked down at my clothes. Since I was applying for a job, Miles had suggested I wear business casual. Shopping with Miles had been... different. He simply asked what my size was and helped me start looking. His ears were red the entire time we were in the women's section, but he didn't even complain once. He did tap his leg so much, though, that he had to have bruises by the end of our trip. In the end,

we found a pair of black slacks, a green button-up blouse and black ballet flats. It felt like a costume and that, any minute now, someone would call me out on it. I eyed the shop storefront.

"Lexie." Miles' voice was the silky-smooth one I loved. Calm moved through me, settling my raw nerves.

"I feel ridiculous," I muttered.

He smiled. "I know the feeling."

I turned to him. "You do?"

He smiled that secret smile that showed you how handsome he really was. "Every time my parents made me put on a suit and dragged me along to functions."

I smiled at the idea of Miles in a suit. "Does it go away?"

He nodded. "The more often you wear it, the more you get used to it." I snorted and looked back out the window.

"Lexie," Miles said again. I turned back to him. "You are going to do great. Just go in there and be yourself."

I chewed on the corner of my bottom lip and nodded. He reached into the back and pulled out the portfolio I had put together over the last few weeks. He held it out to me. Hades made a whining, talking noise.

I took the portfolio and opened the door. "Are you sure you want to wait with Hades?"

Miles gave me a patient smile. "Of course. Go."

I grumbled under my breath before stepping out onto the sidewalk. The sun beat down on me, making my skin start break out in a sweat instantly. It was the best motivation to get indoors that I could imagine.

Inside, the waiting area was neat and clean, with walls covered in framed artwork. I stepped up to the empty reception counter and set down my portfolio. A woman came around the corner in a pair of jeans, belt, and a vintage, dark-gray Rolling Stones T-shirt. Her hair was black, with blond streaks and fringed edges. Her dark-chocolate eyes ran over me.

"I don't do underage tattoos," she stated before turning around.

"I'm not looking for a tattoo," I told her.

She moved back to the desk and crossed her arms. "Then you're in the wrong place, cheerleader."

I raised an eyebrow. Cheerleader? Really? I put it out of my mind. "I was actually wondering if you had any job openings."

Her eyes ran over me before meeting mine. "You want a job here?"

Okay, now she was irritating me. "Yes. I eventually want to find an apprenticeship, learn everything I can, and become a tattoo artist. But I'm seventeen, which is why I'm hoping you might need a shop girl."

Her eyebrows shot up. "You want to be an artist?"

"Ever since I was a kid." I took a deep breath and opened my portfolio before turning it towards her. "I'm practicing my artwork and trying to learn everything I can. It would be wonderful to get a chance to see how a real shop works."

Her eyes narrowed on me before looking down at my portfolio, which was filled with neo-traditional and watercolor style tattoos. It had taken me weeks to draw and improve each design until I liked them enough to include them. My heart was pounding in my ears as she looked through the pages.

She looked at me, then at the drawings again, before closing my file. "I'm not hiring today." My heart dropped. She turned and started walking off.

I wanted to work in a tattoo shop before I died. If I wasn't going to be able to learn officially, at least I could watch. I wanted this. "Alright. Then I'll see you tomorrow."

She turned back. "I told you, I'm not hiring."

"Today," I reminded her. "You said you weren't hiring *today*. That doesn't mean you won't be tomorrow." I closed my portfolio.

She raised an eyebrow and looked me over again. "I won't be hiring tomorrow, either."

I smiled. "Then I'll see you the next day too, and then the next, and the next."

Her lips moved into a half smirk. "Have you ever had a job in your life?"

"Several."

"What? Did you keep getting fired?" she asked as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"We kept moving," I countered.

She ran her eyes over me, seeming to decide something. She walked around the desk and leaned on the counter. "You have a resume?"

I opened the folder, pulled it out of its pocket, and handed it to her. Her eyes ran over it. Eventually, she looked at me again. "There are a lot of cities here. How do I know you aren't moving again?"

"I'm living with family now, and I'll be eighteen in August," I explained.

She reached out, turned my portfolio to her, and looked through it again. "These are good, but you need to work on your use of negative space." She pointed to one of my skull and roses drawings. "This is too busy; you're packing too much in. You need a balance." She met my eyes. "What are your plans for college?"

"I haven't made any," I admitted. "Everything would depend on where I could get an apprenticeship."

She tapped the drawing. "You need college-level art classes. It'll help you perfect your technique, and *that* is everything."

I nodded. Shit. "Alright. I'll start looking at art schools." How the hell was I going to do that?

"You're out for the summer?" she asked.

"Yeah, yesterday was our last day." I told myself not to hope.

"Alright, I'll start you at one day a week for a few hours," she told me. I resisted the urge to shout in victory. "Come back Monday, around eleven. The sign will say closed, but I'll be here." She eyed my clothes. "And casual is more than fine."

"Thank you so much," I said. "You won't regret this."

"I better not." She held out her hand. "I'm Meghan Bricker."

I shook her hand with a smile. "Lexie Delaney."

WHEN I GOT BACK in the car, I practically knocked Miles over in my rush to hug him. He laughed and hugged me back.

"I take it you got the job?" he asked, chuckling.

"Yes!" I practically squealed as I squeezed him tight. Moving back to my seat, I smiled up at him. "I start on Monday."

He grinned at me. "That's great." I put on my seatbelt, still beaming.

Miles pulled out onto the road and started for Zeke's house. "Did they like your artwork?"

My smile faded. "Yeah, though she did say I should take college art classes."

"She did?" he asked carefully.

I looked out the window and sighed. "Yeah, looks like I need to start looking for an art school."

"What was your SAT score?" he asked.

I wrung my fingers as I answered. "I haven't taken it."

There was a long silence. "Well, testing starts again when school starts. I'll help you prepare if you'd like?"

I flashed him a smile. "I'm taking you up on that. I'm way behind on the college front."

"Maybe, but you do have a great GPA. And you have time to prepare for the exam," he reassured me.

"My GPA is pretty good," I admitted, feeling better. If Miles said I had time to get ready for the test, I had time.

"And with a job, that will help with extracurriculars," he said, clearly thinking out loud.

I closed my eyes. "Extracurriculars." I groaned before turning to him. "I don't have any, at least none that I can put on a college application."

"That's not completely true." He turned into Zeke's long driveway.

"What am I going to put? 'Crossing the dead and healing the Veil?"

He grinned. "I was going to suggest 'volunteer work."

I thought about it. "Okay, yeah, that might work."

Then it hit me, like a blow to the heart. I almost couldn't breathe as I realized, I might not have to worry about college. Given what my scans showed, I'd be lucky to graduate high school. Shit. My heart ached, and I fought to keep my face blank.

Miles pulled his car in next to Zeke's Jeep. "The point is, don't panic. You have time, and I'll help." He sounded so excited...

I sent him a smile as my throat tightened. "Thanks, Nemo."

A warm smile spread across his face. "You're welcome, Lexie."

I got out of the car and let Hades out, grabbing my bag of clothes to change into. I was *not* working in Sylvie's garden in slacks. Hades ran off with his leash still attached. I wasn't worried; he wouldn't leave the property. I headed for the house while Miles headed around the side.

"Tell them I'll be there after I change," I said, opening the front door.

"I will," he said before disappearing around the corner of the house. I walked inside and closed the door. Zeke's house was cute, there was no other way to describe it. The inside was bright and had a beach house feel; all white wood and light colors. The house was cool and quiet, exactly what I needed right now. I walked to the end of the hallway across from the door to the bathroom. Zeke's bedroom door was cracked open. I knocked, just in

case he was inside, but there was no answer. Heart aching, I walked in, closed the door and sat on Zeke's bed. I took deep, slow breaths, hoping it would stop my eyes burning. I got a job at the shop. Be happy and just enjoy that. Focus on the good.

Slipping off my shoes, I got up and started changing into my cutoffs and a blue tank. I was fastening my shorts when the door opened.

"Hey, Beau—Oh, shit!" Ethan's voice came from behind me.

I rushed to put my shirt on. "Damn it, Ethan," I snapped as I pulled it on over my head.

He chuckled. "I've seen you in your underwear before."

"In emergencies," I countered. "Not exactly the same." I pulled the hem down to cover myself and got my sandals out of my bag. It was totally different. Especially since he had kissed me, even if he didn't remember it. Or remember grabbing my ass... or biting my lip... I let out a breath as my body warmed at the memory. Now, if only *I* could forget it.

"Sorry, Beautiful."

I shook my head and started folding my slacks to put in my bag. "Why were you looking for me?"

"I wanted to see if you got the job," he said as he moved to stand next to me. He picked up my blouse and laid it against his chest, as if to see if it would fit. "And I wanted to get a look at you in this get up."

I smiled as I shook my head and snatched my blouse from his hands. The twins could always get a smile out of me.

He chuckled. "You're gonna burn out there, Beautiful," he reminded me.

I pulled my sunblock out of my bag and handed it to him. "I think ahead."

He poured some lotion into his palm before stepped behind me. I pulled my hair into a high, messy bun. I held my hand over my shoulder so he could put some sunblock in my palm. I began rubbing it into my arms.

"So, did you get the job?" he asked.

I started rubbing lotion on my face. "Yep. Had to convince her though. And she told me I needed college-level art classes."

"Oh, ouch," he said.

"Not really. I just hadn't planned on college," I explained.

"Did she say you had to graduate?" he asked as I moved on to my chest.

I sighed. "No, she didn't. But if I go, I might as well, right?" I tried sounding optimistic.

"I don't know," Ethan admitted as he stopped rubbing lotion into my back. "I'm not doing college."

I turned, sat down and took the sunblock from him. "You're not?"

He shook his head. "I know exactly what I want, and it doesn't involve college. At least not right away." I started rubbing sunblock into my legs and feet.

"Music, right?" I smiled.

He nodded. "Yep. Once we make a bigger name for ourselves. We've already started getting a following on YouTube. We just need to build on it; write our own music and get better. We'll have to bust our asses, but in the end, it'll be worth it."

I met his eyes. "I really hope it happens for you."

He grinned. "Me too."

Zeke walked into the bedroom. His eyes shot to Ethan then to me. "What are you doing in here?"

"I was changing." I pointed at my bag.

"And I was helping," Ethan added. Zeke glared at him, his mouth a hard line.

"Relax, Zeke. He's messing with you," I told him. Zeke's shoulders relaxed a bit. "I was putting on my sunblock." I got to my feet and put my lotion in my bag.

"Out!" Zeke barked at Ethan. Ethan left, laughing. I put my flats in my bag and picked it up. "You can leave your stuff in here," he told me.

I turned around and watched him plugging his phone in at his desk. "You aren't worried I'll go after your baby pictures?"

He set his phone down. "I moved them weeks ago."

I walked to the door and set my bag down next to his desk. "Oh, a challenge."

He walked around the desk and looked down at me. "Come on, we have gardening to do," he grumbled. I snickered the whole way down the hall. Irritating Zeke was always fun.

Sylvie's vegetable garden was on the right side of the house, and it was huge. It took everyone working in it to get the vegetables picked and packed for the farmer's market tomorrow.

I was working in the squash section when my phone rang. I wiped the dirt off my hands and pulled my phone out of my pocket. It was Travis.

"Hey, Travis."

"Hey, I've got some info," Travis announced.

"What's going on?" I asked as I sat back on my knees.

"The girls' parents are leaving at five to go to a church support group they are running. They aren't coming back until around midnight."

"Um, when does the action usually start?" I asked.

"Around dark."

"Okay, text me the address and I'll be there around dark," I told him before hanging up. Was I really fucking doing this? Everything that could go wrong ran through my mind. I shook my head. Worrying about it wouldn't help a damn thing. Pushing it out of my mind, I went back to work in the garden.

It was peaceful work with the sun warming my shoulders; my hands were buried in the cool, rich soil. An odd kind of calm filled me. All my worries faded away. I don't know how long I worked pulling weeds, but eventually the scent of limes met my nose. I smiled.

Isaac squatted across the row from me. Sweat covered his face and soaked the neckline of his tank top. "We're calling it, Red. Asher and Miles almost have dinner ready."

I got to my feet and dusted the dirt off my knees before heading back to the house.

"Travis called," I told him. "I need to head over around dark."

Isaac wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "We need to head over."

"You're sure you want to go?" I asked, wrapping my arm around his waist.

"We're not letting you go alone," he told me as we reached the front door. I opened the door and went in. I walked down the hall and used the bathroom to clean up. When I came out, Isaac was looking in Zeke's room. I smacked him on the butt; he yelped and jumped.

He glared at me. "I thought you were Zeke."

I snorted. "Zeke smack your ass often?"

He chuckled as he walked into the bathroom. I headed for the kitchen.

"How do you think he'll do this year?" Asher asked. Miles was at a counter making a fruit salad while Asher was making hamburger patties.

"The last two years he was alright until the month of," Miles said as he put washed berries in the fruit salad. "I think he'll be alright until three weeks ahead."

"We still need to watch him," Asher countered.

Miles nodded.

I stepped between them and snagged a blueberry from the bowl. "Watch who?" I popped the berry in my mouth and went still. It was not a blueberry. It was sweet, but with an odd almond taste. "What did I just put in my mouth?"

They chuckled.

"That's a Juneberry," Asher explained. "They ripened early this year due to the heat wave." It was tasty. I snagged another one.

"Nifty. Now, who were you talking about?" I popped the berry in my mouth.

"We can't really say," Miles said. "It's... not our history."

"Oh, okay." I snagged another berry. "Are you sure you have enough of these?" I ate the berry in my hand and grinned up at Asher.

When I reached for another one, Asher shot me a look. "Not if you keep eating them."

I giggled as Asher finished making the patties. "Take these to Zeke."

"Why? So I can't eavesdrop?" I teased.

"I don't care about eavesdropping, I'm saving the berries from you," Asher countered. I took the tray of raw meat and headed for the back door. Miles opened the door for me. I winked at him before heading out. Zeke was at the barbecue with his hand over the grill. I smiled. Tank and Kita were sunning themselves on the roofs of their dog houses nearby. One twitch and Tank was going to fall off.

"I come bearing meat to cook," I announced as I set the platter on the barbecue shelf.

"Good timing," he muttered.

I eyed him. "You okay?"

He nodded.

"Zeke?" My voice rasped. I winced.

"Have you heard back from those ghost hunting guys?" he asked.

"Yeah, I need to head over around dark," I said in my damaged voice as I went to the cooler and pulled out a water bottle. "You want a drink?"

"Water," Zeke answered.

I picked up another bottle then moved to his side and handed it to him. I took a drink to get my voice back. "Okay, Tough Guy, talk to me." I wasn't asking.

His jaw clenched as he seasoned the burgers. "I don't like these guys knowing what you can do."

"That's why Miles had his lawyer draw up the confidentiality agreement," I reminded him, trying to be patient.

"I still think it's a stupid risk," he told me.

"It's a little girl," I reminded him. "You saw the photos."

He nodded. "I know. And I want you to do this." He turned and met my eyes. "Doesn't mean I like it."

I gave him a small understanding smile. "Same here."

His eyes ran over my face before he went back to the grill. "You need anything before we go?"

I thought about it as I chewed the corner of my bottom lip. "I have a few things that could work. I'll need to pick them up from Miles' house before we head over."

"I'll tell Sylvie we're hitting Miles' house," he muttered as he began to put the burgers on the grill. "That should get me a few hours."

"Sylvie is going to be studying for the Bar Exam, right?" I asked, getting his mind off where we were going tonight. We talked about Sylvie's new job that was waiting for her, how happy she was to see the light at the end of the night shift tunnel. Anything to keep him from worrying about tonight. I was worried enough for the both of us.

IT WAS ALMOST DARK when the twins drove me and Hades over to the address Travis sent me. It was a neat three-story house at the north end of town. Ethan pulled the car up to the curb and parked. The others weren't too far behind. When I got out, I brought Hades and my bag with me. The front door opened. Keith, Travis, and a girl who was vaguely familiar came out onto the front porch. Her brown hair was back in a ponytail.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before walking up the flower-lined walkway.

"Lexie, this is Cara," Keith said. "Her little sister Mia is the one the activity revolves around."

"One moment," Miles said as he reached the porch steps. He held up the papers in his hand. "First, everyone signs the confidentiality agreement." He pulled a pen from his pocket and handed it, along with the papers, to Travis. Travis sighed, put the contract on the porch railing, and signed. Keith did the same.

Miles turned to Cara. "You too, please."

Cara eyed him and then signed as well. She handed the contract to Miles. Miles nodded to me. I sent him a small, grateful smile.

"Fill me in," I said.

Cara gestured for us to come inside. We followed her into an inviting living room and I sat on the couch beside her. Hades sat on the floor next to me. Asher took one armchair and Ethan took another. Keith and Travis stood near them. Zeke and Isaac leaned against the walkthrough to the foyer.

"It started a month ago," Cara began, her hazel eyes shadowed. "My sister and I had horrible nightmares. Mine were bad, but Mia's..." She met my eyes. "Mia told me about one once. It was like every nightmare she had ever had wrapped up into one."

"That bad?" I asked.

She nodded. "In that dream she was skinned alive. She felt it and she woke up screaming. I thought something was wrong."

My nightmares were bad, but... damn. "What happened next?"

"My nightmares went away, but she started sleep walking. We found her a mile away once, just walking down the middle of the street. She had no clue how she got there."

"That's scary as hell," I admitted.

She nodded. "Mom and Dad thought she was just sleep walking, but it didn't feel right. Then things started moving around the house." Cara took a breath and let it out. "Doors slammed. I could hear a voice, but I could never hear what it was saying. Then the first scratches started." Cara met my eyes. "My parents thought she was being bullied at school, so they took her out and put her on homeschool. But it hasn't stopped. She barely sleeps anymore, and one night, when she slept next to me, I woke up to her standing there with a knife. The look in her eye wasn't my little sister." Oh, shit.

"I'm going to assume that's extremely out of her normal," I offered lightly, trying to break the tension and failing.

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. "Now, she gets sick whenever she tries to go to church. She's awake all the time. And if I make her angry, things fly at me. My parents don't believe me and I don't know what to do."

I nodded. If I had a sister, I'd feel exactly the same way. "Where is she?"

She wiped her face. "She's upstairs, playing I think. I let her stay up past her bedtime tonight."

"And everything happens around her?" I asked.

"Lately, yeah." She answered. This was one seriously powerful ghost or.... the kid had abilities.

"Think I can talk to her?"

Cara nodded and got to her feet. I told Hades to stay before I followed her up the stairs and down the hall, everyone else followed closely. We were eight feet from the staircase at the other end of the hall when she stopped at a door and knocked.

"Yeah?" A girl's voice called.

Cara opened the door. "There's someone who wants to talk to you, is that okay?"

I stepped into the doorway. Mia was a younger clone of her sister. Same brown hair, same hazel eyes, and same triangular face, though Mia's bags were worse than Cara's. The kid looked young, even for six.

Mia's eyes went to the guys behind me. Her eyes widened. "Who are they?"

"They're my friends," I told her in a cheerful voice.

"They're all boys," Mia pointed out.

I smiled. "Tell me about it. I need to make more friends who are girls." Mia giggled at the disdain in my voice. I looked over my shoulder.

"Why don't my taller friends wait downstairs," I suggested. Asher sent Mia a smile and a wink. Zeke met my eyes, his face hard. He really didn't like it, but he followed Asher. Keith followed him. I turned back to Mia and Cara. "Can I come in and visit?"

Mia nodded and picked up one of her dolls.

I stepped inside and sat across from Mia on the rug. "Cara tells me you aren't sleeping."

Mia nodded.

"Can you tell me why?"

"'Cause the two little girls keep me up." Mia put her doll in a plastic chair at her play table. She pretended to pour tea for her.

"Tell me about the little girls. How do they keep you awake?" I asked gently.

She met my eyes. "They don't like it when I talk about them."

Chills ran down my neck, and they were not the 'a ghost is around' kind. "Well, if I tell you a secret of mine, will you tell me about them?"

Mia seemed to consider it. Then she smiled and nodded.

I leaned in and whispered. "I can see ghosts."

Her eyes grew wide. "Really?"

"Yep, ever since I can remember," I told her. "You want to know what else I can do?"

"What?" she asked eagerly.

"I help them cross over; help them get to Heaven." These ghosts, though... I highly doubted they'd be going that way, even if there was a Heaven.

She eyed me. "Why?"

Her question surprised me. "Well, you see, once someone dies, their soul is supposed to move on. Without their body, they don't belong here anymore. They need to go to Heaven; it's where you're supposed to go." She seemed to think about it. "Now it's your turn. What can you tell me about the little girls?"

She wiped her nose. "They look alike." She poured another pretend cup of tea. "They protect me."

I forced my face to stay neutral. "Really? From what?"

Mia handed me the cup of pretend tea. "The monster."

"What monster, Mia?" I asked softly.

She looked down at the floor. "He scares me at night. The girls keep him away."

"How do they do that?" I pretended to drink tea.

"They chase him away and play with me at night. He can't come out during the day," she explained. I blinked. That was new.

"What does the monster look like?"

She went to open her mouth, but her eyes shot to the door. "They're coming." She turned back to me. "I told you they don't like me talking about them."

I looked at the door and got to my feet. I moved into the hallway and looked around.

"Get out of the hall," I told the guys. Ethan went into the bedroom, followed closely by Miles and Isaac.

"Red?"

Something was coming; I could feel it, as if someone had walked over my grave. It was there, just out of reach of my senses, but it was coming.

"Stay put," I told him absently as I looked up and down the hall. The sun was setting outside, the hallway was almost dark. I flipped the hall lights on. They flickered but stayed on. Still nothing. I turned to look back toward the other staircase and froze.

Two little girls were standing near the third-floor staircase. Both had blond curls and wore blue dresses with white lace at the collar and wrists.

My heart slammed in my chest as fear clawed at me. There was no chill.

Hades began to bark from downstairs. The edges of the twins were slightly blurred. I stepped towards them, trying to stay calm. They watched me with dead black eyes. Their edges blurred even more as I stepped closer.

Still no chill. Nothing that told me they were souls, but something new was going off in my head. Information from somewhere.

"You aren't ghosts," I said out loud. My heart began to race. Their heads tilted in sync, to the exact same angle. It felt... evil. More evil than the Shadow Men. More evil than I'd ever known. It was something... something that never... "No... you're something old. Something that was never human." Something that simply existed to destroy. "Get them out."

"Lexie?" Miles' voice was quiet.

"Get. Them. Out," I whispered, not taking my eyes off the lie it was throwing to fool me and Mia.

The boys led the girls out of the room and started getting them down the hallway. Isaac stayed with me.

"That's them," Mia said.

The things' eyes stayed on me. My breathing grew faster. Good, as long as I had its attention they could get out. They smiled in unison. My gut knotted as their forms blurred even more. Their forms began merging together into a pitch-black fog. I swallowed hard. Glowing, blood-red eyes watched me from the fog. A bead of sweat ran down my spine; my skin crawled. The air grew thicker with the stench of sulfur.

"Run," I told Isaac. The fog formed into a long-limbed shadow with long, pointed ears. I backed up, making my way to the stairs.

The fog charged.

Adrenaline shot through me as I tried to run. A wall of icy air hit me hard. I was off my feet, spun, then hit the wall. I cried out as pain shot through my back and down my legs. The sweat on my skin froze. I was suddenly shivering. Its hands grabbed me, its claws digging into my skin. Searing pain tore through my arms as its eyes filled my vision.

"You're mine." A deep, terrifying voice moved through my mind. Paws ran up the stairs.

"Fuck you," I growled.

Black, tar-like smoke poured into my mind. Images flashed, memories.

Blood, death, pain, Dad, Mom, Clay...

Hades growled and barked. It roared. The house shook; glass shattered.

I dropped, not knowing where I was. I lay there, trembling and shivering on the hard floor, my vision fading in and out.

Arms grabbed me, and the scent of limes reached my nose. "Come on, Lexie." Isaac's honey-like voice made me aware. I was limp as he gathered me in his arms and started moving.

"What happened?" Zeke bellowed.

"Take her, I'll get Hades!" Isaac shouted as he reached the stairs. Demonic laughter echoed through the house as he handed me off to Zeke. Zeke started moving, but all I kept seeing were those images running through my head. Everyone I loved, dead. And me standing above their bodies, blood soaking my hands.

Zeke hit the first floor and ran out into the heat. My clothes grew damp as my sweat melted. Isaac wasn't far behind with Hades. When we reached the lawn, everyone stopped. Zeke set me down on the grass. Hades moved to my side and pressed against me, his warmth comforting.

"What the hell happened in there?" Asher demanded.

I was looking down at Dad in his coffin.

"Why did we run?" Mia asked.

Mom was beating me with the belt.

Calloused hands touched my face. "Miles!" Zeke barked.

Clay was dragging me back to the cabin.

"Lexie?" Miles' voice was gentle as his hand lifted my chin. I kept my eyes closed as I fought back memories.

I took his hand that was on my chin and squeezed. "Give me a minute," I whispered. His hand squeezed mine. Hades pressed harder against me as my insides shook.

"Zeke, your handkerchief?" Miles asked.

Zeke cursed. Miles gently cleaned under my nose. "Lexie?" I couldn't answer, I was still struggling to push those images away.

The black smoke was gone, but the memories kept coming. Yes, they happened. Every memory sucked. But I was alive. I continued to remind myself of that as I fought to come out of it.

"Lexie, come on. Tell us what to do," Ethan demanded.

Finally, I was able to push them back. They were still there, waiting for me to relax, but they were back far enough that I could think.

I blinked up at them, my head pounding. It felt like someone had gone at my brains with a whisk. "I'm here," I told him. "Just..." I swallowed back tears. "Just give me another minute."

Miles saw the tears in my eyes. The fear. He squeezed my hand and turned to Isaac. "What happened once we got the others out?"

I used the time he gave me to try and pull myself together. Fear was choking me, making it hard to breath. Come on Lexie...

"Whatever was there... threw her into the wall and held her three feet off the fucking ground. I couldn't see shit," Isaac growled.

Miles began wiping the blood off my arms. "You're cut, Lexie. And you've been burned."

Zeke cursed.

Pull it together. There's a kid who needs your help. Remember her? "It's a demon. At least, I think it is," I told them, taking Zeke's handkerchief from Miles and holding it to my nose.

"What?" Asher asked, his voice full of disbelief.

"It's old, and it's never been human. It feels evil," I explained, my fear rising again. "I think it's a demon." A demon that had just pulled out every horrible memory I had and paraded it in front of me. I pulled the cloth from my nose and looked at the house. I didn't want to go back inside. It was a stupid move. Beyond stupid. But that demon just pissed me off. I could use pissed off, it was better than scared any day.

Head still pounding, I got to my feet and headed for the door.

Zeke grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stop. "Where do you think you are going?"

"To kick its ass out," I growled up at him.

"No, you're not," he snapped, his fingers tightening on my arm. "No one is going back inside."

"Oh, yes I am," I shot back. "That fucker went after a kid. I'm giving it an eviction notice." Couldn't he see I needed to do this?

"How?" he growled.

"I brought supplies in my bag." I went to walk away; he didn't let go.

"Lexie," he warned.

I turned back and met his eyes. "Don't even try."

He glared at me. "Not alone." The look in his eyes told me he wasn't budging.

"Fine," I grumbled. He let go of my arm.

"What are you two doing?" Asher asked.

I turned to him. "I gotta go back in. And Zeke won't let me go alone."

Miles' eyes went to the cuts on my arms and then my eyes. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"It's the only way to get rid of it." I turned and headed for the door. Hades followed. I stepped inside and grabbed my bag. I rummaged through it until I found what I was looking for. Holy water, and a jar of black salt.

I started by sprinkling holy water in the corner of every room. Then, starting from the attic, I sprinkled a pinch of black salt in the center of each room. The entire time, my heart raced and my hands trembled. Zeke and Hades followed me like shadows. When we reached the living room again, I pulled out a smudging stick.

"Why are we going up and down the house?" he asked.

I picked up my bag. "The holy water is to get the demon out, the black salt is to cleanse the entire area so it won't have a hold on the house, and the sage puts up a barrier against it."

"You really have done your homework."

We walked out of the house. I met Cara and Mia on the porch. I handed her the sage. "Okay, that *should* work. But tonight, after your parents are in the house and in bed, light the sage and move the smoke over the doorways and windows. It'll create a barrier throughout the house."

"Are you sure it's gone?" Cara asked, her voice shaking.

"I think so. I didn't feel or see anything inside, and Hades didn't bark," I told her, "so you should be clear. If not, call Keith or Travis and they'll get a hold of me."

Cara nodded, her eyes watering. "Thank you so much."

I gave her a small, strained smile. "No problem." I moved down the stairs to meet the guys.

Zeke grabbed my arm and took me to Asher's truck. "Asher, where's your first aid kit?"

"Zeke, I just want to go home," I told him. The pounding in my head was getting worse. I just wanted to curl up in the quiet. He eyed me. "I'm tired."

"I'll take her home and get her patched up," Miles told Zeke. Zeke looked like he wanted to argue. He turned back to me. His eyes ran over my face before he nodded.

Travis and Keith reached the group.

"Thanks for helping," Keith said.

"What did you see?" Travis asked as he eyed me.

"I saw two little girls. But something was off; they felt... wrong," I explained through the throbbing in my head. "I didn't feel the chill on my neck that I usually do when I see a soul. That was the first clue." I rubbed the bridge of my nose between two fingers. My head was killing me.

"So, you really see the dead?" Keith asked, hesitating a little. Pain shot through my skull. Hot liquid began to run from my nose.

"Shit," I bit out as I quickly pulled Zeke's handkerchief from my pocket. I held it to my nose as my head ached.

"Lexie?" Asher's voice was worried. I waved him off as I stepped away from the guys to take care of my face. The blood seemed to be pouring from me like never before. My heart dropped. Was this... was this another symptom? I'd never had a nosebleed this bad without a soul being around. Was this because of the demon, or because of that spot on my brain? My throat closed as I focused on what I was doing.

Just as quickly as it started, it suddenly stopped. And Zeke's hankie was soaked.

"Is there a bag somewhere?" I asked. Isaac brought me a small Ziploc bag from the kit and some wipes to get the blood off. He held the bag open so I could put the cloth inside. "Zeke, I'll wash it and get it back to you."

"I'm not worried about it," he grumbled.

I cleaned my face quickly. Isaac pointed to let me know where I missed some. His amber eyes were worried as he watched me.

I gave him a smile. "I'm fine."

He nodded but didn't seem to believe me. Then again, I wouldn't believe me either. I walked back to the guys with Isaac.

"Just keep it to yourselves," Ethan told Keith and Travis. They nodded.

Miles came to my side, picked up my bag and moved his hand to my lower back.

"I'll see you guys tomorrow," I told my guys. They said goodnight. Miles led me to his car and opened the passenger side door.

The drive to Rory's was a blur. Memories kept pouring through my mind. Miles opened my car door. I grabbed my bag. Hades was already waiting at the front door when I started unlocking it.

The great room was empty. I dropped my bag near the door and moved straight to the couch. I sat down and set my feet on the edge of the coffee table. Hades jumped on to the couch and rested his head in my lap. I scratched his head while the memories kept flashing.

"Lexie?" Miles' voice was soft. I blinked. He sat next to me and opened the first aid kit from the upstairs bathroom. He tore open some antiseptic wipes. He carefully took one arm and started cleaning the cuts on my forearm. "I need to hear your voice," he said gently.

"I'm okay. It's just... when it pinned me to the wall, somehow it got into my head and pulled all my worst memories to the surface," I told him absently. His fingers slowed.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"They just won't go away," I told him, staring off at the dark TV. Not to mention that nosebleed and the headache...

He set the wipes down and turned back to me, his emerald eyes warm. It was exactly what I needed. Well, almost. I shifted and leaned against him, my fingers digging into his shirt. His arms moved around me, one around my shoulders, the other around my waist, holding me to him. I took a deep breath of wintergreen. The chaos in my mind started slowing down.

"It's going to be alright," he said against my hair.

"I saw it all over again," I whispered. "Dad's funeral, Mom beating me, Clay... I buried my face in the crook of his neck. He held me tighter.

"I'm sorry, Angel," he breathed. I took deep breaths of his scent and slowly began to relax against him. When I wasn't clinging so much, he loosened his grip until I was leaning against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. After some time, he broke the silence. "I need to clean your burns." I nodded and sat up.

He took my hands and examined my wrists. "These look like handprints."

I nodded. Four fingered handprints, but handprints none the less. "It grabbed my arms, but it was smoke, so... I don't know how it did it."

Miles' face was blank as he carefully cleaned my wrists before he gently applied burn ointment. When he was done, he repacked the kit. I was exhausted, again.

"I'm... I'm gonna go to bed," I announced.

Miles' eyes ran over me before he got to his feet and held out his hand. I took it. He helped me to my feet and walked me to the stairs. Instead of leaving me there, he climbed the stairs behind me. I was half asleep by the time I reached the second floor. Miles guided me into my bedroom. He helped me pull out the futon. I didn't hesitate. I lay down and curled up on my side. Hades jumped onto the bed and snuggled down between my back and the wall. Gentle hands were on my feet, slipping my shoes off. He covered me with the light afghan at the end of my bed.

"Nemo?" I called softly.

"Yes?"

"Stay?"

"As long as you want me," he whispered. I was almost out when his hand took mine. Peace settled through me, pushing me into sleep.



# Asher

I WALKED into the house to find Jessica actually home and in the living room with Dad.

"Where the hell have you been?" Dad bit out.

I sighed as I put my keys on the table in the foyer, beside Mom's flag case. "I was at Zeke's."

He huffed. "That Blackthorn kid? You're still hanging with that loser?"

That irritated the hell out of me. I turned around. "Zeke's a good guy." I half expected Jessica to smile or chime in to bash Zeke, but she surprised me. She looked at Dad with a frown.

"I don't want you hanging around him," he told me.

Normally, I would just say 'yes sir' and sneak around until he left. But... not this time. I couldn't stomach this crap anymore. "No." Dad's eyes went to me. "I'm going to keep hanging out with Zeke."

His eyes narrowed at me. "No? Asher, that kid's father—"

"Zeke isn't his father," I snapped. "And you don't get to tell me who to be friends with." I walked away from the living room and up the stairs. I locked my bedroom door behind me. Then I dropped into my desk chair. I braced my elbows on the desk and held my head in my hands. I was so tired of his shit. I was tired of him. I was tired of playing things his way. I sighed and pulled out my phone. I started to text Ally and hesitated. She had looked exhausted when Miles took her home. She was probably asleep already. I set my phone down and tried to come to grips with what had happened tonight.

Demons. Demons were real. Those burns on her wrists showed that alone. Shit. What the hell else was out there? What else could come for her?

# ~

#### Isaac

METAL SMASHED INTO METAL. The car jerked again. I held Sophie tight to my chest.

"Izzy." She coughed. I looked down to find blood trailing from her mouth. Her amber eyes were wide, tears filling them. "Why didn't you save me?" Her voice shook. My heart split in two. I bashed on the door, slamming my shoulder into it over and over.

"Hold on, Sophie, I'm getting you help," I told her, my voice thick as desperation took control. I slammed and hit the door over and over. "Let us out!"

"Izzy..." her sweet voice called. I looked down into my arms. Bright red blood poured from her mouth onto her chest. "I can't breathe." She coughed a wet cough that ended with her gasping for breath. I wiped the hot blood away from her mouth so it wouldn't go back into her lungs.

"Hold on, hold on for us," I told her, my voice cracking. My chest burned, my lungs ached. The sound of cars crashing finally stopped. Silence fell. She looked me in the eye. "You could... have... saved me." Her eyes became blank, her pupils dilated. Her body went limp in my arms. No, no, no. NO!

I bolted up in bed, gasping for air. Sweat rolled down my face as I searched my dark bedroom. Home. Sophie's been dead for years. My fault. Fuck, it was my fault. My heart tried to rip itself in two as I brought my knees up and rested my elbows on them. Taking deep, shaking breaths, I wiped my face. I should have fucking got out of the car! I should have fucking tried harder! She was dying and I just fucking SAT THERE! My hands came back wet. My eyes continued to burn. More tears fell down my face. My chest stayed tight, my lungs not taking in enough air. I laid back down and watched the shadows from the tree outside dance across the ceiling.

It should have been me. It should have fuckin' been me.

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#### CHAPTER 6

#### SATURDAY

#### Asher

n annoying buzz woke me up. Groaning, I rolled over and shut it off. MMA practice. Right. I rolled onto my back and took a deep breath. Another Ally dream. That was the third this week. And they always ended at the best damn part. I laid there, taking deep breaths until my body grew soft again. Normally I'd just take care of it, but I was dreading going downstairs today. How much of an ass was Dad going to be?

When my hard on was finally gone, I got up and went to my dresser. I got dressed on autopilot and headed downstairs.

When I stepped into the kitchen, I came up short. Dad was at the table with a cup of coffee and the newspaper. And surprisingly, Jessica was there too, in her pink Hello Kitty pjs, standing at the stove and trying to make eggs.

I moved into the kitchen and grabbed a bowl of cereal. No way was I sticking around long enough to cook anything. I eyed Jessica's cooking. "The heat is too high. You want medium high."

She said nothing as she turned down the burner.

I stood against the sink and looked out the window, watching the sun rise.

"You have training this morning?" Dad asked. I let out a breath. So much for a quiet breakfast.

"Yeah, MMA." I was almost done with breakfast anyway.

"Good cardio, but no fighting. You don't want to break something or damage your arm," he informed me absently.

"Sparring is part of it," I said before I could think.

"Well, knock that shit off. You're going to get injured and blow your ride," he said.

I put my bowl in the sink and closed my eyes. I hadn't realized how tired I was of his bullshit. How tired I was of pretending to be someone I wasn't. It finally hit me full on. What I wanted, what I didn't. I couldn't do this the rest of my life. I could barely do it the rest of his visit.

"No, I won't," I said, my heart pounding. "I'm not playing football in college." Tension filled the room.

His chair scraped against the tile. "What are you talking about? Of course you are."

I turned around and met his eyes. He was leaning against the kitchen island. "I don't want to play football for the rest of my life." I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to ease the tension there. Just accept it. Please. It was a futile hope, but a hope all the same.

His eyes flashed. "It's not about what you want. It's about money," he reminded me. "It's about the scholarship to get you through school, and then the money you'll make in the pros. If you're good enough, you'll be set for life by the time you're twenty-four." He shook his head. "Football is your future. You're not going to get into college any other way."

Anger flashed through me. "I have a three-point-nine GPA. Of course, you would know that if you ever asked about my grades instead of about my football stats."

He shook his head. "Listen here. You are going to get a scholarship. You'll play football in college and move on to the pros."

I met his eyes and shook my head. "No. I'm not." Accept it, Dad, please.

His jaw clenched, his eyes grew hard. "Then don't expect me to pay for it." What? That's all he had to say?

"I'll get a student loan," I told him.

He scoffed. "You need someone to co-sign, and I'm not doing it. I'm not going to help you set yourself up for failure."

It was like a blow to the stomach. Failure... rage coursed through me. "Fine. You know, if you cared half as much about Jessica's grades as you do about me playing football, then she'd have a better GPA." I was sick of it.

Sick of the way he treated Jessica, sick of the way he treated both of us. I was done. I walked away from him and out of the kitchen. Snagging my keys on the way, I left the house. Anger burned in my gut all the way to the gym.



### Lexie

I was gasping as I rolled off of Maddie's back and dropped to the mat. I had managed to put her in a hold that made her tap out. Again.

"Damn, Lexie," Maddie said. "You're kicking my ass too much."

"Think of it as me getting even for all the times you've pinned me," I countered. She chuckled. I got to my feet and reached down to help her to hers. She was shaking her head as we reached Dave.

"Maddie, you did well. You pushed her into her usual weak areas and kept her there." He turned to me. "Lexie, you're improving on your grappling, but Maddie shouldn't have been able to get her hands on you. Work on your cardio." He turned back to Maddie. "Give us a minute." She smiled and headed off to the showers. Dave gestured for me to follow.

He led me over to the room Isaac was training in. Isaac was tearing into a punching bag. His face was hard, his jaw clenched.

"Do you know what's wrong with Isaac?" he asked.

"No..." I said. I watched him beat into the bag. "Nothing I can think of."

Dave sighed. "What about Asher?"

I turned to where he was looking. Asher was laying into his sparring partner. His partner was holding his own, but Asher was going all out.

"His dad is in town," I offered.

"Shit," he snapped. "I'm taking him off sparring until that ass leaves." Dave moved toward the ring Asher was sparring in.

I headed back to the main gym room and towards the lockers, unwrapping my hands as I went.

"Hey, Beautiful, are you done?" Ethan asked, breathless as he met me in the center of the large room.

"Yeah, how about you?" I asked as we headed toward the front and the lockers.

"Oh yeah. I'm done," he grumbled. I eyed him; he was walking with a slight limp.

"Snoopy, is your back hurting?" I asked, in a low voice. Ethan didn't exactly like to advertise the slipped disks in his back.

"Yeah. My massage therapist is off at a family reunion this week," he muttered. "Think you could give me a hand, or two?"

I smiled. "Sure, but you need to put sunblock on me again."

He instantly perked up and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "I think I'm getting the better end of the deal."

I was laughing when we reached the lockers. After I opened my locker, I pulled out my bag and headed for the women's showers.

Today we were going out to the quarry to swim. The guys thought it would be better than going to my house. Less Tara at least. I took a quick shower before pulling on my two-piece suit. Then I slipped my street clothes over that. Feeling tired already, I washed my face with cold water, hoping it would wake me up.

I slipped on my sandals, threw my hair up into a bun, slapped some sunscreen on my face, and called it good.

When I came back out, the boys were all in their board shorts and had their bags slung over their shoulders. Everyone headed outside.

"So, where is the quarry?" I asked them as we stepped out into the blaring heat. Ugh, yuck. It was like running into a wall of burning air.

"I'll go with ya," Ethan offered. He held the car keys out to Isaac. Isaac shot him a look, his face hard.

"Sure. I'll take the car," he muttered on his way to their sedan.

"Asher and I will be a bit," Miles announced.

"We'll be there after we pick up lunch," Asher explained as they headed for his truck.

"Can you pick me up an iced coffee?" I called to Asher and Miles. Asher waved his hand without turning around to let me know he heard.

I turned back to the others. "Well, I've got a blanket in the back, so we don't need to sit on the ground," I told them.

"Oh, a blanket?" Ethan wiggled his eyebrows. Heat washed through me at the soft, smoky sound of his voice.

I shot him a look. He chuckled. Everyone loaded up.

I followed Zeke's Jeep until we pulled into a gravel lot full of cars.

"Looks like the quarry is busy today," Ethan said with a smile.

We climbed out. I grabbed my small bag of stuff and pulled out the folded blanket. Ethan led me to a path through the trees where Zeke was waiting. We were only a few feet along when Zeke grabbed my arm in a hard grip and kept me on the inside of the path. I didn't understand why until I looked to the right, past him. We were at the very top of a cliff over the quarry. It was at least forty feet down to the deep, water-filled pit. Shit. There was no way I was jumping from this high. Ethan led us down the path and steps that had been carved out of the rock. Being careful, we eventually reached the bottom of the quarry. Zeke didn't let go until I was off the last step.

People from school were everywhere. Music was playing from somewhere. Thankfully, it wasn't hard to find a good spot in the shade for the blanket. Ethan helped me spread it out under the branches of a tree. I sat down, opened my canvas tote, and pulled out my sunblock. Ethan took off his shirt as I rubbed the lotion into my skin. He smiled and sat behind me. I squirted some into my hand before handing it to him. Zeke laid down and covered his eyes with his large forearm. He looked like he was going to take a nap.

"Don't forget to put some on you," I reminded him as I started on my legs. Ethan pulled the back of my shirt up and started rubbing it onto my back and shoulders.

"So, how high are you jumping from today?" Ethan asked.

"She can go to the second level, that's it," Zeke snapped. I shot him a look, but his eyes were still covered.

"What's the second level?" I asked Ethan.

He reached around me and pointed at an outcropping of rocks about ten feet up from the water. "The first level is ten feet. The second, twenty. The third is thirty. The fourth is from the very top." He went back rubbing in lotion.

"Don't even think about going above—"

Zeke stopped himself. I looked over my shoulder to watch him clench his jaw. He dropped his arm off his eyes and looked at me. "It's dangerous over twenty feet. Don't go higher than the second level... please?"

I eyed him. He was asking? Zeke never asked, he just ordered. "Okay," I answered. What was going on? Zeke let out a deep breath and covered his

eyes again. I slipped my sandals off and rubbed sunblock into my feet. When I was done, Ethan moved in front of me and handed me the lotion.

I sat back on my knees and began to rub the lotion into his muscular shoulders and back. My fingers glided along his toned lines. Needing a distraction, I sang under my breath. It wasn't until my voice cracked that I realized what I was doing. I stopped instantly, my mood dimming.

"Keep singing," Ethan told me, "you were doing great."

"Not here," I muttered. When I was done putting sunblock on his back I tapped his shoulder. "Lie down."

"Oh, Beautiful," he said eagerly as he laid down next to me, "this is going to feel so good."

Smiling, I turned and put more lotion in my hands. Then I began working on his back. His muscles were tight and knotted as usual. I focused on broad strokes that loosened up most of his muscles.

It wasn't long until Isaac came down the cliffside and joined us. He pulled off his shirt when he reached us. Oh, mother... definition and muscles. That described Isaac perfectly. I fought not to drool as he moved behind me to sit against the trunk of the tree.

When I started on the small knots, Ethan started groaning into the blanket. I smirked and ignored it as much as I could.

After a while, the guys had had enough.

"Will you shut the fuck up?" Isaac snapped. My eyes jumped to him. His jaw was clenched, his mouth a hard line as he glared at his brother.

"Can't, she has magic hands," Ethan mumbled.

"Lexie, just push a lot harder," Zeke told me. I snorted as I continued to work out the last of the knots. When I was done, Miles and Asher were coming down the stairs with several grocery bags.

Ethan sat up, stretched, and then leaned over and kissed my cheek. "Thank you, Beautiful."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered as I worked my thumb into the muscle between my thumb and forefinger. I gasped as I hit a knot.

"Red?" Isaac asked.

"I'm fine, the muscles in my hands are just tight," I muttered.

"Why?" Asher asked as they reached the blanket. Miles and Asher sat down and began handing out drinks. I took my coffee happily and popped it open. "She worked out the knots in my back." Ethan moved over to sit in front of me. He held his hands out. "Gimme. Time to pay for my massage." He began to gently rub the muscles in my right hand as I drank my coffee.

Asher began passing sandwiches out. Miles started with the chips. By the time Ethan moved on to my left, everyone else was eating lunch and talking.

"So, who's here?" Asher asked before biting into a sandwich.

"Uh, the usual crowd," Ethan answered.

"Is there any news about a bonfire down here yet?" Asher asked.

"We haven't talked to anyone yet," Isaac told them. "We've been here waiting for you, and Ethan made annoying noises. That's about it."

I looked over my shoulder at Isaac. His shoulders were stiff, his brow was drawn down as he ate his sandwich.

"Cookie Monster, are you okay?" I asked gently.

His eyes snapped up to mine. They softened slightly. "Yeah, it's just hot." I was smiling at him when Ethan pressed too hard.

"Ow, ow, ow," I hissed as I jerked my hand away.

"If you can't fucking do it without hurting her, don't fucking do it at all," Zeke snapped.

"You want to try?" Ethan shot back over his shoulder. "It's not exactly easy, ya know. She's got these freaking little hard knots in a muscle that's sensitive." Wow. Everyone was crabby. Was it just the heat?

I sighed and picked up my sandwich.

"Beautiful, I'm not done with your hands," Ethan reminded me.

I shook my head as I pulled my legs out from under me. "Everyone is in a shitty mood today. And I'm a little tired of hearing everyone snap at each other." I started opening the white butcher paper.

The silence stretched as Miles looked at each of the guys. I took a bite of my turkey sandwich.

Isaac sighed. "Sorry."

"Me too," Ethan added.

"The heat is just getting to everyone," Miles offered.

"Then go dunk your butts then come back and eat. 'Cause your grumpy asses are killing my good mood," I told them. Isaac chuckled and got up. Ethan followed. I sent Zeke a look. He cursed and got up to jump in the water.

I chuckled as they came back. Isaac and Ethan came back with smiles. Zeke came back and squeezed the water out of his shirt over my head.

"You shit!" I laughed as I wiped the water off the back of my neck. He chuckled as he went back to his spot.

Lunch was more fun after that. It wasn't too long before Miles and Asher were taking off their shirts to head into the water. Feeling more awake, I got to my feet then took off my shorts, folded them, and put them by my bag.

When I stood up Zeke's face was pained. "Maybe you should keep your shirt on."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Why?"

He ran his hand through his hair. "There's not as much shade here as at your house. You're going to burn like hell."

Uh-huh. I didn't buy that for a second. "If I start to burn, then I'll put it back on," I promised.

"Fine," he bit out before he started for the water. I smiled to myself as I pulled off my shirt and dropped it onto my shorts. I did, however, grab my towel and follow behind Zeke. Someone whistled. Oh, great.

"Hey, it's Casper!" a girl shouted. I flipped the bird toward the voice. Another whistle had Zeke stopping in his tracks and waiting for me. It was the last whistle of my walk to the water. Guys actually turned away from me when Zeke was next to me.

When we reached the water, the guys were laughing their asses off.

"What are you laughing at?" I demanded.

Asher shook his head. "It's not you, Ally, it's all the guys looking away from Zeke's glare."

I looked up at Zeke. Sure enough, he was glaring at some guy I recognized from my Math class. I shook my head, climbed onto a flat rock a few feet over the water, and cannon balled right into the middle of the boys. I came up and smiled at them. Zeke dove in and splashed everyone.

The guys started jumping into the water from the first level. I simply enjoyed floating and relaxing in the cool water. The guys took turns holding my hand so I didn't float off. Isaac spun me around in circles until I was laughing and begging him to stop.

It was an hour later when I was sitting on a rock ledge in the water, watching the guys jump and considering giving it a shot myself, when Eric swam up.

"Hey, Lexie," he said with a smile. His shaggy brown hair was slicked back from his face. His skin was tan from the sun. He was a good-looking guy, just not enough to counter his personality.

"Hey, how's your summer going?' I asked with a smile.

"Not bad," he said. "How about yours?" He lifted himself out of the water to sit next to me on the ledge. I fought not to tense up. The guys were right in front of me, and it was daylight. Chill out, Lexie. I focused on something else.

"Going good so far." I turned away to watch Isaac jump off the second level.

"Do you have any plans tonight?" he asked casually.

"Yeah, I'm hanging out with the guys at the farmer's market," I told him. He cringed a bit. I fought back a smile. He really didn't like Zeke.

"There are some rumors going around." Eric's voice caught my attention. I turned back to him. "Are you dating Blackthorn?"

I wish. I rolled my eyes. I'd love to date Zeke, or Miles, or Asher, or Ethan, or... hell, even Isaac was popping up on my radar lately. I had it bad and didn't know what to do. "Those aren't new rumors. They're old. Why do you ask?"

