THE VEILDIARIES BOOK THREE

WENTO FEAR THE ITVING

B.I. BRUNNEMER

When To Fear The Living

The Veil Diaries Series, Volume 3

B.L. Brunnemer

Published by B.L. Brunnemer, 2017.

Also by B.L. Brunnemer

The Veil Diaries Series

When The Dead Come A Knockin'

When To Fear The Living (Coming Soon)

Copyright 2017 BL Brunnemer All Rights Reserved.

Contents

- Chapter 1Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- The Boys: Zeke

The Boys: Asher

The Boys: Ethan

Epilogue

For the latest on the Veil Diaries

Sneak Peek

Sneak Peek

First, to my husband Robert. Who suffered many days and nights of being ignored for this book.

You're the best, and I promise I'll make a schedule and stick to it now.

Second, my Content Editor, Melissa Leeper. You saved this book. There is no doubt in my mind, and when the editor got sick, you jumped in and helped save it again.

Third, To Vivian and Katrina, you two jumped in and help save the book when the editor got sick.

I can't thank you enough!!

And a special thank you to

Grondin Designs for the covers and my new website!

Check them out!

www.grondindesigns.com

Chapter 1

Thursday

I was laughing when I opened my locker. At least I was, until I saw a folded piece of paper in my otherwise empty locker. I was tired of these stupid notes. I've been getting one every day since we came back from Christmas break. I picked it up, unfolded it, and read it.

You get more beautiful everyday -Your Secret Admirer.

Secret admirer my ass, one of my friends were messing with me. I turned around and looked up at Isaac, Ethan, and Miles.

"Okay, which one of you is messing with me?" All conversation stopped as they looked at me, confusion written all over their faces.

"What are you talking about, Red?" Isaac asked in his sweet, rich honey-like voice. It was hard to look at Isaac and not smile, his personality just came out through those chocolate eyes of his. Not to mention his grin when he was up to no good. Which was usually all the time. His hair was freshly buzzed on the sides, his longer hair on top trimmed a little. His vibrant blue hair with darker blue streaks was starting to look a bit less like Cookie Monster and more like ocean waves from the length. I handed him the note before turning back to put my books away.

"Red's got a secret admirer!" Isaac chanted. I shut my locker, turned back to them, and shot Isaac a glare. He just kept grinning as he handed the note to Ethan. Ethan was Isaac's identical twin, though that only meant they were both too good looking for their own good. Ethan had a style that was vastly different than his brother. Where Isaac wore bright colors, Ethan wore all black and silver rings. His straight, jaw length black hair was tucked behind his ears showing off his right ear, and the five silver loop

rings running up it. Ethan hadn't shaved this morning, and the black scruff over his jaw had me occasionally watching him in appreciation. Yeah, he was my friend, but I was only human. Ethan grinned as he read it.

"This isn't me, Beautiful," Ethan said in his smooth, smoky voice that could stop a girl in her tracks. "I'd write better shit than that." He passed the note to Miles while Isaac kept chanting,

"Someone's got a crush on Red, someone's got a crush on Red." I ignored Isaac as I looked at Miles, he frowned. With his high cheekbones and angled jaw, it had an interesting effect on my heart. Though to be fair, that might not have anything to do with his frown. His chestnut hair was shorter than last month, the curl was gone, and the wave was back. His emerald green eyes narrowed on the note behind his black-rimmed glasses. While as tall as the twins, he was leaner with broader shoulders.

"This isn't my writing, Lexie," Miles said in his quite timber. He looked over to me from the note as he continued. "And I don't recognize it." I looked over their faces, they weren't lying. They really hadn't sent the note, must have been Asher, or even Zeke. Since the break-up with Dylan, Zeke had been fighting with me over the stupidest shit. Maybe he was trying to make up for it? Yeah, I didn't buy it either. I took the note back and looked at it again before heading to the cafeteria.

"Is that the first note?" Ethan asked as we walked down the hall.

"No, I've gotten one every day since we got back from vacation," I grumbled. It must be Asher. He probably wanted me to feel pretty or something. Ever since I came home from spending that week at Asher's, he'd been acting sweeter than usual. It was just in little ways, but I noticed it. It didn't help that each time he smiled at me, it made my stomach flutter. The stupid butterflies had gone nuts and taken an interest in Asher. Okay, yeah, it was me, I needed to get over this crush. The notes were probably Asher trying to cheer me up. I was just going to have to ask.

"Doesn't Dylan have friends here?" Miles asked, his voice neutral. I sighed.

"Yeah," I said wearily. Two days after my ex Dylan dumped me, he called, he apologized and said he was just really tired and depressed. I

might have bought it if he didn't hurt me on purpose on his way out the door. "I don't think he'd bother," I added.

"I'm not so sure about that, Red," Isaac smirked down at me. "He did ask you to forgive him."

I snorted. "Fuck that." The guys chuckled as we reached the cafeteria. It was a single-story building but long. The food wasn't bad, we even had healthy options, but it was just a cafeteria. Isaac and Ethan walked in ahead of us. Miles held the door open for me to walk ahead of him, I gave him a small smile, Miles was always a gentleman. He grinned back as I passed to follow the twins. Everyone made their way through the crowded cafeteria to the square table we'd been using since it got too cold to sit outside. Asher was already there going through his history book. Asher was handsome, in your wholesome, boy next door way, if the boy next door was an international model. High cheekbones and a sharp chin gave him that movie star quality, his sandy blonde hair was shorter than a month ago. He was leaning his temple on his hand with his eyes on his book. Those eyes, by the way, amazing, with dark blue, light blue, and white flecks, looked like ocean waves crashing. His dark blue sweater hugged the muscles of his chest and arms. I dropped the note onto the page he was reading.

"Is this you?" I asked as I set my bag down and started pulling off my jacket. By the time I was sitting next to him, Asher was looking at me, frowning.

"No Ally, this wasn't me," Asher held the note up between two fingers. "What's going on?"

"Someone has been leaving Lexie love notes," Ethan told him gleefully. I rolled my eyes as I pulled out my lunch.

"How long?" Asher asked as he looked back to me.

"Since we got back from vacation, I figured it was one of you messing with me." I pulled my sandwich out.

"Who's messing with you?" A gravelly, deep voice demanded. I looked up to watch Zeke start to take off his jacket. Zeke was huge, there was no getting around it, or him. He was two heads taller than me with wide shoulders and more muscle than you'd believe. If his size didn't scare you, his wide, strong jaw, broad cheekbones, and angry glares would do it. It's

not that he wasn't good looking. He was, just in... a scary, rough kind of good looking. It didn't help that the only thing he wore was black jeans, shirt, motorcycle boots and a new gunmetal wallet chain. The wallet chain had been a gift to him from my Uncle Rory this Christmas. He finished pulling off his black snow jacket and sat down across from me.

"I thought it was one of you guys, but they're all saying no," I pointed at the note. "Unless this is you?" Zeke was frowning as he took the note from Asher and read it. His ice blue eyes met mine.

"Not me." He tossed the note back over to me.

"Zeke," I grinned.

"What?"

"Someone is messing with me," I grinned as he shook his head at me. Yeah, I liked giving Zeke shit a bit, or all the time, depending on my mood. But this probation thing was actually starting to irk me. Last month Asher, Ethan, and Isaac's girlfriends were trying to get rid of me by being bitches. I figured the guys liked them, so, I just dealt with it. Until I went after Asher's girlfriend. When they found out what had been going on, they hadn't been very happy with me. The others had let it go, but Zeke had put me on probation. I still didn't have a clue what it was, only that I had to tell Zeke whenever someone messed with me. I had about a week left, and I was trying not to let it bother me.

"Thanks," He said dryly before he pulled his own lunch out of his bag.

"I still say it's Dylan," Ethan announced, his mouth full of sandwich. I shook my head as Ethan pointed at Asher. "He has friends here, right?"

Asher nodded slowly. "Yeah," Asher's eyes unfocused as he looked at the table. "I'll ask around." I rolled my eyes, it was probably a waste of time. I pulled out a pen and my note book.

"I have a better idea," I announced as I tore out part of a page. "Let's just ask." I wrote a message asking who it was and if they were a friend of Dylan's. I was putting my notebook away when the guys read the note.

"That works," Isaac observed as he opened his bag of chips.

"I'll stick it to my locker. Whoever it is might come by and see it," I shrugged as I picked up my sandwich. A tall, willowy, lilac haired girl sat down next to Zeke. Riley, Zeke's girlfriend, was pretty awesome. She had good cheekbones and lovely almond eyes, and she was also the only survivor of the Great Girlfriend Purge of December. At least that's what I was calling it, Isaac called it The Bitch Fest.

"What are you sticking to your locker?" Riley asked, setting her lunch down on the table.

"Red's got a secret admirer," Isaac answered before I could. I rolled my eyes.

"Really?" She asked. Isaac snatched the note from in front of me to pass it to Riley. Riley read it and smiled. "Interesting, any idea who?" Riley asked as she grinned.

"Not a fucking clue," I admitted before I took a bite out of my sandwich.

"She wrote a note back, asking who it is. That's what she's sticking on her locker," Ethan supplied since I was eating.

"Any interest there, Lexie?" Riley asked excitedly. I groaned while I rolled my eyes, the guys chuckled as I finished my bite.

"God no, I'm still trying to get rid of the last one," I said, emphatically. Riley chuckled.

"Dylan's still calling you?" She asked as she opened her salad container.

"Calling, texting, sending emails," I grumbled.

"That's got to be satisfying." Riley offered before taking a bite of her salad.

"The first three times yeah, the rest, no," I said dryly. Talking about Dylan made my stomach knot, I put my sandwich back in my lunch bag half eaten. I had just started to love the guy and he... I pushed it out of my head and tried to focus on something else. I looked at Isaac who was happily eating his sandwich. "Do you have tuna again?" I asked as I grinned at him. Isaac loved tuna fish. He said it was low in fat but high in

protein. I didn't understand the low in fat, considering there was lots of mayo on the stuff. He swallowed his food and smiled at me.

"Yes, I do," Isaac said. "You should try my tuna salad, Red. It's pretty good." I eyed him.

"Didn't your Mom make that?" I asked pointedly. He shook his head.

"She's refusing to make our lunches anymore," Isaac grumbled. I snickered.

"Aw, the poor twins have to make their own lunch," I taunted them. "It's almost like you're 17-years-old." Everyone, but the twins, burst out laughing. The twins' cheeks tinged pink, as Ethan glared at me.

"You wouldn't have anything to do with that, would you Beautiful?" Ethan asked.

I gave him my fake outraged look, "Never!" I gasped dramatically. Ethan glared at me.

"What did you do, Red?" Isaac demanded.

"I... only pointed out that you guys would be going to college soon and you should probably learn to cook for yourselves a bit," I said innocently. The twins glared at me as everyone else laughed. Isaac dropped his sandwich and reached for me, I dodged his hands by surging to my feet and moving behind a chuckling Asher. Ethan was already up and heading toward me. Shit. I calculated my chances of getting back to my bag and jacket, they weren't good. Instead, I turned and ran for the other door of the cafeteria.

"You're dead, Red!" Isaac shouted.

"Lexie!" Ethan yelled. I snickered as I hit the door and ran out into the cold turning towards the library. The cafeteria door slammed shut again. I ran down an empty hallway, footsteps echoed from behind me. Shit! I turned down another hallway and spotted someone I knew.

"Ryan!" I shouted. Ryan, the drummer for Ethan's band, looked up from his group of friends. Ethan's drummer was big and burly, his buzzed brown hair was covered by a black beanie. The horseshoe shaped ring through the septum of his nose was surprising, but it was his eyebrow stud that drew your attention to his gray eyes. When he saw me running his eyes went wide, "A little help!" I called. Ryan got to his feet as one of the twins rounded the corner behind me.

"What's going on?" Ryan asked as I ran past.

"Buy me time!" I shouted back, laughing as I ran. Ryan chuckled as I kept running. I was about to turn down another hallway when I was grabbed around the waist. The smell of limes filled my nose as I was lifted off my feet.

"Gotcha," Isaac declared triumphantly. Laughing and out of breath, I didn't even fight him as he lifted me to dangle over his shoulder. "Bad Red." Isaac smacked me on the butt hard. I yelped at the sting and then kept laughing my ass off. Isaac walked over to Ethan and Ryan, still carrying me.

"What's going on?" Ryan asked as Isaac turned a bit so the others could see me.

"Lexie convinced our Mom not to make lunches for us anymore," Ethan informed him. I sniggered and looked at them from my upside-down position.

"It's just lunch," I pointed out. Ryan chuckled.

"Just lunch?" Isaac scoffed. "You forget morning snack, second lunch, afternoon snack, and after school snack!" Isaac started to tilt backwards threatening to drop me, my sweater began to slide down.

"Shirt, shirt!" I yelled. Ethan reached out and pulled my sweater back up. He even tucked the back into my jeans so it wouldn't happen again. I was laughing again as they started walking by a chuckling Ryan. "See ya at practice, Ryan," Ethan said as he followed behind Isaac. I pushed off of Isaac's lower back to wave.

"Bye Ryan!" I called before dropping back down and giggling. "How did you get around me?" Isaac snorted.

"Ethan couldn't take you down, but he could run you out," Isaac explained.

"So, I ran parallel to him through the side hall."

"Damn," I said, still laughing. "I'll have to zig zag more next time." The guys chuckled, then they began talking about what to do with me.

"Trash can?" Ethan offered. I cringed.

"Nah, too old school, what about the water fountain near the library?" Isaac countered. I burst out laughing.

"Sure, what do you think Miles will do to you two this time?" I asked, sweetly. They grumbled and moved on. In December, the twins thought it would be funny to soak me outside in the snow. They accidently overdid it, by the time I got into Asher's house, I had been hypothermic. Asher and Zeke had to strip me down and get me wrapped up, so I didn't die. I later heard that Miles' lecture was scathing.

"Locker?" Ethan countered. Isaac hemmed and hawed.

"She'd fit," Isaac agreed.

"Don't you think that stuffing me in a locker is a bit out of proportion?" I asked, dryly.

"Nope, Ma made empanadas on Sunday," Ethan explained. "She said we couldn't take any in our lunches, or have them for snacks." I looked back at him.

"The chorizo and cheese ones?" I asked, suddenly interested. They sighed.

"Yeah," Isaac answered.

"I'm screwed," I announced. They chuckled. They kept going on until they carried me into the cafeteria like that. We got a lot of looks, including ones from teachers, though they didn't seem to care too much.