"There's just a rumor going around that Zeke broke up you and that guy from Dulcet" he said.

I shot him a look. "And where did you hear that?"

He shrugged. "From several people."

I shook my head as I looked back out at the guys. Asher turned our way. I winked at him, letting him know I was fine. "Dylan - that guy from Dulcet - dumped me because he saw me have a seizure and ran like a bitch." I turned back to him. "Zeke didn't have anything to do with it."

"He seems pretty protective of you," he pointed out.

"He's protective of all his friends," I countered.

Eric chuckled. "I don't see him getting pissed about girls whistling at Westfell."

I smiled at the image. "Nah, but I'm smaller and cuter than they are."

Eric snorted. Asher chuckled. I met Asher's eyes and shrugged. "Tell me I'm wrong!"

Asher shook his head. "I agree completely, Ally." I chuckled.

Eric looked out at Asher, who was about eleven feet from us. "He can hear you?"

I smiled up at him. "Asher has excellent hearing."

Eric's face turned red. "I'll... I'll see ya around."

"Later." I held back my laughter until Eric was out of earshot. Then I couldn't seem to stop. Eventually I did, when I needed to catch my breath.

I was relaxing in the water when my coffee wore off. I blinked hard as my energy level dropped. Shit... I was trying to decide if I was going to get out or stay in when Zeke swam over.

"You're burning, Lexie," he told me as he stood up. I looked down at my shoulders. He was right, I was starting to turn pink.

"Damn it." I swam to the edge, found my feet, and climbed out of the water. I picked up my towel, wrapped it around my waist as I headed back to our blanket.

"Oh look, it's the slut banging my brother," Jessica's voice came from the crowd. I turned as I started to squeeze the extra water out of my hair. Jessica was taller than me. She had a pretty face with the same sandy-blond hair as Asher. She was looking amazing in a blue two-piece and gold sandals.

"Oh, it's you," I said, my voice about as lively as I felt. I turned back around and kept walking to our blanket. Jessica followed.

"When are you going to get it through your thick skull that he is just using you?" Jessica asked snidely.

I picked up my sunblock and began rubbing it into my shoulders. "You really don't think much of your brother, do you?"

Her eyes grew wide, as if I had slapped her. "My brother is amazing," she snapped.

I tilted my head to the side. "And I'm trash, right? At least according to vou."

She huffed and looked down her nose at me. "Yeah, you are."

"And you believe I'm banging your brother," I stated as I changed arms. "So, either your brother is an idiot because I'm so obviously trash and yet he's banging me, or your brother is awesome and therefore thinks well enough about me to have a relationship with me." She blinked at me. "It can't be both, so which is it?"

Jessica stared at me as she tried to think her way out of the puzzle I set for her. I pulled on my slouchy white boyfriend shirt as I waited for an answer. When she still said nothing, I began to add another layer of sunblock to my face.

"Which is it, Jess?" Asher's voice had us both turning. Asher stood at the end of the blanket.

"She's using you," Jess stated.

He shook his head, his eyes hard. "Jess, I'm sick of this."

"I'm trying to protect you," Jessica insisted.

"Bullshit," he stated. "You've always loved tearing into anyone I liked. And I'm not allowed to say shit about Jason."

She straightened her shoulders. "Jason isn't using me to get back at you."

"Oh, please," I muttered as I picked up my towel again and began soaking up water from my hair.

"Jason is an asshole," Asher told her. I went still. This was new... but he wasn't done yet. "I don't like him, but I say nothing, because you *do*. I respect your choices when I can. For once, can you just respect mine?"

"You're making a mistake," Jess told him. "She doesn't care about any of you."

"And you do?" he snapped, his voice angry and sharp. I flinched. I'd never heard that voice from Asher before. And from the look on Jessica's face, she hadn't either. "I can go days without seeing you, Jess. The guys haven't heard from you in over a year." Her face was blank as he continued. "Ally's my friend. Deal with it." Jessica huffed and stormed off.

Asher turned back to me. "I'm sorry about her. The things she says..."

I shook my head. "It's not your fault. If she really thinks I'm trying to get back at her for something... Then, I guess, in her twisted way, she is trying to protect you."

Asher eyed me. "You alright?"

I gave him a tired smile. "Yeah, I'm just... I think I'm going to take a quick nap."

He raised an eyebrow. "A nap?"

"Yeah, that workout this morning wiped me out," I lied.

"Okay." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Just... stay out of the sun."

I sat down in a nice shady spot and smiled. "Way ahead of ya." I folded up my towel and laid sideways across the blanket.

"You need anything, give a shout," he told me.

"Don't worry, I will," I told him as I folded my hands behind my head and looked at the sky through the leaves. Asher hesitated before heading back to the others. My mind went straight back to the scan results.



# Asher

THAT WAS ODD. Ally hasn't taken a nap in the afternoon since... well, since we got Hades for her. I looked over my shoulder at her stretching out on the blanket in the shade. She *has* been drinking coffee in the afternoon lately, too. I turned back around and headed for the guys. Maybe one of them knew what was going on.

I went to the large rock near them and sat down. "Hey, does anyone know why Ally is so tired?"

Everyone gave me their attention immediately.

"What do you mean?" Miles asked.

I gestured towards the blanket. "She's taking a nap right now."

"What?" Ethan asked, not believing it.

"That's strange," Miles admitted.

"She's just taking a fucking nap," Isaac snapped as he swam towards the edge of the water.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

Isaac pulled himself out of the water and snatched his towel from the pile. "I didn't sleep worth shit last night, so I'm taking a fucking nap too. Or do I fucking have to ask for permission?" Isaac shot over his shoulder as he started to dry his hair. Everyone chuckled as he left.

Miles continued watching as he walked away. "He's not sleeping again?"

Ethan sighed. "No, I don't think so."

"He didn't get wasted at the party," Zeke pointed out.

"That's true," Asher added. "Besides, there isn't much we can do if he's not willing to talk."

"We should try and keep an eye on him," Miles announced.

The guys nodded in agreement. Putting it out of my mind, I got to my feet and dove into the water.

# Lexie

I was running around in circles in my head when a shadow fell over me. I opened my eyes and smiled. Isaac was still dripping wet from the water, his wet hair slicked back off his face.

"Heard you're taking a nap," he said.

"Yeah," I muttered.

He grinned. "Sit up."

I didn't ask why, I just sat up. Isaac sat down behind me and stretched out.

"Now you can use me as a pillow," he said as he bent an arm under his head and closed his eyes.

My heart warmed. "You don't have to do this you know."

He opened one eye. "I didn't sleep worth shit last night. You're doing me a favor." He reached over and tugged on my sleeve a little. "Come on. Nap time."

I smiled and put my towel where my neck was going to go before I lay down. My head was resting on his hard, but still comfy, stomach. His hand found mine where it was resting on my upper stomach. His fingers played with mine as I looked up at the sky again.

"Comfy?"

"Uh-huh," he muttered.

"Why couldn't you sleep?" I asked, my voice quiet.

"Bad dreams," he hedged. "What about you?"

"Same," I lied. Warmth slid through me as he continued to stroke my fingers with his.

"Hell, we could have napped at my house," he pointed out, his voice growing slurred.

"Good point." My own body was starting to relax now. Isaac grew quiet.

I went back into my own head. Okay, I wasn't doing as well as I thought. But I wasn't that bad. I still had time. What the hell was I going to do with it?

"Isaac?"

"Hmm?" He was more than half asleep.

"Hypothetically, if you were dying, what would you want to do?" I asked in a whisper.

"Crash at your place," he mumbled, his words barely audible. His fingers tightened on mine making my heart skip. "We'd hang... out... every... day..." He drifted off.

It was a sweet answer. His fingers stopped playing with mine as he fell asleep. He was right, though. Spending time with the people I loved and making sure they *knew* they were loved felt right to me. His deep, even breathing helped me relax. I slowly slipped under.

PINS AND NEEDLES in my hand and up my forearm woke me up. I shifted. There was a grunt. I opened my eyes to find myself lying with my head on someone's shoulder and my back against their side. I took a deep breath and smelled limes. Smiling, I relaxed against him. The hand on my belly moved a little.

"You awake?" Isaac whispered.

"Uh-huh," I mumbled. The fingers on my stomach started rubbing back and forth slowly.

"Do you want to wake up?" His face pressed into the back of my hair.

"I'm debating," I grumbled.

He chuckled. "Whatever you want."

"How long have you been awake?" I asked as I started to rub the sleep from my eyes.

"A while," he muttered as his face moved from my hair.

"Then why didn't you get up?" I asked as I tilted my head backward to look up at him.

He grinned. "You were out cold. I figured you needed the sleep."

I smiled. "Thanks, Cookie Monster."

He leaned down and kissed my forehead. "Are you getting up now?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I want to jump off a level."

He smiled as he pulled away so I could get up.

Isaac and I headed back to the others. When we reached the water, I looked up at him. "Want to jump off the first level?" I asked. He grinned.

"Hell yeah." Isaac led me up the steps to the first level. "Make sure to jump out so you don't hit the rocks right below you," he warned. I winked

at him, then ran and jumped. I tucked my knees to my chest and hit the water. I came up laughing. I swam over to the guys, still laughing.

"Nice splash," Asher told me as he wiped water off his face.

"What's so funny?" Miles asked.

I stopped long enough to wipe the tears from my eyes. "My ass hit the water first. I've got the wedgie from hell." Miles turned bright red while the others burst out laughing. I was starting to calm down when Isaac jumped in and came up near us.

"What's so funny?" he asked. That set us off again, leaving Miles to explain.

"Um, Lexie has a situation," Miles hedged.

Isaac's eyes snapped to me. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head as I quickly pulled my suit out of my crack.

"What'd I miss?" Isaac asked again. Everyone but Miles and Zeke started laughing again.

"I hit ass first and got a wedgie," I admitted.

Zeke shook his head at me. "You don't get to jump anymore unless you're doing a pencil jump."

I saluted him. "Yes, sir. Only the one wedgie for me, sir," I said in a gruff voice. The guys were still laughing as they got out and headed for the jumping ledges. Except for Ethan. He sat on a small ledge still in the water. I swam over and lifted myself onto the ledge next to him.

"You're not jumping?" I asked, watching as the guys climbed the stairs.

"I can't," he muttered. "If you have a healthy spine, you can jump from ten feet with no problem, even twenty. With my back, I can't even do ten."

I wrapped my arm around his and squeezed. He smiled down at me before we went back to watching the guys jumping from the second level.

After a while, everyone was getting tired. Isaac got out and held his hand down to me. "Want to jump off the second level?"

I smiled, took his hand, and followed him up the path. We moved to the second level.

"You're going to do a pencil jump or it'll hurt. Lock your legs together, point your toes and keep your arms straight down at your sides. When you hit, you want to make a point not to take a breath. After you hit, spread your arms and legs to stop you from going too deep. Got it?"

"Yep." I looked down at the water. "How much is this going to hurt?"

"Your feet might sting a bit." He shrugged.

I smiled, my heart pounding. "This should be fun." I jumped, locked my legs straight, and kept my arms at my sides. I hit the water. I cringed. My feet stung as if I had hit cement. I swam to the surface and cursed.

The guys whooped. I swam toward them, hoping the stinging would stop soon.

"Enjoy that?" Ethan asked with a smile.

"Yeah, I just wish it didn't make my feet sting." I pulled myself out of the water and onto the ledge.

"You didn't point your toes enough," Miles informed me.

"Next time I'll try that," I said as I looked up to watch Isaac jump.

My heart dropped.

Isaac was climbing past the third level. "Guys. Isaac."

Everyone turned and looked up.

"Shit," Asher bit out before he took off for the path. Zeke was barely a heartbeat behind him.

"Isaac, don't even think about it!" Zeke bellowed as he rushed up the steps. I got to my feet and stepped out of the water as everyone else was yelling. It didn't even slow Isaac down.

Fear filled my heart, sharp and stabbing.

"He's not going to..." I muttered as Isaac moved to the edge at the very top. "Oh, God." Asher was only halfway up. Everyone in the quarry was watching, talking about how no one had ever jumped off the top without hurting themselves. "How dangerous is that level?"

"If you don't land right? Bad," Ethan said, his voice tight. I reached over and took his hand. His fingers tightened on mine.

"Brother, don't!" Ethan shouted.

Isaac backed up to get a running jump.

"Isaac! Stop!" I shouted.

He paused, but it was only for a couple of heartbeats before he ran for the edge and jumped. He seemed to fly for forever, but it was still not long enough. He moved into the pencil position just before he hit the water, hard.

I covered my mouth as my body shook, my stomach knotted. "Oh God, no."

Miles dove in and swam for Isaac's entry point.

Fear tore through me. I couldn't lose Isaac. We couldn't lose him. Life without Isaac flashed before my eyes; no more blue hair, no more pranks,

no more of that smile, no more limes... never another touch...

Tears filled my eyes as the seconds stretched into what seemed like hours.

Miles reached Isaac's entry point just as Isaac came up.

He whooped and raised his arms.

He was fine.

The pain in my chest eased. Relief swamped me. I took several deep breaths. Ethan sat down on a rock and took deep, shuddering breaths.

I was just glad he was alive. But when he got out of the water smiling that shit-eating grin, I got pissed.

"What the fuck, Isaac?" I shouted. His eyebrows went up, his smile fading as he stepped closer.

"It was fun," he offered.

My eyes met his. "You promised me," I reminded him. His smile disappeared completely. "You fucking promised me! No more crazy stunts!" Anger washed through me, making me shake.

"That wasn't—"

"You could have died," I growled, tears falling down my face. "You promised me. And then you go and..." I shook my head. I couldn't even deal right now. I thought I had lost him. For those seconds he was under the water, I had thought he was dead. I turned and walked back to the blanket, stuffed my things into my bag, and began pulling on my sandals.

"Red—"

My eyes snapped to his. "Don't Red me!" I grabbed my bag. "You know how much your stunts scare me! And you fucking did it anyway!"

"It was a challenge!" he shot back.

"The third level would have been a challenge!" I pointed at the cliff. "That was a fucking stupid risk!" I strode past him with tears streaming down my face and climbed the path, passing Asher and Zeke as they came down.

"Ally?" I didn't stop.

"Watch your footing," Zeke warned as I passed him.

"Lexie!" Isaac shouted. I ignored him, my throat tightening. I climbed into the Blazer and gunned it out of the gravel lot. I went home fuming and crying.

#### Jessica

ISAAC SURFACED.

My knees gave out. I dropped to my towel as I tried to breathe again.

That son of a bitch! My hands shook as I watched Isaac swim to the shore. Why the hell does he keep doing this shit? I pressed a shaking hand against my face as I tried to get control of myself again.

"Damn, I hoped the fucker would break something," Jason said. Jason's friends agreed and started talking about what should have happened as they sat down. I shot him a look.

A girl's voice was shouting. I looked around and found Lexie shouting at Isaac about his stupid stunt. For once, I agreed with her. My eyes went to Ethan and his hunched over form as he tried to get his breath back. He looked like he was going to be sick. Didn't Isaac realize how much he scared him with this stuff? My heart ached as Lexie shouted at Isaac again and stormed up the stairs, leaving the guys behind. At least someone finally told him to knock it off.

"And there goes the bitch," Jason announced. The guys laughed.

"At least she was nice to look at," Hale offered. I rolled my eyes.

"I wouldn't mind hitting that," Brendon added. They continued talking about Lexie's body as I watched Isaac walk off into the trees. Someone needed to talk to him. Asher was right... I hadn't been around the guys for a long time. Maybe...

"Hey, who are you looking at?" Jason snapped.

I turned back to him. "I was just thinking someone should talk to Isaac."

He scowled. "Why do you fucking care?"

"How can you say that?" I snapped. "Isaac's family."

Jason's eyes flashed to me. His hand shot out and wrapped around my wrist. "Oh, you want to screw him, right?" His fingers tightened on my wrist painfully. I tried to pull back, but his grip was too hard. "Don't you?" he snapped.

"Ew. He's family," I reminded him.

"Bullshit." His grip tightened.



#### Miles

Lexie stormed out of view at the top of the cliff. Isaac cursed and walked off into the trees. Well, that was horrible. I looked at the others.

"Who do we go after, Isaac or Ally?" Asher asked.

I thought about it. "Let Lexie go, she probably needs some time to calm down." I turned to look the way Isaac went. "Ethan? Do you want to talk to Isaac?"

"Fuck no," Ethan growled. I turned. He was still sitting on a rock, his face pale, taking deep breaths. "That asshole just scared the shit out of me."

"I'll talk to Isaac," I decided.

The guys agreed, so I headed after Isaac.

"This shit needs to stop," Zeke snapped.

"Let Miles deal with it," Asher said.

I stepped into the tree line and followed the path that Isaac seemed to have taken. Isaac wasn't one to break a promise, so what happened today? I walked for several minutes before I heard him.

"Stupid, worthless piece of shit," Isaac growled. Wood snapped. "You can't even fucking keep a promise. It's not that hard! But no, you can't even fucking remember. You just had to make her cry."

I stepped into the clearing. Isaac was snapping down branches and throwing them into the woods. His face was red, his mouth hard, as he continued cursing at himself.

I had to be the calm one. Asher didn't want to do it, Ethan couldn't do it, and Zeke wanted to hit him. I had to be the calm one. "Isaac."

He shot a look at me over his shoulder before picking up a fallen branch and bashing it against a tree trunk. I moved a bit closer and waited until he broke the branch and threw it through the trees.

"Leave me alone," he bit out.

"I came to listen," I reminded him. I always came to listen. It was the only way to get him to talk about what was bothering him.

"Yeah, well." He grunted as he smashed another branch before he turned back to me. "I don't feel like talking."

"Alright," I said carefully. "Then I'll just be here." I sat down on a log and watched Isaac work his anger out. It took time and patience.

When he was finally done, he turned around, out of breath and sweating. He spotted me, shook his head, and turned away. "I fucking made

her cry," he muttered.

"Yes, you did," I said carefully. "You scared her pretty badly."

He shook his head again. "I wasn't thinking about the promise I made her."

"What were you thinking about?" I asked gently.

Isaac shook his head and looked at the ground. "You know what. Don't worry about it, I'll fucking fix it," he snapped before he moved down another path and out of sight. Knowing Isaac, I didn't follow. It was different than our usual talks, and that bothered me. I walked back to the quarry, running scenarios through my mind.



# Lexie

I was in My Room, lying on my bed with Hades, when the door downstairs opened. I ignored it and continued scratching his ears as his head lay on my stomach. Footsteps moved up the stairs. Figuring it was probably Tara, I continued to sulk in my misery.

There was a knock on my door. "Ally, it's me." Asher's voice broke my intense staring contest with the ceiling.

"It's open," I called.

He opened the door and stepped inside. His eyes ran over me, making me aware that my shorts were riding up my legs.

His eyes met mine. "Hey, you coming to the market?"

I looked back up at the ceiling. "I don't know," I admitted. That had been the plan, but Isaac's stunt this afternoon had just knocked me sideways.

Asher sat on the futon beside me. "Come on, Ally, Ethan can't really go on without you talking him through his pre-show freak out."

I snorted. "Yeah he can. Remember Winter Formal?"

He huffed. "Yeah, and he said he kept missing notes."

I smiled.

"Why does he do this?" I asked, knowing he didn't have an answer.

"I don't know. But maybe you should ask him," he suggested.

"Me?" I asked doubtfully. Why would he listen to me?

He nodded. "Yeah, you. Miles didn't get anywhere talking to him after you left. But you might."

I thought about it.

"Besides, if he resists, you could always cry and he'd break like a cheap broom," Asher added. I chuckled as he smiled down at me. "So, are you coming or am I hanging out here all night?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'm coming, let me get my shoes on." I scooted to the edge of the bed.

"Are we bringing Hades?" he asked as he got to his feet.

I slipped my sandals on. "Yeah, my poor baby was home all day." Hades made a soft bark.

Asher chuckled as he headed out the bedroom door with Hades following. I locked my door and headed down the stairs. Asher already had him on the leash.

"Where are you two off to?" Rory asked from the kitchen.

"Farmer's market," I answered. "Ethan's playing tonight."

"Good, I've got a list. Well, Asher gave me a list." Rory went to the fridge.

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you cooking this week?" I asked, getting a bit scared. Rory could barely boil water, and that was being generous. Asher chuckled.

"Asher's teaching me a few dishes." Rory grabbed a list off the fridge and brought it over.

"Is that... safe?" I teased.

Rory shot me a playful glare as he pulled his wallet out. "Ha ha ha." He handed me several bills. "Just get the groceries."

I grinned and took the money. We were about to walk out the door when Rory stopped me. "Wait, you're taking Hades?"

I turned back from the door. "Yeah?"

"Check the cement outside before you do," he told me as he went to the couch.

"What?" I raised an eyebrow.

He gestured to the driveway. "It's in the high nineties outside; cement gets hot. Go put your hand on the driveway for five seconds."

Okay... I gave Hades' leash to Asher and then went outside and did as he asked. At the count of four I was yanking my hand off the cement. My skin was pink and painful as I went back in. "I had to take my hand off."

Rory nodded. "Then it's too hot for Hades to go walking around on asphalt."

I didn't like it, but he had a point. The cement was too hot for my baby. I bent down, took off his leash, and rubbed his ears. "I'm sorry, baby. You can't go with us." He gave me puppy-dog eyes. He really knew how to play me. "I'll take you for a walk tonight after it cools off. And I'll bring you a treat or something from the market." Hades licked my cheek before he moved to the couch where he promptly started pushing Rory over. He didn't seem too broken up about it. I put the leash on the hook and left with Asher.

The farmer's market was held in the town square, which was a large park of grass and trees. The small stage was set up, along with the games for little kids. The four blocks around the square were closed off. Booths and stalls were already bustling in the late afternoon heat. At least the trees gave some shade. Asher parked several blocks away and we walked in. I was eyeing the list when I realized how much there was.

"Damn, I didn't bring a bag for all this," I muttered as I put the list away.

"There is usually someone who is selling canvas bags for cheap," Asher told me. Well, that solved that. We turned the corner and saw the crowd. I paused. The market was busy - very busy. I was missing Hades when Asher took my hand.

"Ally?" he said gently. I looked up at him. "If it's too crowded we can wait till it thins out."

I looked back at the crowd and chewed the corner of my bottom lip. The crowd was rather large. Almost as large as the party the other night, and I had handled that alright. Come on, Lexie. Grow a pair. You got this.

I gave Asher a smile. "It's okay, I can handle this. I hope." He squeezed my hand and waited until I started walking. We moved into the crowd. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. You got this, you got this.

Asher found the stall for the bags and suggested I buy three. Apparently we were getting a lot of veggies this week. With bags in hand, Asher walked with me to pick out produce.

Asher was picking out strawberry baskets when I spotted Laura. The girl was shy as hell. It had taken her months to say a word to me. Her brown hair was down and in her sweet face, as usual. Even in this heat she was wearing sleeves almost to her wrists.

"Hey, Laura," I said with a smile. "How's your dog?"

Laura's head snapped up, her eyes wide. "Oh, Lexie. I - I didn't see you." Her eyes darted to Asher. They grew wider then shot back to me. "His cast is off, and the vet says he should be fine."

Yep, Laura was still super shy. "That's great. Why don't we take them out to the dog park someday soon?" I suggested.

She swallowed hard. "Um... yeah. That'd be fun. Call me and we'll set it up," she said quickly. Before I could answer, she disappeared into the crowd.

"She's still really shy with you," Asher said.

"Yeah." I tucked a flyaway hair behind my ear. "I'm trying to be her friend, but... it's like she doesn't want one." I looked up at him. "Am I not catching a hint or something?"

Asher thought about it. "No, I don't think so." He looked at another basket of strawberries. "She didn't seem too comfortable with me here. Maybe that was it?"

I sighed. "Maybe..." We went back to shopping.

It was fun, even with the sun beating down on us. We walked from stall to stall, holding hands as if we... as if we were a couple. I pushed the thought away. It's not going to happen; he doesn't think of you that way. But what if he did...?

I still couldn't. Zeke had kissed me months ago. Even though we still hadn't talked about it, or kissed since, it had still happened. And until I knew one way or another, I shouldn't even think about Asher. Right? I didn't know. Feeling this way for all of them was confusing.

"Ally, are you okay? You just turned pale, even for you," Asher asked. I met his eyes, guilt eating at me. "Yeah, I'm fine."

He looked like he didn't believe me. "Uh, Sylvie's stall is next on the list. Do you want to see Isaac?"

I sighed and thought about it. "No, not yet. But Sylvie does have a lot of the veggies we need."

Asher smiled. "Give me the list and the empty bags. I'll get the rest of the list."

"You're sure?" I asked. My voice had grown raspy. "I can suck it up."

He shook his head. "Come on, let's get some water and find the others."

Asher kept my hand as he headed towards one of the stands. We both bought waters before we headed for the grass area. We spotted Miles and Zeke sitting in the shade, under a tree in the corner of the lot.

"I can go from here," I croaked. I opened my water and took a quick drink.

"Are you sure? I don't mind walking you," he said, his brow drawing down.

I grinned. "I can make fifteen feet."

"Just making sure," he told me before heading back into the crowd. I headed over to the guys.

"Hey." I set my bag down, took a drink of my water, and then lay on the grass and enjoyed the shade. The ground sucked the heat from me, cooling me off.

"So, what's happening?" I asked as I closed my eyes.

"I was thinking about going and looking at some of the non-food related stalls." Miles turned to me. "Lexie, would you like to go?"

I smiled. "That's Miles for 'I want to check and make sure you're alright." I announced.

His cheeks tinged pink. "Maybe."

"Hey, sweetness!" Jake's voice had me half sitting up.

"Hey!" I smiled. Jake was smiling down at me. Derrick was next to him with his usual grin plastered to his face.

"I heard you caught Dylan with his pants down at the party the other night," Jake announced as they sat down.

"Literally." I snorted. "But yeah, you should have seen his face," I told him. "He looked like a kid caught with his hand in a cookie jar." Derrick and Jake chuckled.

"What happened?" Miles asked.

I lay back down and tilted my head back so I could see Miles. "When I took that walk with Isaac, Dylan came out of the bushes zipping his zipper."

"So? He was taking a leak," Zeke pointed out.

I chuckled as I turned my head to look at him with a smile. "I thought that too, until some chick told him to wait because she couldn't find her underwear." Jake, Derrick and I burst out laughing. Zeke shook his head while Miles stayed silent.

"Yeah, you'll never believe who the chick was," Derrick told me.

I snorted. "I don't care—"

"It was Cece," Jake announced.

My jaw dropped. "Cece? Isaac's ex-girlfriend Cece?" I asked, just to be clear.

They both nodded as they chuckled.

I shook my head. "Wow. I did not see that happening. No wonder he turned white." I shook my head and changed the subject. "Miles was about to take me around the non-food stalls, wanna go?"

"Sure," Derrick said as he got to his feet and reached down with both hands. I smiled as he pulled me to my feet.

I picked up my water bottle. "Zeke, can I leave my bags here?"

He lay down in the shade and covered his eyes with his forearm. "Yeah. It's too fucking hot to move."

"Maybe you shouldn't be wearing head to toe black in the summer," I countered.

He lifted his arm and shot me a look. I smiled before walking off with Miles and the others.

We walked from stall to stall, checking out everything from sun hats to jewelry. I made sure to pick up a fancy dog treat for Hades. Derrick was asking a salesgirl questions while I checked out another rack of sunglasses.

Derrick picked up a pair of glasses and put them on.

The salesgirl giggled. "I call those the Terminator glasses."

Derrick grinned. "I'll be back," he said in his best Schwarzenegger impression. I snickered at the corny joke. Jake turned away from the rack of hats and eyed Derrick.

"Are you upset about Dylan?" Miles asked quietly.

I smiled and looked up at him. His ears were pink, his blank face in place. "Not really. I was surprised. You don't exactly expect to turn a corner and see your ex zipping their pants up."

"No, I don't suppose you do," he said as we followed Jake and Derrick through the crowd. "But you're alright?"

"I'm more upset about Isaac," I admitted, watching as Derrick shot Jake a frustrated look.

"I thought you would be," he said. "When did he promise to stop pulling stunts like today?" Jake shot Derrick an angry look.

"In April," I said. "I told him that his stunts scared me."

"And he agreed," he said, as if it made sense to him.

"Yeah, he promised." Derrick and Jake were talking; it didn't look like it was going well. What was going on with them?

"It's not like him to break a promise," Miles said.

"I know. I just kind of lost it," I admitted. "I'll talk to him about it."

"That's a good idea," Miles said. Derrick stopped walking and turned to Jake, gesturing angrily at him. "Oh, perhaps we should—"

"Let's stay back a bit." I stepped up to a jewelry stall. Miles moved to my side as I looked at necklaces. There were a few I liked. Then my eyes found a rose gold angel wing necklace.

"Did you find something?" he asked softly.

I shrugged. "I gave my angel wing necklace to Riley. It worked better with her complexion."

He started tapping a staccato rhythm on the table. "The one Dylan gave you?"

I nodded. "I realized how the silver washed me out." I looked up at him. "So, I'm keeping my eyes out for a replacement."

"Did you find one?" he asked.

I glanced to make sure the saleswoman was out of earshot. "Nah, these are too big and bulky. I'd be getting them caught on everything." I smiled up at him. "Your birthday is coming up, are we still having dinner at the twins'?"

His ears turned pink. "Um, yeah, but there's no reason to make a big deal—"

"It's your eighteenth birthday," I told him. "We're gonna make it a big deal."

He grinned as his ears turned red.

There was shouting in the crowd. I looked down the way. Derrick held his hands up, his face frustrated he turned and walked away. Jake looked down at the ground. "Miles, I think I need to talk to Jake."

Miles looked the same direction I was. "I'll head back to the others."

I gave him a warm smile. "Thanks."

"Of course." He turned and moved into the crowd while I made my way to Jake.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked when I reached him. Jake shook his head, his jaw locked. I took his hand and started moving him through the crowd, out of the market and across the street. When we had some privacy, I looked up at him. "What just happened?"

Jake shook his head. "Derrick fucking did it again."

"Huh?" What did I miss?

He ran his hand through his hair. "He's fucking flirting with everything that moves!"

My eyebrows shot up. "What? When?"

Jake shot me an angry look. "He was flirting with that salesgirl!" He leaned back against the wall and tilted his head back to rest against it.

I thought back over Derrick's conversation with the salesgirl at the last stall. There had been no flirting. "Um, Jake?"

"What?" he asked, his eyes closed.

"He wasn't flirting," I told him gently.

He lifted his head and looked down at me. "Yeah, he was. They were all giggly."

"Jake, honey, I was standing right there," I reminded him. "She made a joke about the sunglasses he was looking at, and he made a Terminator impression. That was it."

His brow drew down as he frowned. "Really?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Why do you think he's flirting?"

He sighed. "He's... he's bi, Lexie."

"And?"

He turned back to me. "What if... what if I can't keep him?"

"Keep him? Is he an animal?" I asked. He snorted. "Jake, Derrick is crazy for you."

"For now," he countered. "That doesn't mean some bimbo with big knockers isn't going to come along and steal him."

"Let me get this straight... He might break up with you one day, so you're sabotaging your relationship now," I said bluntly.

"Aren't you supposed to be on my side?" he snapped.

"I am," I told him, "but I'm not going to blow smoke up your ass."

His eyes narrowed on mine as he scowled at me. "What? So, I'm the bad guy?"

"No, you're not. But he wasn't flirting," I countered.

"Yeah, he was!" he all but shouted as he clenched his fists.

"He made a joke," I shot back. "Don't you think you might be overreacting?"

He walked up and down the sidewalk taking deep breaths.

"I'm going to tell you the truth. That's why you love me," I reminded him. "And kinda hate me right now."

"Maybe," he said through gritted teeth as he turned and paced back towards me. "You might have a point."

"Have you talked to him about this?" I tried to calm him down.

"We've been talking about it for a month." He sighed as he came to stand next to me again.

"Talking, or fighting?" I asked.

He cursed and closed his eyes. "Fighting."

"You're being insecure and jealous"—I wrapped my arm around him —"and you're pushing him away."

"How'd you get so smart?" he grumbled.

I smiled. "We recognize our own."

He smiled. "I should go find him."

"Only if you want to keep your boyfriend," I told him. He cursed.

We walked back across the street. Jake walked me back to the lawn and then left to find Derrick. When I reached the guys, the lawn was starting to fill up.

"I thought you were with Jake?" Asher asked.

"Jake and Derrick had a fight. He went to go find him," I explained as my phone vibrated in my bra. I pulled my phone out and checked it.

Ethan: Kinda need you.

I smiled as I typed in my response.

Alexis: I'll head over now. Where r u?

Ethan: West side of the lawn next to the van.

Alexis: Coming.

I looked in the direction he said he was. I could see the van from here. "I've got to head over to Ethan. I'll be right back."

"You want someone to go with you?" Zeke asked. I thought about it. It wasn't even five hundred feet.

"Nah, I should be good," I told him. "If something happens, I'll scream."

Zeke shot me a look. "Not funny, Lexie."

I met his eyes, my grin fading. "I know."

Asher got to his feet. "I need to make a trip to the food trucks anyway."

He started walking me to the van. "Thanks, Asher," I muttered.

"No problem, Ally girl," he said.

I smiled up at him. "So, what food truck are you hitting?"

"I was thinking the Greek food truck. They have great food," he said.

"Sweet, can you get me something yummy?"

He grinned down at me. "Sure. Have you ever tried Greek food?" "Nope."

"What are you wanting? Light or rich?" he asked.

I opened my mouth to say something, only to hear a noise from a nearby doorway. We turned. Ryan, Ethan's drummer, was kissing a girl in the recessed doorway of the church. A girl with lilac hair. Oh my God. We went to walk by, but they split apart. Ryan's face turned red, Riley's turned pink.

I just grinned. "Carry on." Then we walked a bit faster. We were ten feet away before we started laughing.

"Was that Riley?" Asher asked between laughs.

"Yeah, it was." I shook my head. "That girl has some explaining to do."

"You didn't know?"

"I knew she liked someone, but not who! And she's gonna get so much shit for it," I snickered.

We reached the van. Ethan was pacing back and forth in front of Oliver and Brooklyn.

"Ethan, calm down. You'll be great," Brooklyn said, trying to calm him down.

"Brooklyn, not now," he snapped.

"You want anything for after your set?" Asher asked Ethan.

Ethan's eyes found me. "Sure. I don't care what."

"One order of 'I don't care what' coming up," Asher announced before heading back.

I gave Ethan a small smile, took his hand, and made him follow me to the front of the van. "Ethan. You know you guys are amazing."

He shook his head. "It's an entirely new set, and you haven't heard it." His fingers twirled his silver rings.

I reached up, held his face, and made him look at me. "Ethan. What did you think when you left the garage last night?"

His eyes unfocused as his hands moved to my arms. "Good. I thought we were ready for tonight."

"Then you're ready," I reassured him. "You are a perfectionist when it comes to practice, Snoopy. You don't let anyone leave until you have it down. You got this."

He sighed and rested his forehead on mine, his eyes closed. "You're right."

I took a deep breath, enjoying his spicy cologne. "I know I am."

He chuckled softly, lifted his head and pulled me close. He hugged me tight. I smiled as I hugged him back.

"Are your wrists okay?" he whispered in my ear, sending chills down my spine.

"Yeah, the burns are small and should be gone in a couple days," I whispered back, resting my chin on his shoulder. He squeezed me tighter.

"Have you talked to Isaac?" His voice was thick. I squeezed tighter.

"No, but I will," I promised.

He nodded, his breath caressing my ear. "Thank you, Lexie."

"You're welcome," I whispered back.

"Ryan's back. It's time." Brooklyn's voice was relieved. I opened my eyes to find her watching me, as if I was going to attack her or something. I pulled back from Ethan. He took several deep breaths before nodding to me. He walked around the van. I followed.

"Come on, guys." Ethan moved to make a circle with the others. Ryan was trying not to look at me. I bit back a grin as I leaned against the van and waited. They put their hands in a circle before throwing them up, shouting, "Under Fire!" My heart ached a bit.

Ethan came back and took my hand. "Come on, Beautiful. We've got a show." I gave him the smile he needed and walked with them to the stage. As the others walked on, Ethan squeezed my hand and sent me a smile.

"Go kick some ass, Snoopy," I said, trying not to be upset that I wasn't going on with him. I let go and started making my way through the seated crowd. The guys were still under the tree, including Isaac. Everyone was talking when I stepped around them and sat in the back of the group with my back against the tree trunk.

Asher passed Miles a small bag. Miles passed it to me.

"Thanks," I said as Ethan went to the microphone.

"Alright, what a turn out," Ethan said, his smooth, smoky voice rolling over the crowd. "Now, let's have a good time." He played the first few notes of 'Unbreakable' by Fireflight. It was a good song. Then Brooklyn started singing. She was good, damn good. She stayed in key and hit the right notes. And the girl had range. She was a perfect fit for the band.

"Lexie, eat," Zeke ordered over his shoulder. How did he know? I pulled out the thick cardboard container and opened it. It was a sandwich wrapped in flatbread. Inside were grilled onions, peppers, tomatoes, and some meat I couldn't identify, along with an interesting looking white sauce. It smelled delicious and I trusted Asher, so I took a bite. My eyes almost rolled into the back of my head. Ohhh. It was so fucking good.

I finished my bite before asking. "Ash, what is this? 'Cause I need it at home every day."

Asher chuckled. "It's a gyro. Flatbread, meat, some veggies, and Tzatziki sauce."

"It's fucking delicious," I said with my hand in front of my full mouth. The guys chuckled. I finished my sandwich quickly; the sauce was surprisingly light and perfect in this weather. I leaned back against the tree and listened to the band.

The sun set and it grew dark. I thought I was doing pretty well, until Brooklyn moved to stand next to Ethan. The first notes of 'Burn with Me' by Amaranthe played. It was a good song, but it was a duet.

Ethan sang the first verse. Then Brooklyn jumped in. My heart took a hit. My eyes burned. I couldn't sit here. I got up and quietly walked around the tree and back through the closing market. Vendors were packing up. I walked to one of the closing food trucks, grabbed some tissues, turned around and went still. Isaac was standing there, his amber eyes meeting mine. He didn't say a word. He just stepped closer, pulled me into his arms, and hugged me. I took a deep, shaking breath and wrapped my arms around his waist. He didn't move, not until the song was over.

"I wish I could give you back your singing voice," he whispered against my forehead. Tears fell down my cheeks.

"You beat the shit out of him," I whispered back. "Tell me again what you did."

"Broken knee, broken arm, broken ribs, kicked him in the face several times, and stomped on his sack a few more."

I smiled. "Thanks, Isaac." I pulled back and wiped my face. "I'm still a little mad at you."

"So am I," he admitted quietly.

I looked up and met his eyes again. "Why do you do those stunts?"

Behind his eyes he struggled until he looked down at the ground. "There's this part of me, sometimes, that needs to see how close I can get."

"To what?" I asked softly.

He lifted his head. "You know what." He turned and walked several feet away.

Death. He wanted to see how close he could get to dying? My chest burned as I moved to stand in front of him. "What were you thinking up there today?"

He sighed and looked away. "That if I get close enough, maybe it will go away."

"Isaac, do you know what it was like when you were underwater today?" I asked, tears rolling down my cheeks. "I thought you were dead. An overreaction, probably, but it's where my mind went." I looked down at the ground. I couldn't look at him and tell him. "I saw the world without you, and it..." I took a deep breath, my lungs growing tight as I met his eyes. "There were no more pranks, no more jokes, no more hugs, no more you. And I don't know if I could..." I took a deep breath and looked away. I had to try to make him understand. They couldn't lose both of us. "Isaac. You have people who love you. Hell, I love you. I don't want to lose you. Or see you get hurt." He shook his head as if to deny it. "Cookie Monster, what if it was me?" His gaze snapped to mine. "What if I was the one on that ledge today, and you were the one who had to watch?"

He looked away. "I don't want to think about that."

"Because it hurts," I told him before I reached up and placed my hand over the center of his chest. "Because it feels like you can't breathe. That your heart is going to shatter and never be put back together."

He reached up and held my hand against his hard chest before he met my eyes.

"That's what you do to us *every time* you pull a stunt like that." I didn't know how else to make him understand. "We love you. We can't lose you."

He swallowed hard and pulled me against him again. I admit, I held on to him as hard as I could. I looked up at him and met his eyes. He wiped the tears from my cheeks again before bending down and resting his forehead against mine.

"I'm sorry," he breathed. I reached up and held his face in my hands. We held each other for several minutes, just like that. Then the band started playing 'I'm Yours' by The Script.

"Dance with me, Red," he whispered. I smiled and slid my hands down his neck and over his shoulders. He lifted his head. I stepped closer and rested my head on his shoulder. He rested his cheek against my hair and started slowly dancing with me. I breathed in limes, and peace slipped through me. I knew there was more he wasn't telling me, but he had let me in a little. With the music, and his arms around me as he danced with me in the dark, it was enough. I stayed against him, not caring that it was hot or

that we were both sweating. All that mattered was that he was here, dancing with me, breathing and alive. And that's all I needed tonight.

Zeke pulled up to Rory's house. He'd been quiet most of the night. Then again, I didn't mind. After talking with Isaac I was pretty tired. He put the Jeep in park. I stared at the house. Tara's car was in the driveway. Joy.

"Lexie?"

"Huh?"

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I focused on the now. "Nothing, um, that talk with Isaac just wiped me out." I looked back at the house. "And I still have to walk Hades." I took off my seatbelt.

"You're going to walk Hades now?" he asked. "At ten-thirty at night?"

I shrugged. "He's been in the house or in the backyard all day. He needs a walk." I opened the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He shut off the Jeep and took off his seatbelt. "I'm walking with you," he grumbled.

"Zeke." I turned back to find him already getting out of the car.

"Don't even start," he growled. I sighed and got out of the car. Zeke was already heading for the door. He unlocked it before I reached him. Hades ran out between his legs and jumped on me.

"Hi, baby," I cooed at the dog as I scratched his ears. He dropped back to all four feet and rushed to Zeke.

Zeke knelt down and got a lick to the cheek. "Not the face, Hades," he grumbled. The dog just wagged his tail happily as Zeke put his leash on him. He moved to his feet, closed the door, and handed me the leash.

We started down the side of the road in comfortable silence. Zeke stayed on the street side. The heat was finally easing up. The crickets were chirping

We were two blocks away when I looked up at him. His face was hard, his eyes unfocused on the road.

"You okay, Tough Guy?" I asked, my voice quiet in the night.

He looked down at me, his face softening a little. "Just thinking." His voice was the soft one he used with me once in a while. I loved that voice.

"About what?" When he didn't say anything, I took a guess. "You have homework from your doc, right?" Zeke's shrink often gave him

'homework', which was usually him talking to me about something.

He nodded before turning back to look down the block.

I looked down at Hades. "Are you ready to talk about it?"

"Do we have to talk?" His voice was almost a whisper.

I met his eyes again. They were tired, and quite frankly, so was I. "No," I said. "Having you around is enough."

The corner of his lips twitched.

We continued walking with Hades on my right and Zeke on my left. It was a nice, relaxing walk in comfortable silence. No issues, no talking, just being together. That long walk gave me peace and helped me feel better.

I never knew silence could be like that. Reviving. Renewing.



## **Isaac**

I ROLLED OVER AGAIN and punched the pillow into shape. Lexie kept filling my mind; her eyes, her touch, the smell of rosemary. Cursing, I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes. The feel of her dancing with me. Yeah, dancing with her wasn't new, but this... this time it was different. This time she was pressed against me, her skin under my fingertips. This time I wanted to kiss her. I tried to imagine how that would go. Looking down at her emerald eyes, holding her pretty face, and pressing my lips to hers. Only to be slapped and shoved away. I blinked, shook my head and tried again, only she slapped me again and called me a loser this time.

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. Even in my fantasies I couldn't kiss her! What did I expect?

She doesn't love you.

The words vibrated in my mind, shredding my heart. No shit. But she said she did...

That doesn't mean she's in love with you. There's no way. You're a bug under her shoe. She didn't even come by the stand - she sent Asher. She can't stand looking at you.

I was right. Deep down I knew I was. Lexie was loving; she loved and cared about everyone. That didn't make me special. Hell, I killed Sophie.

As soon as she realized it, she'd be gone. I'm nothing, and I mean nothing to her.

Unable to lay here anymore, I threw the covers off me and got up. I pulled on my clothes from today. Rosemary drifted off my clothes. My cock hardened against my zipper. God damn it. I shoved my feet into my shoes and left the house. I needed to walk, maybe even run. Anything to get my head to stop.

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# CHAPTER 7

SUNDAY

## Ethan

I was going downstairs when the front door opened. Isaac walked in, wearing the same clothes from last night.

"Hey, where were you?" I asked as I reached the first floor. "We're going to be late for Miles'." Isaac's eyes had heavy bags under them, his hair was a mess, even his face was pale. "Don't tell me you're getting sick, 'cause I'll leave your ass at home."

Isaac didn't even look at me as he passed me and headed up the stairs. What the...?

"Are you coming to Miles' house?" I asked. Isaac said nothing as he slammed his bedroom door behind him. My eyebrows went up. That's a hell no.



# Lexie

I had just hung up my phone after leaving another message on Serena's phone. That witch had yet to get back to me. I had questions about what I

had seen the other night. And I had already called her twice. The front door opened.

"Here!" Ethan shouted.

"Kitchen!" Everyone else shouted back.

"Fruit is done," Asher announced as Ethan walked into the kitchen.

Isaac wasn't there. Everyone picked up serving dishes and headed into the living room.

When everyone was sitting with their breakfast and coffee, I finally asked, "Where's Isaac?"

Ethan shrugged. "He's at home. He walked into the house this morning when I was coming downstairs."

"He didn't want to come?" Asher asked. That was strange, there was food here.

"I guess not." Ethan took a bite of toast.

"I thought you two talked last night," Miles said, turning to me.

I finished my bite before answering. "We did. I thought we were okay."

"Maybe he's getting sick." Ethan took a drink of his coffee. Probably, it still bothered me that he wasn't here.

"That's weird," I pointed out.

Ethan shrugged. "It happens, though it hasn't for a long time."

"Any word from Serena?" Asher asked after finishing his bite.

I shook my head. "Straight to voicemail. I get being busy, but... I think she's avoiding me."

"Well, from what you've told us," Miles began, pushing his glasses back up his nose, "that is entirely possible."

"Great, my only resource is dodging me," I grumbled. The room grew quiet.

We were halfway done with breakfast when Asher asked, "So, what are we doing today?"

"Well," Miles grabbed our attention, "I still owe Lexie a day of paintball."

I threw my hands up in the air. "Yes!" The guys chuckled.

"You'll need to change out of your shorts and into jeans," Zeke warned before he clenched his jaw. "Please?"

I stuck my tongue out at him. He shook his head as he went back to his breakfast.

"Did you just say please?" Ethan asked, his eyes wide and mouth gaping.

Zeke's eyes were hard as they went to him. "Shut it," he growled in his deep gravelly voice.

Ethan shut his mouth and went back to eating.

"If that's what we're doing, then I want to stop by and pick up Isaac," I told them.

"He'll probably be asleep," Ethan pointed out.

I smiled. "I can get his ass out of bed. There's always ice water." Everyone laughed.

We finished breakfast quickly. Before leaving, I went to 'my room' and found a pair of jeans in the dresser. Luckily, I also had a pair of sneakers here. Did I have any clothes still at home?

It wasn't long before I was driving over to the twins' house while the others headed for the paintball field. I parked and hurried inside. Maria, the twins' mom, was in the living room reading a book. Maria was beautiful; she had the same amber eyes and black hair as the twins.

She looked up when I stepped onto the stairs. "Oh, good," she said with a smile. "Go get his butt out of bed."

I sent her a thumbs up and moved up the stairs quietly. His door was closed. I moved to it and slowly opened it. Isaac's room was a mess. Clothes were everywhere. With the curtains closed, the room was dim. Isaac's twin bed was against the left hall wall. He was only wearing boxers that said 'got bacon' with strips of bacon all over them. The white sheets of his bed were tangled around his legs. I took a second to enjoy the lines of his back, before I pounced.

I ran and jumped, landing on his back with my knees on either side of his waist. He grunted. I dropped my upper body onto his back and rested my chin between his shoulder and neck.

"Get the fuck off," he growled.

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "We're going to play paintball. Get up!"

"Lexie..." he grumbled, burying his face in his pillow.

"Come on, I need help kicking Zeke's ass." I moved my face next to his neck.

"No, I'm not going."

"Yes, you are," I countered. He cursed. I started giving him raspberries on his neck. He managed to twist under me, get his arm around me, and drag me under him. I don't even know how he did it.

He lay back down, half on top of me, and glared.

I simply smiled up at him.

He shook his head, lowered the rest of his body to mine and nuzzled his face against my neck. "Do you really want to play paintball?" he whispered, his voice warm and rich. My heart picked up, warmth flooded my body. "We could stay here... puedo abrazarte todo lo día."

Oh...boy... um... I needed to get him to wake up. Like, now! I lifted my head and gave him another raspberry on his cheek without stopping.

"Knock it off." He tried to grumble, but he was holding back a laugh.

"I'm not gonna stop until you get out of bed." I pressed my lips against his neck again and continued the raspberries. He started laughing. I kept at it until he was fighting to get away.

"Okay, okay!" He finally gave in. I dropped my head back to the pillow.

"Are you gonna get up?" I asked sweetly.

He was smiling when he said, "Yeah, I'm getting up. Want to get out so I can get dressed?"

"Want to get your ass off of me?" I countered in a funny voice. He lifted himself up into a plank position. I slid out from under him and headed for the door.

"Hurry up! I want to kick Zeke's ass today," I told him before closing the door behind me. I took a minute to get my body under control. That voice... shit. I'd never heard him use that voice before. I leaned against the wall, my body humming. It took several more deep breaths before I could even push away from the wall. I headed back downstairs to wait.

"Is he waking up?" Maria asked.

"Yeah, I didn't give him an option," I admitted with a smile.

She chuckled. "Good. I'm glad at least one of you can get him out of bed."

"Well, it's either get up and go with me, or I annoy the hell out of him until he gets up and goes with me," I told her. "There's no real way for him to win." Maria was laughing when Isaac came downstairs in paint-stained jeans and a green camo shirt.

"Are we going?" he asked. I got up, said goodbye to Maria, and hurried out the door.

"Are you going to be grumpy?" I asked as we reached the Blazer.

He opened the passenger door. "I'm hungry." That explained it. Isaac got as grumpy as Zeke when he was hungry.

"I'll buy you lunch if you cheer up," I offered. He sent me a small half grin. I pulled out onto the street, wondering why he wasn't sleeping.

PAINTBALL WAS FUN, there was no denying it. You got to shoot your friends and dodge their hits. It was a blast. A splat hit the tree next to me. I dove for cover, rolled, and came up on my knees behind several metal barrels. The barrels dinged as they were hit with paintballs. Where were they? I peeked around the side and spotted Asher. I ducked back behind cover before peeking out again. I fired at him, only to get hit in the back. What the...? I turned. Isaac, the traitor, had shot me in the back. It was on now.

"You shit!" I shouted as I shot at him. He took off running, laughing as he went. I chased him, jumping over logs, moving around trees easily. He pulled ahead and dove for cover. I moved behind a large tree and tried to think about how I'd get to him. I was looking around when an idea sparked. Smiling, I let my paintball gun hang from the sling and started climbing the tree as quietly as I could. When I was hidden in the branches and high enough, I could see Isaac. And Zeke. And Miles. Fighting back a giggle, I got into a good spot and brought the gun up. I fired. Bright purple paint hit Isaac's shoulder. He dropped back behind cover. Zeke and Miles moved up through cover quietly, getting closer to Isaac.

Smiling, I took aim. I nailed Zeke in the shoulder. He cursed and dropped back behind cover. I was struggling not to laugh as I aimed for Miles. Miles was hunched behind a low log and moving to Zeke's side. I got him in the side. I had to put my hand over my mouth to stop my giggling.

"Where the hell is she?" Zeke snapped.

"She was behind me," Isaac yelled. I shot him in the back again for good measure. "Damn it, Red!" Now I really started giggling.

"Anyone see Lexie?" Zeke bellowed.

"No!" Ethan's shout came from somewhere below and behind me. I carefully turned in the tree.

"She was heading this way," Asher answered. I moved to another branch, being careful not to shake the leaves and give myself away. There.

Ethan and Asher were both huddled behind a barrier. The little shits had set a trap for me. I grinned, took aim, and hit Asher on the shoulder.

"Damn it." Asher moved and tried to hide more of his body behind the barrier. "Anyone see her?"

"No!" They answered in unison. I snickered silently.

"She's around here somewhere!" Ethan snapped. He began to move. I couldn't hit him in the back, but... I took aim and fired.

"Fuck!" Ethan snapped.

"What?" Miles called.

"She got my ass!" Ethan rubbed his butt cheek, cursing the entire time. I couldn't stop myself. I started laughing and couldn't stop. It didn't take long for Asher to figure out where I was.

"She's in that tree," Asher announced. I kept laughing. Everyone came out of cover, took off their masks and looked up.

"Get your ass down from there!" Zeke snapped. I shook my head, still laughing.

"Lexie, be careful," Miles warned.

"She totally cheated," Ethan pointed out.

I took off my mask and looked down at him, tears in my eyes. "A-are you butt hurt?" I burst out laughing, holding on to the branch below me. The others chuckled. Ethan's look promised retaliation.

"That is cheating, Red," Isaac chimed in.

"You were supposed to be on my team!" I reminded him. He chuckled.

"Ally, can you climb down?" Asher asked with a smile.

I took a deep breath. "Yeah, I just didn't want to try while I was still laughing." I let the gun hang on the sling and started moving down the tree branches. When I was almost down, hands bit into my hips and took me off the tree. The scent of vanilla reached me before Asher put me down.

I turned and smiled up at them. "So, I guess I win."

Asher pointed his gun at my leg and fired. It stung. "There, now no one wins." I flipped him off. Everyone laughed.

I eyed everyone's paint covered clothes. I was definitely the least covered. I had paint here and there, but I still had the least colorful clothes.

A buzzer was going off. Miles pulled out his phone. "Our time's up."

Everyone grumbled as we headed back. Then I was shot from behind, right on the butt. Twice. I turned. Zeke and Ethan were snickering.

"Hey! The game's over."

"That's for cheating," Ethan countered.

"And for hiding in the tree," Zeke added.

"You guys planned to trap me," I shot over my shoulder.

"You were hard to hit," Isaac pointed out.

"You'd think the hair would make it easier to find her," Ethan said. I was smiling as we walked into the parking lot. Once we reached Miles' car, everyone started pulling off gear and putting it into bags. I was putting mine into a bag with the name Lexie on it when my phone rang. I handed the gun to Miles before I answered.

"Yeah?"

"It's me." Jake's voice was thick.

"Hey, you okay?" I asked, tucking a stray paint-soaked hair behind my ear. Miles and Asher turned to watch me.

"Derrick dumped me." He sniffed.

"Fuck," I said. "I'm on my way, hon. Just text me your address."

"See you soon." He hung up.

I looked up to Asher. "Jake and Derrick broke up."

His brows shot up. "Damn. Is he okay?"

I shook my head as I tucked my phone into my pocket. "I gotta head up to Dulcet."

"Let me know if I can do anything," Asher said.

"I will." I turned and kissed Miles on the cheek. "Thanks, Miles." Then I headed for the Blazer.

It took me an hour and change to pick up Hades and drive to Jake's house. I made a quick stop for a full water bottle, tissues, chocolate, and ice cream. It was the only thing I could think of that might help. It's what I would want if I got my heart broken. Shit. I forgot the cookies. Oh well. I was already at Jake's house.

It was a nice cottage with an English rose garden in front next to the white picket fence. It looked like it came right out of a magazine.

We hurried up to the door and knocked. Jake opened the door looking like shit. He had deep bags under his bloodshot eyes, and his nose was red.

Heart aching, I stepped inside and hugged him. He held on tight. When he finally let go I held up the grocery bags. "I come bearing junk food."

He gave me a half-hearted lift of the lips. He took the bag and headed into the kitchen. The house was charming, small, but then again it was only Jake and his mom. Everything looked... perfect. Neat, tidy - like no one

actually lived here. It creeped me out. I let go of Hades' leash; we followed Jake into the white kitchen. He was still only in his flaming-hearts pj bottoms. He put the ice cream away then grabbed the tissues and the chocolate before he led me to the living room couch.

"What happened?" I asked gently as I sat down on the couch facing him. Hades sat near my feet, watching Jake.

Jake sniffed. "He was tired of me being jealous." He opened the tissue box. "I apologized and everything. I even told him I knew I was being stupid." Tears started falling down his face.

"What did he say to that?" I asked carefully.

His breathing grew faster. "He - he said, 'If you don't trust me by now, you sure as hell don't know me." His shoulders shook.

"Oh, honey." I opened my arms. He hugged me. held him tight, tears running down my face as sobs racked his body. He hurt so much. I didn't know how he could stand it. "Just breath, Jake," I whispered to him. "Take a deep breath for me and let it out slowly." I kept holding him tight, my hand running up and down his back. Even Hades put his head against Jake's leg.

"I fucked everything up. He was one of my best friends," he said between gasps.

"It's going to be okay," I told him. I didn't know how, or if it was even true, but what else could I say? I rocked him side to side and tried to think of something to say. I couldn't say it wasn't his fault, or that Derrick was an asshole. That would be lying. Which I normally didn't mind, but... I didn't know what to say. So I held him close and listened as he poured his heart out. I rocked him, dumped the waste basket of tissues, got ice cream, and listened. Eventually, we put a comedy on. He fell asleep with his head in my lap while we watched it.

It was over an hour later when the front door opened. Hades' head snapped up and he moved to my side. Dylan stepped around the corner and went still. His eyes met mine, his face grew strained. Great. I put my finger to my lips to tell him to be quiet. He raised an eyebrow. I pointed at the couch. He moved closer so he could look over the back of the couch. Hades started growling a low growl.

"Heel," I whispered. Hades looked at me as if he was going to argue, but did as I said.

Dylan sighed and then looked at me. "You can get up. He sleeps like a log," he whispered.

I eyed Jake. He did seem to be out cold. "You're sure?" I whispered.

He nodded, his eyes full of shadows. "Unless you start banging pans together, he'll stay asleep." He moved around the couch. Hades moved so he could watch him, keeping his body between me and Dylan.

"He's gotten huge," Dylan muttered as he carefully lifted Jake's head off my lap. I moved off the couch. Dylan lowered Jake's head to the pillow that had been behind me. When he stepped back, Jake was still asleep.

"Thank God, 'cause I've had to go to the bathroom for half an hour," I muttered before walking down the hall to find the bathroom. Hades was hot on my heels; he even insisted on going into the bathroom with me. Odd.

When I was done, I looked in the mirror. Okay, Dylan was here. Would I be a bad friend if I bailed on Jake? I didn't know. I sighed. I was going to have to stay as long as I could. With Dylan in the house. Great. I took a deep, calming breath before stepping back out into the hall.

When we walked back into the living area, Dylan was in the kitchen pouring two glasses of ice tea. He picked them up and handed me one.

"Thanks," I said, keeping my voice quiet.

He tilted his head to the porch, then headed for the glass back door. I debated how smart it would be to go onto the porch with my ex. I looked at the couch. Then again, Jake was asleep and right here. Not to mention Hades was with me. Shit.

I followed him outside onto a large, shady deck. It wasn't too hot in the shade at least. I sat down on a chaise and crossed my legs under me. Hades sat next to me, watching Dylan. Dylan hesitated a moment before sitting down at the end of the chaise.

"How is he?" he asked, his voice still quiet.

I turned my head to look through the window at Jake's sleeping form.

"He's hurting." I didn't know how else to explain it.

He nodded his gaze on Jake. "Did he tell you what was going on?"

I nodded and turned back to Dylan. "That he was being jealous and an ass? Yeah, I heard about it the other day."

His lips half grinned at me. "You're the one who told him he was being an ass, right?"

"Yeah." I shrugged then looked back at Jake. "It was too late though."

"How bad is he hurting?" he asked.

I turned back to him. He was serious. "His heart's broken, and it was his own fault for pushing Derrick away. I'd say pretty bad." I scratched Hades' ears. He leaned into it.

Dylan looked down at the glass of tea between his knees. "I remember," he muttered. It took me a moment to realize what he meant. He was thinking of our break up. I tried to ignore it, but he wasn't going to.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice soft.

"For?" I asked carefully.

"All of it." He met my eyes. "I shouldn't have said what I did. And I sure as hell should have listened that night at the hospital."

But not the rest of the time? I looked down at the tea in my hand. "Thank you."

He got to his feet and moved to look over the railing to the backyard. "I want us to be able to talk. It's a small area, Lexie." He turned and leaned on the railing. "We're going to run into each other. It'd be nice if you didn't run away every time."

I raised an eyebrow at that. "I'm not running away from you, Dylan. I just don't have a reason to talk to you."

"We were friends," he reminded me.

"Yeah, we were," I admitted. "But then you said what you said, and that made me not trust you."

He frowned. "Do you think you'll ever forgive me?"

I met his gaze and told him the truth. "I already have. But that doesn't mean I've forgotten what you did."

"Was what I did that bad?" he asked. Was he serious? He seemed to realize what he said. "Not the hospital thing, or things I said that night. I was way out of line. But... everything else?"

Didn't he get it? "Dylan, I asked you not to call. I told you to leave me alone, and you didn't listen." I shook my head, not believing that I had to explain this to him. "The way you were acting... I didn't even think twice about it when Rory said they arrested you."

His face grew dark as he looked away. "I wasn't thinking back then. I was... I was hurting and stupid."

"That's not a good enough reason to act the way you did," I told him honestly.

He came towards me, his shoulders blocking out the sun as he stood over me. "I've said I'm sorry—"

I flashed on the cabin. Ice on my face.

"Dylan, back up," I told him.

Hands gripping my sweater, yanking me to my feet.

"I'm not trying to touch—"

"It's not an ex thing, it's an Ordin thing," I snapped as I scrambled to my feet on the other side of the chaise and backed up several feet. Hades came with me, jumping over the chaise, keeping himself against my legs and between me and Dylan. I focused on the present and took deep breaths. I was at Jake's. Hades was here. It was June. The feel of Hades' fur under my fingers. The sweat running down my back. It took a little time, but when I opened my eyes I was okay. A little shaken, but okay.

I met his eyes. "That is why I can't be friends with you."

"What just happened?" he asked, his brow drawn down.

"You just triggered a flash." I took a deep breath and let it out. "I'm not the same person that you knew. I need people around me who will listen when I tell them to back up. And that's not you." I picked up Hades' leash. "I'm going to head out."

I walked around the chaise and past him to the door.

"I didn't know," he reminded me.

I sighed. I didn't bother to turn around. "You didn't have to. You just had to *listen*." I opened the door and closed it quietly behind me. I picked up my keys and left Dylan on the deck.

I was in my bedroom working on a drawing when my phone rang. It was Riley.

"Hey, make-out girl," I answered with a smile.

"Not funny," she told me, though her voice made it clear she was smiling.

I burst out laughing.

"Lexie!"

I decided to let it go. "Tell me what happened and why didn't you tell me you liked Ryan?"

She sighed. "Because, I didn't know if he liked me."

"Well, from the look of that kiss I'd say he does," I chimed, grinning from ear to ear.

"Yeah, well, shit," she said, her voice embarrassed. "Yeah, okay, he asked me out, I said yes and... we..."

"Started making out in the doorway of a church?" I asked, my voice helpful as I grinned wickedly.

"It wasn't that bad!" she insisted. I started laughing again. "Lexie!"

"Sorry, sorry." I tried to get control of myself again.

"He's sweet, Lexie," she told me. "He's funny, he's sexy as hell and, well, when he looks at me..."

I smiled, remembering that feeling. "Oh, it's like that, huh?"

"Yeah. It's like that," she admitted. "He even holds my hand around other people."

"Then you better hold on to him," I said. "And kiss him, and make out in a church—"

"Shut up," she snapped, laughing. "I'm going to be busy for a bit; Ryan has a bunch of dates planned out."

I snorted.

"He plans dates, Lexie!" she practically squealed.

I shook my head. "I'm happy for you, hon."

"Oh, shit, that's him on the other line," she said in a rush. "Talk to you later."

I hung up the phone still laughing at her. I couldn't blame her for being so giddy. When Riley was dating Zeke she was constantly unsure about where she stood with him. Now, with Ryan, she was getting what she needed. My dirty mind came out to play. I snorted at myself.

I continued working for an hour, until Hades got up and whined at me. Smiling, I put down my colored pencil and headed downstairs.

Rory was on the phone in the living room when I took Hades to the back door and opened it for him.

While he went out I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

"Yeah," Rory muttered. "I understand."

I ignored it while I waited for Hades at the door. Eventually he lumbered in and went to his food dish. I went into the living room and dropped into the chair near the door. I was taking a drink of water when Rory hung up the house phone with a frown on his face. His eyes met mine and I knew this wasn't going to be good.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Tired," I admitted.

"Dr. Peltier said that would happen. Your body is fighting to keep the black spot from spreading. At least, that's what he thinks is going on."

I nodded. I figured it was something like that.

He nodded as if he expected it. "That was the doctor. He needs to know if we're doing surgery."

I scoffed. "You know as well as I do that it won't do shit."

"It might act as a stop gap," he offered.

"It's brain surgery," I countered.

"It's an option no one's ever tried before," Rory pointed out.

Shit. He was right, but.... I met Rory's eyes. "It's brain surgery. What are the chances that there'll be a fuck up? That it will cause more damage than they fixed?" I focused on the coffee table and tried to make him understand. "They don't know what this is. They don't know how to handle it. And..." I let out a breath and met his eyes. "Honestly, I'm not going to be their lab rat when I could be doing something fun."

His eyes searched mine before he nodded. "I'll tell the doctor. But that means there are some other decisions to be made."

I looked away from him. "I know. I'm trying to figure it out." Needing to get away from this conversation, I got to my feet and headed upstairs. I paused on the steps. "Thanks, Rory."

"No problem, kid," he replied. I started up the stairs again and went into my room. Having made one decision was a relief, as if I had been carrying a weight I didn't know about until it was gone. One down, a few more to go. I sat on my bed and tried to figure out who I was going to hang out with tomorrow afternoon.

Alexis: Hey, what are the plans for tomorrow?

It took a minute or so to get an answer.

Miles: Your first day is tomorrow.

Alexis: I know, I meant after.

Ethan: I'm free late in the afternoon.

Asher: Working all day.

Miles: I'm working on my RPG, but I can change my plans.

Alexis: Miles, you don't have to change your plans. I'll probably stop by anyway.

Miles: Alright, come over anytime.

Ethan: Come over around four tomorrow.

Alexis: You're on. Thanks, guys.

Hmmm, no Zeke. He must be working right now. But... why didn't Isaac answer?

I sat looking at my phone. There was someone else I wanted to see tomorrow too. I found her number in my contacts and called.

"Hello?" Laura's voice was hesitant.

"Hey, it's Lexie," I said cheerfully.

"Oh, Lexie. Hi," she said, surprised.

"I was thinking we could hit the dog park tomorrow afternoon?" I asked, hoping she'd finally say yes.

"Oh, um. Yeah. I-I can do that," she said, her voice shaking around the edges. "What time?"

I should be out of work by one according to what Meghan told me. "Around three."

"Okay, I'll see you at two," she said quickly before hanging up.

Okay... I was tired of trying to be friends with Laura when all she did was dodge me. But at the same time, she was so shy I didn't know if that was the case or she was just being... shy.

Putting it out of my mind, I got up and gathered my pajamas before I went to take a shower. When I came back my phone had a message.

Zeke: I'm working right now.

I snorted. Zeke messaging - short and to the point. I shook my head before pulling out the futon and climbing in. I was about to fall asleep when my phone dinged again. Expecting it to be Isaac, I checked.

Zeke: I don't know what I'm doing tomorrow.

I sent him a smiley face emoji before putting my phone down and falling asleep.



Isaac

METAL SMASHED METAL. The car jerked again. I held Sophie tight to my chest.

"Izzy." She coughed. I looked down to find blood trailing from her mouth. Her amber eyes were wide, tears filling them. "Why didn't you save me?" Her voice shook. My heart split in two. I bashed on the door, slamming my shoulder into it over and over.

"Hold on, Sophie, I'm getting you help," I told her, my voice thick as desperation took control. I slammed and hit the door over and over. "Let us out!"

"Izzy..." her sweet voice called. I looked down into my arms. Bright red blood poured from her mouth onto her chest. "Make it stop." She coughed a wet cough that ended with her gasping for breath.

"Sophie..." I begged.

"Make it stop..." she pleaded.

Oh God. I moved my hand over her face and covered her mouth and nose. I screamed at myself as I watched Sophie fight my hold.

STOP! STOP!

I was helpless as I watched myself smother my little sister. Sophie's movements slowed, and then stopped altogether.

No. No. NO. NO!

I BOLTED UP IN BED, my heart pounding, sweat running down my chest as I struggled to breathe. Sophie... no... everything was foggy and... did I...? No. No. I didn't. No way in hell.

Maybe you just now remembered.

My eyes burned as my stomach rolled. I couldn't have... I loved her... I was begging for her to stay...

Were you really? Or did you hold your hand over her face and finish her off?

Bile rose in my throat as I ran from my bed to the bathroom. I was sick over and over, my body shaking, tears running down my face as that voice filled my mind.

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## CHAPTER 8

#### MONDAY

## **Isaac**

climbed to my feet and picked up my skateboard. It was early. There weren't many people at the park yet, even though the best time to skate was before it got too hot.

After that nightmare, I couldn't get back to sleep. Doubts kept swimming through my head. Did I do that to Sophie? I couldn't have... but what if I just didn't remember? A deep pit burned in my chest as I tried to remember. I rubbed my hand over my eyes and started to head across the street to the gas station. Coffee. Coffee was what I needed.

I had just crossed the street when my phone rang. It was Ethan. I sent it to voicemail immediately. Oh, good. They had ice coffee. I quickly made my drink, went to the counter and paid before I headed back to the park.

I spent most of the day in the park. I skated, watched others, and sat in the shade when it was too hot. I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to be around anyone right now. Leaning back against the tree, I wanted to disappear.

Joshua eventually showed up and came over. "Hey, man." His eyes ran over me. "You look like crap."

"No shit," I bit out.

"Whoa. You're in a shitty mood,"

I met his eyes. "Just... leave me the fuck alone, man."

Josh eyed me. "You fighting with what's her name?"

I sighed. "Yeah, and I want to be left alone," I lied. Anything to get him to go away.

Josh nodded and headed towards the park. Good. I just needed to... figure this out.

My phone rang. It was Red. It rang again. I couldn't... I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I couldn't talk to her until I knew. If I really did that to Sophie... I swallowed back bile. I opened my eyes and sent her to voicemail. If I talked to her, I'd tell her everything. And... I couldn't handle that. The way she'd look at me... I closed my eyes tight and took deep breaths through my tightening chest. I waited as long as I could before tapping my phone and checking my messages.

The first was just Ethan wondering where I was. I deleted it.

"Hey, Cookie Monster." Lexie's voice was cheery and warm. "I just finished my work today, I'll tell you all about it later. I'm at the dog park to meet Laura and thought it'd be fun if you came out, but... you're probably doing something. I'll talk to ya later. Love ya." I smiled to myself. Hearing Lexie that cheerful made me relax. I hit repeat. Her voice played in my ear again. Lexie. I closed my eyes and listened.

Why was I torturing myself? Between Lexie knowing about Sophie and that stupid fucking agreement, I didn't have a fucking chance. What the hell was I thinking? Yeah, I didn't want the guys dating her, but... I didn't know if I wanted to either. I pulled my phone from my ear, brought up her picture, and grinned. It was a selfie I had taken with her. Her arms were wrapped around my waist as she smiled up at the camera, all that copper hair back in a braid. Her eyes were bright and full of laughter. She had come out to give me a ride home from the skate park. I didn't even ask, she just knew that Ethan had the car and surprised me. We'd spent a couple of hours talking and goofing around before we headed home. That had been a good day.

It was a lie.

My grin faded.

She's just pretending. She spoke to Sophie; she knows what you did.

My chest ached deeply. It's true. There was no way she would ever... she deserved so much better than an asshole like me.

Unable to stop myself, I played her message again and held it to my ear as my eyes burned. "Hey, Cookie Monster..."

## Lexie

I HUNG up my phone and looked around the almost empty park. It was a weekday, so it wasn't packed, but I still couldn't find Laura. Did I get stood up? I walked Hades around the park and kept an eye out.

Half an hour later, I still couldn't find her. Finally giving up, we headed toward the parking lot. We were halfway down the path when Brooklyn came into sight. Great.

Her blue eyes spotted me and grew wide. She had a small dog that reminded me, oddly, of an Ewok - white with brown markings and cute as hell.

When I got within speaking distance I said, "Hi."

She gave me a nervous smile. "Hey." Her eyes moved to Hades. "Big dog. "

"Yeah, he is." I gestured to hers. "Yours is cute as hell."

"Thanks. His name is Yoda," she offered, relaxing a bit.

I smiled. "I was just thinking that he reminded me of an Ewok."

She chuckled a bit. Then she seemed to decide something. "Can we talk?"

What? She wanted to talk? "Um, sure," I said, not knowing what to expect. We started walking back into the park. When she didn't say anything, I tried to get the conversation started. "So... what did you want to talk about?"

"The band," she admitted. "I... I know how good you were before your voice got messed up."

I nodded.

She swallowed hard. "I-I guess... I want to know if you're going to come back to the band?"

"I can't," I admitted. "My throat took too much damage. I don't have the voice anymore."

"Are you sure?" she asked uncertainly.

I figured it out. "You think you're just a stand-in, right?"

Her cheeks turned pink. "Um, well, yeah. I mean, I like the band and want to stay, but... I don't want to get so into it that if you come back..."

"You don't have to worry about that," I told her. "It's not going to happen."

She nodded.

"Brooklyn, Ethan picked you because you're good. Your voice harmonizes with his and Ryan's. You're not a placeholder," I told her. "You're a band member for as long as you want to be."

Her eyes met mine. "You think?"

I smiled. "I know Ethan, and Ryan and Oliver. They were looking for someone for the long haul."

She nodded, her eyes misty. "Thanks, Lexie."

"No problem." We walked and continued talking for a while. Turned out she was actually pretty nice. She had two older brothers who drove her crazy, and a mother who wouldn't get off her case about her hair. By the time I left, we had exchanged phone numbers.

I PULLED up in front of Rory's house behind Zeke's Jeep. What was Zeke doing here? I thought he was busy today. I got out, closely followed by Hades. He was scratching on the door before I even reached the lawn.

The front door opened. Hades jumped on Zeke and went into crazy-happy-tail-wagging mode. He moved into the house and out of the doorway. I hurried into the air-conditioned heaven and closed the door behind me. Zeke was on his knees, playing with Hades as he went nuts. He grinned as he played.

"How was your first day?" he asked as Hades chewed on his hand.

"Good, the artists were awesome, except one but apparently he gets grumpy when he gets interrupted." I said as Hades finally started to calm down. I dropped onto the couch. "So, what's going on? You usually never show up unless I'm here." He'd been trying to avoid Tara for months now.

He looked up at me, his shoulders tense and his face hard. "I need a favor."

I raised an eyebrow.

I was biting back a smile as Zeke walked into the department store at the mall with me. He had cursed under his breath the entire drive here. Since he had grown two inches, his shirts were now too short and were annoying the hell out of him, not to mention they were tight in the shoulders now, too. And from the bitching I was hearing, he hated shopping. I resisted the urge

to rub my hands together in joy. This was going to be fun. Zeke led me to the big-and-tall section of the store.

"So, are we just getting shirts?" I asked as he moved through the racks of clothes.

"Yeah," he grumbled. I sighed. He stopped at a wall of shirts. He gestured at the wall. "Which are the black ones?"

I smiled to myself before pointing to the row. "Right there." He started going through the shirts. "Do you know what size you need now?"

"Probably just a size up. Two-XLT," he growled. He really didn't like this. Naturally, I had to poke.

"You should try a shirt on just to make sure," I told him. He shot me a look over his shoulder. "What? Do you want to come back and return them simply because you didn't take five minutes to try it on?"

He scowled at me before turning back to the wall. He picked out one shirt then turned. "Fine." He started away from the wall. I moved quickly and grabbed a dark blue V-neck and hurried after him, fighting back a laugh. I caught him before he reached the dressing rooms.

"Wait, try this one." I held it out to him with a straight face.

He scowled at me. "Why?"

"Because you grabbed a crew neck and I've noticed you pulling at your neckline lately," I explained in a rush. It was true but, well, I wanted to fuck with him and make Sylvie's week.

He grumbled as he took the shirt and headed in. I stood at the doorway that led to the fitting rooms and pulled out my phone. "Come out when you try it on."

"Why the fuck would I do that?" he snapped.

I smiled and pulled an excuse out of my ass. "Well, if you don't lift your arms, you won't be able to tell if it's too short. I can make sure." I brought up the camera on my phone. If he came out, I only had a few seconds to take the pic before he killed me.

It only took a minute or so for him to come out in the dark-blue V-neck. My breath stopped. The dark-blue shirt that hugged his muscles brought out his eyes even more. Oh... fuck... My heart raced, my body tingled.

He fingered the collar. "You were right about the crew neck." His voice brought me back to the mission at hand.

I held up the camera. "Zeke." He lifted his head to look at me. I snapped the pic fast.

His brow came down, his shoulders grew tense. Oh, he was pissed. "What the fuck are you doing?"

I started snickering as I quickly sent the pic to Sylvie. "Nothing, just... um." I dissolved into laughter as I hit send.

Zeke stalked towards me. "Lexie." I backed up and darted down the hall of empty dressing rooms. "Give me the phone."

I was laughing so much that, when I reached the mirrors at the dead end of the dressing room, I was breathless. I turned around and tried to breathe.

His face was hard as he moved towards me. "Who did you send it to?" He demanded as he got closer.

I snorted and planned my escape. He finally got within arm's reach. I darted left, jumping over the arm of a couch and trying to hurry past him.

Zeke's hand grabbed my arm, stopping me. "Give me the phone." He held me steady on the couch as he reached to take my phone from me. I dropped it out of his reach and he tried again.

"Nope!" I stuffed the phone into my bra as I kept smiling up at him.

He stopped trying to grab it. "I will go after it," he warned.

I burst out laughing. "No you won't. You're a terrible liar."

He narrowed his eyes at me.

I snickered.

"What did you do with the pic?" he asked.

I gave him a big smile. "I sent it to Sylvie."

He cursed. I chuckled. My footing on the cushions shifted. He reached out and steadied me without a thought.

"Who else did you send it to?" he demanded as he kept me from falling.

"No one," I admitted. I was still smiling at him when he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It looked like he was searching for patience. "I just wanted to make Sylvie's day."

Those ice-blue eyes opened and met mine. My heart skipped as I held his gaze. His grip on my arms eased.

"Are you really mad about the picture?" I asked, my voice quiet.

"Gonna delete it?" he asked in that deep, quiet voice he used with me every once in a while. Chills ran down my spine - in a good way.

"Do I have to?" I grinned up at him, hoping he'd say no.

"Yeah," he growled. Then he closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. "Please get rid of it."

My curiosity piqued. "Why have you been saying please so much?"

He sighed. "It's my homework for the week."

I grinned. "Really?"

"Yeah." He gritted his teeth as his grip softened. "I... know I can be a controlling asshole. So... I'm trying not to be a controlling asshole and order you around."

I looked him in the eye and said in a matter of fact voice, "It's not like I usually listen anyway."

He glared at me with his jaw clenched. "I'm aware."

I gave him a big smile.

"Now, delete the pic, please," he asked again, his voice strained.

"Zeke, come on," I tried again. "It'll make my day."

"Fuck no," he snapped.

Giving up, I sighed and reached into my shirt. I pulled my phone out of my bra and handed it to him. "Here. Delete it. Grumpy pants." He took it from me as I stepped down onto the floor and headed to the front of the dressing room. If he didn't trust me with it then it was okay, but I thought he knew me better than that. It was just a joke anyway.

Eventually, he followed me to the doorway and handed me my phone before going back into his dressing room, all but slamming the door behind him. I tapped my phone and started looking through my stuff, wondering if Zeke might have gotten some revenge. I was almost done when I found the picture of Zeke in the blue shirt. I blinked. I thought... under the photo was a caption.

*If one of the guys gets this, you're dead. -Z* 

I smiled to myself. He let me keep the pic.

In the end, Zeke ended up buying a dozen or so black, V-neck T-shirts. He asked me three times if they were black. I had to promise him they were. He almost called Miles to confirm, but eventually believed me.

We were halfway to the Jeep when my face gave a familiar ache. I caught the first drip of blood.

"Shit." I dug in my pocket for tissues. Before I could pull them out, Zeke was handing me his handkerchief. I took it and held it to my nose. Zeke was silent as we got into the Jeep. He turned it on and blasted the air-conditioning. I put on my seatbelt and waited for him to start driving, only he didn't. He sat there watching me, like a wolf eyeing a trap.

"A ghost?" he asked.

I looked out the window. "No... I, uh, think it's just the dry air."

"Lexie." His gravelly voice had me turning back to him. His brow was drawn down, his eyes worried. "What's going on?"

There it was. The perfect opportunity to tell him what was happening. I had to tell him. I couldn't keep it to myself. Come on, Lexie. Open your mouth and say, 'It's getting worse.' I opened my mouth to tell him but nothing came out. Say it! My throat closed. I closed my mouth and looked out the windshield. Fuck! "It's just, you know, the dry air and heat." You fucking wuss. Zeke watched me for several more minutes before starting the car.

"Okay," he said. I closed my eyes as he drove out of the parking lot. He believed me. Shit. Guilt hit me hard. Why couldn't I nut up? I cursed myself all the way home.

BY THE TIME Zeke pulled up in front of the house, I was tired again. Seriously, this was getting annoying as hell.

"I'll wash your handkerchief and get it back to you with the others," I told him as I undid my seatbelt.

He nodded, his eyes on the road. "Thanks for helping."

I smiled. "Thanks for the pic."

He glared at me. I snorted as I got out of his Jeep and headed in.

I was halfway up the stairs when I noticed my door was open. Oh, come on! Taking a deep breath, I climbed the rest of the stairs. I leaned against the doorjamb and crossed my arms. Tara was rifling through my research books. Stay calm. Don't kill her. I eyed Hades. The big lug was on my futon watching Tara calmly. The traitor.

She sat in my desk chair and opened my bottom drawer. My supply drawer. She pulled out my research journal. It was nothing big, just what I had found that worked against the dead and what didn't. She opened it and began to read. Yeah, it wasn't important, but it still pissed me off.

"What are you looking for?" I asked. Tara jumped to her feet and spun around. "Because I took my really expensive supplies and rare books over to Miles' place days ago."

She put my book down on the desk. "Why are you so determined to keep this stuff from me?"

Was she fucking serious? "You tried to blackmail me just the other day. Why would I tell you anything?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I deserve to know."

"Why the sudden interest?" I asked, my voice tired.

She pressed her mouth together and looked everywhere but at me. "I'm having nightmares." I stood there, stunned that she actually answered. "They won't stop."

I tilted my head to the side and eyed her. Was she trying to play me? Or was she telling the truth? "What kind?"

She shook her head. "I'm driving to the cemetery," she whispered before she met my eyes. "Then I tackle you and choke you." Oh fuck. But she wasn't done. "Then I'm burning, as if I'm on fire." My heart stopped. Mary Summers. When her body was salted and burned. That feeling still haunted my dreams. I never thought Tara would remember it. Shit, shit, shit. What the fuck was I going to say to her?

"You need to talk to your dad about this," I tried. "He'll be able to help."

Her eyes flashed as they met mine. "You know something," she stated. "What is going on?"

"Tara... you really should talk to Rory," I repeated.

"No. You tell me. Now!" she hissed.

I sighed. Fine. It wasn't as if she didn't have the right to know. "In October, there was this ghost. There were circumstances that gave her more energy than she should have. She was determined to take over my body or kill me." I met her eyes. "She found you at that one party, she possessed you, and used you to drive to the cemetery. She tried to take me over again, and when that didn't work, she used you to attack me." She gaped at me in horror. "It wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could have done about it. Rory thought it was best that if you didn't remember, then we shouldn't tell you."

She took deep breaths and looked down at the floor. "Why do I remember burning?" she asked, her eyes filling with tears.

I stepped closer, not knowing how to comfort her. "Because, while she was attacking me, the guys... the guys did something to get rid of her. Her anchor, her connection to this world was severed. That was the burning you felt."

She looked away from me as tears fell down her face. "It was... so painful..."

"I know," I said quietly. Her eyes snapped to mine. "I felt it too."

Her gaze ran over me, her face filled with jealousy. "Why you?" "What?"

Her blue eyes were burning as they met mine. "Why you? You get Asher, you get Zeke. Why do you get the abilities too? Why do you get everything?" she spat out.

"I don't have Asher. Or Zeke," I told her, my heart aching as I realized the truth. "What I do have is an expiration date." She narrowed her eyes at me. "I'm going to die before I turn thirty. That's the record. Hell, the tests are saying sooner."

"What?" she asked, her eyes clearing.

"That's what happens, Tara. The dead either take over your life or you go out being jumped by the dead and your brain gets fried." My eyes burned as a vise clenched my heart.

"How do you-"

"Because our grandmother died that way. So did our Aunt Claire, and she was only eight years old. Plus, Dr. Peltier's test confirms it. I'll probably die before I even graduate." I took a deep breath. "You think these abilities are so great? Take 'em. 'Cause I'm going to die early. You're going to graduate. You're going to get the chance to get married, have a family. Fuck. You're going to get to grow old." Tears fell down my face as my heart filled with envy and pain with every word. "While you get to do all of that, I'll be six feet under. As worm food." I shook my head and wiped my face. "You'll get to live. You got fucking lucky, Tara. So stop acting like a little brat who isn't getting what she wants." I wiped my face, resisting the urge to hit her. "Now, get the fuck out of my room."

Tara eyed me before walking out the door. I slammed it closed behind her. I sat down on my futon as tears continued to fall. Hades moved his head into my lap. I stroked his ears as it hit me.

I was in love with them. All of them. Miles, Asher, Ethan, Zeke, Isaac... all of them. And I couldn't have any of them. I was going to die early, and I wasn't about to drag one of them down with me. Tears fell as I cried into Hades' fur.



Around four in the afternoon, I was in my room tuning my guitar when the front door opened.

"I'm here!" Lexie shouted from downstairs.

"Be down in a sec!" I called back as I got up and put my acoustic guitar back on its stand. I picked up the sheet music off my dresser and hurried down the stairs. When she looked up I slowed on the steps. Her eyes were bloodshot, the skin around her eyes pink. My heart sank. "Beautiful?"

She gave me a forced smile. "So, what are we doing?"

Oh, fuck that. I stepped off the stairs and crossed the room to stand in front of her. "Why do you look like you've been crying?"

She shrugged. "Oh, it's just allergies. Been sneezing all day. I think the antihistamines finally kicked in."

"Are you sure?" I asked, running my eyes over her. It could be allergies... I'd had them pretty bad a few weeks ago.

"Yeah, something is just blooming." She gestured to the music in my hands. "What's that?"

I held up the sheet music, deciding to let it go, though not sure if I should. "Yeah, I thought it'd be a good time to teach you the piano."

She grinned. "You are just determined to teach me how to play an instrument."

"Yep." I took her arm, led her over to the piano and patted the bench. "Sit." I lifted the key cover and sat down on one side of the bench. She sighed before sitting next to me, her shoulder pressing against mine. "Okay, first, the keys." I set one finger on middle C. "This"—I pressed the key several times so she could hear the note—"is middle C. When playing the piano, middle C is where you want to start, at least until you get the hang of it. Give me your right hand." She held her hand out to me palm up. I turned her hand over and placed her thumb on middle C. "Now, your thumb is on middle C..."

I began to run her through the notes slowly. She chewed the bottom corner of her lip as she learned the notes. Her eyes focused completely on the keys, blocking everything else out like she did when she was doing homework. I had spent enough time watching her when I was supposed to be doing my own homework. When she concentrated like this, she picked things up quickly.

It wasn't long before I began giving her a melody to follow by simply saying a finger number. Soon she was playing 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little

Star.' When she ran through the melody twice without making a mistake she threw an arm up.

"Yes!" she exclaimed before she looked up at me. Her eyes were clear and happy, her face glowing. My heart skipped a beat as she met my eyes. Rosemary filled my lungs. She was right there, her body heat warming my side. My eyes traveled over her face, the sweep of her lashes, to the curve of her cheek and down to those lips.

"So, that's all it is?" she asked, reminding me what we were doing.

I tore my eyes from her and back to the music. "Um, yeah. That's the basics. Eventually, you'll learn chords and how to use both hands at the same time."

"Play something?" she asked in a quiet voice. I turned back to her and went still. She was looking up at me from under her lashes with a small grin. My will disappeared with that look. I met her eyes and a song came to me.

I turned to the back to the piano and placed my fingers on the keys. I began the first notes of 'By Your Side' by Lifehouse. I focused on the music and tried not to worry if I was showing my cards or not.

As I played the last notes, she leaned her head against my shoulder. When I was done I looked down at her. She had a sweet, serene look on her face.

"Again?" she whispered. That nagging feeling that something was wrong was back. I wanted to ask, but... if she wanted to talk about it she would. So I did the only thing I could. I played for her. One song flowed into another, and another. There was nothing else in the world but us and the music.



# Asher

I OPENED THE FRONT DOOR, looking forward to relaxing after work. Dinner. What was defrosted in the fridge?

Cursing caught my attention. I moved from the doorway and into the living room just in time to watch Dad take down a picture of Mom. Anger rolled through me.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

He turned and put the picture frame in a box. "Taking these down, again."

"Why?" I snapped.

Dad pulled down the last photo in the living room, picked up the box and turned around. "Because, there's no point in reminding everyone she's gone," he snapped before moving into the foyer and starting on those pictures.

"It's not a reminder," I told him. "It's to remember the good times we had with her." Dad kept taking down pictures. I walked up behind him. "It's wrong to erase her from the house as if she never lived." He slowed. "She was our mother. Why shouldn't we have photos of her up?"

He turned around and glared at me. "Because it's my house and I don't want them up." He moved past me, bumping my shoulder. I turned to watch him put the box on the foyer table. He picked up Mom's flag.

"Where the hell did this come from?" he snapped.

"Ally had it made at Christmas," I said, my voice quiet.

He scowled, then used the case to point at me. "I told you I would get one when the time was right."

"When is the time going to be right? You've had more than two years," I pointed out. He shook his head and flipped the box around. His fingers moved to the latches. No!

I snatched the box out of his hands before he could open it. "What the hell is the matter with you?" I shouted. "Someone did something nice for Mom, something you never did, and you get pissed about it?"

He turned on me, fire burning in his eyes. "It's this girl, isn't it? That's where you got the idea you don't want to play football." I looked at him like he was insane. Was he kidding?

He shook his head. "You can't hang out with her anymore. She's a bad influence."

That was it. "She's a good person who actually listens to me."

He scowled at me. "As long as you live under my roof—"

"Well, it's a damn good thing I have options," I snapped. "I'm out until you're gone. It shouldn't be long, three or four days. Max."

I moved past him and went back upstairs, taking Mom's flag with me. I quickly packed a duffle and carefully put the flag in with my stuff. I headed downstairs and shouldered past him on my way out the door.

He was yelling at me from the porch as I pulled away from the curb, still seething.



#### Lexie

I PARKED the Blazer in front of Miles' house, on the circular driveway. The three-story gray stone mansion was covered in green ivy now. It looked pretty in the summer.

I leaned my head back, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. Ethan was asking if I was okay. So was Zeke. If I wasn't careful they'd call a family meeting and ask to know what was going on. I looked at the red truck. Huh, Asher's here.

Grumbling, I got out and let Hades jump down to the gravel. I needed those research books. I shut the door and headed inside. Was that... was that pizza? I closed the front door behind me.

"I'm here!" I shouted, as much as I could.

"Kitchen!" Miles called.

Hades took off for the smell of food; I followed at a less hungry pace. Sure enough, on the counter were two pizza boxes. That wasn't right.

"Where's Asher?" I asked as I stepped up to the counter. "I saw his truck outside."

"Asher is upstairs in his room," Miles informed me as he put his dish in the sink.

My eyes met his. "There's pizza from a restaurant and Asher is *here*?" I asked, just to be clear. Miles nodded. Oh, shit. Something was wrong. "Did something happen?"

"Asher and his dad are not getting along. Asher will be staying here until he leaves," he explained. Holy shit.

I looked at the door to the kitchen. "Which room?"

"Right hall, second on the right side," Miles said. I sent him a smile before heading upstairs. I never really spent much time upstairs in Miles' house. My bedroom was the master bedroom downstairs. I stopped at the door and knocked.

"It's me," I announced.

"Come in." Asher's voice was low. I didn't like it. I opened the door and smiled. Asher's room looked a lot like, well, him. Shelves of cookbooks everywhere. The walls here were more of a buttery yellow, his comforter was a light, faded blue, and of course there were rock climbing holds all over the walls. But what held my attention was Asher, laying on his back, sideways across a queen-size bed.

I closed the door behind me and climbed onto the bed to sit near his head. I piled a couple of pillows behind me so I could lay against them with my knees barely bent. His eyes were closed. I rubbed a fingertip over the center of his forehead. He opened his eyes and met mine.

"Hi," I whispered.

"Hi," he whispered back.

"You okay?" I asked, keeping my voice soft.

He sighed. "No."

"What happened?" I asked gently. He sighed deeply and closed his eyes.

"Things haven't been good," he began. "Any time I see him, we argue."

"What about?"

He looked up at me, his eyes full of shadows. Instead of saying anything he moved closer, his head finding my stomach. My fingers instantly moved into his hair. He closed his eyes and sighed. My other hand found his upper chest. Vanilla and cinnamon surrounded me as he took that hand and stroked my fingers with his. We sat like that for several minutes, until he was ready to tell me.

"I told him I didn't want to play pro football," he announced. Whoa. Asher told his dad that? Holy...

"How did he take that?" I asked, hoping his dad was understanding. But from the look on his face, I doubted it.

"To sum up, he told me I was too stupid to get into college on my own, and that he wouldn't pay for it or co-sign a student loan," he said, his voice matter-of-fact. My chest ached.

"Oh, Ash." I squeezed his hand tight. He squeezed back. "I'm sorry he said that."

"What the fuck am I going to do?" He looked up at me.

"You have amazing grades, so you have options for scholarships that aren't related to football. If you can get a couple, then that would bring the loans down and you might be able to get a loan without a co-signer," I tried

to reassure him. "And if they don't, there is still financial aid. And community college."

"Yeah," he said. "You're right, there are ways to still get there."

"Besides, he might be bluffing," I offered.

He met my eyes and shook his head. "He doesn't bluff."

I continued moving my fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry, Ash."

He squeezed my hand. "That's not even why I left."

"Miles only said you and your dad aren't getting along..."

He shook his head. "He got angry about the flag case." His voice was soft. "And I couldn't believe it. You did something nice for Mom, and he was angry about it. It just hit me, then."

"What did?" I asked.

"What an asshole he is," he whispered. "He couldn't see past his issues to see how thoughtful it was." His gaze moved to the ceiling, his eyes unfocused.

"I wish I could fix it," I admitted. He squeezed my hand. We were quiet for several minutes.

"In my desk at home, I have emancipation forms," he said.

My eyebrows went up. "Are you going to file?"

He closed his eyes. "I think so."

My heart ached. I hated to do this, but I knew Asher. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

He rolled his head on my stomach to look up at me. "I don't know."

"Honey, I know your dad's a dick, but he is only here for a little while. If you do this, you'll be leaving Jessica alone in that house." He winced. "And if something happened to her, you'd never forgive yourself."

His face grew dark. "I don't know if I care anymore."

I ran my fingers through his hair again, getting his attention. "You do. It doesn't feel like it right now, but you do. I'm not saying don't do it, I'm saying that you should wait and take your time to think about it when you aren't upset and angry."

His eyes unfocused on my face. I waited. He sighed. "Alright, I'll think about it more." His eyes focused on me again. "How was Jake? I haven't heard from him."

I sighed. "Heartbroken. He's been acting jealous whenever Derrick talked to a girl for a month now. Derrick had finally had enough."

"Damn," he muttered. "They'll work it out, Ally." His fingers began rubbing mine again. "They've been friends for years."

"I don't know." I took a deep breath and told him the rest. "Dylan showed up."

Asher's brow drew down as he shifted so he could see me better. "What happened?"

"He apologized for what he said. Then he said he wanted to be friends." I still couldn't believe it.

"Wow, what did you say?" he asked quietly, his fingers tightening on mine.

I met his eyes. "I told him no." I explained to him how Dylan had stood over me and not listened when I told him to back off.

His gaze ran over my face. "Are you alright?"

I gave him a smile. "I'm okay. It's over. I've said my piece, he's said his. And he knows it's not going to happen."

"Good. Otherwise he'll get a beating of a lifetime," he grumbled.

I chuckled. "So, are you going to come downstairs and eat? Or do I have to call everyone to come over and hang out here?"

"Oh God, no." He chuckled. "I'm getting up."



## **Isaac**

Seventy-eight, seventy-nine. My heart hammered in my chest, my muscles burned. I did another push up, and another. I kept moving. I was going to get some sleep tonight, I had to. Eighty-two, eighty-three. My lungs burned for air. My arms shook before they gave out. I dropped to the floor of my room and tried to catch my breath. The voice... it needed to stop... I rolled onto my back, bent my knees and began doing crunches, alternating center with side-to-side.

I had taken sleeping stuff. I've tried warm milk. I tried moving all day. Now I was down to working out until I was exhausted. My abs burned. I kept pushing it.

It's not going to work, you'll still be the asshole who killed his sister.

I pushed it harder, barely allowing myself to breath. I needed to sleep... I couldn't take it anymore... I focused on moving my body the way I needed to. Focused on every movement, every twist, until everything else fell away. But the voice never went anywhere. It was still there, whispering to me.

Finally, I dropped back onto the floor, my body exhausted and aching. Images of me smothering Sophie kept flashing. I couldn't do this anymore. I needed to know the truth.

You know the truth.

No. If I had done that, Sophie would have told Lexie... Lexie. I had to know. I had to ask. Darkness washed over me and I sighed gratefully. Tomorrow... I'd ask her tomorrow....

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# CHAPTER 9

#### TUESDAY

## **Isaac**

woke up gasping, images of Sophie floating through my mind. It took me several minutes before I realized I was on the floor in my room. What...? Oh... right... My muscles protested when I got up and moved to my dresser. Mom's probably at work, Ethan was probably here... The urge to pound my fist into his face flashed through me. My hands shook. I needed to get out. I pulled on some clothes, jammed my feet into my sneakers, and then rushed out my bedroom door and down the stairs. I grabbed the keys off the table next to the door as Ethan walked out of the kitchen.

"Hey, where are you going?" Ethan asked. "I gotta go over to Miles' today."

Rage tore through me as I turned around. "Then fucking walk, like I've been fucking doing for the last year," I snapped.

Ethan's eyes grew wide. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"What the fuck do you think it means?" I shouted in Spanish. "For once *you* can fucking walk!" I stormed out the door, slamming it behind me. I wasn't going to deal with his shit anymore.

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Lexie

An annoying ringing had me rolling over and unsuccessfully trying to pick up my phone.

"Yeah?" I mumbled.

"We can't even be in the same room!" Jake shouted in my ear. I rolled onto my back and tried to wake up.

"What? Huh?" I asked, blinking as I tried to get used to the light streaming in my window.

"Derrick and I met last night to try and talk things out," Jake explained, his voice thick. "We barely said a sentence to each other before we started yelling. That fucker can go to hell!"

What? "Wait... slow down." I tried to understand. "What happened when you met?"

"We can't stand each other, that's what happened," he grumbled. "He started saying how it was all my fault. And I asked him if he was still talking to his ex-girlfriends. He admitted it!"

I blinked at the high note in his voice. "What? He said... what?"

"He said he was being friendly with his exes," he scoffed. "I know what being friendly for Derrick is, and those bitches still like him."

Was he fucking serious? "Jake," I stated calmly, "do you have proof? Have you seen him flirt, actually flirt, with an ex?"

"Well, no. But he does," he countered.

I shook my head. "Okay, so you were acting like a jealous ass to the point he broke up with you, you had a chance to fix it and work it out, but instead you went in and accused him of more flirting?"

The line was silent for several heartbeats.

"Um... yeah," he admitted.

"Damn it, Jake," I snapped. "Why?"

"I don't know! When I saw him I got pissed and went off." He sighed. "I don't even want to be around him anymore."

"He's been your friend for years," I reminded him.

"Yeah, well. Maybe we weren't good enough friends to get through this shit," he groused. I sighed. I was afraid of this.

"I'm sorry, hon," I said.

"Never date a friend, Lexie." He sniffed. "You just... it implodes."

I spent the next hour calming him down. During that hour I fed Hades, took him out, and made coffee and toast. I didn't have much of an appetite this morning. When I hung up, my heart was aching for Jake.

When I went back upstairs I checked the time. It was one in the afternoon. How the hell had I slept so long? I had gone to bed before midnight... Shit.

Not having any plans, I picked up my drawing supplies and went back downstairs to work.

I was at the table, looking out the window and drawing the lake when Tara came down stairs. I ignored her as I focused on my work. I had coffee, I was drawing, there was no reason for her to talk to me.

Tara made a sandwich and grabbed a soda before sitting at the table. My shoulders grew tense as I continued to ignore her. We sat in silence.