"Put her down now," Zeke growled.

"No," Isaac stated stubbornly. "She's my Red. I caught her fair and square." I snorted.

"I wasn't asking," Zeke's voice grew firmer. Isaac grumbled wordlessly then put me down. Ethan held my shoulders until the dizziness passed. When I was good, I gave him a smile. "You still owe us snacks, Red," Isaac threatened. I stuck my tongue out at him before I sat back down and looked at Riley.

"I still need to find a dress for winter formal," I announced. The guys all groaned as if they were in agony. Riley and I smiled at each other, torturing the guys with girl stuff had become our favorite lunch time activity.

"Are we going with Jake this time?" She asked, spearing a tomato.

"Shit." I reached into my coat pocket to pull out my phone. "I forgot to ask him." I quickly called Jake, Dylan's gay friend, who I now had joint custody of since the breakup.

"Hey sweetness, tell me you're surrounded by hot guys," Jake's cheerful voice made me smile. He was the only person who I could really talk about the guys to, at least about how hot they were.

"Always, handsome," I said as if it were obvious. He chuckled. "I need a favor, are you free Saturday?"

"Let me guess, you still haven't found a dress?"

"Nope, can you help?" I asked, sweetly, watching the conversation going on around me.

"Yeah, what are you looking for?" Jake asked. There was a familiar husky voice in the background, my stomach knotted even more. It was Dylan. "Hold on a sec, sweetness." I listened to Jake tell Dylan to chill the fuck out. "I'm back."

"I keep finding way too girly stuff. Like, princess shit and I can't stand it," I grumbled.

Jake chuckled. "I imagine black?"

"Of course," I replied.

"Are we going for sexy elegant or sweet?"

"What do you think?" I countered.

"Sexy elegant it is," Jake sounded proud. "I have an Aunt that has a shop here in Dulcet. She's got great taste. Come meet me on Saturday, and we'll have some fun." I smiled.

"That would sound so dirty if you were straight," I said, smiling. He snickered.

"True, very true," Jake offered. Dylan's voice spoke again. He sighed. "Lexie, Dylan is asking to talk to you." Jake's voice was pained.

"Tell him I have to go, the bell rang," I said, innocently.

"You got it. See you Saturday." I hung up the phone then smiled at Riley.

"We have a shopping date Saturday with our favorite guy," I announced. Riley frowned.

"As in this Saturday? I'm stuck watching my cousins that day," She grumbled. "I love Jake."

"Me too, we need to find him a hot guy of his own, though," I thought out loud as the guys groaned, Isaac winced.

"Not today," Zeke groaned painfully, Riley and I giggled. It was almost time for the bell, I packed up my stuff and asked if anyone had any tape. Miles, of course, pulled out a small roll of scotch tape and handed it to me.

"Thank you, sir," I said in my fake British accent.

"You're welcome, my lady," Miles answered in his gallant voice. I was smiling as I headed back to my locker. I put the note up just as the bell rang. Joy, gym.

On the way out of art class, Asher showed me his latest drawing attempt. It was robots on the moon, and there wasn't a single stick figure in sight. Oh, wait, there he was, falling off a crater and becoming a splat at the bottom.

"I like it," I told him as I pulled my bag onto my shoulder.

"Keep it." He handed it to me, grinning as we walked out into the hallway. I rolled it and slipped it into my bag as we headed to my locker to pick up my books.

"Where'd you get the idea?" I asked. He shrugged, his cheeks turning pink.

"I was bored a couple days ago, so, I found some how to draw videos for kids online," He admitted. I burst out laughing. "Hey, I actually liked some of the drawings they did. Robots on the moon looked fun to me," He admitted. I wrapped my arm around his and gave him a squeeze. I smiled up at him.

"Ash, that is so freaking cute," I said. He snorted as I let go. Asher walked with me back to my locker to pick up my books. Since we got back from vacation, I sometimes stowed my books in my locker at lunch. Walking there and back gave the parking lot time to empty out a bit and a little more time with Asher, but I wasn't admitting it.

"It is not," He muttered as we turned down another hall. "I was just bored out of my mind."

"Well, next time you're that bored come over to my house, we can do a movie marathon," I offered, smiling.

"Or we can go out and do something fun," He said as he grinned down at me. "Like.... ice skating. The lake's still frozen, and it's something you should do at least once a year. Or go to a movie?" He offered, I grumbled.

"You want me, on ice, with skates? Are you trying to find ways to watch me make a fool out of myself?" I asked, dryly. He chuckled as we turned down the hall where my locker was.

"There's also snowboarding, skiing, and snowmobiling," He offered. I thought about it.

"If you promise there will be no recording devices of any kind," I said. He smiled that smile at me that sent my pulse into overdrive.

"I promise, there will be no recording devices of any kind," He assured me. When did his smile get so killer?

"Then I'll try, but I'm not promising anything," I grumbled as we reached my locker. The note on the door was gone. I opened my locker, there was a folded piece of paper on my books. "That was fast," I picked up the note.

"What?"

"Secret admirer guy," I said as I opened the note. "He wrote back."

Who's Dylan? I don't know anyone by that name. I've seen you around campus, you're beautiful, and kind of hard to miss. Honestly, I just want to get to know you. I'm socially awkward and say the wrong thing at times. I can write and rewrite a note to make sure I'm not saying something in an offensive way which I can't do in person. - Your Secret Admirer

"He's not a friend of Dylan's," I said, surprised.

Asher leaned against the locker next to mine. "Then who is it?" I handed him the note. As he read it, I pulled out my notebook and wrote a letter back. "This guy has a crush," He announced. I sighed as I tore out the note. "What'd you write back?" His voice was a little strained, but I was trying to find that tape Miles had given me and wasn't paying attention. I handed Asher the note so I could find it not expecting he'd read it out loud. "Secret Admirer, Dylan is my ex who's trying to get me to go out with him again. I thought you might be one of his friends trying to help him out. I'm sorry but I'm just out of a break up, and I'm really not looking to date right now, but a friend is always welcome. By the way, have I actually met you? Lexie." I winced, that was really blunt.

"Too harsh?" I pulled the tape from my bag. Asher had a strange half grin on his face as he reread it.

"No, it's direct. You're letting him know you're not interested, but you're willing to be his friend. If he doesn't want that, then he knows not to waste his time." Asher still had the strange half grin on his face as he handed the note back to me. I put the note on my locker door. I started to shove my books in my bag. "You're not even looking for a date to Winter Formal, are you?" He asked, quietly.

I thought about it as I put the last book in my bag and shut my locker. "It would be nice," I admitted as we started walking again. "But I'm not looking for anything romantic right now, and I wouldn't want the guy to get the wrong idea." I shrugged. Then I got an idea. "Hell, maybe I'll ask Jake if he wants to come, bonus, grope free dancing." Asher chuckled as we turned down another hallway.

"Well, both Isaac and I are going. So, you'd have grope free dancing anyway," Asher reminded me. I grinned.

"That's true." We were headed out to the student lot when I heard my name being called. I turned around and spotted Doyle Barns walking toward us.

"He's still after you?" Asher asked his voice full of disbelief.

"I guess," I muttered. We had met Doyle during a party in December, he'd been trying to pool shark Isaac, so, I hustled him. He'd been saying hi to me ever since. I had originally thought he was an asshole, but over the last couple weeks, he'd been nothing but nice. Doyle was a head and a half taller than me, his blonde hair was nicely trimmed, his gray eyes were smiling as he walked towards us. Sure, Doyle wasn't bad on the eyes. However, considering who I hung out with, I had much higher standards for hotness.

"I'll leave you to it." Asher grinned down at me before he started walking off.

"Traitor," I hissed at him. Asher chuckled as he headed for the lot.

"Hey Lexie, did ya paint anything good today?" Doyle asked, his voice cheerful. I shrugged before unrolling the paper under my arm. It was a bouquet of flowers, I had no choice.

"It looks great," His eyes went to my face, he grinned. "You hate it right?" I nodded.

"Too cheerful," I grumbled. Doyle chuckled, his eyes warm eyes met mine.

"I heard that you and Dylan broke up," He said. "Break-ups suck." I snorted as I began rolling up the picture.

"Yeah, they do," I admitted. Doyle leaned down so he could meet my eyes again.

"You're still too pretty for him anyway," He said, matter-of-factly. I chuckled and smiled at him. He grinned back. "I'll see you around, Lexie," Doyle said before he took off into the hallway, I sighed. Doyle had been making a point to make me smile lately. It was sweet, but I didn't want him to think I was interested. I wasn't really interested in anyone now. Well, anyone I could have. I grumbled to myself as I headed for my '89 Blazer, I got into my truck and headed across town to the Gym. I had been looking at

Asher different ever since I spent the week at his house working to build my link to the Veil. During that week, I had horrible nightmares from the soul of a sadistic killer. I woke up forgetting who I was, I thought I had done the terrible things in my nightmares. Asher held me night after night, reminding me who I was until I came back, and then he'd hold me as I shook. He'd remind me who I am, that I didn't do those things. Ever since that week, I looked at him differently. I pulled into the parking lot of the gym and parked between the twins' car and Miles'. I'm going to ignore my feelings, and they are going to go away, right? Right, time to get my ass kicked.

Two hours later I dropped to the mat because I put myself off balance, again.

So, Zeke had given me a small shove. I hated Zeke with a passion right now, the asshole always pushed me until I wanted to puke. After the weights, the bag, the jump rope and the fucking running he insisted on, I was tired. I lay on the mat gasping, sweating, and waiting to see if I'd be sick. Zeke's sweaty face came into view as he bent down to look at me, at least the fucker wasn't grinning. "I hate you," I grumbled.

"And your point?" Zeke asked. I groaned as I sat up. "I wasn't supposed to have fight training tonight," I reminded him.

"It's for not telling me about those notes sooner," He smirked down at me. I flipped him off. He chuckled as he reached down and pulled me to my feet by my hands. I got up, my stomach still iffy, and I had to blink to focus a little more.

"Zeke, seriously, my stomach is rolling, and I'm getting light headed." His eyes ran over my face.

"Okay, one more set and we're done," He ordered. I groaned as I moved into position, my arms already feeling dead. Zeke put on the padded mitts again, he held them out, and I went at it. I punched the first mitt and moved immediately to the other, then back. Only Zeke had moved it making me move to hit it properly, or he'd knock me down when I was off balance, again. I hit, Zeke took half a step back, I kicked the other mitt. My lungs were burning as I switched my stance and kicked the mitt he held at his chest level. He held one down for me to practice a sweep, I hit. That's when

the world really began to spin, and I dropped to the mat. Just barely catching myself with my arms and landing on my butt.

"Lexie!" Zeke's face was in front of me, his hand on my chin forcing me to look at him.

"Just dizzy," I muttered. Zeke frowned at me.

"Didn't you eat lunch?" He growled at me. A couple of other people were watching us, someone going down in the gym was never good or ignored. The spinning was slowing down a little. A guy around our age came over to our mat out. "Lexie, answer me!" Zeke shouted at me.

"Yeah, I ate lunch you dick," I shot back. There was laughing coming from somewhere in the gym. Zeke frowned at me.

"Did you eat it, or did you take a couple bites and stop?" He growled.

"Go to hell," I grumbled back. The butt-head knew me too well. "Damn it, Lexie," He shot back. "Have you been drinking water?"

"No, I drank ammonia," I snapped back. Zeke snorted.

"Are you alright?" Someone asked. I turned from Zeke to look up at him. I recognized him, it was the guy who eavesdropped on a conversation the guys and I had once. I nodded then went back to glaring at Zeke.

"Yeah, she was stupid and didn't eat at lunch," Zeke growled. The world was almost done spinning. "You're such a stubborn shit sometimes."

"Hey! Don't talk to her like that!" Eavesdropping guy snapped. We ignored him.

"I wouldn't be on the floor if you had fucking listened to me," I countered.

"You wouldn't be on the floor if you ate your lunch," He shot back.

"Don't worry about it, they argue like this all the time. It gets pretty funny sometimes. Just watch the show," Someone called from one of the other mats. The guy, I didn't really look at him again for I was too busy glaring at Zeke, stepped away. I flipped Zeke off before trying to get up, it didn't work. The world spun again, and I dropped back on my butt. Zeke

seemed to realize I was in more trouble than I thought, his glare disappeared, and worry filled his eyes.

"Lexie?"

"Ooh... okay, we may have a problem," I admitted. He dropped the other mitt and took my hands in his big calloused ones.

"Let's get you up and see if it stops," He said, his voice having lost its pissed off tone already. He stood up still holding my hands. "One, two, three." He pulled while I stood and the world spun again.

"Shit." I was instantly leaning against Zeke's chest. My forehead resting on his shirt as the world tilted. His hands on my arms were keeping me steady.

After a few seconds, he asked, "Is it getting better?"

"Nope." I closed my eyes hoping that would help, Zeke cursed. Reaching down, he picked me up and cradled me against his chest. The world spun even worse as I clung to his shirt.

"Damn Zeke... slow down, or I'm gonna puke."

"Come on, there's some juice in my bag that you're going to drink, it should help," He growled. Zeke started moving, I kept my eyes closed.

"Yeah, but how long has it been there?" I grumbled.

"Is she okay?" Dave, one of the trainers, called out.

"She's dizzy because she didn't eat," Zeke bit out. I pointed my finger in the air.

"I told him I wanted to puke and was light headed Dave! He made me do another set!" I defended myself. Chuckles ran around the room as Zeke carried me through the gym. The arguing Zeke and I did wasn't new to anyone here, but we did provide entertainment.

"What happened?" Miles' voice came from somewhere.

"Zeke broke Red!"

"Ally?"

"Whoa, what happened to Beautiful?"

"She's dizzy cause she didn't eat lunch," Zeke growled. As he walked past them, I leaned back so I could see the boys past Zeke's massive shoulder.

"I told him I was lightheaded, and the asshole made me do another set! Get him!" I demanded. They all chuckled.

"We're staying out of this, Red," Isaac said as he backed away.

"Yeah, we're not stupid enough to get between you two when you're fighting," Ethan called before he went back to training. Zeke huffed as he carried me over to the lockers and set me down on the bench. I took deep breaths as Zeke opened his locker, yanked out his bag, and started going through it. He pulled out one of those apple juices you get at the gas station and handed it to me. I opened it and took a drink as Zeke sat next to me. He waited until I was half done before he started in on me.