After she finished her lunch, she reached across the table and slid one of my completed drawings to her. I focused on shading a section.

"These are good," Tara said.

I paused in my drawing. "Thanks." I didn't know what to make of it, so I went back to drawing.

"You say you're dying, but... you got a job. Why?" she asked directly.

I stopped drawing and looked up at her. "I've always wanted to be a tattoo artist." I looked back down at my drawing. "If I don't get to do that, at least I'll get to work in a shop for a while." I went back to drawing.

"When you showed up, Dad treated you different," she said. I stopped drawing as she continued. "He let you get away with stuff I never could."

"Well, now you know why," I told her. "I'm dying, so he lets me out to deal with ghost crap."

"Yeah, I get it now," she whispered. "Your friends, do they know?"

"You mean Zeke and Asher?" I asked as I changed pencils.

"No, all of them," she said. "Isaac knew what to do in April when you fell into the water."

"Yeah, they do," I admitted as I looked up and met her eyes. "They've saved my ass... I can't even count how many times now."

"They really do care about you," she pointed out.

"They're my friends." I went back to drawing.

"Well, I'm glad you have them," she said before getting up and heading for the stairs.

Damn it. "If you want, I can make you a sachet for nightmares?" I offered before I realized it.

She stopped at the stairs. "Thanks." She smiled before heading back upstairs.

Well, that was weird. Maybe realizing I was going die soon loosened the stick from her ass?

I worked for another half hour before the door opened. Asher strode in.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he asked as he closed the door behind him.

"Drawing." I smiled as I put my stuff aside. "What are you doing?"

"Picking you up," he countered. "We're going swimming."

I started picking up my stuff, happy to get out of the house and away from Tara. "Give me five minutes."

WE TOOK his truck and left Hades behind since it was still too hot out for him. Asher had pulled off the highway and onto an old paved road I'd never seen before.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Asher smiled as he pulled off onto a dirt road. "There's a great hidden swimming spot out here that we used to swim at."

"Why's it so great?" I asked, curious now.

"No one but the guys really know about it," he said. He stopped the truck at the end of the dirt trail.

"Oh yeah?" I picked up my towel and put my sunglasses on top of my head.

He grabbed his towel. "Yeah, now you don't have to worry about people being blinded by your pale legs."

I shot him a look before getting out. Asher chuckled as he got out on his side and came around. "It's this way." He pointed down a trail. Asher led me down the trail for five minutes before we reached the lake.

The swimming hole was beautiful. It was a small inlet surrounded by trees and grass. In the middle of the cove was a platform floating on the water. An old rope hung from a tree near the water. The water was practically clear.

"Wow," I said.

"Nice, right?" he said.

"Where'd the platform come from?" I asked when we reached the waterline. I slipped my sandals off before unbuttoning my shorts.

"We made it at Zeke's then brought it out here and anchored it," Asher said, his voice muffled a little. I looked over and pressed my lips together. Asher was taking off his shirt, showing off his muscled upper body. My

eyes ran down his defined abs to his board shorts that rode low on his... I turned my back so I could get my drooling under control. Damn. I let out a breath as I pulled off my shorts and put them on my towel. There was a splash. I looked over my shoulder as Asher was coming back up. I went back to taking off my shirt, tossing it onto the rock with my sunglasses before I went to the shoreline. I ran and dove into the water. I came back up and swam out further.

"Nice splash," he teased. I splashed him and then started swimming. Asher started swimming after me.

We swung into the water, swam and jumped off the platform for over an hour.

The sun was behind the mountain when I was floating. I moved from my back and dunked again, slicking my hair back. I wiped the water out of my eyes after I came back up.

Asher was watching me with a small grin on his face. That fucking grin killed me. "Why are you smiling? Do I look that funny without makeup?" He snorted.

"You're beautiful, Ally," he said, his voice serious. I rolled my eyes.

"Cute I'll give ya. Beautiful? Not buying it." I shook my head at him. He chuckled before dunking and coming back up. He slicked back his hair. I looked away for my own sanity.

I pointed out to the platform. "Come on, let's get out for a bit." I swam for the platform, climbing up the ladder when I reached it. I sat down on the side, my feet in the water. Asher joined me, his knee bent behind me, his arm hanging on his knee. The other leg dangled in the water. The sun was behind the mountain throwing the inlet into the shade. It was a pretty evening. I looked up at him to find him looking down at the water, his face somber.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked gently.

He sighed. "About what you said last night." He turned to look down at me. "You were right. I'd regret leaving Jess, even if I don't recognize her anymore."

"I'm sorry, Ash," I said.

He shook his head, his eyes back on mine. "Don't be. You were right."

"I didn't want to be," I admitted. "Hell, you'd be happier if I wasn't. But then..."

"I'd regret it," he finished for me. "Like you said."

"I'm sorry," I told him.

"Ally." I looked up and met his eyes. "How did you know I'd regret it?" I gave him a small, soft smile. "I know you." My voice was quiet, just barely louder than the water lapping at the platform.

"You really do," he whispered. His eyes ran over my face. "I care about you, Ally."

"I care about you too."

He swallowed hard. "No, Ally... I have feelings for you." My heart raced. Everything stopped.

"You... do?" I asked, stunned. Was this really fucking happening?

"Ever since you stayed that week with me," he said softly. "I thought I'd just ride it out... but my feelings aren't going away." His ocean eyes ran over me again. My heart raced as warmth poured through me. "Do..." He swallowed hard. "Do you have feelings for me?"

My heart slammed against my ribs, taking my breath away. Before I realized it, I was answering softly. "Yeah."

The tension left his shoulders as he let out the breath he'd been holding. He smiled and for a moment I thought it might work. That I could be with him and be happy. Then I remembered what my future held and reality came crashing down.

"But..." I took a deep breath as I met his eyes. "But I don't think that matters."

His face fell. I had to give him a reason, a reason that wasn't the truth. I scrambled for an excuse. "Ash, if it went wrong... If we try and break up... I-I-I would lose all of you."

His eyes unfocused as he looked out at the water again. "You think it wouldn't work?"

My heart breaking, I answered. "That's not it. I just... if it went wrong, I could lose everyone."

He looked down at me. "No, you wouldn't, we're family. We'd never \_\_\_"

"Look at Jake and Derrick," I said desperately. Please buy this. I can't... I can't tell you the truth, not yet. "They can't even be in the same room right now and they have years of being friends over us." My throat tightened. "I can't lose you guys."

"Ally, they broke up a couple of days ago," he reminded me. "It's going to take some time for them to adjust. But..."

"Do you really want to take that chance?" I asked quietly. Asher. Please. Believe it...

We were quiet for a few minutes. "Shit," he cursed with feeling. "Ally... I can't lose you. Even if..." He took a breath. "Even for the chance of something more."

"I can't lose you guys either."

He wrapped his arm around me and buried his face into my hair. This was for the best... really it was.

"I shouldn't have said a damn thing," he said, his voice thick. "I shouldn't have told you. I should have just kept my mouth shut." I squeezed him back.

"No, Ash. It's okay," I reassured him. It was nice to hear once. "We both know this can't happen, so now maybe we can move on." I hoped I wasn't full of shit. I wiped my face, hoping he wouldn't notice. His lips moved to my forehead.

"Ally," he groaned softly. He noticed. I rubbed my hand over his back.

"It's okay. I'm a girl. We leak." He snorted, his hold loosening. I pulled away and wiped my face again, looking back towards shore.

"Did I just screw everything up between us?" His voice was pained. I looked up at him and shook my head, my heart sore and aching.

"No, Superman, we'll be okay." I reached up and ran my fingers along his jaw. "It's just going to suck for a while." He looked like his heart was hurting too. It was hard to see. I dropped my hand and turned back toward shore. "We... we should head back."

"Yeah, we're supposed to meet at Miles' soon," he said. I nodded and then slipped into the water. He splashed in behind me.

When we reached the shore, we silently got dressed and headed back to the truck. Neither one of us spoke as we got in. He started the truck while I put my seatbelt on. The tension was so thick in the cab I could almost taste it. This was the right thing to do. Too bad my heart wouldn't listen.

We were almost back to the old paved road when he stopped the truck and put it in park.

"What are we doing, Ally?" he whispered.

"Um. I..." I didn't know what to say.

"Why aren't we going to try?" he asked, his voice soft. My pulse skipped.

"Because if we broke up..." I met his rough eyes.

He leaned over the console then his lips were on mine. My heart slammed in my chest, my eyes closed automatically as his lips moved. He kissed me gently before his lips pressed down. Then I was kissing him back. I couldn't stop myself, I didn't want to. Vanilla and cinnamon filled my senses as his fingers slid up my jaw until he held my cheek.

My lips opened to his; he slipped in and scrambled my brain. He kissed me sweetly, his mouth driving everything away. I moved with him, not caring if this was smart, or right. I just wanted to feel Asher a little longer. His free hand moved to my knee. Tingles rushed through me as his fingers brushed my skin. He kissed me deeply, my heart raced in my chest. In the back of my mind, I knew this was stupid. This was Asher. Wonderful, talented, sexy as all hell Asher. I had fucking loved him for months. I knew I couldn't have him, I just... needed this memory. I needed this feeling just a little fucking longer. His fingers moved up the skin on the outside of my thigh. Our kiss slowed, became gentler, softer. When he pulled back, I tried to catch my breath. His hand moved down to hold my neck, his thumb running over my throat. His eyes met mine.

"Why aren't we trying?" he whispered. My chest ached. I bit the corner of my bottom lip. He needed to believe me. I wasn't ready to tell him...

"Because..." I swallowed hard, trying to get my mind back. "Because if it went wrong, it could go really wrong. Remember Jake and Derrick?" I reached up and held his hand against my neck. His eyes ran over my face before meeting my eyes again.

"But if it didn't go bad?" he offered. "What if it went the other way?"

I bit my lip again. I couldn't see a way out, not without lying. I swallowed hard. "Then someone else will get hurt," I admitted. He sighed deeply and closed his eyes.

"Zeke, right?" he asked. I pulled back, his hand dropped from my neck.

"I didn't say that," I whispered, my chest burning.

He gave me a sad smile. "You didn't have to." He looked out the windshield. "I'm not blind, Ally. I've seen the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is paying attention."

I rubbed my eyes with one hand. I couldn't correct him. This might be the only way for him to understand. "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about," he said before he turned to look down at me. "If anyone deserves a girl like you, it's Zeke."

My eyes burned as I swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, I don't want to hurt anybody," I said quietly.

He rubbed his neck. "I kissed you," he reminded me. He shook his head. "And... I can't do that to Zeke." He met my eyes again. "I'll step back, Ally."

"Is that what you want?" I asked in a whisper. He needed to believe me...

He gave me a sad grin. "For Zeke? It won't be easy, but yeah."

I closed my eyes and rested my head back on the headrest. I needed to be more careful. First Zeke, then Ethan, and now Asher. "I'm sorry."

"Ally, there's no reason to be," he said. "I'm glad I kissed you, even if it was just once."

"Me too." I really was. It was something I'd never regret. Something I could hold to my heart.

He put the truck in gear and drove up the dirt road.

We were silent the entire drive back to my house. He pulled up to the curb and parked the car. I hesitated to get out of the truck. "Ash—"

My phone rang. So did Asher's.

It was Zeke.

"Hey," I said as Asher answered his phone.

"Are you driving?" he asked. I rolled my eyes.

"No, I'm at my house in Asher's truck." I didn't bother to ask why he wanted to know. It was Zeke. "What's up?"

"Baby... Miles is in the emergency room."

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slammed the Blazer door shut and ran across the emergency room parking lot while Asher was just pulling into the lot behind me. I didn't care if I was acting nuts or if I looked insane. Miles was in the emergency room!

Zeke came out of the automated glass door in time to stop me from going in. His hands grabbed my arms and forced me to stop.

"Lexie, stop!" he snapped. I tried to break his hold, but he only pulled me closer. "Miles is fine! He has a broken arm that needs surgery and he banged his head, but that is it!" I stopped trying to break his hold. My eyes burned as I met his gaze.

"That's it?" I asked, my voice small.

His face softened. "That's it, Baby," he said in a soft voice. Well, as soft as Zeke's voice got. His eyes ran over my face and then back to my eyes. "So calm down, or they won't let you in the ER to see them."

My heart dropped. "Them?"

He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and cursed.

"What do you mean 'them?" I asked very clearly.

He cursed again and met my eyes. "Ethan was also in the car. A truck ran a red light and hit the car on Miles' side." My lungs seized. Both of them? No... "Lexie, they're fine. Ethan didn't even want you to know until you got back there. He's got some stitches and he's a little banged up, but he's fine."

"What about his back?" I demanded.

His eyes grew shadowed. "They gave him some painkillers, so he's fine for now."

"That's not an answer," I pointed out.

He clenched his jaw. "His doctor ordered an MRI." My heart sank, Ethan's back...

"Fuck," I breathed. My gaze moved to his chest as I took deep breaths. His hands dropped from me.

"What's wrong?" Asher asked as he reached us.

"I told her about Ethan," Zeke grumbled.

"Damn it, Zeke," Asher muttered.

I turned around and looked up at Asher. "You knew?"

Asher started rubbing his neck. "Yeah. The only reason I didn't tell you was because Ethan asked me not to."

My temper sparked, but I kept it on a leash. "Okay, I'm not going to yell. But both of you are in deep shit."

"Let's go inside and you can see for yourself," Zeke suggested before turning and leading us through the ER waiting room. He went straight to the doors and knocked on the window to the right. "Huntington, bed eight."

The woman eyed us. "Only two visitors per patient," she announced.

"One of them is for Turner, bed seven," Zeke growled. The woman checked her computer then hit a button. A buzzer sounded. Zeke opened the door and led us in. He walked us down a hall to a larger room. Beds were lined up on the right wall behind blue curtains. We stopped at one with the number eight hanging from the ceiling. "Miles, you good?"

"He is, but I'm enjoying the air on my junk," Ethan responded. I rolled my eyes.

"Lexie's here," Zeke informed him.

"Cool, she can join the pants-less party," Ethan countered.

Zeke opened the curtain only enough for him to peek in. Ethan chuckled as Zeke flung opened the curtain the rest of the way. Ethan was in the left bed, half sitting up. The curtain between his section and Miles' was pulled all the way back. He had stitches over one eyebrow, and a few bruises, but seemed fine, if out of it.

Ethan smiled and waved. "Hola, linda!"

I eyed him. "You're loopy."

He smiled a big smile. "Yep. They're gonna take me to get an MRI in a few minutes." He pointed at Miles. "You might want to come in. He's blind right now." I slid past Zeke to stand between the beds. Miles was half sitting up; his left arm was covered in blood-soaked bandages while resting

on a table. His glasses were gone. Half his forehead was black and blue. The bruising ran down the side of his face. I didn't know who to go to first. I just wanted to hug both of them and hold on tight.

"Lexie, can you shut him up? My head is killing me," Miles asked, his voice slurred.

"Miles?" I asked softly. Worry filled my heart. That didn't sound like Miles.

"They'll be taking him into surgery soon," Zeke informed me, "so he's drugged too."

"Oh." I moved around Ethan's bed to the other side and sat on the edge.

"Mujer que es dueña de mi corazón," he said with a wide smile.

"Hey, Snoopy, can you lower your voice? Miles hit his head, hon," I reminded him. His eyes grew wide, he covered his mouth.

"Oops," he stage whispered. He dropped his hand and took mine. "Don't worry, we're going to be fine."

I squeezed his fingers. "I hope so."

Ethan winked at me. Then he turned to Asher. "Did you call Isaac and Ma?"

Asher nodded. "Maria is on her way. Isaac's phone went to voicemail. He's probably training right now."

Someone pushed back the curtain. A man in scrubs stepped in and eyed all of us. "Ethan Turner?"

Ethan raised his hand enthusiastically. "Present!"

I snorted.

The man chuckled as he pulled the curtain open all the way. "We're taking you to get your MRI."

I moved to get off the bed, but Ethan's hand pulled me closer. His glazed eyes met mine. "I'll be right back, Beautiful. Don't worry."

I smiled. "Okay, I'll see you when you get back." I leaned down to kiss his cheek and he turned his head so his lips were there instead. I barely pulled back in time. He snickered. I held his chin, and then leaned down and kissed his cheek.

"Worth a shot," he muttered. I was shaking my head as I got off the bed and moved out of the way.

Soon Ethan was gone. The guys grabbed the chairs from the other side of where Ethan's bed had been. I moved to Miles' non-injured side.

"Hey," I said softly. "It's me."

He grinned. "I know; I see a red blur and smell rosemary."

I chewed on the corner of my lower lip as I looked at him in the hospital bed. Miles lifted his hand from his chest and held it out to me. I took it. Relief filled me as I felt his warm skin. His thumb moved over my knuckles slowly.

"I'm okay. I just need some pins and plates in my arm," he explained.

"We'll push back the climbing trip," Asher offered. "How much recovery time will you need?"

Miles made his thinking face, the one that made a small wrinkle in between his eyebrows. "I... can't think right now."

My eyebrows went up. "Well, that's a first."

His lips twitched. His fingers squeezed my hand. "I hate to ask, but will you please go get my extra pair of glasses?"

"Of course. Where are they?" I asked, grateful there was something I could do.

"I'll go get 'em." Zeke stood up.

Miles turned his head. "No, you won't. I don't trust any of you in my room after last time."

Asher chuckled.

"What happened last time?" I asked, curious now.

"I came home and my room was a disaster," Miles explained, his voice slurring.

"We moved his books around on his shelves," Asher countered.

"Isaac moved his clothes from drawer to drawer," Zeke added. I shook my head. Yeah, that would drive Miles crazy.

He turned back to me. "Which is why I'm asking you to get my glasses."

"Where are they?" I grinned down at him.

"Right nightstand, top drawer," he said.

I squeezed his hand. "I'll go when they take you to surgery."

He squeezed my fingers back. "Thank you."

"Is there anything else you need from home?" I asked.

He blinked hard. "Um... I... damn it," he bit out. My eyebrows went up. He practically cursed. "I can't think. Stupid meds." He closed his eyes, frowning.

I carefully sat down on the edge of the bed facing him. "It's okay, sweetie, I'll bring you a set of clothes just in case."

Asher leaned forward and picked up a bag from under the bed. He opened it and rifled through its contents. "He'll need new clothes, these are covered in blood."

I closed my eyes as I wondered how much blood it would take to ruin clothes. I'm sure I didn't want to know. Miles squeezed my hand, bringing my attention back.

"Thank you," he muttered.

"No problem," I assured him.

The curtain was drawn back. "Miles Huntington, it's time for surgery," a man announced.

Miles squeezed my hand again.

"I'll go get your things," I told him, my voice fraying at the edges. I leaned down and kissed his cheek. "If your surgeon fucks up, I'm slashing their tires," I whispered softly into his ear. He gave me a small smile as I pulled away. Hating to leave him, but needing a minute, I left Miles' sectioned off area and headed out of the ER without another word.

By the time I reached the Blazer, I was shaking. I took deep breaths and focused on the fact that they were okay. They were alive and breathing. It took several minutes before I could start the truck and drive over to Miles' house.

I pulled to a stop in front of the house. Going over what Miles might like at the hospital, I unlocked the door and turned off the alarm.

It wasn't long before I was in Miles' bedroom. The room was black for the fiber optic stars in the ceiling. One wall was completely bookcases, and another a large corner desk with multiple computers and monitors. Finding Miles' closet, I opened it and tried not to move too many things as I found his book bag. I went to his dresser and pulled out a pair of loose mesh workout shorts and one of his loose gamer shirts. I hesitated at his top drawer. It had to be his underwear drawer, since I had already found everything else. Well, he was going to need a pair. I opened the drawer and found two different kinds. Short boxer briefs, and boxers. Okay... An image flashed of Miles in nothing but... I picked a pair of both and shoved them into the bag before I quickly closed the drawer. I didn't need to remember him almost naked. Making sure to grab a pair of his slip-on sandals, I zipped up the bag and moved to the right nightstand.

As I wondered how Miles was doing in surgery, I opened the drawer and found his extra glasses case. My fingers brushed paper. Curious, I

looked at the folded paper. It had to have been read many times, it was wrinkled to hell and back. It was just sitting there... so tempting. Curiosity nudged at me. Determined not to look, I got up, grabbed the bag, and went to the bookshelf. I pulled out a few books Miles' might like if he felt like reading. Then I was rushing out the door to get back to the hospital.

WAITING AT THE HOSPITAL SUCKED. There wasn't any other way to say it. It just sucked. I shifted in my chair and turned the page of Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein.' Ethan had been discharged a couple hours ago, so he was sitting beside me playing a game on his phone. Maria was pacing the waiting room. Isaac, who had finished training, was to my right, quiet as can be.

I put my book down. "You okay, Cookie Monster?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

I didn't buy it. His eyes had dark shadows underneath, and he was bouncing his knee. I leaned closer and rested my head on his shoulder. His knee stopped bouncing. "He'll be okay," I reminded him.

His shoulders stiffened. "Yeah, sure." His voice was clipped and strained. I wrapped my arm around his and squeezed to get his attention. Those amber eyes found mine. I gave him a small smile.

"Hey, they're okay," I reminded him.

His shadowed eyes softened a little. "I know. No thanks to me."

I frowned up at him. "What do you—"

"Ms. Turner?" A woman walked in wearing scrubs. Everyone turned to her.

Maria strode over. "How is he? Is he awake? Will he have full function of his arm?"

The doctor smiled. "He is fine. The surgery was flawless, no complications. He should have a full recovery in the next six to eight weeks," she announced. I sagged against Isaac's shoulder. "Since we did have to operate he will be spending the night with us, especially with the hit to the head. He's in room two-three-two on the second floor if you'd like to see him."

Everyone got to their feet and started for the door, leaving Maria behind to grill the doctor. Isaac and I fell into step behind Asher and Zeke. When we hit the stairs, I glanced up at him.

"What did you mean?" I asked.

"What?" He pulled a little ahead as we turned a corner in the stairwell.

"In the waiting room, you said, 'no thanks to me?" I kept my voice quiet.

"Nothing, forget about it," he muttered as he pulled ahead and reached the second floor before me. By the time I stepped through the door, he was already down the hall with the others. Strange. I followed at my own speed; short leg speed. Ethan, realizing I wasn't with them, stopped and waited for me.

"We lost you, huh?" Ethan asked with a grin.

"Yep, you guys were going the 'we forgot Lexie is short' speed," I teased. He chuckled as we turned the corner and found Miles' room.

I pulled Ethan to a stop carefully. "I think your brother is upset," I whispered. He stepped closer so his ear was next to my lips, his arm sliding around my waist. My skin warmed. I reminded myself to breath.

"Why?" he asked softly.

"He said something... I told him you guys were going to be okay. And he said, 'no thanks to me.'" I pulled back to see his face.

He didn't seem surprised. "I'll check on him."

"Thanks," I whispered. He squeezed my waist before turning and heading into the room. I followed.

Zeke was against the wall opposite the door. Asher was next to Miles' bed on the right wall. Isaac was against the wall near the door. Ethan walked in and sat down in the only chair in the corner of the room. Miles was half sitting up in bed again, squinting as Asher spoke to him. His left arm was in a white cast, held in a sling against his chest.

I pulled Miles' glasses out of the bag and moved to the right side, beside Asher. I put the case in Miles' hand.

Miles turned to me still squinting. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." I squeezed his hand and pulled the bag off my shoulder. "I brought you some shorts, a shirt and sandals for when you go home." I set the bag down on the bed.

"Shorts sound like a good idea," Miles admitted, voice tired.

"And that's my cue to leave," I announced. The guys chuckled.

"I can go in the bathroom," Miles offered, his ears tinting pink.

"Not with a hit to the head," I countered. "Don't worry, I'll pick up some drinks." I headed for the door.

It wasn't long before I was back with an armful of sodas and waters.

"Are you sure?" Maria's voice asked from behind the curtain. "Alright." Maria came out of the hospital room, closing the curtain behind her. She smiled when she spotted me. "They're getting him dressed now."

"Then I'll stay outside," I said. She chuckled as she stepped out of the room.

"How are you doing, honey?" she asked quietly

I smiled. "I'm worried about Ethan's back, and, well, Miles." I looked over her shoulder at the curtain. And I was starting to worry about Isaac. He'd been off for a couple of days now.

"Ethan will be okay, his doctor has already changed his pain meds," she reassured me, "though the brat won't go home until Miles does."

I smiled up at her. "I'll make sure he takes care of himself."

She wrapped her arm around me and squeezed. "I know you will. It's the only reason I'm agreeing to let him stay the night." I snorted. Maria squeezed me again. "I'll see you at dinner tomorrow?"

I smiled. "For Miles' birthday? Of course." She chuckled. There was cursing coming from inside.

Maria sighed before she headed back in. "Boys, what are you doing?" she demanded as she slipped behind the curtain. Laughter erupted in the room.

I was giggling until that chill ran down my neck. No... not now. I turned and looked down the hall. The soul of a woman in a hospital gown walked down the hallway in a daze. Her short, wavy hair was messy, her eyes wide. She looked to be in her early forties. Her triangular face was classically pretty, her cheekbones sharp as she looked around the hallway, trying to talk to the staff around her. But what caught my attention was the fact she was in black and white, her image fading in and out. I'd only seen that one time before.

My barriers shook and cracked. The need to be heard swamped me, making me fight for breath. Fuck. After crossing thirty souls this morning, this was going to hurt. I set the soda cans and bottles of water on the inside of the door and headed down the hallway. I walked past her and made eye contact. Her eyes grew wide as she realized I could see her. My barriers shook again. Shit. I moved further down the hall; the woman followed. I found a guest bathroom and went into the handicap stall. I closed the door and locked it. I stepped back before the woman walked through the door.

"You can see me?" she asked.

"Yeah." I sighed. "Who are you?"

"Caroline Peters," she said. "They aren't listening; they have to let me go."

Fuck me. "You're on life support." What was with today?

She nodded. "I want off of it. I don't want to be a vegetable the rest of my life."

My face ached, my nose started bleeding. I grabbed some toilet paper and held it to my face. "Look, I can't get them to take you off the machines."

"Please, you have to tell them—"

"And then I'll be thrown out because they'll think I'm nuts," I countered. "But I can try to cross you over."

"Do you think that will work?" she asked. "I don't want to stay here."

I shrugged. "I don't know. I've never tried and I don't know what will happen to your body. I might be killing you."

"I don't care," she told me. "I just want to go."

I nodded, and then slid down the wall to the floor. It's what she wanted; was it murder to do this? I didn't know. I reached out to her and wrapped that gold ribbon of will around her wrist. I dropped. As we fell there was resistance. We slowed. Shit! I focused on pulling her with me. Pain tore through me as I fought to drag her down. It took time.

When we finally landed in the Veil I felt scratched, torn. I dropped to the grass and shook. That hurt like a bitch. Caroline was smiling as she looked around. A golden ball came down from the Way.

"Thank you," she said. I waved to her as I tried to get my strength back. It took a few minutes. By the time I was on my feet again she was gone. I closed my eyes and pulled myself out.

Opening my eyes, my stomach rolled. I scrambled across the tile to the toilet. I was sick over and over. My head exploded and lights danced in front of my eyes. When I finally stopped heaving I stayed where I was. Blood poured into the bowl. When I could, I sat up and put tissues to my face. Leaning my head back against the stall door, I closed my eyes.

I don't know how long I sat there, miserable, but eventually the bleeding stopped. I tossed the tissues into the toilet and struggled to my feet. Throwing the latch, I moved out into the rest of the bathroom. I leaned against the counter and looked in the mirror. Dried blood caked my ears and

trailed down my neck. I grumbled as I grabbed some paper towels and got them wet. Then I went about cleaning my neck and face.

I looked into the mirror. How much longer could I do this? How much longer could I keep pushing it like this? Honestly? I looked at my paler-than-usual face, and my less-than-bright eyes. Not much longer. It was time to face it. I reached into the pocket of my shorts and pulled out my bracelets. I didn't even have a choice anymore; my barriers were going to hell. I needed to pull back... I slipped my beads on, resigned to spending the rest of my life wearing them if I had to. Don't be so dour, Lexie. Start with a day or so.

When I felt human again, I headed out into the hallway. People were running. I stayed near the wall. Down the hall, medical personal were spilling out of a room. I leaned against the wall and watched through the window as the doctor used the defibrillator on Caroline Peters.

I closed my eyes as I listened to the sound of a heart monitor flatlining. She was dead. It was her choice; she asked me to. It helped, but it didn't erase the guilt.

With a heavy heart, I headed back towards Miles' room. It felt farther than before. I turned the corner and almost ran into Isaac.

"Hey, Red. I was coming to look for you," Isaac told me as his eyes ran over my face. "You okay?"

I nodded and gave him a strained smile. "Yeah, fine."

He frowned at me. "Fine, don't tell me." He walked towards Miles' room.

"Isaac..." I called, my voice cracking. He stopped and turned back to me.

"What?" he bit out.

"I want to talk to you," I told him, my voice tired, "but you don't even answer the phone anymore."

He sighed deeply. "I... " He met my eyes. "I need to ask you some questions."

"Okay." I had no clue what about... "How does tomorrow afternoon sound?"

He nodded. "Sounds good." He walked beside me to Miles' hospital room.

He simply walked in. I stopped at the closed curtain. "Is it clear?" "He's dressed, Beautiful," Ethan called.

I started to pull back the curtain and hesitated. "Is he really dressed or are you fucking with me?"

The guys chuckled.

"He's dressed," Asher reassured me. I opened the curtain and walked in. Miles was pale and sweating in the bed. I walked over and grabbed a water bottle.

Zeke eyed me with a frown. "You okay?" he growled.

I gave him the same smile I gave Isaac. "Yeah, fine." I moved to the right side of Miles' bed, near Asher, and took a quick drink.

"Hey," I said softly. He opened his eyes and gave me a small smile. His backup glasses were rimless with narrow rectangular lenses. They looked... damn good on him. I bit back a smile.

"Do they look that funny?" he asked, his eyes still a bit glazed.

"No, actually, they look better than the last pair," I admitted.

He grinned. "Yeah, but they're easier to break."

"Hey, we're going to go see about getting chairs for everyone," Asher announced.

"Thanks, guys," I said. The guys headed out. I sat carefully on the side of the bed, facing him. "So, how are you feeling?"

He closed his eyes. "Like I was in a car wreck and had surgery."

I smiled. "If you need to sleep, sleep."

His hand moved to mine. I reached out and held his. He quickly fell asleep after that.

When I was sure he was asleep, I sat down in Ethan's chair. Caroline popped back into my head. The ventilator.... being stuck here when there was no hope of recovery.

I was deep in thought when Rory came into the room. He was still in his uniform as he moved to Miles' side. "How's he doing?"

"He had surgery to fix his broken arm. He's banged up and had a hit to the head," I explained. "Surgeon said he'd have full use of his arm again."

"Good." He sighed. "Well, his car is totaled."

I doubted Miles would care. Everyone in it was safe and alive.

"I need you tomorrow afternoon," he told me. "I have somewhere to take you."

"Sure," I muttered.

Rory's eyes ran over me. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, my eyes still unfocused. "I just crossed a woman who... she was in a coma, on a ventilator."

Rory came to my side. "What you do mean? You were able to help her cross when she was alive?"

I nodded. "She... didn't want to stay a vegetable. She asked me to cross her over." My stomach knotted. "It killed her."

He knelt down to my level. "That's not your fault, kid."

"I know." I swallowed hard before meeting his eyes. "No ventilator."

His eyes narrowed on mine. "What? You mean..."

"If it comes to it, no ventilator," I told him again.

His face softened, his eyes growing shadowed. "Alright." He sighed. "Have you told them yet?"

I shook my head. "I'm almost ready. Give me a couple more days, until after Miles' birthday." I only needed a little more time. He reached out and squeezed my hand. Two decisions down, how many more to go?

#### LATER THAT NIGHT

I shifted in my chair, trying to find a comfortable spot. There was only one sleeper chair, and everyone made sure that Ethan got it for the night. Especially when his pain meds stopped working. He was near the door, stretched out in the sleeper chair. Zeke was snoring in his chair in the corner of the room, Asher was out cold with his chin on his chest, Isaac had gone home, and Isaac had taken off a couple of hours before sunset. I shifted again. These chairs really did suck, but it was nothing compared to the anxiety running through me. The 'what could have happened?' scenarios; they were what was truly keeping me awake. I fingered the beads on my wrist.

The nurse came in, again. She woke Miles up, again. The poor guy wasn't getting any sleep, not with the nurse waking him up every half hour.

The nurse left. Miles sighed and met my eyes. "Can't sleep?"

I shrugged.

He carefully scooted to the left side of the bed and pulled back the covers.

Warmth filled my heart as I got to my feet and moved to the side of his bed. I slipped off my sandals and slowly climbed in. Miles lifted his good arm so I could move closer. I moved carefully to lay on my back. The bed was at an angle so that we weren't lying down completely. He turned a bit more so he could look down at me.

Those emerald eyes were warm when they met mine. "Why can't you sleep?" he whispered softly.

"My head won't stop," I admitted just as quietly, relaxing against him. "I keep running through everything that could have happened."

He blinked at me, his eyes still glazed. "There's something I want to tell you. Something about how worrying now is pointless. But I'm sure it'll come out wrong..."

I fought back a grin as he frowned. "Your pain meds are pretty strong."

He sighed. His brow drew together, his lips frowning. "I hate it, Angel. I hate feeling this way, not being able to think. So, I just lay here like a log and do nothing." Did he just call me angel? Again? My stomach fluttered at the thought.

I reached up and gently touched his chin. "You're healing. It's okay to do nothing for a while."

He closed his eyes and sighed deeply. "I still don't like not being able to think."

"I know, Nemo." I lowered my hand to his chest and rested it there.

He opened his eyes and met mine again. "Stay here, get some sleep."

My body warmed. "Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you."

"The bruising is all on my left side. You won't hit them," he promised. When I hesitated he added, "Please?"

I grinned as I curled up against him, my bent knees resting against his leg. Wintergreen filled my lungs. His hand gently ran up and down my back, soothing me. It wasn't long before I fell asleep.



## **Isaac**

The TEQUILA BURNED as it went down my throat. Maybe this will shut the voice up. The music was blasting and ringing in my ears. I took another drink from the bottle before looking around. I was in the corner of the house of... some guy Josh knew. The party was crazy; everyone was wasted and it had the feel of a party that wouldn't end until morning.

It's my fault. The whole fucking thing was my fault. I closed my eyes and let my head fall back to rest on the back of the chair. If I hadn't taken the car this morning, Ethan wouldn't have been in Miles' car.

And Miles wouldn't have been at the intersection.

That damn voice! I took a deep drink. Shit. Why didn't I think of that earlier? Fuck. Rage burned in my gut along with that need again. I looked around me. Everyone was wasted. All it would take was one swing... I pushed myself out of the chair and to my feet. The tequila sloshed out of the bottle and onto the carpet.

I got to my feet and staggered through the crowd toward the door. The urge to hit someone tore through me. I moved a little faster. My hands shook as I got to the door. Air, I needed air. I walked out onto the grass and leaned against the tree in the middle of the yard. I took several deep breaths.

You almost got them killed, just like Sophie.

I... I needed to... Lexie. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone.

*She's with Miles and Ethan.* 

I cursed and tried to stop the shaking. Lexie... I'm gonna see her tomorrow... Tapping my phone with my thumb, I brought up her picture again.

She's probably cuddled up with Ethan by now.

My heart raced as that urge came back, the urge for pain, to bleed. I took a deep drink from the bottle as I brought up my voicemail and listened to her message again. Tomorrow, she could tell me tomorrow. I swallowed hard. If I did do that to Sophie... Lexie would know. A hole burned in my chest as I took another drink.

"Hey, Isaac, what are ya doing?" Josh called from the door. Not now. He needed to stay away.

"Getting air," I told him as I kept looking at my phone. He came outside. My stomach burned. Couldn't he leave me the fuck alone?

Josh stood across from me. "What's with you?"

I shot him a glare. The urge to pound my fist into his face rolled over me. I focused on those green eyes on my phone.

"You and that Lexie chick broke up, didn't ya?" Josh asked with a smile. Rage ate at my control.

He thinks the worst of her, always has.

He needed to stop talking. Josh knew I didn't like it when he talked about Lexie. The shit always went too far. "No," I growled.

"Don't feel bad, at least you're off the bitch's leash," he offered with a chuckle.

The world grew red. Fury crashed through me, making me shake. I looked up from my phone and met his eyes. That motherfucker. Something dark washed over me.

I dropped the phone and the bottle before lunging at Josh.

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## CHAPTER 11

#### WEDNESDAY

woke up slowly, Miles' scent surrounding me. Miles, the wreck, hospital. It came rushing back. I opened my eyes. Miles' eyes were closed, his breathing deep and even. He was alright. As I woke up I realized the hand of Miles' broken arm was on the inside of my bent knee. His warm fingers rested on sensitive skin. I tried not to feel the tingle running up my thigh. The strange feeling of being watched had me opening my eyes. I turned my head and looked around the hospital room.

Zeke was in his chair in the corner. His phone was in his hands, but he wasn't looking at it. He was looking at us with a longing on his face so intense it took my breath away. His eyes met mine and the look was gone, as if it had never been. He went back to looking at his phone and ignoring me. Was, was he jealous that I was cuddling with Miles? That didn't feel right. That wasn't jealousy I saw.

Carefully, I slipped out of Miles' bed and walked out into the hallway. There was no way I was using the bathroom in the room with Asher in there. Finding the one from yesterday, I went inside.

I was walking back down the hall to the room when Asher stepped out into the hall, running his hand through his hair.

Asher spotted me. "Hey, I'm heading down to the cafeteria to bring breakfast up. I could use a hand."

"Coffee is on the menu, right?" I asked, still feeling groggy.

He grinned. "First thing."

"Good," I muttered as we headed down the hall.

Apparently, the cafeteria was in the basement and Asher knew the way. We both grabbed a tray and started pouring coffee. Asher cursed.

"What?" I asked as I put a lid on a black coffee for Zeke.

"I can't remember how everyone likes their coffee," Asher grumbled.

"Zeke drinks it black, Miles adds half a packet of sugar and a teaspoon of creamer, Ethan would prefer a mocha, but if you put some cocoa mix in with the coffee it's close." I listed them off without having to think about it.

"You can remember that this early?" Asher asked as he picked up a cocoa packet.

"Well, it's coffee," I reminded him. He snorted.

"Coffee is life," he said in a droid voice. I chuckled.

"Coffee get brain started," I countered in my own droid voice.

He smiled as we picked up our trays and moved to the hot food table.

"What are we getting?" I asked.

"The food here isn't bad, actually," Asher informed me. "If you get breakfast for Zeke, I'll get breakfast for Ethan."

"Oh, yeah, give me the heavier tray." I grinned up at him.

He chuckled.

I loaded up two plates of eggs, sausage and toast. For Zeke I added a couple of waffles before we went to the cashier.

I pulled out my wallet and paid for half of breakfast. Then we snuck the trays out of the cafeteria and headed back to Miles' room.

We were in the elevator between floors when Asher broke the silence. "We're going to be okay, right?" he asked quietly.

My pulse raced. "I hope so." I swallowed hard. "What do you think?"

He sighed. "I don't know. Right now, I'm trying to remember why I shouldn't kiss you again."

The butterflies went nuts as heat flashed through me. "Ash..."

"I know," he whispered.

The elevator doors opened. We walked out and down the hall towards Miles' room.

AFTER THE DOCTOR checked on Miles, she decided he was well enough to be discharged. Asher took Miles, while I drove Ethan. Ethan refused to go home.

Asher was walking with Miles into Miles' house as I was pulling to a stop in the circular gravel driveway. I quickly shut off the truck and hurried around to the other side. Ethan was already getting out carefully.

"Are you sure you don't want to go home?" I asked for the third time.

"Yeah, this is closer, and I have some of my ibuprofen still here." He grunted as he started limping towards the door. I followed close behind him into the house. "I'm going upstairs, Beautiful. Can you bring me a bottle of water, please?" He grit his teeth and put his foot on the first step.

"Nah-uh." I grabbed his arm carefully. "You're going to my room. It's closer and not upstairs."

He looked up the stairs and scowled at them. "Yeah, that's a good idea." He stepped down and headed for my room. I walked with him. When he sat down on the bed he was cursing under his breath.

"What do you need from your room?" I asked.

After taking several deep breaths, he opened his eyes. "I need both pill bottles in the nightstand, the TENS unit, and some shorts to sleep in. Don't bother with a shirt."

"What's a TENS unit? And where is your room?" I asked.

"It looks like an iPod with cords connected to sticky patches. And my room is down the left side, the first door."

I gave him a small smile. "I'll be right back." I left my room and headed for the stairs. Asher was coming down.

"How's Miles?" I asked as I passed.

"Hurting. I'm getting him some water and making him a sandwich to eat with the pain killers," he said as he continued down the stairs. "How's Ethan?"

"Hurting, I'm getting his pain meds now. Can you make him a sandwich too?" I asked as I continued to climb the stairs.

He nodded as he stepped off the stairs. "On it." I headed down the left and opened the first door. Ethan's bedroom at Miles' house looked a lot like his bedroom at home. The walls were covered in posters, only here his clothes weren't all over the floor. His bed was simple and lengthwise against the wall, just like at home. I went to the nightstand and pulled out the drawer. I pulled out the two pill bottles and dug around to find the TENS unit. It looked exactly like he said, a little iPod. Closing the drawer, I moved to the dresser and found a pair of mesh shorts. It was summer, these would work for sleeping, right?

I hurried downstairs and into my room. Ethan was slowly eating a sandwich. I set the bottles and TENS unit on my nightstand then set the shorts next to him. "Let me get you some water." I went to the kitchen.

I was pulling out a couple of bottles of water when Asher came in. "Ally, I need you to go upstairs. Miles is at his computer trying to type," he bit out.

"Go tell him if he doesn't get his ass in bed I'm going to come up there and take his glasses away." I closed the fridge.

He grinned. "I'll try, but you might want to check on him."

"I will." I showed him the bottles. "I've got to get Ethan his water and then I'll head up."

"I'm going to get some sleep," Asher told me, his warm eyes running over me. My heartbeat picked up. He looked away from me and started rubbing his neck. He turned away and left the kitchen, leaving my heart aching.

I sighed and headed for my bedroom. We're going to be okay. We're going to be okay... right? I walked in, looked up, and froze.

Ethan was only in his dark red boxer briefs, sitting on the side of the bed with the mesh shorts in his hand. Those muscles, that toned... holy shit. I swallowed hard. Bruises were here and there. A large one ran down his left side.

He lifted his head and raised an eyebrow. "You peeping on me?"

I rolled my eyes and walked over to him. "Turnabout is fair play. You want a hand?"

He smirked. "You don't want to say that to a guy in his shorts, Beautiful."

I chuckled and took the shorts from his hand. I knelt down and got them around his feet before wiggling them up to his knees. He groaned as he got to his feet and pulled them up. I steadied him when he wobbled. He cursed and sat down, wincing. "Carajo coño!," he bit out.

"Did you take your meds?" I asked, trying to figure out how to help.

"Yeah, they're gonna take a half hour to kick in." He groaned. "Lexie, get out of here. I'm just going to be miserable." There was no way that I was going to leave him here like this.

"Get on the bed and roll over," I ordered.

He lifted an eyelid. "Why?"

"'Cause I'm going to give you a massage," I told him, before going into my bathroom and getting my lotion. When I walked back in, he was cursing as he lay down further on the bed. Careful not to bump him, I climbed on the bed and moved to his side. I put some lotion in my hands and warmed it up.

Before I could even touch him, he turned his head to look up at me. "Soft hands, Beautiful," he warned.

I gave him a small smile before gently touching his back. I cursed. His back was locked up tighter than ever. I started with long, soft strokes to loosen his muscles. As they began to let go, he groaned deeply. My hands began working on the smaller knots down his spine. When I got to his lower back, he grunted. I eased up on the pressure, but I wasn't making any headway.

"I can't get these, Snoopy. I'm sorry." I leaned back on my heels, trying to massage my hands to get the knots out.

"It's okay, my muscle relaxer is going to kick in soon," he muttered. "Thank you, Lexie. It hurts less already."

I lay down beside him. "So, your doc changed your pain meds?"

His eyes opened and met mine. "Yeah. He did a couple weeks ago. I've been trying not to take them."

"Why not?" I asked, my voice quiet.

He sighed. "Because they're opiates and there are more side effects than I'd like."

"Is there any other option?" I asked, hoping.

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Surgery. The doc wants me to get a fusion done."

My stomach knotted. That didn't sound good. "What does that mean?"

"He wants to cut off the part of the bone that is pressing on the nerves in my spine." His voice was weary. "And because there is more than one, I'll probably need a spinal fusion to protect my spine."

I thought about it. Yeah, surgery sucked, but Ethan was in more pain lately than ever before. "Would it stop the pain?"

He huffed. "It would. But there's the risk of paralysis, and of course, the spinal fusion would stop me from doing the stuff I like."

"What do you mean?" I rolled onto my side to face him.

His chocolate eyes met mine. "No more MMA, no more climbing - shit, I wouldn't even be able to carry a book bag for months."

"How long would it be—"

"Possibly a year," he said. "A year before I could do anything I like." I reached over and took his hand in mine.

"I know you don't want to give up the things you like, but Ethan," I met his eyes, "you're in pain all the time. And it'd only be a year."

Ethan gritted his teeth. "I'm not that desperate yet. These meds might work." I scooted closer until my head was beside his arm. His spicy cologne filled my nose.

"And if they don't?" I asked softly.

His lips rose into a sad half-grin. "Let's see if they work first." His body relaxed into the bed. "Finally, they're kicking in."

I took my hand from his and brushed his hair out of his face. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His breathing became deep and even. When I was sure he was asleep, I got up and closed the bedroom door behind me.

It didn't take me long to get to Miles' room upstairs. I knocked twice and then opened the door. Miles was at his computer, typing with one hand and muttering under his breath. I strode across the room and snatched his glasses off his face.

"Lexie—"

"Don't Lexie me. Get your ass in bed," I ordered.

He squinted up at me. "I'm fine, I'm not even tired."

Not tired? The guy had bags under his eyes. I knew damn well he hadn't sleep last night. "Bullshit. Bed. Now," I stated clearly.

He sighed, got up, and moved to the bed. He lay down on the right side of the bed. "I'm really not tired," he tried again. I grabbed one of his other pillows and put it under his arm to support it.

"I know you're lying, Miles," I told him as I walked away from him to his bookcase. I quickly ran through his fiction collection and found one that I thought would work. I walked around the bed to the other side and climbed on.

"Can I have my glasses back? I'll stay in bed," he asked.

I snorted. "Nope." I fluffed the pillow behind me and rested my back against the headboard.

"Lexie—"

"Shh." I opened the book to the first page. "Close your eyes and listen," I told him, my voice growing raspy. Miles reached over to the nightstand and passed me a bottle of water. I smiled my thanks as I set the book down, opened the bottle and took a sip.

"You didn't get much sleep either," he reminded me with a small smile on his face.

I put the lid back on and picked up the book. "I got more than you," I countered as I picked up the book and opened to the first page.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

"We are reading 'Fahrenheit 451,'" I told him as I got comfortable and began to read. "'It was a pleasure to burn..."

I read to him for almost an hour before I needed to get a drink again.

"It's not working..." he muttered, his voice soft.

I smiled. "You're almost asleep," I whispered. He rolled onto his side, facing me as I set the book down on my stomach.

His left arm, the arm in the cast, moved over the bed, his fingers running over my beads. "You're wearing your beads," he said quietly. "What happened?"

I smiled at him. "I'll tell you later. Now, get some sleep." I picked up the book and continued reading.

He eventually fell asleep, his fingers still on my wrist. I continued reading until I was sure he was out cold.

Sleeping, Miles was a sight to see. He was relaxed. Peaceful. I carefully slid my arm out from under his fingers, then leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Happy birthday, Miles."

I got up and closed his door behind me. I needed some sleep, but Ethan was hurting in my bed. I could sleep in Ethan's, but that didn't feel right. I looked back at Miles' door. No, I'd probably wake up on top of him, hurting him even more. And Asher was out of the question. I should probably go home anyway. If anyone needed anything, Asher would hear them. I headed downstairs and out to my Blazer.



# Zeke

"I don't think I can be what she needs," I finally admitted out loud.

"Why do you say that?" Dr. Shay asked. The image of Lexie waking up next to Miles this morning had haunted me all day. "I can't wake up next to her in the morning." I stared at the floor without really seeing it.

"Well, first, you're a teenager," Dr. Shay reminded me. "You shouldn't be sleeping next to her anyway."

I lifted my head and met my old shrink's gray eyes. Her kind face had wrinkles where she hadn't before. Well, I had been eight the first time I met her. "She has nightmares and she can't sleep without someone touching her. We got her a dog to help, but sometimes she still falls asleep on the couch when we're watching movies. She'll start making this... small, scared noise. If you touch her, she stops. So, sometimes the guys nap next to her to help her sleep." I hated explaining Lexie to her. The girl was one of a kind; it was one of the things I loved about her. But that didn't mean I wanted Dr. Shay to judge her.

"Ah, well. That's understandable," she admitted as she wrote a note on her notepad. "Do you want that? To be able to wake up with someone nearby?"

"It never mattered before. It never bothered me," I admitted. "It does now."

"You'll never know unless you try," she offered.

My gaze shot to her eyes. "If I try and I'm wrong, I might hurt her." I'd rather spend my life sleeping alone than do that. There's a lot of shit I can take and have, but that isn't one of them.

Her gaze ran over me before she looked back through the pages of her notepad. "She's woken you up before," she reminded me. "When you were sick. You didn't hurt her then, why do you think you would now?"

"I was sick," I pointed out.

She set the notepad down and gave me a look. I knew that look. "I'm not going to bullshit you, Zeke."

"If you did, I wouldn't be here," I told her.

"Exactly." She grinned. "Now, do you want to be alone the rest of your life?"

It hadn't been the plan, but it seemed to be the way things were going. Then Lexie made that corny joke... "No, I don't," I answered quietly.

Her eyes were understanding. "You did fine with Riley."

"Riley was different," I countered.

"She didn't mean as much as Lexie does, right?" she asked without really asking.

I nodded. I couldn't deny it.

She gave me a gentle smile. "You're scared, Zeke. You're scared you're going to hurt her, you're scared to let someone that close. To be that vulnerable with someone. That's all this is. It's nothing more. Do you understand that?"

I nodded.

"What you're really scared of is if you try and you lose her," she stated.

"Yeah," I admitted, my voice gruff.

"But you still want to be with her? You still want that relationship with her?" she asked directly.

I nodded again.

"Then you're going to have to grow a pair and try," she told me. "Or someone else is going to come along."

The doc was right. I was just looking for excuses to keep her away. Sure, at first putting off talking about our kiss was for her. To give her time to heal and process everything. But it was six months later, and she only had two therapy sessions left. Now, I was just making excuses for myself. I had to try with her. Something told me that I'd regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't.