"Lexie, you can't be forgetting to eat," Zeke began. My mouth was full of juice, so I couldn't tell him off. "Serena said you needed to take care of yourself, it's not a choice." I hated this lecture. I hated even more that he was right. Serena was a witch in Northridge. She was the one to tell me that I was a Necromancer and what I had to do to stay alive, which meant taking care of my body and mind. And Zeke never let me forget it.

"You think I did this on purpose?" I asked before taking another drink.

"You had your lunch out, why didn't you fucking eat it?" Zeke snapped his eyes narrowed on my face. I glared at him knowing a fight was coming. It was all we seemed to do lately, I had enough. Instead of avoiding the reason, I just told him.

"Because your girlfriend asked me about my ex, and my stomach knotted." He went still next to me. "I lost my fucking appetite," I bit out. He groaned painfully, it was girl stuff, Zeke didn't do well with girl stuff. He rested his elbows on his knees and glared at the ground.

"You can't let a break up with some jackass make you stop taking care of yourself," He said in his 'I'm trying to be patient' voice, but it always came out condescending.

"Well, I'm sorry I'm not able to control every feeling I have like you can," I shot back more than a little irritated. I got up and threw away the

empty juice bottle. "Don't worry. I'll make sure I eat every fucking meal from now on," I called out over my shoulder. Pissed off and hurting, I pulled my coat and keys out of my locker before slamming it shut.

"Lexie," He snapped. I ignored him on my way out the door, I was too mad to talk rationally about anything right now. I pulled on my jacket and was almost to my truck when I heard him again. "Lexie!" Zeke barked. Great, he followed, I kept walking. Zeke grabbed my arm pulling me to a stop. I turned to him and jerked my arm out of his grip. It was easy, Zeke never grabbed me with a hard grip anyway.

"Ya know, if you had listened when I told you I was light headed, I wouldn't have even had a problem," I pointed out, still pissed off. "But no, it's my fault for not eating enough, it's my fault for not controlling my emotions." I looked at him exasperated. "You have these insane expectations of me, and I'm always falling short. Here's the kicker, I don't even know what they are!" Zeke's face was growing hard. "So, fuck you and your expectations." I turned around, unlocked the truck.

"Yeah, having you take care of yourself, that's a real fucking insane expectation!" Zeke shouted back. I turned back around.

"And you actually listening at the gym when I tell you I'm light headed would be a fucking miracle! Cause let's face it, Zeke! You love pushing me till I want to puke. In fact, ya live for it." I climbed into my truck and took off, leaving Zeke running his hand through his hair in the parking lot. I was so tired of fighting with Zeke. For once, I just wanted him to stop expecting me to have his perfect control.

Once I got home, I slammed the Blazer door shut before I stormed towards the house. I ignored the pain radiating down my neck as my nose started bleeding. I wasn't in the mood to deal with all the camped-out ghosts today. There were ten of them now, standing around in the front yard, demanding I help them cross. I had explained over, and over that I was working on it. But, apparently, that wasn't good enough, they surged toward me. Today was a bad day for it.

"Back the hell off," I hissed at them putting my will into my voice. The closest four were shoved back a good five feet. The others scrambled out of my way. "I'm working on it." I went inside and slammed the door behind

me. Hades, my 3-month-old Neapolitan Mastiff puppy, came running over to me with his tail going crazy. The little dog had a big growth spurt in the last month. His head was now at my knee, and he weighed 54lbs. He was almost too big for me to pick up anymore. I dropped my bag, and smiled as I lifted him up. "Hey Hades baby, did you have a good day?" He licked my cheek. "I had an okay one, until Zeke was a dick." He looked up at me with his bright puppy eyes, he instantly made my day better. Still fuming over what happened, I took him upstairs with me and put him on my bed so I could get clothes for after my shower. I was pulling underwear out of my drawer when my phone rang. It was Ethan, I answered the phone. "Hey."

"You okay, Beautiful?" He asked immediately. "Cause Zeke is pounding into a heavy bag that I'm pretty sure they are going to have to replace now." I rolled my eyes at the image.

"Yeah, peachy," I told him dryly.

"Liar," His smoky voice grew gentler. "What happened?"

"I didn't eat much of my lunch. I told him I was lightheaded and he made me do another set anyway," I explained quickly as I finished getting my clothes together. "He didn't listen to me, and then got pissed at me for losing my appetite at lunch, as if I meant to do it. And I've about had it with his expectations." Then I had a thought. "Oh, and tell him 'Zeke's messing with me.' Wouldn't want to violate my fucking probation," I snapped, my voice frustrated.

"Whoa, okay," Ethan said, his voice impressed. "What is it with you two lately? You guys have been going at it all the time." I took a deep breath and came up blank.

"If you figure it out, let me know, cause I'm just...." I paused as I realized what was going on. I was about fed up with this probation crap of Zeke's. I sighed. "I have a short fuse right now, and Zeke just keeps lighting a match."

"Yeah, he's suicidal that way," Ethan agreed. I snorted. "I'll talk to him, Beautiful."

"Good luck, his skull is thicker than mine," I countered. Ethan chuckling in my ear made me smile.

"Still want us over for homework?"

"Yeah, if our pattern holds we'll both be ready to talk in an hour or so," I grumbled.

"See you soon."

"Bye." I hung up, grabbed my clothes, then went and took a shower. I was sick of fighting with Zeke. But if I didn't argue with him, well, no one argued with him, and the shithead needed it. I loved ruffling his feathers about stupid stuff, but when it's about something like this... I hated it. It made my gut knot and gave me the urge to hit someone, usually a tall, blue-eyed ass.

I finished showering and got dressed. I pulled on my black flannel jammy bottoms with white skulls everywhere, then my black Five Finger Death Punch shirt. I pulled my hair up into a messy bun before getting Hades from my bed and going downstairs. I could already hear the others at the table. I got to the bottom of the stairs and put Hades down who immediately went to greet the guys. Zeke wasn't there yet, figures. Rory was on the phone with somebody, he waved to me before walking into his bedroom and closing the door. I grabbed my bag and brought it to the table.

Isaac eyed me as I took the seat next to Miles. "Hey Red, you look pretty," He told me with a funny look on his face, I snorted then smiled at him. He grinned back.

"Thanks, Cookie Monster," I said. Isaac shot a look at Ethan.

"Told ya I could make her smile," Isaac said smugly. I chuckled as Ethan pulled out a dollar and handed it to him.

"Where is tall and grumpy?" I pulled out my books.

"He was still at the gym when we left," Miles said. "But he was winding down."

"He's on the phone with Rory now," Ethan added. I nodded, I figured that when Rory went into his room.

"Asking if the coast is clear?" I asked as I finished pulling out my books. The guys chuckled. "You are both on edge. It makes you both..." Miles paused as he looked for a word.

"Bitchy?" I offered, grinning. Miles' eyes narrowed on me.

"I wouldn't say that," He said.

"I know. That's why I did." I grinned at him. Miles gave me a 'what am I going to do with you' look. I just winked at him. I was pulling out my World Civ. when Rory came out of his bedroom. My Uncle was tall and fit, for a cop that was astonishing, at least that's what I always teased him about. He had the Delaney copper red hair, but he had Grandpa's brown eyes, at least according to him. I'd never met the man. My Uncle was good looking in that guy next door way but his mischievous side was never too far away. In fact, just yesterday the twins had come out of school to find the trunk of their car full of ping pong balls. That one had been funny as hell.

"So, you and Zeke went at it today again, huh?" Rory asked. He grinned at me as he went to hang up the cordless.

"He started it," I said instantly. Everyone chuckled. "I'll talk to him when he shows up," I mumbled. Rory nodded.

"Good, he's going to be late, he came out of the gym and found he had a flat tire," Rory said. I snorted. Zeke really was having a bad day. Rory looked to Asher. "Got that list for dinner tonight? I might as well hit the store now." Asher turned the pages in his notebook and yanked out a page before handing it to Rory. Asher was cooking dinner tonight, so Rory did the shopping. It worked for everyone, especially Rory, who couldn't boil water.

As I was working on my World Civ. chapter questions, the front door opened. I didn't even need to be told, I knew it was Zeke. I just got up, grabbed my coat off the back of the couch, and headed out back. It had become our routine lately. I pulled my coat, stepped into galoshes before stepping outside and closing the door behind me. Zeke was already sitting on one of the plastic covered patio couches, I sat on the one across from him. He was resting his elbows on his knees and staring at the snow on the ground. We were both quiet, waiting for the other one to go first. He went first last time. I sighed.

"I should have eaten my lunch," I muttered, hating to admit it. I hated going first, it always felt like I was saying it was my fault. "I should have listened when you told me you were lightheaded," He admitted. He shook his head, his jaw clenching. "I wasn't thinking about your stamina level like I should have been. I was just..." He cursed before lifting his head to meet my eyes, his face was hard. "How many times have you puked from working out with me?" He asked in his 'answer me now' voice. Great, now Zeke was mad at himself.

"None, but my stomach is usually rolling by the end of our sessions," I admitted. His eyes narrowed on mine. "Are you lying?"

"No, if I had, I'd tell you. Loudly and often," I countered. The corner of his lips twitched. The shadows in his eyes were still there. I looked out toward the lake waiting for him to tell me what was going on with him but he didn't. So, I looked at him and asked. "I know why I've been on edge, why are you?"

He met my eyes unflinching. "I don't want to talk about it." "Okav."

"We good?" He asked, gruffly. "Yeah, we're good." I waited for a beat. "Asshole,"

He grinned at me, releasing some of the shadows in his eyes, "Harpy." "Shit head."

"Usually," He admitted. I chuckled as I got up. He got to his feet and met me in the middle for our usual makeup hug. I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my cheek on his chest, his arms wrapped around my upper back and shoulders. He rested his cheek on my hair as he squeezed gently. He whispered, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to take my shit out on you." I squeezed him back.

"I'm sorry too. I've been on edge and it's not helping," I whispered back. I gave him another squeeze then moved away. I looked up at him, his eyes were still shadowed but not as much at least. "Come on, we've got homework."

I was struggling with my math homework when my phone rang. Grumbling, I answered it.

"Hello." There was silence on the line. "Hello?" Nothing. "If you can hear me, I can't hear you, so call back." There was still nothing so I hung up. I went back to my own math torture. I was trying the same problem for the third time when my phone rang again.

Not paying attention I answered it, "Hello."

"Hey, Lexie." Dylan's husky voice rolled through my ear. I immediately closed my eyes and wished I had checked caller ID. My stomach knotted, but no heart ache this time. Yay!

"Um, hi, what do you need?" I asked, trying to be polite. I went back to my homework, giving him half my attention.

"Jake said you were going to the Winter Formal," He was talking as if we just ran into each other on the street. "If you can find a dress you like."

"Yeah?"

"He told me you didn't have a date, and if you didn't... I thought maybe I could take you," Dylan suggested, his voice confident.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said, not really paying attention. I looked at the problem again, what the hell was I getting wrong?

"Lexie, I miss you."

"Yeah, well, you broke up with me. Not seeing me is kinda part of that," I said matter of fact. It vaguely registered that the guys had all stopped doing their homework and were watching me, I didn't care, I was trying to figure out if this number was a seven or a nine.

"It was a stupid thing to do." Dylan's voice was pained.

"Breaking up with me wasn't stupid. The stupid part was telling me I had too many problems for you to deal with." I frowned at the page. What the...? "That hurt, and you did it on purpose."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Lexie. I'm sorry, I was exhausted-"

"Yeah, you said that before," I began, not really paying attention. "Look, this algebra is kicking my-"

"Sunshine-"

"I told you to never fucking call me that again," I snapped into the phone, my voice hard. I looked up to glare out the back door. I caught movement out of the corner of my eye.

"It slipped-"

"No, that was intentional, and so is this." I hung up the phone just as Zeke reached for it. I looked at him and the others quizzically, they were all watching me. "What?" The guys burst out laughing. Zeke was smirking as he headed back to his chair, I eyed him. "What were you doing?" I asked.

"I was going to tell him to fuck off for you," Zeke admitted. I snorted.

"Have I ever had a problem telling someone to fuck off?" I reminded him

"No," Zeke admitted. I smiled at him.

"He's calling again?" Isaac asked from across the table.

"Yeah, he wants to get back together," I grumbled shifting Hades in my lap. "He called a few days after he broke up with me and tried. Then he backed off, and he came back, then backed off. I guess he's back again." I looked to Miles next to me. "Miles, can you explain what I'm screwing up here? Please?" Miles gave me that gentle half smile of his then looked down at my notebook. I scooted my chair closer to show him the problem. Hades didn't even lift his head at the movement. Miles half turned towards me, putting his forearm along the back of my chair as I explained to him what I was supposed to be doing. Asher picked up his phone.

"I'm going to take Hades outside," Asher announced. I looked down in my lap at my big ball of love.

"Hades, want to go outside with Ash?" I asked in my cutesy voice. The dog's tail wagged as he slid off my legs to go with Asher. They went outside as I went back to my math problem. Miles began explaining what I kept doing wrong in his sweet, polite way. Apparently, I was skipping one step, doing the next, and then doing the step I should have done first. Asher came back in a little later, Hades came back to my side and wanted back in my lap.

"Well?" Zeke asked as I picked Hades up again, the puppy draped across my lap like a living, breathing blanket. I looked up to see Asher nod

his head with a shit eating grin on his face. I instantly got suspicious.

"What did you do?" I asked. The guys all chuckled, oh, that wasn't good.

"Just... had a chat with a friend," Asher said like it was nothing. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Uh-huh, which friend?" I asked directly. Asher tried to look innocent.

"Oh, just one I haven't talked to in a few weeks," Asher answered as he sat back down.

"Ash...."

"Ally." Asher had no remorse.

"He was your friend first," I pointed out. Asher snorted as he went back to his homework.

"My friend wouldn't have said that shit to my other friend." He looked down the table at me and winked. "Don't worry about it, Ally girl." I rolled my eyes and went back to my homework. I wasn't going to worry about it, but I was going to enjoy it. I had a half smile on my face when my phone vibrated, I checked it.

Dylan: I'm sorry.

I sighed and put the phone down. I was trying to do the math problem with Miles coaching me when Ethan snagged my phone.

"Snoopy," I warned Ethan, not even looking up from my homework. Ethan just snickered and checked my messages.

"Man, this guy has got balls," Ethan announced.

"Yeah, too bad he didn't have them when we were dating," I said absently. The guys burst out laughing. I looked up to see a grin on Miles' face as he shook his head. I smirked at him and went back to trying to do the math problem correctly. Though with Miles' thumb slowly rubbing up and down my shoulder blade, it was a little hard to concentrate as warm tingles ran down my back. Miles ended up having to go through each math problem with me one at a time. I was starting to hate math, but at least with

Miles helping I was going to pass. Luckily, he had already finished his homework when I had asked for help.