## Lexie

I had just stepped out of the bathroom in my robe when the door downstairs opened.

"Lexie!" Rory shouted. Shouldn't he be at work?

I went to the railing and looked over. Rory was in his street clothes, not his uniform. "Yeah? I just took a shower."

Rory looked up, his face hard. "Get dressed, we're going to see your grandfather."

My eyebrows went up. "What? Really?" Was he serious? He talked about finding his dad before, but... Shit, I had plans with Isaac!

He nodded. "Hurry up. It's a drive."

I turned and went into my room. Quickly, I pulled my hair back into a ponytail and slipped into a pair of cutoffs and a gray boyfriend shirt. I was

downstairs in less than two minutes. Rory already had Hades on a leash.

I got in the truck and called Isaac.

"Hey, what time did you want to meet up?" Isaac asked.

I cringed. "I can't make it, I'm sorry. Rory's taking me to see his dad—"

"Yeah... fine." He hung up on me. My stomach rolled as I put my phone back in my pocket.

WE HAD BEEN DRIVING for almost two hours. The further we got from Spring Mountain, the more tense Rory became, until I couldn't take it anymore.

"It feels like you're taking me to stand in front of a firing squad," I told him.

He huffed. "Yeah, sorry, kid. My father and I don't have the best relationship."

I looked out the window at the trees going by. "Is he just an asshole?"

"He's a grumpy asshole, yeah," he agreed, his voice dry. Grandpa sounded fun.

"Great," I muttered.

"He won't be an asshole to you," he said.

"Why's that?" I turned back to him. His mouth was a hard line, his hands gripping the wheel until his knuckles turned white.

"Because you're his biological granddaughter," he bit out. "He hasn't seen Tara since she was born."

I gaped at him. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "He yanked me out of Susan's hospital room to tell me Tara wasn't mine." He shook his head. "That's when I told him about my vasectomy and the sperm donor. He hasn't spoken to me since."

"What an asshole," I stated. "Tara's never met him?"

"I tried around her first birthday. He hung up the phone. I stopped calling," he admitted as we pulled into a tiny town. "If he wanted to see her, he knew where to find us." Rory turned down another street.

"If he's such an asshole, why do you think he'll help?" I asked, watching the town go by.

"You're Henry's biological kid," he reminded me. "You're all that's left of our mom. He'll be as nice to you as he ever is."

"I don't remember him," I admitted.

"That's because your mother decided that she didn't want him around you," he said. "I always thought that Lisa believed if she kept our side of the family away from you, then you wouldn't inherit your abilities."

"What did she say when she saw my red hair?" I asked, oddly half curious and half dreading his answer.

"She was happy you were healthy," he hedged.

I turned my head to look at him. His face was carefully blank. "Rory?"

He sighed. "There's a reason you were an only child, Lexie, and your Dad didn't get a say." I turned and looked out the window. That was enough to give me an idea. My chest ached a little. What did I expect? For her to have been happy I was born? How could I still have that hope? For years she told me she wished I had never been born. Knowing what I know now, I looked back at my life with my mother and saw hints of her true feelings in my memories. She had never been the hugs and cuddles type of mom, but I always thought that was normal. I was wrong.

"She's not all there anymore, kid," he reminded me.

I nodded. "Yeah, but was she ever?"

"At one time, yes," he said softly. I wish I had seen it. I shoved the emotions swamping me back behind their door. Now wasn't the time. Rory took a gravel road.

"So, how is Susan?" I asked.

"She's doing good. She's on a lecture circuit this week," he said. "She still asks about you." I smiled. My memories of Tara's mom had always been good ones. I remembered her playing dolls with Tara and soccer with me. She even handled the ghost issue pretty well. A memory came from the back of my mind.

"She saved my life once," I said before turning to look at him. "Did you know that?"

His brow drew down. "No. What happened?"

I looked back out the window. "I was six. You guys had come to visit. Mom was talking with Susan in the family room. I was sitting on the floor drawing when a soul came through the wall and jumped me." Images flooded my mind. Mom's face as I dropped, coming to only long enough to watch Aunt Susan shout at my mom. Then waking up, hurting, in the shower with Aunt Susan holding me. "Mom just sat there. Susan got me into the shower, scrubbed me down with salt, and made sure I was okay."

"I remember," he said. "Henry and I went fishing. Susan called and told us you were jumped. She never said anything about it. Though, she did say she didn't trust your mother after that." Yeah, that sounded like Susan. I shoved everything back behind a door again.

A log cabin came into view through the trees. Small, and charming. There was smoke floating from the gray stone chimney. A small porch with an empty rocking chair. Rory pulled up behind a blue truck and parked. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He really didn't want to do this.

"I can go in alone," I offered.

He shook his head and opened his door. I got out, Hades jumping out after me. By the time I closed the door, Rory was beside me and the front door of the cabin was opening.

A tall mam who was closer to seventy than sixty stepped out onto the porch. His short silver hair was buzzed almost to his scalp. He looked so much like Rory I almost did a double take. They could have been brothers. Decades apart, but still. Rory sighed, and then led us over to the porch steps. Brown eyes narrowed at me, or more precisely, my hair, before shooting to Rory.

"How'd you find me?" the old man bit out.

"I'm a cop. It's not that hard," Rory countered. "This is Lexie. Lexie, this is your grandfather, Marvin."

"Hi." I didn't know what else to say; there was no instruction book for this.

His eyes ran over me. He turned back to Rory. "You got your vasectomy reversed?" What was with this guy and his son's junk?

"No. This is Alexis; she's Henry's daughter," Rory reminded him. Marvin's gaze shot back to me. His frown faded a little. "She was wondering if any of the family had left information that has to do with their abilities. Instructions? Anything?"

Marvin's eyes stayed on me as he seemed to be deciding something. Eventually, he sighed. "Come in." He turned and headed inside. I raised an eyebrow at Rory who just waved me up the stairs. I followed Marvin into the house. The great room wasn't huge. It didn't need to be, but it was sparse. A recliner, a small two-seater couch, a TV, a fire place, and a bookcase. A stool at a small breakfast counter and a neat kitchen. Marvin turned back to us and crossed his arms. "Now, what do you need?"

"I want to see if... Grandma left anything about her abilities, anything she discovered," I explained.

His gaze went to Rory. "Stay here." Marvin turned. "Back here, Lexie." I followed my grandfather down the short hall and into a work room. Building blueprints hung on the wall, several lay on a drafting table. There was a hand-drawn picture of a building framed and hanging on the wall.

"What do you do?" I asked as he went to the closet.

"I was an architect," he muttered. "I'm retired now."

"So, you can draw?" I asked carefully.

He turned and looked down at me. "Yeah. I can draw." He turned back to the closet and began pulling out boxes and setting them to the side. "These are Amelia's records. She kept track of her family history, pretty much everything she thought was important."

I eyed the boxes. There were a lot. "Thanks." I picked up one and sat down on the floor. Hades lay beside me as I opened the lid. "Do you know if she kept a journal?"

He sighed, grabbed a box, and sat down in a desk chair. "No, I don't. Is that what you're looking for?"

I pulled out a large file and set it on the floor. "Yeah, anything about herbs, her abilities, anything at all."

"She used to surround the house with salt," he muttered.

I kept going through the file. "That works unless it's winter or windy. Wards work much better." I was looking at a family tree. Down at the bottom was my name under my parents' names. Wait. I had never known my grandmother. I looked at the writing. It was different than the handwriting Dad and Rory's names were in. Marvin must have added them. But there was no Tara. I folded it back up and put it aside.

"What do you mean wards?" he asked gruffly.

I picked up more records in clear cellophane. The date said late 1892. Neat. "They're a symbol painted on a surface, with a drop of my blood in the middle. They keep the dead out of the house. Well, that and the betony that Rory planted around the house," I explained absently. Nothing, it was just a will. I moved on.

"Betony?" Marvin asked.

"Yeah, it's a flower. It keeps the dead away, along with salt, black salt, tar water, some sage to create a barrier..." I trailed off as I opened a small book. Inside was scrolling handwriting.

"And that works?"

"Yeah. So does Hades." I turned the page.

"Hades?"

I scratched my baby's ears. "He can see the dead and they're scared of him. It's something about his breed."

"Where did you find this information?" he demanded.

I looked up and met his eyes. "One of my friends is really good at research." I went back to the book in my hand.

"Huh." He grunted. "It seems you're doing better with the Sight than anyone so far."

I stopped scanning to meet his eyes. "Well, that's because it's not the Sight."

He frowned at me. I was starting to think that was his usual face. Like resting bitch face, except his was resting frowny face. "What?"

"My abilities? They're not from the Sight. It's... something else." I put my nose back in the book.

"What is it?" he demanded.

I sighed. "It's Necromancy. The Sight is just seeing, being a witness. To interact with the dead, that's Necromancy."

"How did you find that out?" he growled.

"A witch told me," I hedged and kept reading. Nothing. It was one of the men's journals, and he was an only child. I set it down and kept looking through boxes. "Basically, they kept having trouble because they were working with the wrong information."

"And you're sure you're working with the right information?" he countered. I raised my head as something occurred to me.

"Did Amelia ever mention a Witches Council?" I asked.

He scowled at me. "No, never."

I nodded. So, they might not have killed my grandmother. That was a small relief.

"She'd never done anything strange," he told me.

"Except see the dead?" I countered as I picked up some photos.

"Yeah, except see the dead," he said. I started going through photos just because they were in the box. A redheaded woman was standing with a younger Marvin. I held it up. "Is that her?"

Marvin looked up. His face slightly softened. "Yeah, that's my Milly." He went back to his stack. "How are your grades?"

Taken back by the question, it took me a minute to answer. "Um, good. I was on Honor Roll last semester."

"Good. Got any college plans?" he muttered.

"Art school - at least, I'm hoping to get accepted," I said awkwardly. Was he trying to get to know me? "I'm planning on being a tattoo artist."

"You're an artist?" he asked, his voice softening around the edges.

"Yeah." Silence filled the room as we continued searching. I set down the stack of photos and grabbed a fresh stack. I froze. Dad. A younger Dad, but still, it was him. My eyes burned and filled. I took a shaky breath.

"What?" he demanded.

I shook my head. "Just... found Dad." My voice was small. "When we lost the house, my mom wouldn't let me take any pictures of him." I bit the tip of my tongue, forcing the tears back. I flipped to another picture.

"Take them," he told me gruffly. "There's no point in them sitting in a box in the closet."

I looked up and met his eyes. "Thanks."

He nodded. I started sorting Dad's pictures out of the rest. We worked in silence for an hour more before I decided something.

"You know, Tara is pretty smart," I began. "She's on the Student Council, the dance committee, even the cheerleading squad." He said nothing. I put everything back in that box, closed the lid, and moved on to the next. Screw subtle. "You should stop by and meet her."

"She's not my granddaughter," he stated.

I raised my head and watched him. Seriously? "She doesn't know that. All she knows is that she's never met her grandfather."

His gaze snapped to mine. "She doesn't know?"

"No." I started looking again. "And I'm sure as hell not going to tell her."

"Unbelievable," he muttered under his breath.

"What is?" I asked directly.

"Rory, not even having the stones to tell her she's not his." He closed the box he was working on and opened another.

I eyed him. "Yeah, it's unbelievable. Wanting to protect your daughter by keeping a secret. Doing everything you can to make sure she's happy, healthy, and doesn't feel different or unwanted. How dare he?" My sarcasm was so thick you could practically see it. He turned to me. "It was his choice not to have kids, he has to deal with the consequences."

"What pisses you off so much about Rory's vasectomy?" I asked. I was going to die soon, I had nothing to lose here. His face was dark as he met my eyes.

"Milly gave everything she had for those boys. And he just threw it away," he said, his voice hard. "That's what I can't forgive." He went back to searching.

I gaped at him. "Yeah, 'cause watching his sister die was *so* easy. He should have just sucked it up and watched his daughter die too. Who in their right mind would want to avoid that?" I shot back. He grew still. I went back to looking. The room was quiet for another hour before he closed his last box, got to his feet, and headed for the door.

"You know, I have an expiration date," I told him without looking up. "A lot of things suck about it, but I'm still kinda lucky in a way. I know what matters to me. My friends, my family. I don't have the luxury of holding grudges because I can die any day. So, I do my best every day to make sure they know I love them." I looked up over my shoulder at him. "I know my expiration date. Do you know yours?"

He walked out of the room. I went back to work. It didn't bother me; I had come here without a grandfather, I'd leave without one. No one needed something like that in a short life. I continued searching and only found more pictures of Dad. So, it wasn't a total waste of an afternoon. I put all the boxes back carefully, and then started down the hall.

"Strong kid?" Marvin's question had me stopping in my tracks.

"Yeah, strong as hell," Rory answered, his voice hard.

"Think she'll get past thirty?" Marvin asked. There were several heartbeats of silence.

"If anyone can, she can," Rory said. "But... she's showing signs already." The roughness in his voice made my heart hurt.

"She's got Henry's mouth," Marvin pointed out.

Rory snorted. "Yeah, she curses like a sailor. But she sounds like Mom when she argues. It's uncanny."

"I noticed," Marvin admitted. "Why is she with you?"

"After Henry died, Lisa started drinking, moving them around a lot," Rory explained. "She started doing drugs. She was already treating Lexie

like dirt, but it only got worse. Lisa beat the crap out of her. She's been charged and is waiting in jail since she can't make bail."

"You need a lawyer?" Marvin asked.

"No, I've already got one ready to keep her in red tape if I need to," Rory admitted. "We've only got a few months left."

Silence fell. Hades started moving towards the great room. Rory was on the couch, Marvin in the recliner.

"I didn't find anything," I admitted before holding up the stack of photos, "except more photos of Dad."

Rory got to his feet. "Sorry, kid. We tried." He headed for the door.

"Thanks for the photos," I said before Hades and I followed. Marvin took up the rear. On the porch, Rory turned to his dad. "Thanks for letting her look."

"No problem. Listen..." Marvin swallowed hard, "keep in touch."

Rory looked as if he'd been hit in the back of the head with a board. "What?"

"Keep in touch. I want to know how she's doing," Marvin told him. The stunned look disappeared.

"Yeah, sure." Rory's voice was hard again. I moved down the stairs and towards the truck. Rory followed. Hades was already in the back of the cab when Rory climbed in. He was quiet all of the way home.

I PULLED UP TO THE TWINS' house and shut off the truck. Rory had ordered a pizza and wanted to watch sports with Hades. Tonight was Miles' birthday at the twins', and I was starving. I hurried up the steps and went inside. The smell of heaven hit my nose. If I could, I would have floated after the scent to the kitchen like a cartoon character. Zeke was in the living room, spread out on the couch. His eyes were closed but he wasn't snoring. Grinning, I walked over and carefully dropped my ass on Zeke's stomach. He grunted, opened his eyes, and glared at me.

"What the fuck, Lexie?" he snapped. "There's a chair right there."

"Yeah, but I wanted to sit on the couch," I shot back with a grin. One of his hands went to my lower back. His muscles flexed under my butt, surprising me. I looked at his shirt before reaching down and feeling the thickness. It was thinner than his usual shirts. "Did you work today?"

"Yeah," he growled. "Now, get your ass off me."

"Are you going to stop hogging the couch?" I asked sweetly.

"I was here first," he countered.

I leaned back against the sofa and rested my hands behind my head. "Ahhh. Comfy."

Zeke's eyes had a small sparkle a second before he grabbed me and pulled me down to lay on him. I was laughing as he moved an arm around my shoulders and locked me against his chest.

He closed his eyes again. "Now, stay still."

I laid my head down on his chest and listened to his heart beating under my ear. "Okay, I can sleep," I muttered. It had been a long day and I didn't get much sleep last night. And he was pretty comfy. Fingers lifted my chin. I opened my eyes to meet those sky-blue ones.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice low.

"Yeah, just a long day."

His eyes were warm as they ran over my face. "Let's get some caffeine."

I raised an eyebrow. "What? No nap?" I teased. His arm loosened, allowing me to get up and climb off him. Zeke heaved himself to his feet and I followed him into the kitchen.

It was chaos. Asher and Maria were chatting back and forth as they moved around the kitchen. Ethan and Miles were at the kitchen table watching the show.

"Hey, Lexie," Ethan said.

"How was your afternoon?" Miles asked as he scratched his arm above the cast.

Zeke headed for the fridge.

I shrugged. "Rory took the afternoon off and took me to see some family."

The guys shared a look before turning back to me. "You have more family?" Miles asked carefully. Zeke came back to the table and handed me a soda. I took it gratefully.

"I'll explain later," I promised as I popped the top and sat down. "So, how are you two feeling?"

"Not bad," Miles said.

"Banged up," Ethan added. "Though not as bad as before that back rub. Thanks, Beautiful."

I smiled. "No problem." I looked around the kitchen again. "Where's Isaac?"

"Upstairs," Ethan stated. "Something's off with him."

"Well, he does have the fight tomorrow," I pointed out. "He's probably nervous."

Ethan shook his head. "I've seen nervous; this isn't it."

Worried, I got up. "I'll go see if I can talk to him."

"Good luck," Ethan called as I left the kitchen. The rest of the house was dead silent as I walked up the stairs and stopped at Isaac's door. I knocked. No answer. I opened the door slowly. Isaac was sitting on the floor, his back against his bed. The evening sunlight glowed against the drawn curtains giving barely enough light to see. I made my way over and sat next to him.

"Hey, Cookie Monster."

He didn't say anything, he just continued staring at the wall. I took a closer look. The bags under his eyes were even darker, his face was pale, and his eyes listless. His hair was oily, and the room had the faint stench of body odor. His entire body was practically shaking with tension. In short, he looked like shit.

"I'm sorry about today... are you feeling okay?" I asked quietly as I eyed his face stubble. It looked like he hadn't shaved in days. I noticed his knuckles. They were bruised, and the skin was scraped off a few knuckles. Where did those come from?

"Fine," he grumbled.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?" I asked, hoping to get him to talk.

He didn't answer. Okay...

"Dinner will be ready soon," I offered. If anything could get him out of his room, it was food.

"Can you leave?" he asked so quietly I barely heard him.

I blinked at him. "You want me to leave?"

He turned to me, his jaw clenching. "Yeah. I don't want to talk. Not everyone feels the need to gab like you and Ethan do." He turned back to stare across the room. I blinked at him. What the hell? Something was wrong. An odd shadow moved over his neck, probably from the light in the hallway.

"Okay," I said, stunned. Isaac never spoke to me that way. Something was very wrong. Worry knotted my gut as I sat with him in silence.

He turned his head to look at me again. His amber eyes were cold and hard as they met mine. "Get. Out."

"I wasn't talking," I pointed out. "I just want to be here for you—"

"I don't give a fuck what you want," he snapped. I was taken aback. His face was like stone; cold and unyielding. It wasn't like him. Yeah, everyone had bad days, but this...

"Alright, you don't have to be a dick about it," I muttered as I got to my feet and left his room, closing the door behind me. I stood in the hall trying to understand what just happened. He was rude, downright mean. Isaac was many things, but mean wasn't one of them.

I started for the stairs. Halfway down, Miles, with his arm in a sling, met me on his way up.

His gaze ran over me. "What's wrong?"

"Um, I think something is wrong with Isaac," I whispered.

His eyes softened. "Why's that?"

"He was rude. Not just rude, he was mean when he told me to leave," I said. Yeah, saying it out loud, it seemed like I was overreacting. But a small part of me was telling me I wasn't.

"That's strange," he said. "What did he say?"

I was being ridiculous. I shook my head. "You know, he's probably nervous about tomorrow and he's not sleeping. That would make anyone cranky."

Miles looked up the stairs. "There was a car accident." He met my eyes. "It could have brought on flashbacks."

Shit, I hadn't thought about that. "Shit." Now I felt like an asshole.

"I'll talk to him," he assured me.

"But first..." I pulled Miles' present out of my pocket and handed it to him.

Miles smiled as his ears turned pink. "You didn't have to," he told me as he began to open the wrapping paper.

"It's your birthday," I reminded him. "Yeah, you got in a crash. Your car is totaled, but it's still your birthday."

Miles pulled off the last of the wrapping paper and smiled. "Lexie, it's beautiful."

My face grew warm. "It's okay..."

He met my eyes. "I love it. Thank you." Everything else faded away. Miles stepped up to my step.

"Um, I should..." He swallowed hard as his gaze ran down my face to my lips and then back to my eyes. My heart raced, my skin hummed.

"I'll, um, head back down to the kitchen..." I whispered.

He blinked and looked up the stairs, his ears were turning pink. "I'll go check on, um, Isaac."

I moved down a step. "Thanks. It's probably just me." Miles headed upstairs while I went down.

It wasn't long before I was in the kitchen listening to the guys talk about... something. I wasn't paying attention. Isaac was probably nervous about his first fight back. It was nothing. Then why couldn't I get the weight in my chest to ease?

Miles came down in time for dinner and sat next to me. "I talked to him. He was tense but seemed alright," he reassured me. Huh.

"Then I'm probably being too sensitive." I gave him a small smile. "Don't worry about it." We went back to dinner. Everyone was talking, laughing, telling jokes, but I was worlds away and playing with my food. Chile rellenos was Isaac's favorite... Stop. Miles said he seemed fine, so he was fine. I forced myself to eat past the knot in my stomach before Zeke noticed I wasn't eating.

I was quiet all through dinner and clean up. It wasn't until we were all out back on the porch enjoying the cooling air that someone got my attention.

"So, what did you do today, Ally?" Asher asked from his perch on the porch railing.

"Well, Rory took me to see my grandfather. He wanted to see if my grandmother left any info around," I announced. I suddenly had everyone's attention.

"How did that go?" Miles asked carefully.

I shrugged. "I got some pictures of my dad, but that's about it."

"That sucks," Ethan said.

"At least you have more photos now," Miles offered.

"I'm not really torn up about it," I admitted. "But I am a little pissed that he's never met Tara."

"Why's that?" Miles asked.

"He knows she's not Rory's, and he refuses to be her grandfather because of it." I shrugged. "He was an odd piece of work."

The guys shared a look.

"What?" I asked. They grinned.

"You said something, didn't you?" Miles asked. I made a point to look anywhere but at them. They chuckled.

I turned back to them. "I may have said something," I muttered.

They kept chuckling. My face warmed. It took a while for them to calm down.



## Isaac

The sound of the front door shutting eased the tension in my body. She was gone. I took deep, dragging breaths. I didn't know how much longer I could keep myself here. Sweat soaked my shirt and ran down my face. The second she stepped into the house I knew she was here. I don't know how, but I did. The urge to rip and pound my fist into something tore through me. Just like with Joshua.

I looked down at my bruised and scraped knuckles. He'd been bloody and unconscious before I managed to stop myself. I left him bleeding and lying in the grass. What the fuck was wrong with me?

And then Lexie came in. Muscles tired, I lay down on my side on the floor. I could have hurt her. I almost did. I closed my eyes as tears ran down my face. What kind of guy wants to hurt the girl he...

Someone who is tired of everyone's shit.

No, no, no... Zeke's dad was like that... Miles' dad... I wasn't like them.

Are you sure? You did kill Sophie.

Maybe I did... but that didn't mean I wanted to. I'm not that way! But the urge to pound my fist into her face when she wouldn't leave... that wasn't normal.

You could have saved Sophie, but you didn't. You held your hand over her face and killed her.

I went limp, too tired to even think. It's true. I was a pathetic piece of shit. I had always known it. Always. Under it all, in the deepest part of me, I knew. I was nothing. Not even worth the air I was breathing. Tears fell faster as the truth settled into me like a burning stone in my chest.

Maybe you can change that...

That voice kept talking through the night until, finally, dawn came.

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## CHAPTER 12

#### THURSDAY

cleaned my brush again and used my palette knife to mix more of the blue shade I needed. We were in Miles' living room using the coffee table for my project. I had spent the last hour putting the night sky on Miles' cast, complete with stars, gasses, and even the moon. Now, all I needed was to mix the Tardis blue and paint in the Tardis flying through the sky.

"So..." Miles began, looking at me over his glasses. "What do you want to talk about?"

I chewed on the corner of my bottom lip as I mixed the paint. "I didn't say I needed to talk." I tried to make my voice light, but it didn't work.

"No, you didn't." His eyes were warm as I met them. "But you usually draw or paint when you have something on your mind. And you usually do it at home."

I resisted squirming under his eyes. He always was too observant. "Okay, you... might be right." I picked up the brush and started working on the little blue box.

"What is it?" he asked gently in his silky-smooth voice that I loved.

"Let me finish this first," I hedged. I really didn't want to fuck up his cast because of what I was going to tell him.

"Are you nervous about Isaac's fight today?" he asked, as if he couldn't help it.

I smiled to myself. "Yeah, but that's not it." I started working on the side of the box.

"Are you worried about Ethan's back?" Miles tried again.

I shook my head. "Yeah, but again, that's not it."

"Am I in the proximity?" he asked.

I shook my head as I began cleaning my brush. Knowing Miles, he was just going to keep guessing until I told him.

"All we need to do is let it dry before I do the white on the Tardis," I told him as I cleaned my fingers with a paper towel. I stalled as long as I could. I looked up and met his eyes. "There is something I need to tell you."

His eyes ran over my face before coming back to my eyes. "Is this about your scans?"

I swallowed hard. "Yeah. The results came back." I looked down and started tearing the paper towel to pieces. "They aren't good."

His hand reached out and stopped me from tearing the towel even more. "How bad are they?"

I let out a deep breath and held his hand. "Do you remember back in October, Rory had me see every kind of doctor there was?"

"Yes."

I looked up and met his emerald eyes. "When my aunt Claire, died, the family learned that there was a black spot of dead tissue on her brain. There was no medical reason for it, but the family knew what it was. It was damage from the dead."

His eyes narrowed on mine. "They found a spot in October, didn't they?"

I nodded. "Yeah, and after getting jumped in April, Rory wanted me to get the scan again. I put it off as long as I could."

"The amount of dead tissue grew, didn't it?" he asked carefully.

My eyes burned as I looked down at his hand holding mine. "Yeah. And the symptoms are getting worse." Tears fell down my face.

"We've noticed you've been tired lately," he admitted, his voice rough. I wiped my face and tried to breathe past the tightness in my chest.

"I'm also getting nosebleeds for no reason now," I admitted.

Miles grew tense beside me. "Alright, what are our options?"

My eyes shot to him. "Um, surgery, cutting back on crossing the dead, uh... that's it. There's nothing else to do."

"Alright," he said carefully, his eyes unfocused as continued. "I'll have Dr. Zimmer find the best neurosurgeon in the States-"

"I'm not having the surgery," I told him, my voice soft. His eyes focused on mine.

"Lexie, if it could help, if it could buy you more time, isn't it worth it?" Miles' hand tightened on mine.

I gave him a small smile. "There's no proof it'll work. And..." I wiped my face again as a fresh wave of tears fell down my face. "And I'd rather spend the time I have left with the people I love rather than in pain. The only thing I can do is wear my beads right now and cut back on crossing the dead."

Miles' jaw clenched. "Lexie..." he whispered, his voice rough around the edges. I leaned into him. He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tight while being careful of his cast. I buried my face in his shirt and clung to him. "We'll keep looking," he promised, his face buried in my hair. "We'll find a way to keep you safe."

"I hope so," I breathed. I really hoped we could.

I woke up only to realize I was on the couch in the living room at home. Rubbing my eyes, I tried to remember what happened. I got really tired at Miles' house so I came home, and apparently, I didn't make it upstairs. I sighed. This whole being tired all the time thing was starting to piss me off. How long did I sleep this time? I pulled my cell out of my pocket and checked the time. It was two o'clock. Shit! I grabbed Hades, jumped into the Blazer and took off for the Rec Center.

I parked, shut off the truck, and ran inside. By the time I reached the payment table, the lobby was empty. One of the fights must have started already. Shit! I got my ticket and hurried in. The MMA cage was in the center of four large bleachers full of people. I looked for the guys and spotted Zeke's giant frame in the bleachers on the far side of the ring.

Careful to keep Hades beside me, I moved around the ring and officials until I was near the side of their bleachers. Zeke spotted me coming. He said something to Asher who was by the edge. Zeke was a little further down. Ethan and Miles were sitting behind them. Asher turned and spotted me. I looked up at them and the packed bleachers, wondering how we were going to get up there.

Asher moved his feet and reached down to me. "Put your foot on the ledge, Ally."

Getting an idea of what he was doing, I reached up, took his hand, braced my foot and did a one leg jump. Asher pulled me up and stepped

back a little towards Zeke.

"Get your ass out of my face," Zeke growled. I looked up and met Asher's warm eyes. It was a couple of heartbeats before I could pull away.

"Thanks, Ash." I moved up the bleachers to sit between Miles and Ethan. It was the only safe thing to do right now. Asher made room, Hades managed to jump up and squeeze between Zeke's knees.

"So, did I miss him?" I asked as Asher sat back down in his spot.

"Nah, but Jordan got his ass kicked," Ethan informed me. Ouch. Yeah, Jordan hit on me and couldn't take a hint, but ouch.

"What happened?" Miles asked, his voice hushed.

"I, uh," I turned to him, "I fell asleep."

His eyes filled with understanding as a tall man with a microphone moved out into the cage. I recognized Isaac's shoulders and he walked through the bleachers to the cage. Another guy followed not far behind.

"In the red corner, weighing in at one hundred and seventy-three pounds and standing five feet ten inches tall - Isaac Turner!"

We cheered as Isaac moved into the cage. He continued shaking his arms and legs to keep them warm.

"In the blue corner, weighing in at one hundred and seventy-five pounds, and standing six feet tall - Michael Bower!"

Everyone applauded. I watched Isaac, my stomach already in knots. I could watch a guy I was in love with get the shit kicked out of him. Right? Oh fuck.

Isaac and his opponent moved to the center of the ring. They touched gloves and circled each other. I took Ethan's hand and tried not to squeeze it too tight. Bower moved in first, throwing a series of punches. Isaac blocked, slipped to the side and got him with a right hook. I winced as Bower backed off a little. They sized each other up. Bower moved in again, feinting a blow to the head and then landing a blow to the ribs.

They went at it, throwing punches and shooting out kicks. It wasn't long before Bower got his arms around Isaac. Then he pushed Isaac and took him to the mat. Isaac landed a nice punch to Bower's jaw. The guy tucked his chin and it turned into a grappling fight.

"Come on, Isaac!" I cheered as loudly as I could, hoping he'd get Bower in a lock.

The ref broke them apart. They got to their feet and each moved to a side of the cage. A strange shadow crossed Isaac's face. I blinked and

looked up at the lights to see what was causing the shadow. I looked back at Isaac again. The shadow was gone. I started bouncing my knee.

This time Isaac went after him. And I mean went after him. Isaac changed in a second. He knocked Bower around the cage, landing punch after punch. He didn't miss a kick, he didn't miss an opening. He tore into Bower. Bower's right eye swelled. A cut opened on his face.

When the ref went to break them apart, Isaac brushed him off and almost looked like he was going in for more. But he got up and turned to go back to the other side. That shadow moved up his throat to his ear then disappeared. That was strange...

When Bower was good to go the ref stepped back. There was no circling this time, there was no sizing up. Isaac tore into Bower, beating him. It went on and on until Isaac got him to the mat. Isaac drove his knee into the guy's gut, then punched him four more times before the ref pulled Isaac off an unconscious Bower. And I mean pulled Isaac. Isaac swung around with his fist raised as if he was going to clock the ref. That shadow ran over his face again, down his neck and down his chest.

Or... at least it looked that way. Dread filled my heart as the ref checked on the unconscious Bower.

"Medics!" the ref called. The paramedics hustled into the cage. Isaac walked out and headed for the locker rooms without looking at anyone. I watched the medics work.

"Did that feel off for anyone else?" I asked them carefully.

"Yeah, that was fucking off," Zeke snapped as he turned to look back at us. "He was on the verge of illegal."

"That was disturbing," Miles said carefully.

"What the fuck was he thinking?" Ethan snapped.

"He didn't even check on Bower," Asher pointed out. "He always checks if he's knocked someone out."

And then there was that shadow... I looked over the ceiling at the lights, for flags, looking for anything that might have caused it. I didn't see shit. That knot of dread in my chest grew bigger.

"I think I'm going to go talk to him," I said as I got up. I braced myself on Asher and Zeke's shoulders so I could step down between them to their level.

"I'm knocking his head off," Zeke growled as he tried to get Hades out of the way.

I turned back to him. "Zeke, give me five minutes. I think something's wrong."

Zeke met my eyes and we had our usual staring contest. This time he sighed. "Five minutes exactly," he told me.

"Got it," I told him as I started moving sideways on the bleachers. I had to slip by Asher, who was sitting down, his face a little above boob height. Yeah, that wasn't awkward at all. I jumped down as the medics started taking Bower out on a stretcher.

I opened the men's locker room door. "Girl coming in; cover your junk!" I called before waiting a second. There were a few chuckles.

"Everyone's already dressed!" a guy's voice shouted back.

The locker room wasn't full, thankfully. A thick silence hung in the air as several muscular guys wrapped their hands and ankles as they got themselves ready for their fights. I looked down the first row. Isaac wasn't there.

"You looking for Turner?" A guy who looked to be in his twenties with short, dark, cropped hair asked. I nodded.

"He's down two aisles," a familiar voice offered. Jordan got up from the bench. His face was bruised and cut, at least from what I could see around the ice. "Heard Bower took a beating. How bad was it?"

I met Jordan's one open eye. "He's on the way to the hospital," I said quietly.

The older man straightened, his brow drawn. "Well, shit."

I walked two rows over and found Isaac sitting on a bench in the middle of the wide row, unwrapping his hands. Even from here I could tell he looked like shit. The bags under his eyes were dark, his face was pale.

"What do you want?" he growled, his voice boiling.

I walked over and stood next to the lockers. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." His voice was short and clipped.

"What the hell was that out there?" I asked, keeping my voice down.

"Fighting."

"Isaac, he's going to the hospital," I told him, very clearly. "You just put a guy in the hospital."

"It's a fight. He lost, I won," he snapped.

"That isn't what happened out there," I stated, my voice growing harder. "According to Zeke, you came really close to illegal fighting. What is going on?"

He got to his feet, slammed open his locker and jerked his gear bag out. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, you need to, because you went ape shit on that guy, you're not hanging out with us, and you're pissed as hell lately," I told him, keeping my voice down. "What is wrong?"

His shoulders became taut with tension as he dropped his bag.

"Isaac, talk to me," I pleaded.

He shoved his feet into his shoes. "Back off." His voice was deeper than usual. It sent a shiver down my spine.

"Isaac, I'm your friend—"

"Some fucking friend. You blew me off yesterday," he bit out. "Whenever you fucking need something, I'm there. But I need you and you're fucking off with my brother or the guys! I'm so sick of this crap. You're never around! You even fucking kept Sophie a secret! Who fucking does that? So don't give me that 'I'm your friend' bullshit!" He got to his feet, grabbed his bag and headed for the emergency exit.

I'd had enough. I grabbed his arm to turn him. "Cookie Monster—" Isaac dropped his bag and turned.

My heart leaped into my throat. That wasn't Isaac. His face was thickly shadowed, his irises flashed a burning red. He bared his teeth at me. "Why would I want a cunt like you around?" he snarled, his voice dark and deep. It sent cold fingers of fear down my spine. I knew that voice... His hands shot out. I fell backwards into the lockers, hard, the sound echoing through the locker room. I slid to the floor. Stunned, I gaped up at him. The red glow disappeared from his eyes, the shadow pulled back from his face. He stared down at his shaking hands as if they had betrayed him. It was only a second before running footsteps came towards us. Isaac grabbed his bag, and ran out the emergency door.

Jordan and the other guys came around the corner.

"What was that?" Jordan spotted me and scowled. "Did he just fucking push you?"

I nodded, still staring after Isaac. A door opened and closed somewhere.

The dark-haired older man squatted next to me, his eyes concerned. "Did he only push you?"

I nodded. "That's... he's never..." I was struggling to wrap my head around this.

"Well, steroids will do that to you," he said. "He needs some help. Come on, let's get you off the floor. It's gross in here."

He held his hands out to me. I took them. He helped me to the bench.

"Did a redhead come through here?" Ethan asked cheerfully.

Jordan turned toward the front of the locker room. "Lexie's down here. And if you don't beat the shit out of Isaac, I will."

Footsteps hurried down the aisle. I was still staring at the emergency door when Zeke and Miles came around the corner. The others went back to getting ready as Hades pulled on his leash.

Miles squatted down to turn my chin with his good hand. "Lexie, what happened?"

I met his eyes. "He told me we weren't friends. He called me a cunt. Then he pushed me into the lockers." I still couldn't quite believe it myself. Ethan and Asher joined us. Hades began straining toward the exit.

Zeke's face grew murderous. "Where is he?

"He ran." I looked up them. "I think something is wrong with him."

Zeke's massive frame turned and strode towards the emergency door. "Yeah, he's about to die," he announced in his deep, gravelly voice.

"Zeke," I called.

He turned back at the door.

"You don't understand," I tried again. "Something is really wrong. Like..."

It finally clicked.

Holy. Fucking. Shit. Something... was *in* Isaac. Oh fuck, oh fuck. Don't panic, Lexie. Breathe.

I got to my feet and headed for the emergency exit. Sweat started to bead on my skin as I led them further away from the door so we couldn't be heard. I turned and looked up at them. "I think Isaac is possessed or something."

Zeke scowled at me. Asher's eyebrows were sky high. Ethan's face grew pale. And Miles' face? Well, he had his thinking face on.

"Why do you say that?" Miles asked, tapping his fingers on his thigh.

"I saw a black shadow covering his face." I swallowed hard. "I saw it during the fight too. I just thought it was from the lights or something." I shook my head. "His eyes turned red and the voice he used..." I looked up at them. "That wasn't Isaac. It was deeper than Zeke's voice."

"What?" Ethan breathed, his face growing even paler.

Miles stopped tapping. "Are you sure?"

I looked at him. "I... I don't fucking know."

"Okay, well, before we go tell him he's possessed, let's check with someone who would know," Asher suggested.

"Serena," I stated, pulling out my phone. Serena and I didn't have the best of relationships, well, with her threatening to kill me and me wanting to live and all. Serena's phone went straight to voicemail. That was it. I had been leaving this bitch messages all fucking week!

"Serena! I need you to pick up your fucking phone! I think a friend of mine is possessed. CALL ME!" I hung up. My chest grew tight as panic set in. Hades moved away from Zeke and sat on my foot, only to lean against my leg.

"Okay, okay. What do I know?" I asked myself out loud as I moved away from Hades to pace, trying to stay calm. "I know a bunch of theoretical shit!" I covered my face and took a deep breath.

Miles stepped closer and pulled one of my hands from my face. "We need someone with experience with this, right?"

I nodded, my heart hammering away in my throat.

His thumbs stroked the back of my knuckles. My panic pulled back a bit. "Alright. You think it's the demon from Cara and Mia's house?"

I nodded.

"Then, maybe we should go to the Catholic church and talk to a priest," Miles suggested.

A priest? Priest! "Shit!" I pulled my hand from his and grabbed my phone. "Serena gave me the name of a priest months ago." I unlocked my phone with trembling fingers. I found the number and hit the call button. I started chewing on the bottom corner of my lip as it rang. Finally, someone picked up.

"Hello, Saint Joseph's church," a young man's voice answered.

"I'm looking for Father Francis." I skipped the pleasantries.

"One moment, he just came into the office. Let me transfer you," the man said. I got an earful of elevator music. I started pacing, my hand balling in the hair of my ponytail. Come on!

"This is Father Francis. How can I help you?" An older man's voice came on the line.

"Do you know a woman named Serena?" I asked immediately.

There was silence. "I'm sorry, I think you have the wrong number."

Fuck it. I didn't have time for subtle. "Look, here's the deal. I'm a Necromancer, I'm seventeen years old, and a witch named Serena gave me this number if there was anything I couldn't handle. Right now, I'm pretty sure one of my best friends is possessed by a demon. Hence the phone call. She's not picking up. Now, can you help me or not?"

There was dead silence on the phone. I held my breath. Don't tell me I just fucked up any hope of helping Isaac. Me and my big—

"Yes, I knew a Serena years ago," he stated. "Why do you think your friend is possessed?"

I quickly summed up Cara and Mia's house, Isaac not sleeping, the way he'd been acting, and then, oh yeah, the big shadow and red eyes. I barely managed to keep the sarcasm from being too much.

"If that is indeed what is happening, it sounds like your friend is in the advanced stages of possession. It has manifested extraordinarily fast," he said, his voice clinical. "You'll have to get him here to the church in Boulder, Colorado. Then we'll determine if it's possession or not."

I moved the phone from my mouth to turn to Miles. "We need to get him to Boulder."

Miles pulled out his phone and was calling before I finished my sentence. "I'll have the jet prepped."

"We'll be there today," I told him.

"Now, listen. If this is the advanced stages of possession, then the entity will try to take over a body permanently, which means killing the soul of the rightful owner of that body. Be on the lookout for it to come to the surface. They have abilities - telekinesis, throwing fire, conjuring hallucinations. You name it, a demon can do it."

"Got it. Super powers, great," I muttered.

"Now, listen. This is very important. Do not leave him alone," he stated. "If a demon is found out, they'll kill the person instead of the soul. And they'll do as much damage as they can on the way out."

"He ran off," I admitted, my stomach knots growing knots.

"Find him and get him here. We'll examine him when he arrives," he told me.

"We will." I hung up and turned to the others. "Not good. We need to find him, now. It's going to try to kill him." I turned to Miles. "We need something to knock him out."

Miles nodded. "I'll take care of the plane, Hades, and the medication. You guys find him."

Everyone split up. When I started the Blazer my hands were trembling. I took deep breaths and let them out slowly.

We had to find him. There was no other option. We had to.



#### Ethan

I DIDN'T EVEN STOP for the stop sign at the intersection. There were no cars, so I just drove through. My heart was racing in my chest. My clammy hands gripped the wheel. It was a job just to breathe.

"Ethan, calm down. We aren't going to help him if we're in another accident," Miles announced, reminding me he was in the car.

I cursed as I slowed down to only five miles over the speed limit. "He's going to..." Bile rose in my throat. I couldn't even say it.

"We'll find him," he reassured me.

"Yeah, how?" I snapped as I turned the wheel. "We don't know everyone he knows!" I hit the brakes hard. The car screeched to a halt at the stop light. I couldn't lose him too. I couldn't seem to breathe. Taking deep breaths, my chest ached as if it were replaced with a deep, burning pit. My control was paper thin. Everything I was, shook. I couldn't do it again...

"Deep breaths," Miles ordered.

I did as he said.

"Now, Zeke and Asher are out looking too. So is Lexie. We'll find him," he promised. I swallowed hard and nodded as my eyes burned. I just... couldn't...



#### Lexie

WE SPENT the next two hours looking for him. We were running out of time. The knot in my chest was pulling tighter and tighter. The longer it took, the

harder it was to breathe. My phone rang. I looked at it in the holder and hit the button as I pulled off the highway.

"Cookie Monster?"

"Lexie..." Isaac's voice was so strained I couldn't take it.

"Where are you?" I asked, running my hand through my hair.

"I need you," he whispered, his voice shaking.

"You got me," I said instantly. "Tell me where you are and I'll come to you."

"The scenic overlook off ninety-three north. It's about three miles outside of town," he said absently. I wasn't even a mile away. "Hurry." The phone went dead. I floored it. My heart raced as I sped out to the overlook. I hit my speed dial.

"Did you find him?" Zeke demanded.

"He called me. He's at the overlook off ninety-three north. Three miles outside of town. He asked me to come," I practically shouted into the phone.

"Not alone!" Zeke shouted.

"Then follow! I'm already here." I hit the brakes and skidded to a stop in the almost empty parking lot. My eyes were on Isaac, standing on the other side of the railing, five feet out at the edge of the cliff. "Hurry."

I left my phone and jumped out of the truck, not even bothering to shut it off. I ran to the railing, climbed over, and went straight to him.

"Isaac," I called gently as I walked slowly towards him. That black shadow covered him, moving constantly over his skin as he looked down at the floor of the valley, over three hundred feet down. I got no response. I moved closer. "Cookie Monster." I kept my voice soft.

"Lexie." His voice cracked. My throat grew tight at the sound.

"I'm here." I swallowed hard as I eyed the edge. "What are you doing?" He shook his head hard. The shadows moved away from his face.

"I want it over, Lexie," he whispered. My heart stopped. "I can't take it anymore."

"Talk to me," I begged.

"I killed her." His voice was so quiet I barely heard him. "It's my fault she's dead." My heart shattered. Isaac...

"No, you didn't," I told him firmly. He looked at me over his shoulder.

"I could have left the car," he growled, his eyes tinged red. "I could have gotten help." I shook my head.

"The accident was still happening, Isaac. You would have been killed too," I pointed out. He looked back down at the valley floor. "With her injuries, there was nothing you could have done except be with her."

"I smothered her!" he growled. His hands moved to his head, his fingers digging into his scalp. He closed his eyes tight and shook his head. Tears fell down his face.

"What?" I couldn't believe he said that. "No, you didn't..."

His tortured eyes met mine. "I smothered her. I remember doing it."

"No, you didn't, Isaac. You made sure that in her last moments she knew she was loved and treasured," I assured him, my eyes burning. "That's what she told me before she crossed. You made it so she wasn't scared to die. You have no idea how much that meant to her. That was all you did. It was all you *could* do."

The black shadow moved over his head again. This time I heard the whispering.

"Don't listen to the voice telling you that it's your fault. That's not you, Isaac!" My hands shook.

"Bullshit." He turned to glare at me, his hands dropping from his head. "It's been there since the day she died."

"But now there's a new one, right?" I asked, carefully stepping closer. "This one is worse, telling you that you should leave the people who love you." I looked down at the cliff. "Telling you to do something that you know you will kill all of us." Isaac shook his head, blinking hard.

"It's loud," he said softly.

"That's not you, Cookie Monster," I told him adamantly. "That's why we've been looking for you since you ran off." The shadow fell back down his neck. "It's the demon from Cara's house. It latched onto you and I didn't see it. It's trying to kill you."

He chuckled darkly; the shadow moved up his neck again.

"I've been trying for a long time," he admitted, looking down at the valley a thousand feet below. "Maybe it's time."

"No." I strode towards him. The shadows darkened. Isaac warned me off with his hand out. I stopped a couple feet away.

"Don't come any closer, Red," he snarled. "I want to hurt you. To pound my fist into your face until you stop talking." Tears fell down his face faster. "Don't let me... please..." Isaac looked like he was listening to the voice again. The black shadow surged over his face.

"It's right," he whispered. "I'm the piece of shit that let her die. I hurt you and I wanted to do it."

"Isaac, I can't imagine this world without you," I said desperately, my voice cracking. Fresh tears started falling down my face at just the thought.

"I don't deserve to live," he said softly as he looked out at the drop again. I slowly stepped closer.

"That's not you, Isaac," I told him vehemently. "You're my Cookie Monster."

I stepped even closer.

"You enjoy the little things. You sing a song every time you have tuna for lunch."

The black shadow lightened over his head.

"You love pranks, silly string, and using me as a shield when you run away from the guys."

His entire body went rigid. The shadow surged over his head.

"Isaac, you don't have to hide from me. You never have to hide from me."

"I let her die. I killed her...." he rasped, his entire body shaking.

"You didn't smother her. You didn't cause the wreck," I told him.

He turned back to me, his eyes blinking.

"Think about it, Cookie Monster." The shadow slipped back down to his neck a little more. "Did you do everything you could?" It was agonizing waiting as he thought about it.

"Yeah." His whisper was like a breath.

"You are not God, Isaac." I tried to reach him as I stepped closer. The black shadow swirled faster over his skin as I spoke. "You don't have control over who lives and dies. All any of us can do is our best." I was close enough to touch him. "You didn't smother her. You didn't kill her." He had to listen. "She didn't blame you. She said that you made her feel loved in her last moments of life. She was grateful for those jokes. You made it so she wasn't afraid." I stepped closer until I could smell limes. Tears poured down both our faces. "She also said to tell you you're wrong." Isaac finally met my gaze. His eyes were lost in a storm of agony that I couldn't fix. I could only stand beside him and go through it with him, let him know he wasn't alone.

"Back up," he said, his voice pleading.

I shook my head as I stepped closer, until there was only a breath separating us.

"No." He was finally hearing me and I wasn't about to lose Isaac to a fucking demon. "You would never hurt me."

The shadow spilled over his head and face, his eyes started to burn red. NO! I grabbed his shirt and pulled him down. My lips found his. His lips were still, but I didn't care. I kissed him deeper, harder, desperately. He needed to know that he wasn't what he thought. That he was essential to me, to my life. His lips finally moved and one arm wrapped around me. The other went to the back of my neck, holding me still as he kissed me back. Vaguely, I felt that sick cloud move away from his skin, but I didn't stop. I wanted Isaac in control again, and if I couldn't do it with logic, I'd sure as hell do it with love. My body burned as I pressed against him. He took over the kiss. It grew softer, gentler. His lips slowly eased from mine. He pulled away a little, his breathing heavy. Those amber eyes were warm and wide when they met mine. His hand flexed at my waist as the other moved from my neck to cup my face.

"Lexie?"

"Losing you would kill me," I told him softly, moving my hands to hold his jaw. "So fight that fucker back and hold on. We're getting rid of it."

The storm in his eyes was calming, but they were still full of shadows. Tires screeched in the parking lot, car doors slammed. I didn't take my eyes off his. He finally gave me a small nod. I kept eye contact as the others started to run towards us. Isaac looked away from me to them. His eyes flashed red as the shadow surged over him again. I grabbed his face and forced his eyes back to me.

"Cookie Monster!" His eyes flashed back to amber. "Fight it. We love you. Don't let that thing take you from us," I all but growled. Isaac's eyes were desperate as he nodded again.

"Move slowly, guys," I told the others, my eyes not leaving Isaac's.

"Red..." Isaac warned, his voice deeper. The guys stopped moving.

"Fight," I ordered. "This is your body, not his. This is your life, not his. You make your choices, not some fucked up thing from hell. So choose." Tears kept falling down my face again. "Choose us, choose our family, and fight like hell." He took several deep, shaking breaths before he nodded. The guys moved slower this time.

"Isaac, we're going to put a zip tie on your wrists, alright?" Miles said in his soothing, calm voice. "It's to stop you from hurting yourself or us." Isaac struggled to fight against the shadow again, his eyes never leaving mine. Then he nodded. I took his hand from my face and moved it to my lower back. Then I held his face again, keeping his eyes on me. The smell of engine grease reached me as I heard a zip tie being closed behind me. Isaac tensed. The red started to come back. I pressed my hands harder into his face.

"Cookie Monster, I'm right here," I whispered. "Feel me. I'm right here. You aren't alone in this." The shadow finally pulled back until it almost disappeared completely down his shirt. Isaac nodded.

"I'm good," he said softly. "Get away before it comes back." I hesitated. "Please," he pleaded. I nodded.

Isaac lifted his arms up over my head and I moved. Zeke and Asher went to both sides of Isaac and started walking him away from the edge of the cliff. I didn't leave Isaac's sight as we got him into the Blazer. Asher climbed in the back, he turned and helped Isaac get inside. Zeke followed closely. I drove, following Miles and Ethan to the private section of the airport. It was a tense drive.

"We've got your back, man," Asher told him firmly. Isaac nodded, his body tense.

We got to the airport without any issues. Zeke and Asher got Isaac out of the truck. When he saw the plane he went white.

"No, no, no," Isaac began, shaking his head. "You don't know what this fucker can do. It could probably tear that apart in the air."

"We know. That's why we're sedating you." Miles came over with Dr. Zimmer. Isaac's face filled with relief.

Dr. Zimmer's face was serious as he opened his bag. "Do you agree to sedation, Isaac?"

"No shit, doc," Isaac snapped.

Dr. Zimmer drew up a syringe of medication. "When you wake up, we'll have landed in Boulder."

Isaac nodded. I watched the shadow on Isaac's neck as Dr. Zimmer gave him the injection. Isaac blinked heavily. It was only a couple minutes before he was out and sagging in Zeke and Asher's arms. The guys carried him to the plane and strapped him in. I followed with Dr. Zimmer.

"Thanks for coming," I said.

"I've known Isaac for years," Dr. Zimmer answered. "If something is really wrong, I'm going make sure he gets through."

My eyes burned. "Thank you."

Miles' plane was beautiful and comfy looking, but I couldn't really appreciate it right now.

I took the seat next to Isaac, wanting to keep an eye on him. I held his limp hand as everyone strapped into their seats. Ethan sat in the chair across from Isaac. He met my eyes. Neither one of us said a word; we didn't have to. We were both terrified. Hades planted himself in front of Isaac. I eyed him. He was in the guard position, but it wasn't for me. Odd.

The pilots closed the outside door then moved into the cockpit. The cabin was silent, the tension thick.

We were waiting to taxi to the runway when I remembered something. "Oh, shit." I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

"What's wrong?" Ethan asked.

I dialed Rory. "Rory." I turned to look at them across the aisle as I held the phone to my ear. "Parents."

The others cursed and pulled out their phones too.

"Hey, kid," Rory answered.

I cringed. "Um... don't kill me..." I quickly gave Rory a rundown of events. He immediately started cursing. He told me to take care of Isaac, and that I was in deep shit when I got back. All in all, it wasn't bad.

The plane took off soon after that. I kept hold of Isaac's hand. For the first time in my life, I felt like praying, but I didn't. I was too worried about Isaac. The others were just as quiet. Two hours. Just two hours and we'd be there.

WE WERE HALFWAY to Boulder when it happened. Hades growled. Isaac's hand suddenly crushed mine. I gasped in pain as I looked up. Isaac's face was in a snarl, his eyes glowing red through the black shadow completely covering him. His hand jerked away from mine. The zip tie broke; his fist snapped out. I felt the hit, tasted blood. I dropped out of my seat to the floor in an effort to get away.

"You fucking bitch!" A deep, demonic voice filled the cabin as the lights started flickering. There was shouting. I was pulled to my back. Isaac was over me, his weight on my waist pinning me down. "You think you can

take him from me!" The demon pulled his fist back. "He's mine, you've already lost." Before I could block, a black blur knocked Isaac off me. I scrambled away from the fight between Isaac and Zeke. The plane suddenly plummeted. Asher moved to help. Zeke was hitting Isaac. That wasn't going to work. The plane was in a nose dive. Heart hammering in my chest, I crawled to the wrestling guys. I moved to Isaac's head while Asher got through to Zeke.

"Isaac!" I called to him. The demon reached for me. Both Asher and Zeke slammed Isaac's arms to the floor of the plane. "Cookie Monster! Help us!" Isaac shook his head hard; the plane suddenly made a hard turn. Everyone was pressed into the floor. I held his face and lowered mine to his until his eyes were all I could see. "Isaac, fight," I whispered. Isaac's amber flickered in his wild red eye. He was fighting, he was just losing.

No! Something inside me snapped. My chest felt solid, strong. Without thinking, I sent my will searching for him. I focused on sending out that gold thread to grab onto his soul. I watched, as if in slow motion, that golden thread move over Isaac's chest. Then it dove deep into his chest.

I was instantly thrown into Isaac. It was like I was skydiving and sliding down a rope at the same time. I held onto that thread and dove past all his memories; I wasn't here for them. I was here for Isaac and nothing would stop me. Suddenly, there was darkness everywhere. I hit the ground hard. I moved to my feet. It was pitch black. Before I even wondered if it was possible, I conjured a light and threw it a few feet above me. The ground was rocky, dry, and covered with red clay. That voice was whispering again. I ran towards it, sending the light ahead of me.

"There is no point in fighting me. They don't want you, they don't care." The voice was growing louder.

Isaac screamed. I increased the light and kept running along a small dirt path towards a craggy outcropping. I threw more lights up to brighten Isaac's center.

"Isaac!" I shouted, hoping he'd hear me as I moved along a desert ridge.

"You are not me," Isaac repeated over and over. "Get out, you fucker!" I ran into the middle of an outcropping of stone pillars and found Isaac, pacing, with his hands over his ears.

"You belong in the dark, Isaac. You know you do," the demon called.

Oh, hell no! I instantly conjured a fireball and threw it towards the voice. It hit a boulder and lit it up, not burning, just making light. The

demon roared. I sent another and another until there was enough light to see by. Isaac stood still, gaping at me.

"That's not going to do it, girl," the demon hissed from the darkness. I strode into the middle of the pillars of stone where Isaac was still eyeing me.

"You're in my territory now, bitch," I warned the demon. Something in the shadows moved through the formations. I kept my eyes on it. "You may be stronger than me, but you don't rule here." I turned to Isaac; he backed up.

"Cookie Monster, it's me," I told him. He blinked.

"Red? How... how did you get here?" he asked, confused.

"I don't exactly know. But I'm here. We need your help. I don't know how much time I have here, so listen." I pointed at the dirt. "This is your center, Isaac. This is who you are, everything you are. You control this world. Bring in the light and you'll drive it away." I really hoped I wasn't lying. Isaac just stood in the sand.

"I don't have any light left, Lexie." Tears were running down his weary face. "I'm tired."

"Then you can have mine." I conjured a golden ball of light from my own energy. I made it grow. Made it brighter. I poured more energy into it, until my nose started bleeding. It was huge. I sent it up into the sky. The shadows fell back a good five hundred feet. There was a scream of pain from the demon as the light burned its flesh. I searched the remaining shadows for it. The shadow was gone, for now. When I turned back, Isaac was looking up at the light with hope in his eyes.

"It's not gone, is it?" he asked wearily.

"No, but this will give us time," I admitted. "You can get him to back off. Visualize light; imagine the heat on your skin, that sting in your eyes, and will it into existence. That's how it works here."

"Really?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"Yeah, that's how it works." I felt that pull. I quickly conjured a pack of road flares for him to use. "Shit, I'm being pulled back. We are with you, we are fighting for you. Hold on—"

I was jerked back and thrown out.

I opened my eyes and the world spun. I groaned and curled up on my side. Pain radiated from my temples and back over my head. It felt like I

had broken something in my brain and the shards were digging in. What... Green eyes met mine. Miles gently brushed my hair from my face.

"Lexie?" Miles' smooth, silky voice was nice on my mind. A tongue licked the back of my hand.

"Here... minute," I whispered. I closed my eyes and floated in misery. Someone pressed a napkin to my nose. I held it there and groaned. Nausea had my stomach in my throat. "Kit," I whispered. There was movement. Someone put a nausea tab in my hand. I popped it into my mouth and tasted cherries. When the nausea finally pulled back, I opened my eyes again.

"I take it we aren't crashing?" I asked, feeling miserable.

"No, as soon as you closed your eyes the pilot was able to get control," Miles told me. "What did you do?"

"Not now," Dr. Zimmer told them. Miles moved so the doctor could kneel next to me. He pulled out a light and checked my eyes. I answered his questions to his satisfaction before he got to his feet.

"She checks out fine, let's get her in a seat," Dr. Zimmer announced.

I swallowed hard. "Let me get up." I rolled to my stomach and pushed to my feet, swaying instantly. Zeke caught me, lifted me off my feet, and moved me to sit in the closest seat.

"What did you do?" Zeke snapped.

I checked my tissues before meeting his eyes. "Well, I kind of grabbed Isaac. I... I somehow went to his center." Zeke frowned. "I found him in the dark, helped him, told him how his center works. Then I was yanked back out."

"How the hell did you do that?" Asher demanded, his eyes wide.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I was desperate and just kinda did it."

"But you spoke to him?" Ethan asked, his voice thick.

I met Ethan's eyes. "Yeah."

A wave of exhaustion crashed over me. I laid back against the seat. "I... I think I'm going to pass out..."

Miles hit a button and the comfy seat reclined. Oh, that was better. Engine grease filled my lungs as my belt was buckled.

"Rest, Ally," Asher whispered. A hand took my left; I recognized the callouses on his fingers. It was Ethan. Darkness washed over me.

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# CHAPTER 13

# BOULDER, COLORADO

e pulled the rented SUV into the parking lot of Saint Joseph's church. The church was beautiful, built from old, rough stone. The stunning stained glass shone in the fading sun light. A great place to take your possessed friend.

We all agreed to have me go in with Ethan while everyone else stayed in the car to keep control of Isaac and Hades. I jerked the door open. We rushed through the foyer and stepped into a large chapel. No one. It was empty. Faces looked down from the ceiling. They were probably saints or something. Down the aisle was a simple altar with a white cloth draped over it. I noticed a door off to the left side of the altar and started striding towards it.

A door on the right side opened. A man in his sixties came out, dressed as a priest. He had nicely trimmed salt and pepper hair, a pleasant face, wrinkled with age, but still likeable. That chill ran down my neck. I cursed. There was a ghost here. I saw her a second later. She walked through the door after the priest. She was older. She had to have been in her eighties when she passed. She wore a long, old-fashioned, flowered dress and a cardigan with a hummingbird brooch. Her hair was short and thick, falling into a bob just below her ears. She had nice eyes and a happy smile. She stayed with the priest, keeping pace.

He looked up and smiled welcomingly. The priest limped over to meet us at the first row of pews.

"Welcome to Saint Joseph's." His voice was just as pleasant as his face. He had the same eyes as the ghost. His mother? A sister? She had stayed back, so I didn't know. Her hands clasped in front of her as she watched us,

happy, waiting. I'd never seen a ghost like her before. "Is there something I can help you with?" The priest brought my attention back to him.

"We're looking for Father Francis," Ethan answered, his voice respectfully low in the church.

He smiled bigger. "I'm Father Francis, how can I help you?"

"I'm Lexie," I told him bluntly. I had no time for subtlety. No, Isaac had no time for subtlety. His eyes ran over me before meeting mine.

"Ah, yes." He gestured for us to sit. I didn't budge. "I understand you believe you're a Necromancer." Huh?

"I am," I told him. That didn't matter right now. "Isaac's in the car with the others. Where do you want him?"

Father Francis smiled gently and sat down in the first pew. "I'm sure you believe you have abilities. And I'm sure you also believe your friend is possessed. However..."

He didn't believe me. You've got to be fucking kidding me! We did NOT have time for this shit! I looked at the ghost, slipped my beads off and took several steps closer. For the first time in my life I didn't fight as her memories slid into my mind. She was his mother. He hadn't called her back; she never left. She never would, not till he passed himself. She was there to protect and watch over him, not to haunt. I felt the love she had for her son. It was enormous and selfless. It was a mother's love. I felt wetness on my face when I opened my eyes again. I turned to meet his eyes, tears falling, my heart bursting with his mother's emotions.

"Elise is right here," I told him, my voice shaking. "She's wearing the hummingbird brooch that you and your dad picked out when you were seven." I shook my head, my throat tight.

"She never went anywhere. She's been here with you all this time." Father Francis's eyes shone as his jaw clenched. He looked away from me. I couldn't take any more. Her emotions were still pouring into me gently, softly. I had never felt anything like it.

I backed away, slipping on my beads and wiping my face until I backed into Ethan. He wrapped his arm around me and squeezed. The pain began to fade. Whether it was Ethan or the distance I didn't care.

It wasn't long before Father Francis was looking at me again. He didn't seem surprised to hear anything I said. "No one has ever mentioned the brooch before," he announced, his eyes bright. "Okay, you're telling the truth. Why do you think your friend is possessed?"

Seriously? I repeated everything that I told him on the phone, then added, "Oh, yeah. And on the way here, it made our plane do a nosedive."

Father Francis listened to everything. Then he pulled out his phone and started texting someone. "What kind of car are your friends in?"

"The only black SUV in the lot," Ethan answered.

He hit send, put his phone back in his pocket and looked up. "Some of our people will bring them in and get your friend into a room," he said, "We will examine him and determine if he is possessed or mentally ill. True possession is rare."

"He almost killed himself," I reminded him.

He nodded with a patient look on his face. "Which is why we will take every precaution."

"Is he going to be okay?" Ethan asked, his voice lost. I grabbed his hand on my shoulder and held it tight.

Father Francis sighed. "If he's mentally ill, there are treatments. If he's possessed..."

"Then what?" I demanded.

Father Francis looked at the two of us. "Depending on the stage, it's a fifty-fifty chance he'll survive." It was like a blade was driven into my heart. It became hard to breathe. Ethan gripped my hand tighter. Father Francis continued. "It all depends on the person and how long they've been dealing with it."

"It's been... a few days." I told him.

Francis nodded, his eyes understanding. "Then there's still hope for him."

The door opened. A tall, bald, muscled man strode into the church. He had a distinctive face with sharp cheekbones and a strong jaw. He was wearing black military pants and a black T-shirt. But what held my gaze were his tattoos. Down the outside of his neck were black and bronze scrolling letters in a single line. They ran down his neck and disappeared into his shirt only to reappear on the outside of his arms and continued to his wrists. They were the same as the tattoos my True Self had... What the fuck? The guy moved to the priest before he bent down and whispered in his ear. Father Francis brow drew down. The man pulled back as the priest got to his feet and turned back to us. "Come with us."

We followed Father Francis as the man led us through the door into a back room. "This is Craig. He's the leader of this unit of Templars."

"Templars?" I asked as we were led outside and across a large garden courtyard to an even bigger building behind the church.

"Yes, the Templars are the world's first line of defense," the priest explained as Craig opened the door and led us out into a large hallway. "Templars all have the same full body tattoo you can see on Craig here. Anyone wearing these tattoos is a Templar." Craig opened a large door across from the front door. We started down the wide stone steps. The air temperature dropped twenty degrees; it seemed like we were going into a basement. The walls were blocks of rock. Lights hung from the ceiling.

"What do the tattoos do?" I asked carefully. "There has to be a reason."

"It's a spell tattooed into the skin for the Sight and also protection against possession from ghosts and demons," Craig explained, "which is why it's so large." They could do that? My mind raced with possibilities. I shoved them away. We had bigger problems right now.

When we reached the basement, there was another long hall branching off to the left and right. We turned right and were led to a door with a crowd of people standing around it. All of them were in black and bearing the same tattoos. I needed to ask about it, but right now Isaac was what mattered.

"Make a hole," Craig barked. People began walking out of the door. There had to have been twelve people in that room. All of them said some form of 'sorry, Captain' or 'sorry, sir.' I put it out of my mind for later and followed them into the room.

It was a medium sized bedroom; there was a desk, a chair, even a bookcase. Isaac was there, in a hospital bed against the middle of the far wall. There were two more of those tattooed guys inside, standing like guards beside Isaac's bed. Dr. Zimmer, Zeke and Asher were standing near the right wall, next to the bookcase. Father Francis moved to the left side of the bed, past the desk. Ethan moved to the foot of the bed next to Miles and Hades, while I stayed where I was in the doorway. There wasn't much more room.

Isaac came into sight. His eyes were glowing red, the shadow slithered over his face.

"Uh, does anyone else see that?" I asked the room.

"Yes," Craig and the other Templars said in unison. Oh, good. I wasn't nuts.

The demon smiled wickedly, its eyes on the priest. "Father Francis of the Templars. I've heard of you." The voice coming out of Isaac was the same as before; deep, dark, and chilling. "How's the family?"

"What's your name, demon?" Francis demanded.

The demon cackled as he looked around the room. His eyes found Ethan. "Hermano, tu lo que eres un idiota, eres un imbécil. No te preocupes, yo me encargo de el," he taunted. Ethan's hands balled into fists at his side. Those demon eyes moved to me and his smile grew. "Ah, Red, we need to talk."

"Go fuck yourself," I growled. His eyes flared red. Faster than I thought possible, he was on his knees and lunging for me. The Templars and Zeke tackled Isaac to the bed before he could reach me. Hades jumped on to the bed. Francis shouted for back up. Someone shoved me, and I stumbled and fell. My head hit something. Pain exploded through my head, making my vision grow dark. There was more shouting, but it seemed far away. Nausea rolled through me. Where... where was I? Hard wood pressed against my face. What...? There were voices I knew, shouting. I opened my eyes and the world tilted. I closed them again with a groan.

"Lexie? Lexie?" Someone was saying my name.

"Ow..." I muttered. My head hurt so much it felt like it was going to pop. The sound suddenly came back.

Miles was kneeling next to me, his eyes worried. "Lexie, look at me." There was shouting elsewhere, barking... Zeke's voice was among them.

I looked up at Miles. "Wha' happened?"

"You were shoved and hit the desk with your head. And you're bleeding," he informed me. Yeah... that felt about right.

"Zeke!" Ethan shouted. "Let them take care of Isaac, Lexie's still down!"

"You have to move her!" a man ordered. Miles looked up. The look he gave the man sent a chill down my spine.

"She hit her head," Miles shot back, his voice chilly.

"We need to move him. Now!" the man shouted. Isaac...

"Lexie?" Zeke yelled. "Get the fuck out of my way!"

I started pushing up off the floor only for my arms to give out. "I need a hand," I admitted, still a bit foggy.

"Asher! I can't carry her." Miles called.

"Isaac. They need to move him," I said as I pushed myself up again on trembling arms. Large arms helped me to my feet before they lifted me. The smell of cinnamon filled my lungs. I lay limp against Asher as he carried me into the hall. I opened my eyes to watch as the Templars rolled Isaac's bed out of the room. Handcuffs held him to the railing. Hades was on the bed as they ran down the hall, growling. Ethan ran after them. Things were a bit blurry as Asher set me down against the wall. I rested the back of my head against the cool stone. Ah... that felt good. Cold good.

"Lexie, how are you feeling?" Miles asked as he knelt in front of me. "You're bleeding." Miles was surrounded by stars as he looked up at the door. "Dr. Zimmer!" Cloth was pressed against my forehead. The world was still spinning as my stomach rolled. Oh, this wasn't good. I closed my eyes.

"What the fuck happened?" Zeke snapped. I whimpered and covered my ears. Too loud.

"Go with Isaac," I told them as I dropped my hands. I swallowed hard against the bile rising in the back of my throat.

"Ally..."

"Go," I ordered. "I'm fine. Doc is coming. Go." Asher cursed as a pair of footsteps walked off. Footsteps came out of the room.

"Miles, let me in," Dr. Zimmer stated.

"Hey, sorry about running into you. I've called a medic for you," a man's voice said. Zeke growled; something hit stone.

"Lexie." It was all Miles had to say.

"Zeke... don't," I ordered weakly. Zeke cursed over and over. I opened my eyes to look up at them. "Go with Isaac."

"Lexie..." Zeke warned.

"Zimmer's here," I pointed out, "and no one is with the twins. Stay with them." The guys shared a look. Cursing, everyone but Miles headed down the hallway.

Miles eyed me, clearly torn. He turned to Dr. Zimmer. "Take care of her."

"Of course," Dr. Zimmer reassured him. Miles headed down the hallway.

A woman in the Templar black clothes and tattoos came up carrying a large pack. "Someone called for a medic?" she said, her voice cheerful.

I shook my head. "Zimmer's got me."

Dr. Zimmer looked up over his shoulder. "Stay, I need to know about your facilities." He turned back to me.

She nodded.

"What happened?" Dr. Zimmer asked.

"Miles said I hit my head on a desk," I told him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked as he slipped on a pair of gloves.

"Um." I closed my eyes and tried to think. "I'm... dizzy, nauseous, and I feel like my head is going to explode. The dizziness is starting slow down, though."

"You also have a cut on your hairline," Dr. Zimmer announced as he pulled a pen light from his pocket. He turned it on. "Alright, look at my finger." I did. He shone the light into my eyes then took it away. He did this several more times. "Well, your pupils are sluggish." He put the light away and tore open a small package. "This is going to sting," the doctor warned. He started cleaning the cut on my forehead.

"Shit, shit," I snapped.

When he was done, he put a small butterfly bandage on my forehead then put the trash and his gloves into a small Ziploc bag. Zimmer looked up at the medic. "What kind of facilities do you have?"

"We have a full hospital in the med wing," she announced. "We're equipped to treat everything and do anything."

He nodded. "Good." He turned back to me. "I think you have a concussion. Your pupils are reacting slowly, which means you probably have some pressure on your optic nerve. You need to go to the med wing and get a CT scan."

I shook my head slowly. "No way, I'm not going anywhere until I know Isaac is going to be okay."

He sighed. "I expected that. Listen, I don't know if I believe what's happening here, but something is wrong with Isaac. You seem to have an idea about how to fix that, so... I won't force you to go," he said. "But if you don't go, any damage this causes can be permanent."

I met his eyes. "I'm not going anywhere except to wherever they have Isaac."

He gave me a small smile, as if he expected it. "Okay. But if the headache gets worse, you get dizzy again, or you vomit, I'm making the Templars take you to the medical wing because that means it's gotten worse."

"I will." If it got worse, yeah, I'd get help. He picked up his bag and helped me to my feet.

"They probably took him to the ward room. It's the door at the very end of the hall," the medic told me with a smile.

Dr. Zimmer turned to her. "Show me the medical wing."

She nodded and they began walking down the hallway to the stairs.

I took a moment to take a breath and then I was moving down the hall. When I reached the only door at the end of the hall, I didn't bother knocking. I stepped into a small room where the priest, Templars in black and my guys were standing. Across from the door was a large window. Isaac was in the center of a large, empty, stone room. Runes written in white paint circled the bed. Isaac's face was completely shadowed. Those glowing red eyes glared at... Hades. Hades lay on Isaac's body, his front paws resting on his chest, his eyes on the demon. What the...?

"So, that's it?" Ethan asked, drawing my attention. "An exorcism?" My stomach knotted.

"Yes," Francis said. "It's that or nothing."

I looked back out the window at Isaac. The demon was smiling. "Do it," I ordered before turning back to them.

Francis nodded. "I'll need an hour to prepare." He looked at one of his men. "Assign them rooms and give them the tour."

Craig nodded. "Follow me." The others started to follow. I didn't budge, neither did Ethan.

"What did the doctor say?" Zeke asked.

"I'm fine." I didn't even turn away from the window.

"What did he say?" Zeke demanded.

"Leave it, Zeke." I wasn't asking.

"I will carry your ass back out to Zimmer if I have to," Zeke warned.

I looked up and met his eyes. "I saw the doc, I'm fine."

He kept staring into my eyes. "Lexie." His voice was hard and sharp.

"I can't," I said, my voice growing raspy. I winced at the sound and then looked back at the glass.

"I'll get some water," Zeke growled.

"If you can find some aspirin, you'd be my hero for the day," I said absently. He cursed under his breath the whole way out the door. Then it was just Ethan, me and two Templars.

### Ethan

MY CHEST WAS TIGHT, it was hard to breathe. Isaac was possessed by a demon. Lexie slipped her hand into mine. I clung to her warmth as I watched my brother through the glass.

Why didn't I see this? How did I miss it? He'd been off for days. Not sleeping, not eating.... That should have fucking tipped me off!

I took a deep breath, trying to ease the tightness in my lungs. My stomach rolled with bone deep fear. It clawed at me, made me want to scream and pound something into the ground.

"I-I-I can't lose him," I breathed, my voice cracking.

She held my hand tighter. "That's not going to happen." Her own voice was cracking and rough.

"He's... that thing... he's trapped inside his own body with that thing," I said again, because I had to say it out loud.

"Yes and no." Her voice was soft and soothing. "He's in his center. I told him how to bring in light and how it works. How to defend himself. I... I don't know if he understood. There wasn't time."

I slipped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. Her arm slid around my waist as she leaned against me. Her warmth and the scent of rosemary helped me take a deep breath. "You tried. I wish..." I swallowed hard. "I wish I could talk to him, just for a minute."

"You will, when we get that thing out of him," she said. Isaac's body jerked at the handcuffs. Hades growled, baring his teeth until the demon settled down.

"What is Hades doing?" I asked.

"I don't know, but... he seems to be keeping him in place."

I held her tighter against me. "I'm scared, Lexie."

She carefully squeezed me back. "Me too."



It was a little more than an hour later when Zeke had come back with aspirin and water bottles. He was my hero for the day. Now if only my damn head would stop hurting. The guys were back in the small, dim room, sitting in a few chairs while we waited.

The door opened. Father Francis came in wearing a white stole with gold embroidery. His eyes looked around the group.

He gave us a warm smile. "I'm going to have to ask you guys to wait in the hall. This is going to be very trying on Isaac as it is." We exchanged looks. No one was happy about it, but everyone got to their feet and moved out into the hall. Everyone but me.

I stepped in front of the priest and met his eyes. "I'm not leaving. In fact, I'm going in with you."

"Lexie..." Ethan stopped before going out the door.

I kept my eyes on Father Francis's. "You said the demon will destroy his soul. I'm guessing if you start this, it's going to get angry and probably take it out on Isaac. Right?"

The Templar behind Francis narrowed his eyes and eyed me. "That usually occurs," he admitted.

"Well, I can feel Isaac. I can tell you if he starts to... have trouble." I didn't even want to think it.

Father Francis thought about it before he met my eyes again. "This is extremely dangerous. Do you understand that?"

I looked at Isaac through the window, pinned under my dog. The demon was growling at Hades. I turned back to the priest. "Yeah, I do."

Father Francis sighed. "You do not say a word. You will ignore anything it says. It will do everything possible to get an emotional reaction, including using Isaac's knowledge of you. Do not fall for it. You will follow orders in there, understood?"

"Got it," I agreed.

"This is Father Andrew. He's the head priest for the Templars," Francis announced.

"Nice to meet you," Andrew greeted.

"Lexie. You too," I said. Francis went through the door into the room with Isaac.

"Lexie..." Ethan's worried voice had me turning back to him. He was frowning. "Are you sure?"

I met Ethan's eyes and nodded before he closed the door behind him. I followed Father Francis and Father Andrew into the room. It was bright as hell. There was not a single shadow in that room. Not to mention that it was cold, but I doubted it was from the air-conditioning. They stood at the end of the bed. I moved to the side and out of the way. Huh, that window was a two-way mirror. Everyone was standing inside the circle of runes. Hades didn't take his gaze off Isaac as the room grew even colder.

Isaac's face twisted into a creepy smile. "Red, we need to talk."

I rolled my eyes and placed my hand on Isaac's wrist. The demon tried to bite me. Hades gave a low growl. I smacked it on the forehead. "Knock it off or I'll put a muzzle on you."

It smiled at me. I looked up in time to watch Father Andrew biting back a laugh.

I put my hand back on Isaac's wrist. I could feel him there, like a pocket of hot air. You couldn't see it, you just felt it.

Father Francis began to speak in Latin. Honestly, I didn't understand a word of it. But apparently the demon did. It started laughing. Then Francis splashed it with holy water and it writhed in pain under Hades' weight. It cursed, growled, promised to hurt us in many different and inventive ways, it was rather strange to hear from the demon handcuffed to a bed. Father Francis continued. The two men got into a rhythm with their prayers. It was rather nice, except for the hate spewing demon in the bed.

Time went on. I focused on feeling Isaac's soul in his body. I fell into a calm space where there was only Isaac's soul and the sound of prayers. It went on and on until Isaac's soul flickered. I focused completely on it as Hades whined. There was a shift under his skin, the feel of Isaac fading.

"Stop," I ordered. Father Francis and Father Andrew looked at me. "He's starting to fade."

Father Francis seemed to struggle with something as he looked at Isaac. Isaac's body was pale and sweating. He was taking deep breaths, as if he had just run a marathon. Father Francis closed his bible with a sigh before he turned and headed for the door. Leaving Hades to watch Isaac, I followed them through the dim outer room and into the hallway.

The guys got to their feet.

"Did it work?" Ethan demanded.

Francis sighed. "No, he started to fade so we stopped." He ran his hand down his face. "Come with me to the cafeteria. I'll explain what's going

Everyone followed the priest down the hall and up the stairs. Ethan fell into step next to me. "How was he?" he whispered.

"He's sweating and pale, but... he seems okay," I answered. Ethan nodded. I took his hand and squeezed. He squeezed back.

We walked into a large, empty cafeteria. Francis led us over to a big coffee maker and cold display fridges.

"Please, grab whatever you'd like," Francis instructed as he picked up a mug and poured a cup of coffee. Everyone grabbed something. I grabbed a water bottle and sat down with everyone at the nearest table.

Father Andrew took a sip of coffee before looking at us. "Here's the situation," he began. "If we can't get the demon out through a standard exorcism, then we need to be able to name the demon so we can do a focused exorcism."

"A name?" Asher asked, his face full of disbelief.

"Yes," Andrew told us. "Demons like to talk and torment their victim's friends and family. In doing that they sometimes slip. Which means, we need to find out who it will talk to. It also serves as a distraction to give Isaac a break."

"And if that doesn't work?" I asked bluntly.

Francis sighed. "I'm going to make a call to... some people. I'll see if they can send help. But if they can't... we need that name."

A thought occurred to me. They weren't the only one with people. I got to my feet. "Restroom?"

Father Andrew pointed to the hallway we came from. "First door on the right," he said. I headed that way without another word. It was a small, one-person bathroom and it was perfect. I locked the door, put the lid down and sat down. I took a deep breath, let it out and closed my eyes. Then I dropped.

I landed in the Veil almost instantly. "Zahur!" I shouted as I straightened. Nothing. "Zahur! I need you now!"

A figure shimmered into form in front of me. Exactly like me in every way, Zahur frowned at me. The foghorn alarm blared, shaking me down to my bones. When it was done, Zahur was scowling at me.

"What? I was finally making progress on a fucking mountain of paperwork," she snapped.

Paperwork? Oh, fuck it, no time. "Listen, my friend is possessed by a demon. I need fucking help because this priest and some group called the Templars can't get it out of him."

She eyed me. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," I snapped.

Her frown disappeared. "Where are you?"

"Saint Joseph's in Boulder, Colorado. It's in the States," I said.

She nodded. "I'll send the best to help you."

"There's also another thing." I explained to him what happened on the plane, how I jumped into Isaac's center.

She was rubbing the bridge of her nose when she was done. "That is not great." Her hand dropped. "It's interesting that you can do it, but that it is extremely dangerous. Especially with a demon possessing your friend. If you do it again, that demon can get to you. It could shift to you."

I nodded.

She tilted her head. "Then again, the energy in someone's center works like the Veil, and you can get to that demon too." I raised an eyebrow. Interesting. She shook her head, her eyes focusing on me again. "Nevermind, forget about that. Just... don't do it again unless your friend is... getting weaker. And be careful. Demons like this will eat your soul if they get a chance."

"Well, shit," I grumbled.

She met my eyes. "I'm sending help. Get your ass back there."

"Got it." I closed my eyes and pulled myself back out.

It took a moment for me to get my bearings and then I was out the door and heading back into the cafeteria. Francis was on the phone a few feet away.

"What did I miss?" I asked.

"He explained the options for Isaac in more detail," Miles answered before changing the subject. "I talked to Rory. He'll back up the twin's cover story to their mom."

I nodded. "And Zeke? Asher?" I looked at them.

"Already done," Zeke announced. "Sylvie thinks I'm crashing at Miles' for a while."

"My dad doesn't give a damn," Asher explained. Well, that covered everyone.

Francis came back. "I couldn't get through to them," he announced. "We need that name." Everyone got to their feet and followed Francis downstairs to Isaac's room.

We had just reached the door when Francis's phone went off.

"Hello?" the priest answered. His face grew pale as he straightened. "Yes, sir."

His eyes found me as he listened to whoever was on the line. "Understood. We look forward to their arrival." Francis hung up and eyed me for a second before turning to the rest of the group. "Well, that was our... higher ups. They're sending their best team to come help with Isaac. But they are going to be a couple of days."

"A couple of days?" Ethan snapped.

"Yes, they have to move slowly for one of their member's health," he explained. "In the meantime, we'll try to get the demon to talk. It'll distract the demon from Isaac and buy him time."

"And how are we going to do that?" Asher asked.

Francis sighed. "Each of you will go into the room with the demon alone. It will either start talking to you or it won't. Then you'll come out and the next will go in."

"It's rather straightforward," Craig told us as he came out into the hall. "The demon wants to torment you, taunt you. It will help us decide who will sit with Isaac."

"Who will begin?" Francis asked. I was about to step forward when Ethan headed for the door.

"Let's get this over with," Ethan bit out as he jerked the door open. Craig and Father Francis followed. The door closed behind them and tense silence fell.

I crossed my arms and chewed the corner of my lower lip. Zeke began pacing. Asher began massaging the back of his neck as Miles began tapping his fingers against his thigh in a staccato rhythm. Zeke continued pacing the width of the hall. My eyes unfocused on the floor. Why did Francis look at me that way? Who was on the other end of that call? Did... Zahur have anything to do with it? It hit me. I really didn't know that much about Zahur. Shit.

It was five minutes before Ethan came out cursing under his breath. "Next!" He walked further down the hallway, taking deep breaths. Asher

was at the door before I could go. After the door closed, I went to Ethan and put my hand on his shoulders.

"That is not my brother." His voice cracked.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, rested my cheek just above his shoulder blades and hugged him. "No, it's not. But we'll get him back." Even if I had to die trying. We were not going to lose Isaac.

He held my arms to him and squeezed me back. We stood that way for several long minutes while he got himself under control. When he patted my arms, I let go. We walked back to the others and waited in silence.

It was a few more minutes of waiting before the door opened and Asher came out. This time I made it to the door before anyone else.

Francis and Craig were at the two-way mirror. I stopped with my hand on the handle to Isaac's room. "Anything it says does not get repeated or leave this room," I told them. They turned to me, each wearing looks of surprise. "Right?"

"Of course," Francis said. I met Craig's eyes.

"Naturally," Craig offered. He handed me a small mic and a battery pack. Right, they needed to listen. I took a deep breath and walked into the room with the demon.

It smiled at me. I walked to the end of the bed, crossed my arms over my chest and waited.

"Ah, Red... so much to talk about," he said, his voice low. Fine, it was going to talk to me.

"Oh, really?" I said with sarcasm.

He giggled. "I see the way you feel for your friends," he taunted, his smiling growing bigger. "Naughty, naughty, naughty."

I said nothing.

"You're a bad girl for feeling this way for all of them," he continued.

I tilted my head to the side and smiled my not so pleasant smile. "Well, then I'm a bad girl." There was no way I was going to let this shit from hell try and make me feel bad for loving my guys. I knew who I was, and I sure as hell could own my shit.

"You agree?" he asked, perplexed, his smile disappearing.

"Yeah, sure." I shrugged. "It is what it is."

His smile came back. "Oh, we're going to have a good time."

I rolled my eyes and walked back out of the room. Craig and Francis looked at me with questions in their eyes.

"So, I take it that's what you're looking for?" I asked without emotion as I handed back the microphone.

"Yes, it is," Craig admitted. his eyes running over me.

"Good, I'll send in the next one." I turned and left the room and their judging eyes. The guys turned around. "Next."

I stepped out and moved to lean against the wall of the hallway next to Asher. "It talked."

"It didn't say a word to me," Asher muttered.

"Lucky." I looked up from the floor to meet Ethan's gaze. We shared a look full of secrets.

Zeke started for the door.

"Wait, let's go together," Miles suggested as he moved to the door. Zeke didn't say a word as they went in.

"What did it say?" Asher asked softly.

"Personal stuff," I hedged. He didn't ask again. We waited in silence.

It was eight minutes later when Miles and Zeke came out. Zeke's jaw was clenched, his eyes burning.

"It didn't talk to either of us," Miles announced. Surprised, I pushed away from the wall as Craig and Francis came out the door.

"It only spoke to two of you," Francis announced. "I hate to say this, but we're going to need one of you in that room at all times."

"We want it to talk, so you're going to have to talk to it," Craig explained. "The more it talks, the bigger chance it has of making a slip. Also, the more you distract him the less time he's wearing down Isaac." Francis came to stand next to me and Ethan.

"It will want to keep the power in the conversation. It wants control so it can hurt everyone around Isaac," Francis warned. "Be prepared for it to play games with you. You cannot react emotionally. Otherwise, you give the demon exactly what it wants, and it has no reason to talk." He looked at both of us. "Do you understand?" Ethan and I both nodded. A small flame sparked in my heart.

"I'll go in and set up the recording equipment," Craig told us before going back into the room.

I checked the time. It was almost midnight "I'll take the first shift," I announced.

"Beautiful..." Ethan looked at me. "No."

I met Ethan's eyes. "Ethan. I got this. You take a shift during the day, I'll take at night."

"We're going to have to split up," Miles announced. "One of us with them at all times." Miles turned to Asher and Zeke. "We need to make sure they eat, sleep, and take care of themselves. Right?"

"Right. I'll take Ethan," Asher said.

"I'll take Lexie," Miles agreed.

"I'll run between both and take care of Hades," Zeke stated.

"Tomorrow we'll change it up so everyone gets enough rest," Miles told them. They nodded.

Ethan was still looking into my eyes. "Lexie..."

"It'll get tired by the time you come in. It probably won't be great, but it should be better," I explained.

"He's my brother," Ethan reminded me.

I stepped closer and put my hand on his chest. "That's why I'm going first." His hand came up and held mine against him. "This is what we're doing."

Ethan took a shaky breath. "Okay."

I pulled away and looked up at Asher. "Take care of him."

Asher nodded, his face somber.

"Be careful, Lexie," Miles warned.

"Promise," I replied. I turned and headed for the door. As I started to walk past Zeke, his arm shot out, stopping me. I looked up and met struggling blue eyes. Poor Tough Guy. Ethan and I were going to walk in there to get torn apart and all he could do was wait. Zeke was going to be in his own hell.

I gave him a smirk and winked. He let out the breath he was holding then dropped his arm. I gave his arm a squeeze as I walked by.

I closed the door behind me and leaned against it. Okay. I'm going to go get a demon to talk. It liked games, it wanted to hurt me. A wicked idea slipped through my mind. I grinned. Oh, this should be interesting.

"Lexie? Are you ready?" Craig asked as he sat at a laptop on a small desk.

"Yeah."

He got to his feet and held up the small microphone again. "This is how I'll hear you," he explained as he pinned it to the inside of my neckline. "I'll be the only one listening."

I nodded, my mind still running over my idea. Once he got the microphone clipped on he handed me the battery pack. I slipped that into my pocket.

Craig eyed me. "It's not going to be easy."

I snorted. "Nothing in life worth doing ever is." I didn't bother to wait around for him to answer. I opened the door and walked through.

The head of Isaac's bed was raised so he was almost sitting up. His red eyes were on me, his smile growing with every step I took toward him. Hades was still sitting directly in front of him, his face only inches from the demon. What was he doing? I strolled to the folding chair that sat to the left of the bed and sat down. Making a point, I stretched my legs out, crossed my ankles and then crossed my arms over my chest. Once I got comfy, I met those crimson eyes. Then I said nothing. Because what is the worst thing you can do to a demon who wants to tear into you and control the conversation? Ignore it and not say a word.

I sat there, relaxed, as the minutes ticked by. Its smile went away. I still said nothing.

It locked its jaw, its eyes becoming sharp. Still I said nothing. In fact, I was counting seconds in my head.

At fourteen minutes, it broke.

"So, tell me. How was kissing Isaac? And Asher? And Zeke?" Here we go.

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# CHAPTER 14

#### EARLY FRIDAY MORNING

# Zeke

sat on the floor outside in the hall and watched the door. Stupid fucking moron. I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the stone wall. Miles and the priest had lied. They had lied for me. The demon had talked to me. Somehow it knew my worst memories and tried to taunt me with them. Francis, Craig and the other Templars had been amazed at how vehemently it went after me. Shit, they had yanked me out of the room after three sentences from the thing.

"We can't allow someone with this much trauma to spend so much time with a demon," Francis had told us. "The damage it can cause... the records show thousands of people with traumatic pasts have killed themselves after putting themselves in this situation."

I opened my eyes and looked at the door again. Lexie was in there, right now, being torn apart. I gritted my teeth and slammed my head against the stone. And I'm sitting out here...

This was beyond fucked up.

I checked the time. Four thirty in the morning. She'd been in there for four hours. Trying to distract myself, I looked down the empty hallway. Asher had taken Ethan off to eat hours ago. Each of us had a room to sleep in, though Asher was crashing on the floor in Ethan's tonight. One of the Templars had driven Miles to a store to buy everyone a few days worth of clothes. It wasn't as if we came prepared.

I checked the time again. Four thirty-five. Fuck. Needing to see that she was okay, I moved to my feet and walked into the small, dim observation room. Isaac's mouth was talking, but I couldn't hear anything. Hades was still, watching the demon intently.

I turned to the Templars. Craig was at a desk with a laptop and had headphones on. He looked up in surprise.

Walking over I asked, "How's she holding up?"

Craig sighed, took off one earbud and looked up at me. "So far? That girl is solid as a rock."

"What's it saying?" I demanded.

"Same thing it did to you. It's bringing up her bad memories, taunting her with them." Craig shook his head. "She's damn good at this."

"What?" I crossed my arms over my chest.

He pointed at Lexie through the window. "That thing is fishing for a reaction and she's giving him nothing. She's not playing his game, she has all the control right now. She's a natural."

"That's my girl," I muttered under my breath as I watched her. If anyone could annoy the fuck out of a demon, it was Lexie.

"Though, we didn't realize how much trauma she's experienced," Craig stated. "If she hadn't had therapy then we'd be yanking her out."

"How the fuck do you know that?" I growled.

Craig looked up at me and tapped his earbud. "Like I said, it's fishing, casting a wide net trying to find what hurts." He turned back to the laptop. "As it is, I'm going to have to station a Templar in her room when she goes to sleep."

My temper snapped. "The fuck you will."

Craig met my eyes. "I don't have a choice," he told me. "If I don't and she hurts herself, I have to live with that."

I shook my head. Lexie would never be able to sleep with some asshole she didn't know in her room. "One of us will stay with her."

"Is she going to go for that?" he asked, typing something into the computer.

"She'll be fine," I stated simply before turning and walking out of the room. Craig was listening to every dark secret of hers, every traumatic memory. I didn't know how she was dealing with that. I sat back down in the hallway and checked the time. Four forty. It was going to be a long night.

### Lexie

THE DEMON KEPT DRONING ON, and on, and on. And he was zeroing in on my fears and what hurt. I was hoping it would take longer. I started to feel beaten and bruised. I'd live, but Isaac... I was worried about him. His face was even paler than before, his skin clammy and shining under the lights. An odd rattle started coming from his chest every time he breathed.

"Do you want to hear about what you'll become?" it asked. I pulled out my phone and checked the time. 7:32 a.m. Where was Ethan? I needed to hold out a little longer.

"Do you know why Necromancers are usually killed?" it asked cheerfully. When I didn't answer it didn't faze it. "It's their connection to the dead. They have one foot in this world and one foot out." It tilted its head to the side and grinned. "That foot that's out is always pulling the rest of you into the dark. Necromancers love death. They enjoy being surrounded by it." I took a breath and let it out as I tried not to let him get to me. "You'll end up like everyone else has; killing to have more dead under your command."

Yeah, I was a real fan of the decaying and rotting crowd. Well, I was - as long as it was in a movie.

"That darkness will build and grow inside you, that fascination with the dead," he said, "until it touches everything about you, and everyone in your life."

The door to the room opened and I looked over my shoulder. Craig gave me the cut gesture.

I turned back to the demon and smiled. "That will be all for our session. I'll see you next week. Please pay your copay at the front desk," I said in a cheerful voice. It growled at me as I got to my feet and walked out. Hades didn't even budge from his spot.

In the dim observation room, I groaned loudly and rubbed my hands down my face. "That thing can talk! We should call it the Jabberer."

Craig chuckled as he took the microphone off me. "You did amazing in there," he announced. "You shattered the old record of three hours. You managed just over seven and a half hours with a demon."

"Think I can sell the movie rights?" I asked, my voice raspy.

He chuckled again as I handed him the battery pack. "Not really. But go get some sleep. Ethan is outside and so is my replacement for the day. And, uh, there's a situation out in the hallway for you."

Not wanting to ask, I opened the door and looked out. The souls of the dead filled the hallway almost wall to wall. I stumbled in the doorway as their energy hit me. My beads began to heat against my skin. The guys seemed to know something was wrong; the corridor was freezing, their breath steaming as they exhaled. The guys turned to me.

Miles was the first to speak up. "Lexie, is there—"

"Yeah, it's packed with ghosts," I admitted. The others cursed. I was about to tell all the souls to get out when Father Andrew made his way through the mass of souls.

"What is the meaning of this?" Andrew demanded as he finished buttoning his shirt. It wasn't even tucked in. He must have just woken up.

I raised my hand. "Yeah... this is my fault. I kinda look like a light to the dead."

"They follow her," Asher added.

Father Andrew ran his hand over the stubble on his jaw. "We can't have this many souls hanging around. We can't even get down the corridor."

I grumbled to myself as I stepped out into the hallway and cupped my hands. "Hey, dead people!" I shouted, my voice straining. "Get your asses upstairs and out to the courtyard or no one is crossing over!"

Father Andrew eyed me, as if I had done something truly offensive, but the dead didn't think so as they started making their way up the stairs and out of the hallway. My beads continued to burn my skin until they were gone. I let out a deep breath and turned to the guys.

Ethan's eyes ran over me as he moved towards me. I hugged him, careful of his bruises.

"You okay?" he whispered into my hair.

I squeezed. "Yeah, I'll live." I pulled back. "Look, it's gonna talk and it won't shut up. The beautiful part is you can sing songs in your head and not pay attention because you'll be wired, and someone will be listening so you don't have to."

"What did you sing?" Ethan asked.

I grinned. "Everything from Pink to DeBarge."

The guys grinned.

"The point is, don't listen. And don't say a word. It irritates the fuck out of it," I offered.

Ethan smirked. "I'm all for that."

My grin faded. "Isaac... he's paler, clammy. It's like he's got a fever. So, just be prepared for it."

He nodded and leaned down to kiss my cheek. "Thank you for being here," he whispered against my skin.

"Always," I answered before he walked around me and inside. I rubbed my temples; my head was pounding again and I just wanted quiet. But that wasn't going to happen yet. "Off to ghost land," I muttered as I started down the hallway.

"Asher, will you stay with Ethan for now?" Zeke asked. I didn't hear his answer.

When I reached the stairs, I cursed before starting to climb. I was exhausted and the last fucking thing I wanted was to deal with the dead. But I didn't really get a choice anymore. At least it felt that way.

Father Andrew walked beside me. "What exactly are you doing with the dead?"

"I'm crossing them over," I stated. "I'm sure you've noticed the dead aren't crossing on their own anymore."

"We have noticed an increase in souls, as well as... disfigured ones," the priest admitted.

I sighed. "Yeah, here's the Cliff Notes version: the Veil is closed and souls can't cross. I have to cross them myself." It wasn't nearly the whole story, but it was enough to get him to understand what he was going to see. We reached the first floor and headed for the courtyard.

The courtyard was packed with the living and the dead. Templars were everywhere, scattered amongst the souls. They seemed to be waiting just as much as the dead were.

"Why are they here?" I turned to Father Andrew.

"Well, this is a rare opportunity to observe what you do," Father Andrew explained. "Word probably spread you were doing something in the courtyard."

"And as the resident witch, I thought it best if I make sure you aren't doing more harm than good." A woman walked forward wearing the Templar uniform. Her brown eyes watched me carefully. "I know all about Necromancers and their perverse powers."

I raised an eyebrow. It was all I had the energy to do. Normally I'd say something, fire back. Right now, I didn't give a fuck.

I turned to the courtyard. "Templars, get your asses to the edges of the courtyard. Dead, get into the center of the courtyard and start deciding which twenty-five are going. Start with those who have the most rot damage. Then come back the same time tomorrow and we'll do it again." My voice cracked. I winced. No yelling. Damn it.

"Why only twenty-five?" witch-woman asked.

"Because I like living," I bit out and I rubbed my eyes with one hand.

"But surely—"

"I'm not about to explain shit to you right now," I snapped, dropping my hand to turn and meet her eyes. "You said you know Necromancers and their perverse powers, which I call 'bullshit' to since we're so rare." She opened her mouth again but I steamrolled right over her. "I've been up for almost twenty-four hours, sitting in a room with a demon who enjoyed throwing painful parts of my life in my face for over seven of those hours. Do you really think I'm going to stand here and give a flying fuck about what you think or want?"

Her eyes grew wide, her mouth gaped. The Templars around her actually put hands on their weapons. Seriously?

I turned back around to find the courtyard was sorted out. Finally. I strode into the courtyard and straight to the dead. "Alright, line up and hold hands. Do not let go of the soul next to you or you will not make it over." They began to make a line. I slipped off my beads as I went to the first person in the line. Their energy hit me hard; my nose started bleeding immediately. Fuck! Got to do this fast. My barriers were shit right now. I didn't ask for names, I didn't even say hi. I just grabbed the twenty-five of them and dropped.

I DIDN'T EVEN OPEN my eyes, I just crumbled to the ground. My head was pounding with my pulse, my face felt like I'd been punched, and my energy was gone. Large arms sat me up to lean against a wide, heavy chest. A big hand lifted my chin to tilt my head back, his fingers hot on my skin. Cloth moved to my nose.

"This... this is a lot of blood," Miles observed. I blinked up at Zeke, trying to get my eyes to focus.

"Damn it, Lexie," Zeke bit out before turning to the priests. "You want to clear the fucking courtyard?"

Father Andrew ordered everyone back to their posts. I closed my eyes again, feeling miserable.

"Can we get some tissues over here?" Miles demanded, his voice cold.

"She's never dropped like this before," Zeke pointed out.

"She's exhausted," Miles covered for me. "What the...? Her ears are bleeding this time too."

Zeke cursed. "Just from crossing? That's new."

Miles didn't say anything about it. "Thank you." Plastic was torn. Soft tissues began cleaning my ears and neck while the large hand kept the cloth on my still-pouring nose.

Footsteps moved toward us. The witch made an odd sound. "So, she uses her own body as a gateway—"

"Does it look like she's in any condition to speak to you?" Miles snapped, his voice glacial. "Back off."

"Is she alright?" Father Andrew's voice asked.