Rory came home with the groceries. Everyone brought them in then Asher went to start dinner. We were still at the table when Tara came home a little later. Over the last couple months, Tara figured out that the more she hit on Asher, the less he came around the house. So, Tara had been easier around the guys lately. She still avoided Zeke like the plague, I thought it was funny as hell. Tara walked in with a big smile.

"Hi everyone," Tara said sweetly. My cousin was pretty, and she knew it. She wore her long blonde hair down today, her makeup perfectly accented her big blue eyes.

"Hi," Everyone called absently. Tara came around the table to sit across from me and pull her own books out. We were alone at the table and Miles was watching me do the last problem on my own to make sure I had it down. When I finished the problem, I looked up at Miles.

"Did I get it right?" I asked, uncertainly. Miles grinned down at me, his warm eyes running over my face.

"You got it," He said. I threw my arms up in victory. He chuckled.

"Dinner, books off the table," Asher called from the kitchen. Good, I was starving. I shoved my books back into my bag and dropped it onto the floor as the guys brought over the big serving dishes full of food. Hades woke up and sniffed at the table top.

"Oh no, you don't baby," I told him firmly as I picked him up and put him on the floor. "Dinner time, no begging and I'll give you a treat." Hades ran over to his dish and started munching away. Zeke walked in, a storm cloud practically hovering over his head, his call must not have gone well. Everyone sat down and started passing food around. It was chicken fettuccine alfredo with a green salad and garlic bread, all homemade by Asher, of course. I was reaching for a piece of garlic bread when Isaac snagged it out from under my hand. I smacked his hand before he got far, he dropped it to the table. I snagged it and brought it back to my plate fast. "There's plenty of bread, get your own Cookie Monster," I shot across the table as everyone chuckled at us. Isaac stuck his tongue out at me before grabbing a different piece.

Conversation flowed around the table, even Tara was talking with the guys. Except for Zeke, she never spoke to Zeke or even acknowledged him. I wondered what would happen if he sat next to Tara at dinner one night, her head might explode. I smiled at the thought, though Tara still didn't talk to me that often either. Ever since I came to live here in October, Tara and I hadn't gotten along. I knew I wasn't the greatest cousin in the world, but I was trying more lately with her. We even had a handful of conversations without arguing since Christmas, which I took as a good sign.

Dinner was loud and noisy. It felt like the guys had been with us for years and it always made me feel good to have them around. I glanced at Asher, then Miles. Maybe not the same reasons for all them. I looked down at my plate as I rolled noodles around my fork, not really paying attention to it. When Miles had come home from Nevada in December, something inside me relaxed, I hadn't even noticed I was tense until then. He was sweet, thoughtful, considerate and the fact he was brilliant was a big turn on, I winced at the thought. Stop thinking that way Lexie, he's your friend, that's all you will ever be. I was still chastising myself when a piece of garlic bread hit me in the shoulder. I looked up to find Zeke across the table giving me the stink eye. I rolled my eyes, picked up the bread, and took a bite of noodles. When he wasn't looking, I threw the bread back at him, hitting him in the cheek. I sniggered. Zeke turned and gave me a warning glare, I stuck my tongue out at him. The corner of his mouth twitched before he went back to talking to Isaac. Wow, he was grumpy.

When dinner was over everyone cleaned up, it was the twins' turn for the dishes. Zeke took off for work, Asher and Miles sat with Rory talking, while I took Hades outside for a break. I was rocking back and forth trying to keep warm and ignore the pain radiating down my neck when a soul came around the house. He was an older man, in his seventies, I'd say. Nice suit with a bow tie, he looked charming and sweet, it was a lie. Mr. Wright was a miserable old ghost who wanted to move on.

"Why don't you get working young lady?" He chided me. "I want to see my family." I sighed painfully. The salt around the house must have worn out. My head started aching.

"I've told you. If I burn myself out, no one will be able to move on," I reminded him. Mr. Wright came closer. My chest started aching, heart

attack. Before I could move, Hades ran back to stand between me and Mr. Wright, he barked and growled at the soul. I opened the back door, picked him up and hurried inside, I came up short. The dead were walking through the front of the house, making a beeline for me. Shit, blood hit my lip, I grabbed tissues and slipped on my bracelets as fast as possible. By the time they reached me, they could only yell at me. I looked around and saw that Tara was still at the table doing her homework. Shit, I hurried through the living room, holding tissues to my nose. It was so loud I didn't even hear my name being called as I ran up the stairs. I hit my room and looked for the salt I usually kept in there.

"Lexie?" I could barely hear Rory's voice over the shouting of the dead. I found my salt and threw it around. The souls screeched and backed up out of my room as Rory walked to the door. I glared at the dead in the hallway.

"Get the fuck out," I hissed quietly, putting everything I had into it. My stomach cramped as they were shoved back a few feet, but it didn't stop them, they just yelled louder. I walked back into my bedroom and covered my ears. If I shoved them again, I was going to be sick, I really fucking hated this. I sat on my bed, rested my elbows on my knees, and covered my ears as Rory got my attention. He was saying something, but I couldn't hear him. "I can't hear you over the dead, Rory. They're in the house screaming at me," I made a point to keep my voice at a normal volume. Tara didn't need to hear me. Rory nodded, then hurried out the door. I closed my eyes and sang a song in my head, hands were on my shoulders and back. I opened my eyes to find Miles next to me, Ethan in front of me, and Isaac standing behind Ethan. They were in my bedroom and they all looked worried. "The dead are screaming," I told them directly. Miles reached into his pocket and handed me some more tissues. I dropped my hands and gave him a grateful smile. I tried to ignore the names the dead were yelling at me. Miles' hand was running up and down my back, comforting me while Ethan was making funny faces at me. By the time Rory got the salt around the house done, I was laughing at Ethan. The ghosts all gave one last shriek as they were thrown out of the house through the wall. I was still laughing as I checked my tissues. Ethan got to his feet; my nose bleed had slowed.

"So, this is your room?" Isaac said, turning to my desk. He started poking through my desk drawers. I reached out and smacked his hand.

"Look, but no snooping," I shot at him. Isaac grinned down at me before looking at the few pictures I'd put on my desk in frames. They were of all us over the last few months.

"Are you alright?" Miles asked. His voice showing his concern, I nodded and checked my tissues again, the bleeding had stopped.

"Yeah, I just-" Ethan started opening one of the drawers under my bed. "Snoopy, shut that now." He looked over at me smirking. I got up and slammed the drawer shut, he barely got his fingers out of the way.

"What are you hiding, Beautiful?" Ethan's eyes were full of mischief.

"That's my underwear drawer," I told him bluntly. "So, unless I get to go rifling through yours, hands off." Ethan held his hands up, palms out and near his head.

"Gotcha, I thought it was just storage. Don't you have a dresser?" Ethan asked before going to open my closet, which I didn't care about.

"No, there isn't enough room," I turned to see Isaac pulling open the drawers on my desk, while Miles eyed my bookshelf from my bed. "Miles, you can look at the bookshelf. That's not being nosey," I offered. He shot me a small grin before getting up to cross the small room. I went back to Isaac's side and smacked his hand again as he was pulling out the middle drawer again. He shot me a suspicious look, I just glared at him. He sighed then went to flop on my bed. I sat on my desk while the others looked through my bedroom.