There was a heavy silence.

"This is new," Miles explained. "She doesn't usually drop like this, and there usually isn't this much blood."

Everything fucking hurt... but my energy was coming back. Well, what there was of it. I cracked open my eyes to find worried emerald eyes watching me.

"Hey," Miles said softly.

I reached up and held the handkerchief so Zeke didn't have to. "I owe you so many hankies."

Zeke gave an exasperated grumble that vibrated through his chest into me. It made me smile a little.

"How are you feeling?" Miles asked in that silky-smooth voice that seemed to soothe some of the ragged parts of my brain.

"Like watered down shit," I muttered as I pulled the hankie away. My nosebleed had finally stopped. I forced myself to pull away from Zeke and sat up. The world spun. I braced myself with my hands on the grass. Big hands went to my shoulders.

It took a little while longer, but eventually I got to my feet. Zeke steadied me.

I looked up at the guys. "I... I just need some sleep."

Miles moved to me and took my arm. "Come on, we'll take you to your room." His voice was soothing to my heart.

I nodded.

"Zeke, can you grab her something to eat?"

"Can you keep her awake for fifteen minutes?" Zeke muttered as Miles led me back into the building.

I didn't really notice what was happening as we walked down the stairs. I wasn't paying attention to which door was mine in the hallway. All I knew was that we were stepping into a room. It was large. There was a queen-sized bed, a desk, a bookcase, a dresser, and a door. And lots of space.

"There's a bathroom through that door," Miles offered. I nodded and headed for it. "Lexie."

I turned back.

Miles' ears were turning pink as he gestured to several shopping bags on the bed. "I picked you up some clothes. I had to guess the size of... Um, I had the saleswoman get several sizes." He was tapping on his leg again.

"Thanks, Miles," I said quietly. "I appreciate it. I wasn't even thinking of clothes."

His cheeks were pink when he met my eyes. "The Templars want to post one of their people in your room."

"Fuck no," I said before I even thought about it.

"That's what Zeke told them," Miles admitted, "but they want someone with you today. So..." He couldn't seem to say whatever it was. It finally clicked.

"Miles, are you trying to say you're sleeping in here?" I asked, confused.

He looked over my shoulder. "I can sleep on the floor, or go get Asher, or even Zeke if you'd prefer..."

I gave him a small smile. "Miles, you were just in a car wreck and you have a broken arm. You're not sleeping on the floor."

His ears and cheeks started to turn back to normal, but he still wasn't looking at me. "Then I'll go change."

"While you do that, I'll take a shower," I muttered as I started going through the bags.

Miles stopped, then turned back around. "Lexie, you lost a lot of blood. You might get dizzy. I'm worried about you taking a shower."

I gave him a small smile. "I'll take a bath. Okay?"

He thought about it for several heartbeats. "That should be alright." His shoulders were tense as he hurried out of the room.

After the door closed behind him, I smiled to myself. Poor Miles. He never quite knew how to talk to me, though most of the time he did just fine.

Putting it out of my mind, I went into the bathroom, started the water and looked at what was in there. The bathroom was stocked, from aspirin to the shampoo and conditioner I used at Miles' house. I smiled to myself. He was sweet. Needing to wash the feel of that room off, I stripped down and slid into the water.

When I stepped out, I felt better. I wrapped a towel around me and went into the bedroom. I started going through the bags, looking at what Miles had bought, when I found the underwear. I raised an eyebrow. Lace. Black lace cheeky panties. Oh, yeah. Miles must have asked the saleswoman to pick out what I would need. I shook my head as I put those back in the bag and found a pair of simple, dark-blue, cotton hipster panties. I set them aside and kept looking for something to wear to bed.

The door opened. I looked up in time to watch Zeke come in carrying a plate. He lifted his gaze and stopped cold. His eyes ran over me a second before he cursed and turned around. "Damn it, Lexie," he practically bellowed.

I looked down at my towel; I was covered. "Zeke, you've seen me in less," I reminded him. "Hell, my swimsuit covers less."

He continued cursing under his breath. "Not the same."

I bit back a grin as I found pajamas. "I'll be out in a second." I headed for the bathroom.

"Dressed this time," he grumbled.

I shook my head as I closed the door. Miles had picked out a cotton cami and shorts set. I slipped them on and felt the urge to pull the shorts down further. They were a little too short for me - they didn't even reach mid-thigh. Oh, well. At least the cami covered everything, mostly. I did like the pjs though, they were a wine color and surprisingly comfy. I ran a comb through my hair before I came out with my dirty clothes in my arms. I tossed them into a corner before I moved to the bed and started putting the bags of clothes onto the dresser.

Zeke cursed as he came over and put a plate into my hands. "Sit, eat," he growled. I didn't even argue, I just sat down with my legs crossed under

me and looked down. I smiled. Chicken noodle soup and what looked like a turkey sandwich.

"Mmm... soup." It was exactly what I needed for my knotted stomach. He started moving the shopping bags to the dresser for me.

"I raided the cafeteria kitchen," he grumbled. "I figured something hot would be good."

I looked back down at the food and smiled. "Thanks."

"Eat," he ordered again. I started with the soup. My stomach was still knotted from dealing with that *thing* and crossing the dead. I ate slowly, seeing how my stomach was doing. When I felt surer, I started on the sandwich. He even remembered that I liked sourdough and tomato.

Zeke sat down on the bed facing me. Those sky-blue eyes watched me carefully. His entire body was tense as he ran his hand through his hair. He was on edge, the bags under his eyes were dark. I looked up at him.

"What's wrong?" I asked softly.

His eyes ran over me before looking at the nightstand. "Are you sure Miles picked those pajamas out?" His voice was strained.

I looked down at what I was wearing again. Okay, yeah, the bottoms were showing more leg than usual, but Miles was a gentleman. It wasn't like Zeke to say anything about what I was wearing... usually.

I looked up to find his eyes shadowed, his jaw clenched. "What's wrong, Tough Guy?" He turned back to me.

He sighed deeply. "What happened in the courtyard?"

My pulse picked up. "I got really dizzy and I'm exhausted," I offered. I wasn't exactly lying, but right now... right now we couldn't talk about this.

His eyes ran over me. "How was it in there?"

I set my plate aside, pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. "Not fun," I offered, hoping he'd let it go.

His eyes were warm when they met mine. "Baby."

I sighed. "It was okay at first, it was just poking at me." I looked down at my knees. "Then later, it started making hits."

"I'm sorry," he said in that gentle voice he used with me sometimes.

"Not your fault," I told him. "If I had been paying attention, I might have seen what was happening sooner."

"That is the *stupidest* fucking thing I've ever heard you say," he snapped at me.

My eyes shot to his. "What?"

He scowled down at me. "It's not your fucking fault," he growled. "There are five of us. And no one noticed."

"The only reason he was at that house was—"

"Because he chose to be," he pointed out, his eyes hard. "This isn't your fault. You hear me?"

I let out a deep breath and looked up into his eyes. "I hear ya," I answered softly.

"Now, finish eating so you can go to sleep," he ordered. I picked up my soup and started eating again.

# ~

# Miles

I WALKED DOWN THE HALL, tapping the fingers of my good hand against the book cover. That crossing was different than usual. And bleeding from her ears? That was entirely new when it came to crossing souls. Lexie had just dropped. She'd never done that before... at least not in front of us. It must be one of the symptoms that she said were getting worse. My tapping increased. At least I'd managed to hire more graduate students to do more research before we had to leave. Hopefully, there would be some information waiting for us when we got back.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as my heart burned in my chest. The signs had all been there. She'd been exhausted lately, frighteningly so. When was the last time anyone went with her to the cemetery?

My stomach dropped. It had been months. God damn it! My body grew tense as I didn't move a muscle. How the hell could we be so careless? We all knew she was tired! Everyone knew she was running herself ragged. And we did nothing!

I cursed myself and the others. We should have seen the signs. *I* should have seen the signs.

My lungs were tight as it finally hit me. She was getting worse.

I took a deep breath and tried to find a calm center in the chaos that erupted in my mind. Now that I had seen it with my own eyes, there was no way I could deny it. Maybe she just needed a break from the dead? She had

been wearing her beads again; she might just need to strengthen her barriers, buy us time...

Even I knew I was full of it. But I didn't want to be. I stared at the door and thought about the girl beyond it. Right now, she was exhausted. She'd spent hours with that demon. She's been crossing the dead left and right. Isaac was possessed by a demon. Ethan was slowly falling apart. Zeke was going to lose his mind. And Asher seemed to be avoiding her. She didn't need me going in there and grilling her while I tried to find answers. It wouldn't be helpful. What would be?

Sleep. Angel needed to sleep to get back to where she was okay. She needed to eat right, too. Okay, that we could do, and Zeke wouldn't question it too much right now.

Zeke. Shit. I took another deep breath and let it out slowly. When he found out... it wouldn't be good.

Stop it, Miles. You can't deal with the future, you can only work with what's in front of you. And right now, she needed to sleep.

Having control of myself, I tucked my book in my sling, raised my good hand, and knocked on her door.

"Come in, Miles," Lexie called. I stepped inside and went still. Zeke was sitting on the side of the bed in front of her.

He took a plate from her and got to his feet. "Get some sleep," he muttered before turning and coming toward the door. I moved out of his way. Zeke didn't look at me as he left. Did he suspect something was wrong with her? He did see her drop in the courtyard... I'd have to find out later today. Worried, I turned back. My heart stopped. The pajamas I had picked out were... damn. The shorts were... the top was... everything... She was showing a lot of skin as she scooted over to the left side of the bed. Thankfully, she didn't notice my stunned expression. Why did I get the shorts? She usually wore pants to bed. I couldn't find it in me to be sorry about her pajamas.

Forcing myself to focus, I walked across the room to the right side of the bed and paused. Deep bruise-like bags hung under her bloodshot eyes. She was even paler than normal.

"What did you bring?" Lexie asked as she slipped under the blankets.

I looked down at the book in my sling. My ears warmed. "Oh, um, 'Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy." I pulled the blankets back and carefully got into the bed, making sure to not touch her. Why was this so

awkward? She slept in my room at home. I carefully pulled the sling off and set it on the nightstand.

"Can't go wrong with Douglas Adams," she said with a small smile. I laid down and shifted to get comfortable. She moved to her side to face me. "Are you going to read to me?"

I grinned a little. "If you like."

She smiled and scooted close enough that I could feel her body heat.

I focused on opening the book and started reading. "Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the western spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small, unregarded yellow sun." I made my voice the one she seemed to like.

I continued reading to her, noticing that she was only half asleep. I made my voice quieter. Her breathing grew deep and even. I kept reading just in case. I knew she was asleep when she shifted closer, her head moving to my shoulder, her leg slipping over mine as she pressed against my unbruised side. She moved her hand to my chest and left it there. The scent of rosemary filled my nose coaxing me to relax. I closed the book, set it carefully on the nightstand with my glasses, and pulled the lamp's chain to dim the light to a soft glow. I held her hand against my chest and took a deep breath. What did she go through in that room? I ran my thumb over her palm and looked at her. If we couldn't find the answer... how much longer did we have with her? My eyes burned as I pressed my lips against her forehead and just felt her against me. Eventually, my eyelids grew heavy. I fell into a deep sleep with her touch and smell soothing me.

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# CHAPTER 15

#### FRIDAY LATE AFTERNOON

# Zeke

hat time was it? I checked my phone. 3:44 p.m. I took another drink of coffee. I was going to need to get some sleep soon. But I didn't want to. There would probably be nightmares; there always were when I hadn't slept for a few days. I leaned my head back and took a deep breath. I was just going to have to—

The door to Isaac's room burst open. Ethan strode out, his face furious. I got to my feet as he walked by, muttering in Spanish under his breath. "Ethan!"

He turned around and shot me a look. "No!" he snapped. "I can't fucking sit in there anymore!" His voice shook, his hands clenched into fists.

"You have to," I growled. "You can't leave it alone to torture Isaac."

"That's my brother!" he shouted.

"I know!" I shot back. "And you need to get back in there and cover his ass!"

He let out a deep breath. "It won't shut up." He seemed to deflate. "It... it used her voice. It told me how much he wanted to die." His eyes watered.

"Fuck," I growled, guilt eating at me. Ethan's face was ragged, his eyes tortured. He'd been in there for hours. I couldn't make him go back inside. If he couldn't do it, he couldn't.

"Go. Take a walk and come back," I told him.

Ethan turned back to me. "What?"

"Take a break," I said again. "He'll be okay for a few minutes."

Ethan's face was dark, his eyes storming, as he walked away with his head down. I looked back at the door. Someone had to stay in there and distract it. Fuck.

I walked into the small room. Andrew, that priest for the Templars, was doing the recording today. He looked up. I didn't bother to stop, I continued into the room with the demon.

It grinned as I walked to the chair.

"Zeke," he greeted me in *his* voice. Isaac didn't look good. His eyes were becoming sunken, his skin extremely pale. "Let's talk about that day..."



### Lexie

I WOKE UP SLOWLY, warm and comfortable. A heartbeat sounded under my ear. Wintergreen surrounded me along with strong, lean arms and a bulky cast.

"Sorry, Nemo," I muttered into his undershirt.

He chuckled softly. "It's alright."

I lifted my head and opened my eyes to look up at him. I was lying on him again, my body between his knees, my arms around his neck.

"How'd you sleep?" he practically whispered.

"Good," I said. "You?"

He grinned. "Better than I have in a while."

"You must be a cuddler too," I teased as I pulled my arms from around his neck. He lowered his leg and moved his arms so I could shift off him and back to my side of the bed. "What time is it?"

Miles reached over to the nightstand, turned on the light. He picked up his phone to check. "It's only four, you still have three hours."

"Good." I got to my feet and went to the bags of clothes on the dresser. I wanted to check on Ethan and Isaac then talk to Father Francis about the tattoos the Templars had. I grabbed some clothes and hurried to the bathroom. I quickly pulled on blue jeans and a black boyfriend shirt. Whoever Miles got to pick out the bra was amazing because it fit perfectly.

Huh. I rushed my morning routine and hurried back out. Miles was just getting out of bed when I was putting on my sandals.

"Why are you in such a rush?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"I want to check on the twins. Then I have some questions for Francis," I told him.

He nodded.

"What are your plans for the evening?" I asked.

"Sitting outside that room," he said, his voice still half asleep.

"I'll meet you there," I offered as I got to my feet.

"How about I meet you in the cafeteria?" he suggested. "For breakfast... or dinner... to get something to eat?"

Oh, yeah. Food. "Yeah, you're probably right. I'll meet you there."

He grinned at me as I closed the door behind me. First, Isaac. I hurried down the hallway.

When I reached the door, I was surprised that Zeke wasn't there. Maybe he had finally gone off to get some sleep. I opened the door, stepped in and my heart dropped. Hades was lying on Isaac again. Zeke was inside with the demon. And it was *talking*. Memories from yesterday surged through my mind as I rushed through the inner door. The demon stopped talking immediately. I didn't stop. Furious, I reached Zeke as he got to his feet, grabbed the neckline of his shirt and dragged him out of the room. I slammed the outer door open and dragged him further into the hall. I turned back to him and let him go.

"What the fuck?" I shouted. "It was talking to you!"

Zeke's face was hard and pale. His haunted eyes met mine. "Yeah." His voice was strained.

"Why didn't you say something?" I couldn't seem to stop shouting.

"Miles and that priest told me not to!" he snapped back. "After it talked to me, they said I couldn't stay with Isaac." His jaw clenched and unclenched. "Not with my history."

I closed my eyes as my heart broke. Zeke had more trauma than I did. An extremely abusive father, finding his parents dead... That would just be a field trip for the demon. My eyes shot open.

"Why the hell were you in there? Where's Ethan?" I demanded.

"He needed a break," he bit out between clenched teeth.

"You should have woken me up," I snapped.

His eyes narrowed on mine. "Why? So you can be tortured even more?" he growled. "It's perfectly fine for you and Ethan to get torn apart, but not me?"

My eyes burned as I looked up at him. "We don't have the shit you do!" My voice came out raspy. My throat hurt and I didn't care. I kept yelling. "It isn't that bad!"

"Bullshit!" he shot back. He stepped closer until I had to look up at him. His voice was hard as it grew quieter. "I know you, Baby. When you came out of there yesterday you were hurting. So don't give me that crap about how it didn't hurt. Don't fucking lie to me and tell me you walked out of there fine."

"I can fucking take it, Zeke," I growled as I clenched my fists. "That's Isaac, it can fucking talk all it wants. 'Cause that's all it fucking is! Talk!"

"That *is* Isaac," he shot at me. "One of my best friends since I was four. His brother, another of my best friends, needed a fucking break because it was tearing him apart! So, yeah, I went in and it tore into me for a while." His eyes met mine. "That shit has taken a lot from me. I'm not going to let it take Isaac too." He strode past me.

I wiped tears from my face. "Are you okay?" I didn't turn around to face him; Zeke hated it when I cried, anyway. And I was still too angry.

"I'll survive," he snorted in disdain. "I always fucking do." His footsteps faded as he walked away. I took a deep breath and wiped my face.

"I seemed to have missed something." Ethan's voice had me turning around. Zeke continued walking down the hall. Ethan's chocolate eyes ran over me as he stopped in front of me. "What happened?"

"Zeke went in," I said, my voice raspy.

His face grew pale, his eyes wide. "What?"

"Zeke. Went. In," I repeated. "Apparently it fucking talked to him, too, but Francis and Miles refused to let him sit with Isaac."

Ethan's face grew dark. "Yeah... I can see why."

I met his eyes. "How long were you gone?"

"Thirty, maybe forty minutes." He swallowed hard. "It used Sophie's voice. I needed a break."

I nodded. "Next time, send a Templar for me first."

His eyes were shadowed as he looked down the hall at Zeke's retreating back. "You got it." He turned back to me. "Now, go get some tea. It sounds like you just fucked up your voice."

I nodded and walked down the hall already knowing what was wrong with my voice. The therapist and the doctor had warned me - don't strain your voice until you're completely healed. I had a nagging feeling I had just fucked it up even more.

I went upstairs and into the cafeteria. Thankfully the cold cases usually had sandwiches for between meals. I grabbed one and made some hot tea. I ate my sandwich quickly, trying not to think of what that thing could have said to Zeke. I was sipping tea when Miles came in.

He got a sandwich and coffee before he came and sat across from me. He eyed me as he sat down. "What's wrong?"

"Zeke sat with Isaac," I told him, my voice rougher than usual. His face grew white. "I agree completely that Zeke shouldn't have sat with him. What I'm struggling with is that neither one of you told us that it spoke to him." I took another sip of tea. My hand trembled around the mug.

"I didn't want to embarrass him," he explained, his voice quiet.

"That's the second time in the last week one of you have hidden something important from me," I told him as I met his eyes. "What the fuck?"

His gaze ran over my face. "Do you believe this is a good time for that conversation?" My eyes snapped to his as my heart dropped. "After all, we haven't told the others about your health situation."

His eyes were shadowed and refusing to leave mine, demanding an answer. Shit. He was right; I had no room to bitch. I was doing the exact same thing. I shook my head.

"Sometimes we don't tell people things to protect the ones we love and end up hurting others in the process," he said patiently. "I didn't want anyone to judge Zeke for not staying with the demon. But, yes, perhaps we should have told everyone."

His calm voice struck me right in the heart. I finally realized how the guys felt all this time when I didn't tell them what was going on. And that was only twice. I'd done it so many times. Shit.

"I'm sorry, Miles." I shook my head. "It's not fair for me to say that."

His eyes found mine. "You have every right to be upset about this, just as they have the right to be upset about... any important news being withheld."

I looked back down at my tea. He was right. I didn't even think about why Zeke would keep it a secret, I just yelled. Fuck.

He leaned forward. "Now, what happened to your voice?"

I snorted. "I was an idiot," I admitted. "Zeke and I had a yelling match outside Isaac's room."

His face grew somber. "So, you just damaged your voice even more?"

"My own fault. I never could shut up." I tried for a joke. It fell flat.

"Well, try resting your voice for a few days. It might just be... temporary," he suggested.

I nodded. The ache in my throat told me it wasn't, but I let him believe it.

When I finished my tea, I went and found the church office. Father Francis was at the front desk talking to another young priest.

When I walked in he looked up. "Ah, Lexie. How can I help you?"

"I have some questions for you, if that's alright?" I asked.

He smiled and waved me back to his office. His office was small and cluttered. He moved behind the desk and sat down. I took the chair across from it. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you know where that help is for Isaac?" I asked.

"Yes, they called a couple hours ago. They're halfway and making good time. They should be here tomorrow," he said with a smile.

"Thank God..." I took a breath before meeting his gaze again. "Now, the Templars' tattoos. You said they prevent possession?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Yes, they do. But they won't work on someone already possessed."

"I wasn't asking for Isaac. I was asking for me." I swallowed hard as I began to explain. "The most dangerous part of being a Necromancer is getting jumped by the dead."

I went on to explain what happened, the damage it caused. I even went so far as to explain the black dot on my brain. I told him everything.

"So, you would like the ward tattoo?" he asked.

"I... I think so," I said. "It would... I would actually have a good chance of reaching thirty years old."

He pressed his lips together before answering. "The ward tattoo is an important step in a Templar's training. It's a commitment to the church and this world. I can't just give it to you."

My heart sank. Great. Thanks. I got to my feet and headed for the door.

"But, if you worked for us, I could see that you receive the wards," he offered.

I turned around and eyed him. "What?"

"If you joined us after high school and went through training, then we could give you the ward tattoo," he said.

He looked like a priest, but he sounded like a dick. I turned around and walked over to his desk. "Let me get this straight. In order for you to let me get this ward tattoo and ensure that I won't die before I turn thirty, I have to join and work for you? Is that right?"

"Well, it's not that simple," he tried. "We're fighting a war against demons, we're working to keep other species in line—"

"So you're bribing me? With something that could save my life?" I tilted my head to the side. "Is that correct, Father? Isn't that blackmail? Or is it extortion?"

"Your skills would be extremely useful," he tried again.

"I bet," I bit out. "If a priest is pulling this type of shit, you must be desperate or an asshole. Which is it?"

His face turned red. "Well, I've always endeavored not to be an asshole."

"Would you keep chemo from a cancer patient?" I asked, trying to make him understand what he was doing.

He swallowed hard. "Sadly, if it meant the safety of thousands, yes."

I shook my head. Work for the Templars? Seriously? "I can't give you an answer now."

He gave me an understanding smile. "That's understandable. If you decide you do want to, then we'll be here."

I turned and walked out of the office, fuming. That fucker. I headed back to the living quarters. Work for the Templars? I headed down the stairs to the basement. Yeah, I could probably do it. But that would mean giving up on tattooing. It would be trading my dream for... a life. I turned into the hallway and headed for Isaac's room. Well, it wasn't like I didn't have options. I fingered my beads. I sat down on the floor outside the door with Asher and Miles.

I could wear my bracelets the rest of my life. That would have the same effect, but they could break. They almost did with Mary Summers. Hell, they had heated up in this hallway just yesterday. My mind ran in circles as I sat there in the hallway. It was a long couple of hours.

ISAAC LOOKED LIKE SHIT. It was almost as if he was disappearing before my eyes. Dr. Zimmer had put a catheter in, along with a nutrient IV. My poor Cookie Monster looked like death. Hades seemed to be keeping him warm at least. The dog wasn't on him anymore but pressed along his side.

It was around two in the morning when the fucking demon changed tactics. It started using my father's voice. I gritted my teeth and managed to keep from crying. Barely.

It smiled that creepy smile. "I've missed you, my love." Clay Ordin's voice came from his lips. I shuddered, unable to stop myself. "Would you like to know what I was thinking that night?"

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth as my stomach rolled. Memories broke through their door and swamped me. My pulse picked up.

"You were my fiancé, you would have enjoyed it." Rage tore through me.

My eyes shot open as I met those cold, lifeless eyes. It grinned. A slash formed over the skin on his chest and blood welled from the cut. My eyes snapped back to his. A smile formed on his face, as if he was wearing it like a cheap Halloween mask. Another cut, and another.

That's it. I reached out with my will before I even thought about it. I drove that gold ribbon into Isaac's chest and followed it down.

I landed in the dark again, still raging. I threw up a light and went looking for Isaac.

"You're not going to save him," the demon hissed from the dark. "He's mine."

"Go fuck yourself," I growled as I kept going. I finally found him where I had left him. Standing in the clearing between pillars, gasping for breath, his arms up defensively. His eyes frantically searching the dark. Blood trickled down his chest.

I ran through the pillars of stone. "Cookie Monster?"

He spun, his eyes finding me. It was like a blow to my heart. He was thin, his muscles wasted away to almost nothing. His amber eyes were dull, his blue hair had patchy bald spots. My eyes burned as he dropped to the sand. I slid to my knees in front of him.

"Red?" he breathed, his eyes wide, his entire body shaking. "Tell me that's you..."

"It's me," I whispered, my throat tight. He leaned against me. Tears fell down my face as I held him in my arms. "Hold on. Please. Help is coming."

His body shuddered against me. "I don't know if I can... you all left me."

I sniffed. "We're with you, Isaac. You haven't been alone since I last saw you." I ran my fingers over his cheek. "Ethan sits with you, I sit with you, everyone is here."

"I can't hear you guys," he muttered. "Hades... I hear Hades...."

"We're here," I told him. "We're not going anywhere." I rested my forehead against his as tears continued to fall.

"When you're gone... it's cold... dark," he whispered. Tears fell from his eyes. "All I hear is her voice... talking, always talking..."

"You didn't kill her. You didn't smother her," I told him. "It was a car wreck. You aren't God." I closed my eyes as my own tears fell on his face. "Please. Stay and fight with us."

"Trying... I'm so tired."

"I know, but help is almost here," I reminded him. "Help should be here tomorrow."

"Really?" He opened his eyes and met mine.

I nodded, my throat tight. "Yeah. Help is coming, I swear."

"How did a piece of shit like me... find you," he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

I met his eyes again. "You're not shit. I don't love shit"—I sniffed again — "so please hold on for me. For Ethan. Please? Don't leave us, please?" His eyes met mine. "I lied to you," he whispered.

"What? When?" I asked gently. What was he talking about?

"The night at the farmer's market. I lied. I hate myself, Lexie," he admitted. "For letting her die... I hate me for it. I can't even look in the fucking mirror anymore." He shook his head. "It's why I do those stunts. I want to get hurt. I want the pain. I deserve it and worse."

"She never blamed you," I told him. His gaze went to the dirt.

"I know," he admitted. His eyes met mine. "I pushed you... I called you..."

"That wasn't you, Isaac. That was the demon out there." I wiped the tears from his face. "That's when I realized something was wrong. You'd never say that to me or push me. I was too wrapped up in my own crap to see it."

He shook his head. "I should have tried to talk to you sooner."

I swallowed hard. "I lied to you, too."

His shadowed eyes met mine. "About what?"

"I got news from the doctor," I said quietly.

He lifted his hand and took mine. "Lexie?"

"I'm wearing out. I'm crossing thirty souls a day, sometimes even more," I told him. His eyes narrowed on mine. "I'm getting nosebleeds for no reason. I can't ever seem to get enough sleep. My barriers are getting weaker. I'm even wearing my beads again."

"When did this start?" he breathed.

"Over the last couple months," I admitted. "Since Davis jumped me. I just had a scan done; I got the results a few days ago."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"It means... things are going to get worse," I said. I explained about the dot on the first scan, and the size of the dot on the second. What was causing it and what my options were.

"Red..."

"So..." I fought back tears, "you need to stick around. You need to get through this. Because... they can't lose both of us."

"They can't lose either of us. I'm trying, but you need to try too." His voice was thin... tired.

"You are stronger than you know," I told him. "You're my Isaac. You chase me, you pick me up, you even smack my ass." He chuckled softly. It was tired, but it was there. "I never thought I'd like that. I love getting even with you. I love how you make me laugh. How you always, always manage to get me to smile no matter how bad it is." He grinned a little. "I love pranking you and watching you pull pranks on Zeke. It's always hilarious when you piss him off."

"I am good at that..." A little color came back into his cheeks. His eyes met mine. I kept talking to him; telling him what I loved about him, how he irritated me, how we couldn't lose him. The more I talked, the more color came back to his face. The more his eyes looked like his. I felt the first pull telling me I was about to go back. I helped him sit up again, threw up a bigger ball of light than before, and conjured more flares for him. I met his eyes again. "I'm going to be yanked out. But I think I know how to do this now. I'll be back as soon as possible. You will not be alone."

He nodded. He looked better than he had when I arrived. I was thankful as I was pulled back and thrown out.

I opened my eyes to find the demon glaring at me. I looked it in the eye and wiped the blood from under my nose. "You were saying, motherfucker?"

Its eyes narrowed at me as it started talking again, still in Clay's voice. I gritted my teeth and fought to stay there. I had promised him...



### Asher

ETHAN WAS asleep in the bed, his face pale and sweating. He was probably having a nightmare. I couldn't blame him. Hell, no one was sleeping well right now. Ally hadn't looked good either. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temple.

Ally. What the hell was that thing saying to her? Ethan never said a word about it. That alone told me it was bad. I wanted nothing more than to talk to her, ask her how she was holding up. But... I had to stay away from her. My chest grew tight. I took a slow, deep breath.

God, why the hell was I worrying about Ally? I should be worrying about Isaac! He's the one wasting away in front of us! Disgusted at myself I started rubbing the back of my neck.

It was Isaac... I closed my eyes, remembering the day we lost Mom. I had told the others that Mom wasn't smiling much the night before, so Isaac had hurried over early in the morning to be there to make Mom laugh as soon as she woke up.

Only that day she didn't wake up. My eyes burned. I took slow, deep breaths. He had stood beside me as I checked her pulse, felt her cold skin and found nothing. He even made the call to Mom's doctor to ask what to do while I went downstairs to tell Jessica. He called the others. He was there for me, for Jess. For all of us. And I couldn't even be bothered to notice that he was struggling! Guilt ate me alive as I ran around in circles in my mind.

### Lexie

What felt like an eternity later, I walked out of that room. I barely stopped long enough to take the microphone and battery pack off and hand it to Craig.

Craig's eyes ran over me, his gaze assessing. "Are you alright? That was... brutal."

I scoffed. "Yeah, nothing like listening to a detailed account of your stalker's plans for you if you never got away." I didn't know if it was true or not, but it didn't matter. It got the reaction the demon wanted. I had thrown up. Thankfully, there had been a trash can next to the bed.

"I'm stationing a Templar in your room tonight," he told me.

I snorted. "No fucking way."

"Look, I was only listening to that shit and I had to take a fucking break," he snapped. "I want someone in your room tonight."

"One of the guys will be there," I told him as I looked through the glass at Isaac and Hades. "How's he holding up?"

Craig sighed. "He's struggling, but your dog seems to help somehow. Anyway, the team should arrive today."

"And if they don't'?" My voice was just above a whisper.

"Then our options are extremely limited," Craig admitted. "Short of getting the demon to go after someone else, we can only keep his body alive."

I couldn't say anything. My heart was hurting too much. I just turned and walked out into the hallway. Everyone was waiting. Ethan's eyes grew wide as he looked at me.

"What the fuck happened?" Zeke demanded.

"I saw Isaac again," I announced as I met Ethan's eyes. "He's... struggling. Today, talk to him. He might be able to hear you."

"You jumped into his center again?" Asher asked.

I nodded. "The fucker is on a roll today, so be warned." Ethan came closer and pulled me into a hug. I took a deep breath of spicy cologne and fought back tears. Not now...

Ethan kissed my cheek. "Love you," he whispered.

"Love you too," I muttered before he stepped back and headed into the room of hell.

"I need to get some sleep." I started down the hall, not caring who was coming with me. Or even *if* anyone was coming with me.

"I've got her," Zeke stated. I stopped walking and looked up at him. There were lines on his face, dark bags under his eyes, and his skin was pale. He looked how I felt. Like shit.

"Are you sure about that?" Miles asked in his careful way.

Zeke didn't say a word, he just turned and started down the hallway. I fell in step beside him.

When we reached the stairs, I remembered. The dead were waiting for me out in the courtyard. Cursing, I headed up the stairs with Zeke keeping pace.

Today the courtyard was just as full as the day before; more so in fact. At least this time the dead were in the center of the courtyard while the Templars were to the sides. Both Father Francis and Father Andrew were there. I ignored them all as I moved out to the center.

"Same as yesterday. Pick twenty-five. Give me your worst off." I tried to raise my voice but it didn't work, it only came out scratchy. "Get in a line, hold hands, and hold on."

They did as I said quickly and without a fuss. No one bitched that it wasn't their turn, no one complained. It was a nice change. Once they lined up and held hands, I didn't waste time. I grabbed all of them and dropped.

"Lexie, come on." Zeke's voice was hard and rough. "Open your fucking eyes."

Oh, that voice wasn't good... I forced my eyes open. Zeke's harsh face came into focus. His ice-blue eyes were narrowed on mine, his face pale. He was holding me against his chest, one hand keeping his hankie to my face.

"I'm... okay," I muttered as I weakly held the hankie to my face.

He let go only to wipe his thumb down the side of my neck. He held up the blood covered finger. "Bullshit," he bit out. I didn't have the energy to argue.

"Does she need to go to the med wing?" Francis asked.

Zeke shot a glare at someone before he looked down at me again. "Can you be moved?"

I nodded. His other arm moved under my knees. He lifted me off the grass and stood. "Get the door," he barked. I rested my head on his shoulder as he carried me down to the hallway in the basement.

Somehow, he got my bedroom door opened and set me down on the side of the bed. He disappeared into the bathroom then came back and squatted in front of me. One large, calloused hand held my chin and jaw as he carefully cleaned the blood from my neck and ears. By the time he was done, my nose had stopped bleeding. He handed me the washcloth to wash my face as he watched me closely.

When I finished, he held my face again and checked my eyes. "What the hell was that, Lexie?" he growled.

I patted his hand. "I... I need a shower."

His eyes began to glow as they held mine. He clenched and unclenched his jaw. "No, Miles warned me. Take a bath. I'll go get you some food." He let go of me and all but slammed the door behind him. Shit. Zeke was suspicious, and once he thought something was wrong he was like a dog with a bone, gnawing on it until he got the answer.

Sighing, I got to my feet, went to the dresser where I pulled out underwear and my pajamas from the night before. After starting the water, I set my clothes down on the closed toilet lid. I caught my reflection; my skin was white as snow, my eyes were bloodshot, and the bags under my eyes looked like bruises. Dried blood was here and there on my face. Great. Now I look like the dead. When the tub was full enough, I slid into the water and tried to think.

Isaac might die. Everything inside me shook. We couldn't lose him... I lowered myself into the water to wash away the tears and dried blood. I sat up and I tried to stop crying, but once I started, I couldn't. I took deep breaths as I tried to get control. What were our options? Get the demon's name, help arrives, or... the demon goes after someone else. My head grew quiet. In Isaac's center I could reach the demon. Isaac was getting weaker... I stopped crying. There was a solution if they didn't make it in time for Isaac. I was going to die anyway, might as well die for a good reason. At the very least it would buy us time. I couldn't let him die. Peace filled me as my decision was made. I wasn't going to let Isaac die. With that decided, a numbness washed through me. It was actually a relief. There was a knock on the bathroom door.

"Lexie? You okay?" Zeke's voice helped pull me back.

"Yeah... I'll... I'll be out in a minute." I quickly washed up. I got out, dried off and pulled on my pajamas. I was still combing the knots out of my hair when I stepped out of the bathroom. Zeke was plugging in his phone at the desk in his usual pajamas; a pair of black mesh shorts and a sleeveless black shirt. He looked up, his eyes running over my face. Whatever he saw he didn't like, because he started frowning. I made a point to sit down on the edge of the bed with my back to him. Another sandwich, chips, and a bottle of water waited for me on the nightstand. I was getting tired of sandwiches but I kept missing meal times in the cafeteria. It was this or nothing.

After I was done brushing my hair, I pulled it into a messy braid before picking up the sandwich. I sat back against the headboard and I tried to eat past the knot in my chest. I only managed half the sandwich. I put the rest back in the wrapper and set it on the nightstand.

It had used Clay's voice, and Dad's. I couldn't even get upset about it. Yeah, it was sick, but... demons lie, they twist, they manipulate. That wasn't Ordin, and it sure as hell wasn't my dad.

"What happened in the courtyard?" Zeke asked, getting my attention. His voice an odd mix of gruff and gentle. Well, gentle for him.

I bit the corner of my bottom lip and shook my head. He didn't need to know. Not now. But he wasn't going to take that for an answer. He moved to stand near the bathroom door so he wasn't looming over me. "Lexie?"

I met his eyes. "Not now."

His eyes narrowed on mine, his jaw clenched. "Tell me."

Wanting to just get away from the conversation, I got to my feet. "Not now."

Zeke stepped as close as he could without towering over me, his face hard, his eyes boiling. "What the fuck is going on?"

This... this wasn't the place or the time to have this talk. I turned to walk away.

"Lexie?" His low voice shook around the edges. It stopped me in my tracks.

"Don't ask," I whispered as I turned back, my eyes burning.

His eye grew wide, his face pale. "No... no..."

"Zeke..." My voice cracked.

"Not you too." He ran his hand through his hair roughly before turning away from me and bracing his hands on the dresser. He took deep, shaking

breaths. His massive frame shook. Wiping my face, I walked back to him and rested my hand on his arm.

"Don't tell me..." he begged in a whisper. "Just... don't." He looked down at me, his eyes lost. He pushed away from the dresser, turned away from me to go back to the bed and drop onto the side. He buried his face in his hands as he continued to tremble. My heart breaking, I went to him and stepped between his knees, forcing him to drop his hands and look up at me. The agony in his eyes made it hard to breathe. I held his face in my hands and kissed his forehead. His arms wrapped around me, crushing me to him. I slipped my arms around his head and hugged him tight. He rested his forehead against me, over my heart as he took deep, shaking breaths.

It took a while, but eventually we both got control over ourselves again. He pulled back, his hands dropping before finding the backs of my thighs. My body warmed as his calloused fingers stroked my skin.

Deeply shadowed eyes met mine. "You... you need to get some sleep," he told me as one of his hands dropped from me and one moved to my hip. "Come on."

I stepped out from between his knees and began to climb into bed. "Are you sure you want to stay?" I asked, my voice raspy.

"I'm not going anywhere," he told me as he covered me with the blankets. He straightened and wiped his face as he moved around the bed to his side. He climbed in on the other side of the bed. He seemed to take up the entire thing. He turned the light on to the lowest setting as I curled up on my side and watched as he shifted to get comfortable. His eyes met mine in the dim light. His gaze ran over my face as if he were memorizing it. He reached over and held my face in his large hand; his thumb moved over my cheek, wiping my tear tracks away.

"Come here," he breathed.

I slid closer and closer until I was using his arm as a pillow. When I hesitated to move closer, his fingers stroked my shoulder.

"I need to hear you breathing," he admitted in a whisper. I moved closer, until a breath separated us. My hands rested on his chest. Engine grease and leather surrounded me, making me relax. He moved his arm around me. He hesitated before slowly resting the heavy weight on me, his warm hand spread over the back of my ribs.

"Do you feel pinned down?" he asked, his voice full of warmth.

"Nope. It's you." I rested my forehead against his chest and breathed in the scent that was uniquely Zeke. "Safe. You make me feel safe." Lips touched the top of my head. "Night, Baby." "Night, Tough Guy."

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### CHAPTER 16

#### SATURDAY EVENING

woke up slowly from a deep sleep. The smell of engine grease and leather surrounded me. Oh... what? I opened my eyes carefully. His face was buried in the hair at the top of my head, his breathing was still deep and even. Zeke? I woke up a little more and realized how carefully he was holding me to him. My knee was over his hip, his thick leg between my thighs, flush against me. One arm was still under my head while the other was wrapped around me. My cami had ridden up my ribs, his forearm was around my back, holding me to him. His fingers were spread wide, as if to take in as much skin on my ribs as he could.

I smiled. It felt good, really good. One of my arms was up around his neck. The other was around his waist, under the back of his shirt. I closed my eyes as my fingers ran over the hard lines of his back. My fingers found a thick, raised line. I stopped then ran over it again. Scar tissue? My fingers moved up his back and found a thick, deep, round scar almost the size of the tip of my finger. My heart ached as I found another long, thick scar not far from it. Did... did his dad do this to him? I slipped my fingers back down to the smooth skin of his lower back. I moved my other hand to the back of his neck and absently began massaging lightly. I floated there, content to simply be held by him.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. His fingers moved over my back, sending warmth through me. His body stiffened against me.

He pulled his head back so he could look down at me. "I didn't... I didn't try to hurt you?" he asked, his voice still thick with sleep.

I pulled my hand from his lower back and ran my fingertips over his chin. "No, you didn't," I whispered.

He dropped his head back to the pillow and relaxed into the bed. Then his arms pulled me harder against him, his face buried into my hair. I relaxed against him and enjoyed his touch.

Eventually his grip eased, allowing me to breathe a bit easier. One arm stayed around me. The other hand ran down my arm, over my ribs to rest on my hip. "How'd you sleep?" Those sky-blue eyes ran over my face.

"No nightmares." I gave him a small smile. "How about you?"

His lips twitched. "Better than I have in a long time."

"Good," I whispered as I became very aware of where his thigh was and where it was pressed. "Um... Tough Guy. Your leg..."

He cursed. He pulled away, carefully moving his thigh from between mine. "Sorry, you kept scooting down. I didn't want to trigger you in your sleep."

I pulled my leg off his hip and scooted to give him more room. He rolled over and turned the light on to its normal setting. I rolled onto my back and stretched with a small groan. Cold air brushed across my stomach. Looking down, I realized my cami was bunched up around my ribs. I pulled the hem down quickly and moved to sit on my side of the bed. I ran my hands over my face before getting up and going to the dresser to find something to wear today.

"I'll come back to take you to breakfast," Zeke told me.

"Okay," I said, not really paying attention. I grabbed a new bra and clothes and hurried into the bathroom.

I quickly pulled on jeans and a slouchy hunter-green shirt after running through my morning routine. By the time Zeke was knocking on my door I was slipping my sandals on.

I stepped out into the hall and started moving. My mind was already on Isaac when Zeke grabbed my arm.

"Food first," he ordered as he steered me to the stairs.

"But... what about Isaac?" I asked. "Those people were supposed to show today."

"Eat first," he repeated. He didn't ease his grip until we reached the cafeteria.

Asher and Miles' faces were dark when we reached Isaac's door. My heart dropped.

"What happened?" I asked.

Miles came over to me and met my eyes. "He's worse," he said gently. "Dr. Zimmer has him on a heart monitor and oxygen now."

My lungs grew tight. "Did those people show up yet?"

Miles shook his head. My eyes burned as I ran my hand down my face.

Fuck. Fuck. FUCK!

I took a shaky breath and tried to keep it together. I had to.

"Then they should be here soon," I offered, trying to stay positive. "Get Francis to call them again."

Miles nodded. His eyes were dark as they met mine. "Lexie, we need to understand that he might not make it—"

"No," I growled, my heart hammering. "We are *not* losing Isaac." I stepped around him and walked through the door into the smaller room. Craig was already there. I didn't need his help to put on the microphone today as I fastened it then met his eyes. "If I suddenly look like I'm sleeping, don't worry about it. But... don't let me leave without splashing me with holy water."

It was the only warning I gave before walking into Isaac's room. My eyes immediately went to the bed and the machines. Isaac's body looked wilted, as if he was empty. The demon grinned between hard breaths. Hades was staring at Isaac again.

Ethan looked like shit. His eyes were red, his face pale. He looked dejected. I squeezed his shoulder. "I've got him, Ethan." He just nodded, got to his feet, and headed for the door.

I picked up the chair and moved it closer before I sat down next to the bed.

"Oh. Getting... cocky... are we?" he taunted.

I met his eyes and said nothing. He cackled. His heart rate was a steady beat in the room.

"I was waiting for you," he said. "You, out of all of them... it would hit you the most... to watch him die."

"Isaac isn't going anywhere," I growled.

He laughed, then coughed and gasped for air. The beeping continued. Tonight, he didn't taunt me. Tonight, he just watched me and smiled. The beep of the heart monitor became loud in the room. I started tapping my

foot to the beat. Help was going to be here any minute. I started talking to Isaac, hoping he'd hear me. I started with gossip, then moved on to fairytales. They'd be coming through that door any minute... My throat hurt, my voice began cracking. Any minute...

We sat there for... I don't know how long, before he smiled a big smile. The beeping skipped a beat. My stomach knotted. I kept the rhythm with my foot. The monitor was slowing.

"Enjoy... watching... him die," It told me before closing his eyes. Isaac's body became covered in ribbons of blood.

No. No. NO!

I reached out with my will and drove that gold ribbon into his chest. I followed it down and my insides shook. I landed in the dark and threw a light into the air.

"Isaac!" I screamed as I started to run. My heart was pounding in my ears when a scream shot through the dark. I changed direction and followed the sound. I wasn't going to lose him. We weren't going to lose him!

I broke into the outcropping. Isaac was lying in the dirt, a large shadow creature standing over him. I threw a fireball. It hit. The demon roared as it was forced back off of Isaac. I threw another and another, shoving the fucker back into the trees. I lit a ring of fire around us and threw my light into the air. It screeched as it retreated.

"You won't be here long!" it hissed.

I rushed to Isaac. His body was a network of slashes and blood. I dropped to my knees and brushed the hair from his face. "Hold on, Cookie Monster."

His eyes met mine. They were dark and so empty it made me catch my breath.

"Is it even worth it?" he rasped.

"What?" I asked gently, my fingers cleaning the blood from his face.

"Life?"

My heart shattered. "You haven't lived your life, Isaac," I told him. "You've been in the shadows so long that you've forgotten the good things: Ethan, your mom, your friends." He shook his head.

"You'd all be better off without me anyway," he mumbled.

"No, we wouldn't. Losing you would break us," I whispered, tears filling my eyes. "We're all here. With you, fighting for you," I said.

But even I could see he was tired. He was bone and tendon now, his hair almost gone. His cheekbones stood out on his face in harsh contrast. He was so tired... He really didn't have anything left. This was it.

Resolve filled my heart. I held his face and forced him to look at me. "I love you. And I'm not about to lose you to this fucker. I'm sorry." I kissed him before getting to my feet and running into the tree line.

"Lexie?" Isaac called out to me.

I ignored him and went hunting. I ran through the stone outcroppings, over desert ridges looking for the darkest parts and heading for them. It began to rain. The clay turned to mud, the rain plastered my clothes to me. Lightning flashed somewhere off in the distance.

"You want a soul? Come on, fresh meat!" I shouted as I ran further into the darkness. Chilling laughter came from every direction, reverberating off the rocks. I conjured a small light, just enough to see by, as I stepped into a large, flat clearing.

It finally came out of a dark cave, tall and long-limbed with a grotesque face and pointed ears. And I wanted its blood. It stalked towards me slowly, a frightening grin on its face.

"Oh, so the Necro wants to play." It licked its lips. "I wonder how your soul will taste."

I gave him my not-pleasant grin and dead eyes. "You might eat it, but I'll make damn sure you choke on it," I growled as I dropped my barriers. Energy rolled through me, brushing every party of my mind. Limes surrounded me as I focused that energy into my hands. "Let's dance motherfucker." I conjured gold light around my fists a heartbeat before I ran at it. It cackled and ran to meet me.

A moment before we would have hit, I kicked out one leg and slid under the demon, the light around my hands changing to a pair of short swords as I slid in the mud. I struck as it missed me, slicing the blades along the inner thighs of the demon. It roared. I kept sliding until I dug a foot into the mud hard, my momentum popping me back up to my feet. I turned back to the creature as he snarled and swiped at me.

I blocked with one blade, dissolved the other, and blasted the fucker back with fire. It screeched, the scent of burnt hair filling the clearing. I didn't stop. I pushed after it, throwing fire, lightning, everything I had at it.

As the fight went on, my focus broke. My blade disappeared as I went to block. There wasn't enough time to move. I ducked one claw only for the

other to catch my ribs. I hissed and tried to back up as blood ran down my side. It wouldn't let me. It bore down on me. I dodged and struggled to focus enough to make a weapon. I was hit again and again, each blow more painful than the last. A surprise kick from his clawed foot sent me flying. I dropped in the mud and slid several feet as I tried to relearn how to breathe. Its large foot pressed down on my chest, keeping me pinned in the mud. Weary, I lay limp under its clawed foot.

I tried to focus as the jaws came closer, but pain racked me as it continued pressing me into the ground. This was it. I was done. I was so tired of hurting, so tired of being exhausted...

"Too bad," it taunted. Its jaws opened.

"Wouldn't you rather possess a Necro than an ordinary human?" I pointed out as he pressed down even more, making it harder to breathe. It paused. "Think of the damage you could do with my body."

"Is that an offer?" It eyed me. I was going to die anyway, might as well do it for a good reason.

"If you leave Isaac alone," I muttered as raindrops landed on my face. Its eyes glowed.

"Deal," it hissed. One of the talons on its foot lifted and then drove through my shoulder. I cried out as the talon dug into the mud under me. I gasped as pain flooded every nerve of my body. Its face moved closer. Smoke moved over its skin and ran into my body through the talon.

That boiling, tar-like goo ran through my mind as smoke moved through me, spreading along my veins, infecting me. I shook as it seemed like blades were dragging through my veins. That blackness drew closer to my Center. Everything grew darker... Sorry, Isaac... That ice-cold black surrounded my Center. My vision faded... Everything slowed.

Images of my life flashed before me, as if a movie was on fast forward. I saw it all again, felt it all again. Dad.... Rory... the guys... my True Self. No. This wasn't me. I wasn't done yet.

Half conscious, I blasted that fucker off me. It flew across the clearing and slammed into the rock face. Pain racked me as I somersaulted backwards to my knees, but I didn't care. I wasn't done. I wanted my life, no matter how little I had left. Adrenaline surged through me, pushing the pain back as I got to my feet. I was still bleeding, still tired, still out matched. But I wasn't done fighting. I wasn't going to die here. My will burned strong and solid in my chest.

"We had a deal," it hissed as it got to its feet again.

I smirked. "If you want a Necro body, you're gonna have to earn it." I pulled energy into my hands again, forming a long blade. I brought it up.

It charged. I ran to meet it.

It swiped. I dropped to my knee and swung. My blade sliced through its leg as I slid through the mud. I scrambled to my feet and brought the blade up just in time to block.

It wasn't long before my adrenaline was gone. I was gasping, my arms shaking, the pain coming back. Its face twisted. It reached for me again and I dodged, only for its other claw to get me. Fire burned up my back as I was knocked across the clearing.

I slid across the clearing, face down through the mud. I struggled to breathe without whimpering as I stopped. Gritting my teeth, I tried to push myself to my feet. My arms gave out, dropping me back into the mud. Fuck! I managed to move to my side to watch the demon stalk toward me.

Shit, shit, shit!

Before it could reach me, a bolt of lime green light blasted the demon away from me. I scrambled back out of reach before I turned.

Isaac strode into the clearing, still bleeding but no longer looking near death. "You don't touch Red," he growled, his body tense as green light moved around him. I pulled myself out of the way as much as I could.

The demon turned to bolt. I threw up a barrier of gold light that circled the area, blocking him from escape. "Oh, you're not going anywhere, motherfucker." I had nothing left to help Isaac, but I could stop the fucker from running.

Isaac grinned a heartbeat before he went after it. I'd seen Isaac fight in the ring, but this was a totally new and different Isaac I was seeing. This one was relentless. And patient. Isaac landed blow after blow with the light covering him. The demon howled and snarled. It tried to hit Isaac, but Isaac simply wasn't there anymore.

"You cut them off, you kept throwing the past in my face, you lied!" Isaac shouted as he landed strikes against the demon. He lasted longer than I did, but eventually the demon got through to him. He dropped to his hands and knees. Blood poured from slashes across his chest. The demon cackled before coming towards me. Isaac crawled to me, placing himself between me and the demon.

"Isaac... don't." I tried to move around him but his arm kept me where I was.

The demon towered over us.

"I'm sorry..." he whispered.

An explosion of light ripped through the sky. I closed my eyes against it. The demon screeched and burst into flame.

When my eyes adjusted it looked like day. The faint scent of lime and flowers drifted on the breeze. The sky turned blue, the mud turned to grass. A swath of desert turned to ocean. The transformation was breathtaking.

Isaac turned around and started to look at my injuries. He pulled up my bloody shirt and cursed. Three long gashes ran from the back of my hip up to the front of my ribs along with other smaller gashes. But I didn't care. Isaac was alive. My eyes burned as I examined every inch of his face. The shadows were gone, his cheeks were filled out again, his wounds were disappearing... Tears poured out of me.

He pulled me against him and hugged me tight. "You're fucking crazy," he snapped.

"Just figuring that out?" I countered dryly, ignoring the blood and pain. He smiled as he pulled back to look down at me. His chocolate eyes glowed with light, making them an amber that was distinctly Isaac. But I wasn't done. "No more blaming yourself. No more stupid risks." This wasn't up for negotiation. I wasn't going to put up with this shit anymore.

His smile faded. "I've been doing it so long..." His eyes met mine. "I can't tell the difference between a challenge and a stupid risk anymore."

I reached up and held his face. "Then ask. Ask me, ask one of the guys, until you can tell the difference again. Trust us." His eyes grew shadowed again. I knew exactly what he was thinking. "She did not blame you," I growled. "She wanted you to be happy. And if that doesn't convince you that it wasn't your fault, I don't know what will."

His eyes were filling when he nodded. He lifted my upper body off the ground. "What happens now?"

I smiled. "You wake up and heal." I kept my voice soft.

"How?" I still sounded lost.

"I think you have to want to live again. You have to want to come back." I swallowed hard. "And I can't help you with that."

His eyes ran over my face. "Yeah, you can."

Before I could blink, his lips were on mine, one of his hands holding my face as he kissed me gently. Light burst through me as I kissed him back. I was jerked from him and thrown out.

I woke up struggling to breathe through the pain. My clothes were soaked with blood and it wasn't getting any better. I took deep breaths as I slowly turned to Isaac. He still didn't look great, but he wasn't bleeding anymore. In fact... there were only scars remaining.

"That was impressive," a woman's gentle voice announced. I tore my eyes from Isaac to look at the woman standing over him. Her dark chestnut hair was back in a braid, cognac eyes watched me from a stunning oval face. Her frame wasn't large, but she had to be taller than me by a few inches. Her rather pregnant belly pushed against the fabric of her white sundress as she scratched Hades' ears.

"You two put up quite a fight," she said, her voice impressed. "But you almost got yourselves killed."

"Who the hell are you?" I snapped, my hands going to my side to try and stop the bleeding. It wasn't working. Pain continued to roll over me.

Her eyes ran over me, growing concerned. "I'm Evelyn. I'm the backup you've been waiting on."

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Before I could answer, the door slammed open, making me jump. Pain had me doubling over as a tall, white-haired man in an immaculate suit came in. His elfin features were furious as he strode straight to the woman.

"You are supposed to be sitting," he growled as he snapped open the chair he carried and put it behind her.

She sighed before she let him help her sit down.

"That was the agreement for coming." It sounded like this wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation.

She rolled her eyes before looking up at him. "Atty, this is Lexie," she said patiently before she turned to me. "Lexie, this is my husband, Atticus."

His gold eyes snapped to me and ran over me, assessing. "You're the one working on the Veil. And you're bleeding."

My jaw all but dropped. "How do you..."

"Zahur sent us," she explained quickly before she turned to Atticus. "I need to heal her wounds or she's going to bleed out."

Atticus growled. "Stay here." He strode toward me. My heart slammed. Who the fuck was this?

"Don't touch me," I growled.

Atticus ignored me. He grabbed the folding chair I was sitting on and lifted it with me still in it. What the fuck? A new wave of pain washed over me, dotting my vision with black. He carefully set me down in front of Evelyn. I whimpered in pain.

"Atticus," she chided.

"I didn't touch her," he replied.

She smiled at me as she lifted the hem of my shirt so she could see my slashed ribs and bruises. "I'm sorry, we're still training him in how to interact with humans."

"I'm almost five hundred. I believe I know how to interact with humans," he countered.

Her brow drew down as she examined the slashes up the side of my thigh. "You'd think." She set her hand on my stomach and closed her eyes. I was confused as my wounds grew hot. I looked down in time to watch the skin close. Long scars took their place.

"Holy shit," I stated. I pulled my neckline down my shoulder. A large puncture wound scar sat under my collar bone.

"You'll scar, but they might fade in time. I also took care of that concussion. You had some pressure that needed to be relieved," she said as she opened her eyes and dropped her hand. "We'll have a doctor look at Isaac but he should be fine in a few hours, physically at least. Emotionally... he's going to struggle for some time." She winced and rubbed the side of her stomach.

"Evelyn." Atticus' voice tried to sound firm, but it came out warm. "You need some sleep, you're still on bedrest. Walking down here was ridiculous."

She looked up at him. "It's not my fault you started to talk with the Templars and got distracted from the entire reason we came here."

"Eve," he bit out, clearly exasperated.

"I walked from the door to the bed," she answered with a smile. "Ranulf carried me the rest of the way down here."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "The three of you are going to be the death of me."

The door to the room opened. A muscled giant in black leather with long, dark-blond hair poked his head in. "The lass's friends are gettin' restless," he announced in a deep voice with a thick Scottish accent.

Evelyn turned back to me. "We'll be here for a few days checking up on everything. Just ask one of the Templars to find me and we'll talk later."

I just nodded, too stunned to say anything.

Evelyn moved to get to her feet, Atticus gave her his hands and helped pull her up. She grumbled under her breath. "All your fault... silly pregnant body..." Atticus just looked down at her with warm eyes. She shot him a

look before turning to me. "We'll let your friends come in and see Isaac. I'm sure they're worried sick."

"Alright, Evelyn. Time to go," Atticus announced.

She turned around and looked up at him. The back of her dress was low enough to show two large, thick scars that ran down from her shoulder blades and disappeared into her dress. What the...?

"Alright, Atty," she said, her voice softening.

"That's not going to work this time," Atticus warned. She giggled as he bent down and swept her up into his arms. He began carrying her toward the door and the large blond man.

"Of course, it will," Evelyn teased, the smile clear in her voice. "Can we stop by the cafeteria? I'm dying for some pickles and ice cream."

Atticus sighed. "You need some rest."

As Atticus carried her through the door, Evelyn looked up at the blond man who was holding the door open. "Ranulf?"

The blond man chuckled, "Aye, I'll get ye your pickles and ice cream." He followed them out of the room "What flavor this time?"

"I'm getting the damn pickles and ice cream. I just want you in bed first," Atticus growled. Evelyn and Ranulf were laughing as the door closed behind.

The steady sound of the heart monitor filled my ears as I turned back to watch Isaac. The blood on him was dry, the cuts scarred over. I got to my feet and moved to the bed.

Isaac looked like himself again. I reached over and held his hand. It was warm. Isaac was going to be okay. Hades moved off Isaac and lay against his side. He closed his eyes and quickly fell asleep.

I was crying when the guys came in with Dr. Zimmer. His gaze went straight to me and assessed. I shook my head. Understanding I was fine, he went straight to Isaac.

Ethan saw me crying first. "They said he was fine!"

I wiped my face quickly as everyone ran in. "He is." I sniffed.

Everyone surrounded the bed while Dr. Zimmer examined Isaac.

"Then why the hell are you crying?" Zeke snapped.

I wiped my face again. "Happy crying. The demon is dead, Isaac is going to be okay."

Deep relieved sighs went around the room. At least until Zeke noticed the blood.

"Why the fuck are you both covered in blood?" he demanded at the top of his lungs as he came around the bed. I looked up at his furious face and started laughing.

"It's a long story." He was so going to kill us.



# Asher

ALLY'S ROOM WAS QUIET, well, except for Zeke's snoring from the chair in the corner. When Dr. Zimmer had decided to move Isaac to a more comfortable room, we agreed immediately to send him to Ally's. Then none of us left.

Isaac was pale and out cold in the middle of Ally's bed, lying on his side. His arms held her to him as if she was his security blanket. Ally was on the left while Ethan lay on the right with his back against his brother's. Hades was curled up at the end of the bed. The dog had refused to leave Isaac's side.

Dr. Zimmer had suggested that everyone be sedated for a good, long, dreamless sleep. Well, except me and Miles. I caught Miles' eye in the dim room and tilted my head to the door. He nodded and got to his feet.

We silently left the room and headed upstairs to the cafeteria. I grabbed an orange juice while Miles poured coffee. We sat down at the closest table. We had our choice - the damn cafeteria was empty this time of night.

"Coffee?" I asked.

"Yes, I need to do some thinking," he admitted.

"Yeah..." I muttered. "A lot has happened. Did you see those scars?"

"Isaac's? Yes. Lexie's..." He met my eyes. "I saw her leg."

I shook my head. "A demon cut them up... Where do we even start trying to understand this?"

"How about with questions?" a woman's voice asked. We both turned to watch a tall woman, with red streaks in her blonde hair come over with the giant man from earlier. "I'm Astrid." Her eyes ran over us. "And you boys are friends of that poor kid and the Necro, right?"

"Yeah." I didn't know what else to say.

She smiled, grabbed a soda and sat down next to the tall blond. She turned towards us. "So, what do you know? Or want to know?"

I met Miles' gaze, both of us stunned. We'd been trying to get info out of the Templars, but they hadn't been willing to explain much.

"First," Miles turned back to them. "What else exists out there?"

She smirked.

The man behind her started laughing. "Tell 'em, Goddess."

Goddess? What?

"Well, I'm a werewolf. My Mate Ranulf, here, is a gargoyle, the same as Evelyn, Atticus, and Falk." She set her soda down and started listing off on her fingers. "Okay, here's the big groups that exist. Vampires, shapeshifters like werewolves, witches, demons, angels, and... pretty much another few thousand species of creatures that have lived in secret for thousands of years."

Stunned, all I could do was stare.

She chuckled. "Okay, too fast." She opened her soda and took a drink. "Look. What you need to take away from this is that demons are real. They are extremely powerful and are not to be messed with by humans unless they are properly trained." She took another drink.

Ranulf nodded. "Aye, what that lass did took guts, and it worked, but \_\_\_"

"It was stupid," Astrid stated. "They're both lucky to be alive. And from what Evie told me, it was damn close."

I shared a look with Miles.

Miles turned back to them. "What did she do?" he asked carefully.

Her eyebrows went up as she slowly put down the soda can. She turned to Ranulf. "It seems she didn't share."

"Aye, it does." Ranulf chuckled. "Ye said it. Ye clean it up." He got to his feet and headed into the kitchen.

Astrid sighed. "Evie explained it like this. Your friend Lexie, she went into Isaac's Center." She eyed us. "Do you know what that is?"

"Yes, we know about a person's Center," Miles said carefully.

"Okay, that'll save time," she explained. "Your friend Isaac was dying. His center was being filled with the demon. It was wiping him out. She jumped in to help him fight off the demon. They both took heavy injuries. Luckily, Evie was there to heal them both, so they just walked away with scars."

"And with that lass's injuries, it was obvious what she had been doing." Ranulf came back in with a couple beer bottles and handed her one before sitting down beside her again, facing the outside of the table.

I shared another look with Miles. He didn't have a clue either.

"What do you mean? What had she been doing?" Miles asked. Ranulf went still.

Astrid smirked at Ranulf. "That one's on you."

"Shite," he muttered as he set down his beer before looking at us. "That puncture on her shoulder? Evie told us it meant Lexie started making a deal with the demon. Probably trading herself for your friend."

My stomach dropped. No.... she... she wouldn't... Shit, I knew damn well that she would do that. I started to rub the tension out of my neck and tried to stay calm.

"Let's put that to the side for now. What can we do to help her deal with these things?" Miles asked.

Astrid gave him an understanding smile. "You can't." She said it like it was obvious. "You can't see these creatures, and even if one was standing in front of you, you wouldn't be able to tell it wasn't human."

"Shit..." I muttered. We had almost lost them both and... I propped my elbows on the table and rubbed my face. "How are we going to be able to help her if we can't..." I dropped my hand and looked at Miles.

His eyes were unfocused on the table, a wrinkle in between his eyebrows. His eyes refocused before he turned back to Astrid. "Astrid, Ranulf, you obviously know more than we do. Is there a way to keep the dead from attacking Lexie? Or to let us help her?"

Ranulf was suddenly smirking at Miles. He eyed Miles with approval. "Smart lad."

Astrid grinned. "There could be."

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# CHAPTER 18

#### SUNDAY

woke up slowly. Arms were wrapped around me tightly. The scent of limes filled my lungs, relaxing me even more. I reached down and ran my hand over Isaac's arm around my waist. His face was buried against the back of my neck, his breathing deep and even. I smiled. Isaac was okay. I was tempted to just stay there all day, but I couldn't. Evelyn was here, and I had questions I needed answers to.

Carefully, I slipped Isaac's arm from around me and moved out of bed. The lamp was on low near Zeke, who was still out cold. Asher was spread out on the floor. Miles was sleeping deeply in another chair with his arm resting in its sling. Hades was stretched out at the end of the bed. I shook my head and moved quietly through the room to the dresser. I pulled out some clothes, snuck into the bathroom and closed the door behind me. Hoping not to wake anyone up, I cleaned the blood off me and got dressed.

When I peeked out the bathroom door everyone was still asleep. Hades had moved to Isaac's side and didn't look like he'd be moving anytime soon. I loved my baby. I put my dirty clothes away and snuck across the room. Amazed that no one woke up, I slipped out of the bedroom. I asked the first Templar I saw on the stairs where Evelyn was. She used her radio to find out she was in the flower garden. I thanked her and hurried outside, following her directions.

Evelyn was sitting on a stone bench next to the rose bushes with a leggy brunette who looked like she should be on a runway. I hesitated at the archway. If she was busy...

Evelyn turned towards me and smiled. "Come on over, Lexie. We're just having a gripe session."

The brunette sent a welcoming smile.

I headed over. The brunette got prettier as I got closer. "We have a bitch session every few days; we can pick it up later."

"Lexie, this is Rina. She's a human telepath and a friend of mine," Evelyn introduced us.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"Same." She took a sip of the ginger ale in her hand.

"I know you must have questions," Evelyn said politely. "That's one of the reasons we're still here. Zahur said you were getting to the point you'd need some answers and he doesn't have the expertise that you need."

"Yeah.... Wait. What? He?" I asked, not sure I heard her correctly as I sat down on the bench across from them. "Zahur's a guy?"

Rina chuckled.

Evelyn sighed. "Let me guess, he appeared to you looking like you?"

"Yeah. I actually thought Zahur was a girl or... something," I admitted. This was so strange.

"That's Zahur. He'll take the most efficient path every time." She shook her head. "Alright, let's see, where to start?"

"How about with 'I'm not human?" Rina offered as she picked up a Saltine from the pack between them and carefully took a small bite out of the corner.

Evelyn nodded. "That's a good starting point." She turned to me. "I'm a member of a guardian race of gargoyles. We've protected humans from supernatural predators, as well as kept those species in line, for... oh, thousands of years."

My eyebrows shot up. Guardians? Serena had mentioned something.... "Wait, are you the ones who made a deal with the Witches Council?"

Evelyn grinned with approval. "Yes, we are, though our role has changed in the last year. But that's another story. So, you've met the Witches Council?"

I scoffed. "I met a witch who said she'd help me figure things out, but hasn't."

Her eyes narrowed, her lips pressed together. "Really?" She sighed. "We'll come back to that. But, first, I'll be happy to clear up anything that's confusing you."

Only a thousand things confused me, but I couldn't seem to remember them at the moment. "Isaac. How'd the demon get in? We were only in that house for... thirty minutes tops."

Her eyes grew soft. "When I help someone the way I did with Isaac, I tend to get a feel for their personality." Her hand started rubbing her stomach gently. "Isaac is self-destructive, it's like he's hated himself for years. When you do that, it creates a... weakness in your natural barriers. He's torn himself down enough to create it. Demons use that weakness to slip in."

I chewed the corner of my lip. There was one thing I wanted to ask. "You healed us both, I watched those cuts heal right in front of me. Can you heal something else?"

She gave me a small smile. "You mean the lesion of dead tissue in your brain? I'm sorry, I couldn't help but notice it when I was working on your wounds."

I let out the breath I was holding. "Yeah. Can you heal that?"

Her face was soft when she shook her head. "I'm sorry, I can't. I'm able to heal almost anything. I can repair a shattered spine, work down scar tissue even heal brain injuries. But what I'm working with has to be alive. I can't bring dead tissue back to life."

I sighed, it figured. I knew there was no point in hoping. "Can you get Francis to give me the Templar tattoos to keep it from growing?" I half expected a no.

She sat up straighter, her eyes narrowed on mine. "He refused?"

I nodded. "He said they are sacred and, if I wanted them, then I had to work for the Templars."

"Pardon?" she said, her voice hard. "He said that?"

I nodded.

"Uh-oh," Rina chimed with a grin.

Evelyn muttered under her breath. "Atticus will bring him here in a few minutes," she said cryptically before meeting my eyes again. "Now, what happened to your voice? I noticed some damage to your throat."

I explained the abduction and attack to her, glossing over some of the details. Her eyes were watering by the time I was done.

"Sorry, hormones. I cry at the drop of a hat these days." She wiped under her eyes carefully. Rina pulled tissues out of her jeans and handed them to her. Evelyn dabbed her eyes. "I'm sorry to say I can't fix your voice. If I had been there before the nerves died off from the damage then I could have fixed it. But... that's something I can't heal. I wish I could fix it.

And when you can raise the dead, don't even think about trying it on your vocal cords. That's just a disaster waiting to happen."

I shrugged. Wait, she just said... and she didn't sound judgmental. She was matter of fact.

"But I can protect your vocal cords so there won't be further damage," she offered. "Though..."

"What?" Anything she could do, I'd be thrilled with.

"Though, your voice will probably stay as it is now," she explained. "It just won't get worse."

"I'll take it," I told her. I just wanted to stop having to watch my volume level all the time. I'm a shouter - I shout. She leaned forward and held my throat in her hands as she closed her eyes. My throat grew warm just like my injuries had earlier.

It wasn't long before she opened her eyes and let go. "That should do it. Try it out."

I swallowed hard. "Testing." For the first time since January, I didn't have to use a slight force to make my voice work. My throat felt fine. It was fucking amazing. "Thank God. That was annoying as hell."

They chuckled.

Questions finally started coming to me. "Um, there's this one thing that happened. In April, I was in class when a bunch of souls found me." I swallowed hard. "I did something. I sent out a blast of light that shoved them out of the room."

They both stared at me. "Did any of the other humans see it?" Evelyn asked quietly.

"No, just me." I took a breath. "I also blew every bulb in the room. And fried the backup generator."

Evelyn started to rub the locket around her neck. "That's interesting." She met my eyes. "Like I said, when I heal people I tend to get more information than I'd like. You do seem to have more ability than I would have expected."

"What did I do?" I asked, scared of the answer.

"It could be that your connection with the Veil is having a few side effects," Evelyn began. "No one has had this much interaction with it before, but Necromancers don't normally have that kind of ability, not to that degree. The fact that you do... it can only be because of your connection." That didn't sound good. "What you did, I believe, was use

your own energy to throw the souls out of the room. Most Necromancers have it to some degree, but what you're describing is a level I've never heard of. You need to be careful with that. As a Necromancer, any energy you use comes from *you*. If you overdo it..."

"Shit." I rubbed my eyes with one hand. "Let me guess, it can cause damage."

"It'll kill you," Rina said directly.

I sighed. Figured. "So, I'm screwed no matter what."

"Not quite," Evelyn said with a gentle smile.

There was something I had to know. "You said 'when you raise the dead."

"Yes, someone has told you that you will eventually... right?" She cringed awkwardly.

"Yeah, that's not it," I said. "It's that you said it without... being rude."

Understanding filled her eyes. "Oh, let me guess. The witches are being snotty about your abilities."

"Yeah, snotty to downright hostile," I admitted.

She shook her head. "That's just... nonsense. You see, you're a magic user. But, you didn't get a choice in your abilities so that makes you a different breed of magic user, so to speak."

"Most witches have worked a long time to get their skills," Rina began. "You'll reach their level and surpass them very quickly, probably before you're twenty-five years old."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is that why they kill us off? Because we're stronger than them?"

I suddenly had their undivided attention.

"What do you mean? Kill you off?" Rina asked, her brow drawn.

I turned to Evelyn. "That's what Serena said. Once a Necromancer raises the dead, they usually have to be dealt with."

Evelyn grew still, her face serious. "There are specific circumstances set for the execution of a Necromancer, and not one of them includes raising the dead for the first time." She shook her head. "I wish I knew more about Necromancy, but I know the laws. And that is... " She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

The church office opened. Atticus walked out, closely followed by Father Francis.

Evelyn shook her head. "One thing at a time. We *will* have a longer discussion about this subject."

Atticus came straight to us and stood beside Evelyn.

Francis stopped next to my bench. "Evelyn, it's wonderful to have you \_\_\_\_"

"You denied her the ward tattoos?" Evelyn snapped as she looked up at him, her eyes burning. "Is that correct?"

Atticus's lips lifted into a slight grin.

Francis frowned. "I offered her a job."

"And if she didn't take it?" she demanded. I almost felt guilty. Almost.

"The ward tattoos are sacred," Francis said. "They can't be just handed out—"

"Oh, sacred my foot!" she snapped as she began to get to her feet. "They're spells tattooed into the skin." Atticus set his hand on her shoulder. She stopped trying to get to her feet.

Francis straightened his shoulders. "That may be, but her skills would be beneficial to the Templars."

Evelyn scowled at Francis. Atticus' face was hard as he handed Evelyn the notepad he was carrying. He pulled a pen from the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket and passed it to her. Evelyn took it while shaking her head.

"So, you're trying to take advantage of her," Evelyn stated clearly as she began drawing something.

"Respectfully, it's none of your concern anymore," Francis stated.

Evelyn huffed, clearly angry at his response.

"The Templars still work for us. Or have you found other funding?" Atticus demanded, his voice hard and dark. "Blackmailing a teenager with something that could save her life is despicable. Especially when that same teenager is risking her life to save this world."

"The... world?" I asked, stunned.

Atticus closed his eyes and let out a long sigh.

"What do you mean?" Francis asked, clearly as confused as I was.

Evelyn answered as she continued to draw. "Lexie, here, is the only way to cross the dead at the moment. If that energy kept building, well, the barriers would have been destroyed." She looked up and sent a look at the priest. "Heaven and Hell would pour into this world. And we all know we don't want that." My head swam. Heaven? Hell? Barriers?

"What the fuck?" I said.

Atticus raised an eyebrow and turned to me. "You didn't know?"

I gaped at him. "That I was saving the world? No," I snapped sarcastically. His eyebrow dropped.

"I need to have a word with Zahur," he muttered to himself.

"And this girl, this teenager, is doing this? Alone?" Francis asked, shocked.

"Yes, she is," Evelyn stated as she clicked the pen shut. "Which is why I'm angry that you wouldn't give her the ward tattoos."

The priest smiled. "Then all the more reason to have her working with us."

The look Evelyn shot him would have made me back up.

"I'd stop talking, Francis," Rina told him.

Evelyn turned to me and handed me the drawing. "Lexie, take that to the Templar's tattoo artist. Tell him to use the same ink as the ward tattoos and have this written down your spine. It's similar to the ward spell and it will work the same way, only you'll have control of it. It'll strengthen your barriers to the point nothing can touch you unless you lower them, which will stop any further brain damage.

The world came to a screeching halt. "It will?"

"Yes. This is tailored to you, so you can continue to cross the dead without hurting yourself. Once the Veil issue is dealt with we'll talk about a better one," Evelyn said. I was speechless, but no one seemed to notice.

"And you will give her the shop address," Atticus ordered.

"Of course," Francis said, his voice quiet.

Evelyn sighed. "And now, I need a nap."

Rina chuckled. "Go take a nap, I'm going to raid the kitchen." She picked up her ginger ale and crackers.

Atticus helped Evelyn to her feet.

"We'll have a longer talk soon," Evelyn assured me. "I also want a peek at that dog of yours when he decides it's safe to leave your friend's side."

Atticus picked her up and carried her back inside. Rina followed. Francis went back to the office, leaving me in silence.

I looked down at the paper in my trembling hand. It... this... fuck. The enormity of what that piece of paper meant... I had to sit down. I was sitting down. I took deep breaths. Tears filled my eyes as I looked at the design. I... I could... I swallowed hard as tears fell down my face. I could live past thirty. I took deep breaths as relief destroyed any control I had and

left me shaking. I could have a life. I could get married if I wanted. I had a chance to... grow old... for the first time in my life. I had the chance for a real life. I wasn't going to die.

I pulled out my phone and called home.

"How's Isaac?" Rory answered his phone.

I smiled, tears still streaming down my face. "Fine. He's fine."

"What's wrong?" Rory demanded.

"Um..." I swallowed hard. "I... There are some people here that know a lot of magic and stuff. They... one of them..." I was struggling just to form the words. "This woman, Evelyn, she gave me a design for a ward. Rory..." I took a breath, "it'll stop me from getting jumped."

Silence met my ear.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his voice hopeful.

"Yeah. She killed the fucking demon inside Isaac, so... yeah, she's probably sure." I wiped my face.

"Holy shit." His voice was thick. He took several deep breaths.

"There's just one catch," I admitted. "I have to have it tattooed on."

"I don't give a fuck, get it today!" Rory all but shouted. I smiled and wiped my face as a fresh wave of tears fell down my face. "I mean it. I want that on you now!" That feeling of being loved washed over me.

"Okay, I'll get it before I come home." My voice was quiet and thick.

"Good." He let out a deep shaking breath. "Love you, kid."

My throat grew tight. "Love ya too." I hung up and wiped my face again.

"Ally?" Asher's voice had me looking up. He stood at the end of the bench, his ocean eyes worried. I had to tell them. It was time.

"I..." I took a breath and tried again. "There's something I need to tell you guys."

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, everyone was sitting in Asher's room, which was the closest to mine. We had left a Templar to watch over Isaac in my bedroom. I had just finished telling them everything about the spot on my brain, the problems I had been having, and what the ward would do. The room was silent as a cemetery. Zeke was oddly still, while the others started asking questions.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Ethan asked, his fingers twirling his silver rings.

"I tried," I admitted. "At first I didn't even believe it, but... I tried several times and I just couldn't manage to..." I stopped and wiped my face again. "And then Isaac was possessed, and I couldn't tell anyone with that going on. I didn't want to add to it."

Asher let out a hard scoff. "Fuck, Ally. You were... you were dying and you didn't tell us." He shook his head, clearly angry with me.

"I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

Ethan turned to Miles and Zeke. "How the hell are you two so calm?"

"She told me the morning of Isaac's fight," Miles admitted.

"And you fucking kept it to yourself?" Ethan shouted, his face turning red. He got to his feet, his eyes storming.

"She told me in confidence," Miles said calmly, his voice growing colder. "Should I have gone straight to everyone and given you the news? Would you want that the next time you confide in me?"

Ethan cursed under his breath and walked away from us.

Asher turned to Zeke. "Why are we more upset about this than you? You knew too?"

Zeke's burning gaze moved to Asher. "Fuck you," he bit out as Asher walked toward him. "You have no idea what's going on in my head."

"You should be yelling your head off," Asher countered, his voice hard. "You fucking knew."

Zeke squared off with Asher. "I figured something was wrong after she kept dropping from crossing the dead," he growled, getting in Asher's face. "Last night she hinted that it was bad. I just didn't want to know it was that bad." My stomach knotted. This wasn't good.

"Knock it off," I snapped. The guys stopped glaring at each other and turned to me. "I'm the one who didn't say anything. If you want to be pissed with someone, be pissed at me."

"Believe me, I am," Asher shot back.

My heart ached but I accepted it.

"Why the hell didn't you tell the rest of us?" Ethan demanded.

I turned to him. "Because of Isaac." The room grew silent. "With the way things were going, I had time. Isaac didn't. It was more important to take care of him."

Asher moved away from Zeke and leaned against the wall.

"You still should have told us sooner," Zeke announced.

I shot him a look. "Oh, you mean when *I* hadn't even processed the news?" I shook my head. "I couldn't tell you because I couldn't believe it myself."

"Everyone has a right to be upset about this," Miles announced, his voice patient. "However, Lexie needed time before she could tell us. There's nothing wrong with that." He looked around the room at the guys. "Be angry if you're angry. But you can't blame her for taking some time to wrap her head around the situation."

"Whatever." Ethan dropped down on the bed. He looked tired already.

"However, there's something else you're not telling us," Miles announced.

My eyes snapped to his.

"We heard from a woman named Astrid. She gave us some information. She's part of the team with Evelyn. I also had a talk with Craig," Miles began. My heart slammed in my chest.

"Oh, yeah? What did they say?" I asked, half afraid of the answer.

"Did you mean to trade yourself to the demon for Isaac?" Miles asked calmly. The silence was deafening.

I looked him in the eye and told the truth. "Yeah."

Everyone but Miles cursed.

"What the fuck?" Zeke snapped.

My eyes shot to him. "Isaac was going to die in front of me," I snapped. "I was going to die anyway—"

"That's not a good enough reason," Zeke growled.

"Yes, it is!" I shouted back, anger filling my chest. "What would you have done? 'Cause I'm damn sure you would have done the same fucking thing if you could!"

Zeke clenched his fists together. "It's not the same."

"Yeah, it fucking is!" I yelled. "Would you rather have lost two friends or just one?"

"Damn it, Lexie," he snarled.

"It was my fucking choice," I stated simply. "Isaac had nothing left. It's done. I bought enough time for help to get here. It's over."

Miles straightened from the wall. "Zeke, you misunderstood the reason I brought it up."

Zeke's head snapped around.

"It wasn't to yell at her." He met Zeke's gaze. "It was to thank her." Stunned silence filled the room. "She's right. I don't like admitting it, but she was right. We were going to lose Isaac. And her. I would have done the exact same thing and so would you. So would Asher. So would Ethan. You can't blame her for making the same choice we would."

Zeke roughly ran his hand through his hair as he began pacing again. "Fine."

Miles turned back to me. "Is there anything else?"

"No." I raised an eyebrow. "How about you?"

Miles sighed. "The demon spoke to Zeke." Asher's head whipped around. "With the nature of what the demon was saying, both Father Francis and I agreed that Zeke shouldn't sit with the demon."

"That's fine. I just don't know why you kept it a secret," Ethan stated, crossing his arms.

"Look, we're all run down and exhausted. We've all made mistakes lately," Asher declared. My heart took a hit. Did he mean kissing me? But Asher wasn't done. "Let's just... let it go. Let's start fresh and work on our communication."

"Seconded," Miles announced.

"Third," Zeke grumbled.

"Motion passed," I stated.

## CHAPTER 19

#### TUESDAY

was lying on my stomach as a needle pierced the skin over my spine. Because of the location it was painful as hell. I focused on taking deep breaths and letting them out slowly. Trying to distract myself, I thought over the last three days since Isaac had almost died.

Since the big conversation in Asher's room, everyone had finally started to relax. It helped when Isaac woke up and asked for food.

Since then, Isaac had mostly been sleeping and eating. The poor guy had had little energy for anything else until this morning. When we filled him in on the ward tattoo and what it could do, he demanded we go to the tattoo shop immediately.

The needle hit a more sensitive spot. I grunted but held still. The curtain opened and Zeke came in, frowning. He really didn't like that I had a string bikini top on, or that the back was undone. Of course, it might also have been combined with the fact the artist was a man. He sat on a stool near my head.

"How're you doing?" he asked.

I smiled. "Fine, it just hurts."

"You need anything?" he asked, his voice gruff.

"Nope." I hissed as the needle hit another sensitive spot.

"I can't fucking watch this," he growled as he got to his feet and left. I was snickering when Asher came in and took Zeke's place.

"Zeke freaked?" Asher asked.

I grinned. "Zeke freaked."

He chuckled. "The plane is being prepped now, so as soon as you're done we'll head home."

"Good, I want my house and my bed," I stated. Asher chuckled.

"It's been a long few days," he admitted.

"A long, hellish few days," I added.

"Yeah." He gestured to my back. "How much does that hurt?"

"The spine is one of the most painful places to get a tattoo," Mike, the tattoo artist, answered.

"So, it hurts," I told him.

Asher shook his head.

Miles came to the doorway. "Asher."

Asher got to his feet and left the room. Miles took his place.

"How are you?" he asked gently.

"I'm going to start charging every time someone asks," I teased.

He grinned, his ears turning pink as his gaze went to my back. "How does it feel not having to worry about your barriers anymore?"

"Freeing." I smiled. "I have a life, I have a future. I'm going to live long enough to enjoy student loan debt."

Miles chuckled. "And you're happy about debt?"

"Yep," I said. "I'm happy that I'll be alive to pay it back."

"I'm glad you'll be around," he said quietly.

"I'm sorry Asher and Ethan were mad at you," I said. "They shouldn't have been."

"They weren't really angry with me," he said. "They were upset at the situation and didn't know what to do."

"Still," I muttered.

"It's alright." His eyes met mine. "What's important is that you were going to tell us before everything went wrong with Isaac."

I gave him a smile.

"Miles," Ethan called from the door.

Miles got out of the chair and headed back out the door. Ethan came in and took his place. What was going on?

"Are you guys playing musical chairs?" I teased.

Ethan chuckled as he moved closer and took my hand. "I know I didn't say this before, but... thank you, Lexie," he whispered. I squeezed his hand. "You saved his ass."

"Evelyn saved both our asses, actually," I reminded him.

"Yeah, but he would have been done for if you didn't go in after him," he countered. His chocolate eyes were warm as they met mine. "Thank you."

"No problem," I said softly. The needle hit another spot, I hissed and grunted. He squeezed my hand. Isaac moved into the doorway.

"Ethan," Isaac called. Ethan squeezed my hand, got up and left the room.

"Okay, seriously, what is with the musical chairs?" I asked again.

"Nothing. Everyone is just antsy to get home," Isaac said as he took my hand. Hades came in and put himself under my hand. Apparently I existed to him again. Ever since the demon died he'd stayed with Isaac and ignored me. What changed? I started scratching his ears.

"That looks painful."

I smiled. "Yeah, but worth it."

He took a deep breath and met my eyes. "Hey, when we get home I want to talk to you." My heart hammered in my chest. Talk? Oh God...

"Um, okay." My mouth went dry. "I have something I need to do first, but after that—"

The needle hit a bad spot. I squeaked.

Isaac leaned closer. "Squeeze my hand, Red." I did. Isaac stayed with me until the artist was done. When the gun shut off he let go of my hand and got up. "I'm going to tell the others you're done." He hurried out the door. Seriously, what was going on?

Hades stayed with me as Mike carefully cleaned my back and then handed me a mirror. I held the towel to my chest as I went to stand with my back to the mirror and used the hand mirror to see the tattoo. It was beautiful. Black and bronze, the scrolling Latin ran down my spine, starting just below my neck and ending almost on my butt. I smiled. No more getting jumped for this Necromancer! I handed him the mirror and sat back down. He bandaged the tattoo all the way down my spine and gave me aftercare instructions before he left to let me get dressed. I tied my suit top lightly and pulled on my cami.

When I came out, no one was in the waiting area. Okay... I went to the front desk to ask where the guys were, but no one was there. Figuring they would be back in a few minutes, I sat down to wait with Hades and picked up a magazine. The writing was oddly blurry. I moved it further away until I could see it better. Weird.

A curtain leading to one of the tattoo rooms opened and Isaac came out into the waiting area. Before the curtain closed, I spotted Ethan in the chair getting a tattoo. What the...?

I got up and met Isaac halfway across the shop. "What the hell is Ethan doing?" I looked up, and for the first time saw the tape on his neck. "Isaac..."

His eyes met mine. "That chick, Evie? She gave us a design to give the tattoo artists here for us."

My mouth dropped. "What? You got a tattoo?"

He grinned. "Yeah." He turned and carefully pulled the bandage off the back of his neck. It was a symbol of some kind. I could figure that much out, but... I had no clue what it meant. There were several parts to it and the detail was intricate. I put the bandage back in place and walked around to meet his eyes.

"Your mom is going to kill you," I told him quietly. "What does it do?"

He swallowed hard. "Two things. Protection from demon possession..."

Okay, that I could get behind.

He continued reluctantly. "And to give the Sight."

Huh? What? "I think I heard you wrong. The Sight?"

He smirked down at me. "Yeah, Red. We'll be able to see what you see now."

My chest warmed even as fear tore through me. "We?"

"Uh. Yeah..."

A curtain opened. Zeke walked out and spotted us. He came over as if nothing strange was happening.

"You guys gave yourselves the Sight," I said again, just to be clear.

They exchanged a look then turned back to me.

"Yeah," Zeke said.

A curtain to another room opened. Miles walked out, still pulling his shirt down. A patch of gauze riding low on his hip caught my eye. What...? Why....?

"Do you guys understand what you've done?" I asked as my chest grew tight. "Do you have any idea what this is going to do to your lives?" My voice was getting louder.

"Our choice," Zeke told me gruffly.

I stared at them, stunned, as Miles joined us. Asher stepped out of another room.

"I see you told her," Miles said lightly.

"You're all insane," I stated.

They chuckled as Asher reached us.

The curtain to Ethan's room moved. Ethan came out with a bandage on the inside of his left wrist. His eyes found me.

"So, she knows already?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah," the guys answered in unison.

"You don't know what you're... your lives... why?" I couldn't seem to manage an entire question.

"It's the only way we can possibly help you," Miles explained. "If we don't see what you do, then we're useless. And we don't want you dealing with this alone anymore."

I shook my head as tears filled my eyes. My voice was warm when I said, "You fucking idiots."

#### ETHAN

I looked out the window at the cloudless sky. The seats in Miles' plane were nice, but no one was ever comfortable on a plane.

I turned away from the window. Well, Lexie was. She had curled up in the seat next to Isaac and passed out before we took off. Not five minutes later Isaac fell asleep too. Hades had stretched out on the floor between them.

I eyed my brother. He was still so exhausted. Isaac. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Lexie went into Isaac's center. I leaned my head back against the chair and cursed myself. If he remembered any of it and told Lexie, she might figure out that I lied about not remembering our kiss. Shit.

My mind went back to that kiss in the Veil, reminding me of the way she felt against me. The way her ass fit in my hands... I sighed. I never should have lied about our kiss. I should have just kissed her again. If I had, I wouldn't have been cursing myself since Boulder.

Lexie whimpered in her sleep. My eyes snapped open as I lifted my head to check on her. Her face twisted in pain. Before I could get up, Isaac reached over and found her hand while still asleep. Her face relaxed as she squeezed my brother's hand. I started twirling my rings.

Even if I told her I remembered, there was still that stupid agreement with the others. No dating Lexie. I cursed under my breath as I looked away from her and out the window again. Why the hell had I agreed to that? I could raise the issue again, but... if she didn't feel the same way, there was no point.

I sighed wearily. I was tired. Tired of holding back with her, tired of not touching her, tired of... not kissing her. I had to fucking tell her or I'd never know.

## EPILOGUE

9

strode into Serena's store and slammed the door behind me. Serena looked up from the computer on the counter. She scowled at me.

"What are you angry about now?" Serena snapped.

I slammed the book down on the counter, hard. "Why the fuck didn't you answer the phone? Or call me back?" I shouted.

Serena's eyes narrowed at me. "If you did your research I'm sure you could find the answer to whatever question you have."

"Did you even listen to my messages?" I snapped.

She gave me a patient smile. "The first two, then I stopped listening."

I gave her a smile, and it wasn't my nice one. "Well, let me fill you in. My friend Isaac was possessed by a fucking demon." Her smile disappeared. "I just got back from Boulder. Francis says hi." I slid the book towards her. "I'm done. I'm done trying to learn from someone who isn't willing to teach me. I'm done trying to jump through your hoops. I'm done with you."

I turned to walk out. Her voice stopped me. "You're a magic user, Lexie, you have to follow our policies."

I turned on her. "Which are?" I snapped. I held my arms open, waiting. When she didn't answer I dropped my arms. "If you won't tell me what they are, I don't have to follow shit."

"Whether you know the laws or not, you still have to abide by them. We are the ultimate authority on this matter," Serena stated.

I tilted my head at the blatant lie. "Oh, no you're not. You see, in Boulder I met an interesting group of gargoyles. Had a nice long chat with a female named Evelyn." Serena's face turned white.

"Evelyn Dalca?" she asked, her voice almost cracking.

"Yeah, Mated to a white-haired guy with gold eyes," I told her cheerfully. Serena swallowed hard. "Anyway, she gave me some interesting information about the Witches Council. Apparently, if I'm not actually a part of your group, then I don't answer to you, I answer to her. She'll also be looking into the Necromancer deaths over the last two hundred years." She swallowed hard. "Lucky for her, Atticus is great at research."

I turned and headed for the door again, slamming it behind me as I left. God that felt good.

#### ASHER

I tossed the baseball into the air and caught it as it came down. I was at Miles' house since Dad was still here. Almost a week - a new record for him. I threw the ball again and caught it.

Ally. I stared up at the ceiling, remembering the way she slept on the flight home. She'd curled up and passed out almost immediately. She had been exhausted. Our kiss ran through my mind again. I closed my eyes and sighed.

I couldn't do it. I finally admitted it to myself. I couldn't step back for Zeke. I had tried in Boulder, taking care of Ethan instead of her, but the entire time I was worrying about her. Well, worrying about everyone.

I ran my hand over my face and let out a deep breath. Zeke. It looked like Zeke had slept in her room the other night. I didn't know for sure, but it looked like it. And if it was true... Zeke had to be crazy about her. I should step back. My heart ached.

I was in love with her, and I didn't want to walk away from that. I sighed. I still had to step aside. Didn't I?

I closed the front door and walked through the kitchen to open the back door for the dogs. Tank immediately jumped on me, his foot stabbing into my gut.

"Down, Tank," I grunted. He dropped back down to all four feet before running further into the house. I closed the door and headed back into the small dining room. I picked up my bag and walked back to my bedroom. Everything was the same as I had left it. Even my bed was still messy. Then again, it would be messy even if I'd made it. Tank and Kita loved to tear the blankets off. I dropped my bag and sat down on the side of the bed. Everything was the same. Except I had slept next to Lexie.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and brought up a picture of her. Her brown eyes were sparkling as she looked up at the camera with a smile. She was lying on her back in bed, smiling up at her phone as she took the selfie.

My chest grew warm, my head quiet. It went okay. I didn't hurt her, I didn't even have a bad dream. There had just been sleep and peace. Holding her all night had been...

I flipped to the next photo. Everyone had been at her house. The twins were doing dishes while Asher and Rory watched baseball. Miles had been at the table still doing homework. She had her chemistry book in her lap as she sat at the other end of the couch, her notebook sitting on the arm. Her hair was in a messy bun. Several long strands had already fallen out. Her sweater had fallen down her shoulder showing her porcelain skin. She had been concentrating on something while chewing on the corner of her bottom lip. With her sweats and mismatched socks, she had looked too good for me to pass on taking a picture. It was still my favorite one. The

others might like the ones Dylan had taken, but this one... this was Lexie. I grinned.

Not two minutes later she had been cursing as she slammed the textbook closed and dropped it on the floor. I had barely managed to hide my smile when I asked her what was wrong. It was Math, again. Since Miles was busy writing an essay, I bent down, picked up the book, and asked her to show me what she had been trying to understand. She scooted closer, opened the book again, and showed me her notebook. I tried to explain the way it made sense to me but it came out wrong. We both ended up getting frustrated and yelling at each other. Miles banned me from helping Lexie with homework after that. I haven't tried since.

Lexie. I closed my eyes. She was amazing. She understood me... and I had woken up next to her without hurting her. I finally admitted it to myself. I was in love with her. I looked at her picture again. The real question was, was she ready to start... anything? That shit with Ordin messed her up, but she was doing a lot better. She only had two sessions left.

Maybe it was time to talk to her about that kiss and what it meant. If she wasn't ready then at least we'd know where we stood, and she'd know I'm not going anywhere. I ran my hand through my hair as anxiety tore through me. I had to try.

I rolled over and tried to stop thinking, but it was no use. Zeke slept next to Lexie. He had feelings for her, there was no other explanation for it. I started tapping my fingers on my chest. Lexie would be good for Zeke, she understood him like no one else. And he'd love her completely. But so would I...

I cursed as I rolled onto my back. Look at it logically. She's one of your best friends, you have an agreement with the others not to date her... and yet you still can't stop thinking about her. I cursed myself.

It was too late for me already. The more I touched her, the closer I got to her... the more I wanted her. Making her smile, helping her fall asleep... all of it left me wanting more.

Control, Miles. Control. I took several deep breaths and tried to remember why I shouldn't call her and tell her how I felt. The agreement, she's my friend... Why did they all seem like excuses?

Lexie had been right, Ma was pissed. I watched the shadows dance across the ceiling. Grounded for two weeks. Of course, if we explained to Ma what had actually happened, she'd just be happy I was alive, tattoo or not. The skin on the back of my neck itched.

Lexie had saved my ass. It felt like I was in the dark forever. The cold had seeped into my bones... I pushed the memory away and tried to find a happy one. Kissing Lexie. Well, Lexie kissing me. That cliff had disappeared when her lips touched mine. Everything had stopped. All that existed were her lips, her taste, the feel of her body against me. Damn, she had felt so good. I hadn't known she felt the same way about me as I did about her. I had hoped... Hell, I shouldn't have even hoped. I needed to talk to her tonight. But not on the phone.

Ma's bedroom door was closed. I waited for an hour before getting off my bed and silently moving into the hall. Yeah, if I got caught I was screwed, but as soon as Ma had seen my tattoo I was screwed anyway. I tiptoed downstairs and got Ma's keys off the table by the door before I slipped out.

It wasn't long until I was pulling up in front of Lexie's. It was only eleven, she should be awake.

Isaac: You up?

It only took a minute before she answered.

Red: Yep.

Isaac: Go out front.

Red: Why? I smiled.

Isaac: I want to talk to you.

I got out of the car and walked toward the house. The door opened as I reached the grass. Her hair was down and everywhere as she came outside. She was wearing her usual cami, but this time she had shorts on. The new scars on her thigh shone in the light. She met me halfway across the lawn.

"What's wrong?" she whispered. "Are you okay?"

My heart raced at the worry in her eyes. "Yeah, I wanted to talk to you, just not on the phone."

She swallowed hard. "What about?"

I snorted. "You know what about."

She pressed her lips together and fidgeted.

"You kissed me, Lexie," I told her. "And I kissed you."

"I know," she said, her voice soft. "Maybe... we should pretend it never happened."

The air was knocked out of me. "Do you... you don't like me that way?"

She licked her lips. "No, that's not it."

I stepped closer, until she had to tilt her head back to look up at me. "Then what?"

Her eyes were wide as she answered. "I... uh... if it went bad... I could lose all of you."

I smiled. "It's not gonna go bad, Red." I ran my fingertips over her jaw. "I'll do everything I can to make sure it doesn't."

Her eyes had an edge of fear in them. "You're not the only one who likes me."

"What?" I breathed. It was like a hit to the gut.

"There's someone else who likes me, and I... I don't want anyone to get hurt," she said gently.

"Lexie, you've been my light for so long, I don't know what I'd do without you," I told her. I didn't care how stupid it sounded, she needed to know. "Do you care about me?"

She swallowed hard. "Yeah." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Then that's all that matters," I said.

Her eyes watered. "Isaac... I don't want to hurt anyone. This could be a disaster."

"So, you what?" I asked, not understanding what she was saying. "You want me to pretend it never happened?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I'm really confused right now."

I reached up and held her cheek. Her skin was soft under my fingers. "I can't do that, Lexie."

Those emerald eyes met mine. I leaned down and brushed my lips against hers. I slipped my hands around her waist and pulled her against me. Her breathing hitched as my lips moved with hers. My hard on pressed into her as her hands moved up my chest. Her lips parted; I took my chance and moved in. She met me stroke for stroke, setting the world on fire. A small, breathy moan came from her. Fuck... that sound. I held her tighter against me. Her hands balled in my shirt. I eased back slowly, enjoying every touch, every brush of her lips. When I met her eyes, we were both breathing hard.

"Now, if you can tell me that didn't matter, I'll walk away," I promised her.

Her eyes were full of tears as she looked down at my chest. "I... I can't."

Light burst through me. I cradled her face in my hands. "I don't want to hurt anyone either. We can keep this a secret until you're sure. But I don't want to stop kissing you. And I'm not going to pretend I'm not in love with you." Her eyes grew wider. Her breathing hitched. I bent down and kissed her forehead. Then I backed up, dropping my hands from her. I left her standing in the grass under the stars.

# IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU LOVE...

If you or someone you love have thoughts of suicide, please contact a suicide hotline.

USA: <a href="https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/tel:1-800-273-8255">https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/tel:1-800-273-8255</a>

UK: http://www.suicide.org/hotlines/international/united-kingdom-suicide-hotlines.html

Australia: <a href="https://www.lifeline.org.au/">https://www.lifeline.org.au/</a>

<u>OceanofPDF.com</u>

## SNEAK PEEK

Something woke me up. I grumbled and rolled over. There it was again. The small ping of something hitting glass. I opened my eyes and listened. It was coming from my window.

Still half asleep, I went to my window, opened it and looked down at the lawn. Claire stood there waving her arms. It took me a second to realize who she was before I hurried downstairs as fast as I could. I jerked the door open and ran outside.

Claire was beaming. "Lexie!"

"Where have you been? You scared the shit out of me," I told her.

She snorted. "I've got news."

I shook my head. "You know there are psycho ghosts out there, right?" "I did it."

I raised an eyebrow. "Did what?"

She smiled again. "I found another Necromancer." My jaw dropped. "And he wants to meet you."

Stunned, it took me a few moments to ask, "Where?" "New Orleans."

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