"Lexie, have you read all of these?" Miles asked, still looking over the shelves.

"Yep, I never got to keep any, though. I've been picking up my favorites from the second-hand bookstore the last few months," I said. Miles turned to meet my eyes.

"Why didn't you get to keep them?" Miles asked.

"It was a one bedroom trailer. I had a cabinet for clothes, and that was it," I reminded him. His brow drew down as he went back to looking at my packed shelves.

"You're running out of room," Miles observed.

"Not in her closet," Ethan snickered.

"You have the least amount of clothes of any girl I've ever known." I resisted the need to squirm. "One side of the closet is full," I pointed out, starting to feel defensive. I hated it. It reminded me of the conversations I had with my Mother, she'd criticize me for not being more girly, it had always ended with a shouting match. I just didn't think that much about clothes, I had nothing to be embarrassed about. I would just rather spend my money on other things, like books and music.

"Most girls have both sides packed," Ethan countered still looking at my closet. I sighed quietly and reminded myself that Ethan didn't mean it the way my Mother had.

"Ethan, in the last five years, I have been well acquainted with not having much," I reminded him. Isaac snagged my hand in his. I turned to see him lying on my bed, he winked at me.

"Don't listen to my brother, Red." I noticed Ethan go still out of the corner of my eye. "He's a clothes horse, his dresser and closet is packed."

"Yeah, he's right," Ethan agreed as he shut my closet, his fingers twirling his rings as he turned around. "I do have a closet to rival the girliest girl ever, my perception is probably skewed." He walked over to drop on to the bed at Isaac's feet. I gave Isaac's hand a squeeze, I was pretty sure he let Ethan know to drop the subject somehow. Someone was coming up the stairs, a few seconds later Asher climb the last few steps to the landing. He was frowning and muttering to himself as he came in, his eyes ran over me then back to my face.

"Are you okay, Ally?"

"Yeah, the dead are outside now," I replied. He nodded before glaring at the twins on the bed.

"You shitheads were going to come down and save me," Asher snapped quietly at them. We all laughed.

"We got distracted checking out Red's room," Isaac gestured around my bedroom. He looked down at Ethan and nudged him with his foot. "Ooh, send some pics to Zeke. We might never see this room again!" I chuckled as Ethan got to his feet, pulled out his phone and started taking photos. I decided to ignore him, I looked at Asher who was looking at my book shelves now. Miles had moved to lean by the door since there wasn't enough room for all of them standing. He had his thinking face on while he looked at my bed.

"You have a lot of books, Ally," Asher said. I eyed the shelves.

"Yeah, I've only been buying the ones Dad read with me, but I'm still running out of room." I hated to admit it, but my shelves were already sagging in the middle.

"You just need more shelves," Asher pointed out. I had been thinking about buying some, but I didn't know how to put them up. Wait, YouTube, I could probably pull it off. Ethan burst out laughing, we all looked at him as he held his phone up.

"Zeke's telling all of us that we have no business being in her bedroom," Ethan announced. Everyone laughed at that. I was still laughing when my phone rang, it was Zeke.

"Yeah?"

"Are the twins being nosy shits?" Zeke growled in my ear. I sighed.

"The twins were trying to be, but they stopped after I almost slammed their fingers in drawers," I grinned down at Isaac. He stuck his tongue out at me before fluffing my pillow behind his head. "Watch the twins. They like to move your shit when you're not looking," He warned. I bit back a grin, it sounded like Zeke had dealt with it before.

"I don't have that much stuff to move," I pointed out. He huffed.

"Good point. You were right, though, your room is small," Zeke said. I snorted.

"Yeah."

"Hades is going to get too big for your bed soon," He reminded me. "I know, I'm saving for a bigger bed, so I don't have to ask Rory," I admitted. Everyone was suddenly looking at me, all of them interested. I snorted. "So, Hades can sleep next to me," I reminded them. They all seemed to relax at once. I just shook my head as I went back to talking to Zeke. "Aren't you supposed to be working?"

"I just finished an engine when Ethan sent me those pics," He growled. "And now I have to get back to work. Call me later with who messed with you. Seriously, watch the twins." He hung up without saying goodbye, I tucked my phone back in my pocket. There were steps on the stairs, Rory reached the landing then leaned in the door. "How's it going?" Rory asked as his eyes ran over me.

"Good, now that they're all outside," I replied.

"Is that tar water still on backorder?" Rory asked. I nodded. Rory sighed before looking at the guys. "Alright boys, it's that time." The guys groaned. Rory snorted as the guys said bye to me before heading downstairs.

"Night Lexie," Miles called from the door. I waved to him.

"Night Ally," Asher said as he sent me a warm grin. Ethan came over gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Night Beautiful," He whispered in my ear. Isaac came over, hugged me, then gave me a wet raspberry on my other cheek. I was wiping it off as he rushed out the door laughing. I shook my head at him. Rory looked around the room and sighed.

"I'm going to lift the ban on guys upstairs," Rory announced. Both my eyebrows went sky high. "But only with me at home and the door open."

I nodded. "Got it, boss," I assured him. He snorted before heading back downstairs. Wow, the boys can come into my room. I was really going to have to keep my laundry off the floor. But it was getting late, and that meant one thing, Veil work. Joy.

I screamed in frustration at the Way. The Veil was a desolate, burnt shadow of itself, the sky above still boiled. The green smoke shifted and slithered through the clouds, and I still couldn't figure out how to get it to stop. I lay back on the cracked, dry dirt and screamed.

"Calm down you mother-!"

"What the hell are you doing?" Another voice snapped at me, only it sounded exactly like my own voice. I sighed and sat up again. Imposter Lexie was standing a few feet from me, with her arms crossed over her

chest, glaring at me. Huh, so that's what I look like when I glare at the twins. "I'm fumbling around in the dark and getting nowhere," I snapped back. She blinked at me in surprise then she was frowning at me.

"What's the problem?" She asked almost kindly. I sighed and pointed above me without taking my eyes off her.

"I can't figure out how I'm supposed to calm the Way," I pointed out. Imposter Lexie sighed then met my gaze with calm eyes.

"Show me what you've been doing," She said.

"What?" I asked, stunned.

"I want to see what you're doing wrong," Imposter Lexie said. "There are other things that I have to take care of, so, hurry up." I said fuck it and closed my eyes. I calmed my mind like I did in the real world when I started to meditate. Then instead of sinking, I tried to reach out with my mind. But again, there was nothing. Growling in frustration, I opened my eyes. Imposter Lexie's were on me. She nodded.

"You're leaving your natural barriers up, that's why you're not getting anywhere," She stepped closer. "You need to drop those if you're going to make any progress."

"How?" I snapped. She sighed.

"Close your eyes." Imposter Lexie's voice was calm. I did as she said. "Think of a time when you felt the safest, happy even." Instantly, I thought of the guys. I pushed it away. No, I had to have felt safer with Dad, right? I tried to remember feeling safe with my Dad. I remembered listening to him read to me, riding in the Blazer on a last-minute camping trip. I remembered feeling happy, and safe. But the feeling was faded, not as sharp as it used to be, not as clear. I had trouble remembering it now. Tears filled my eyes as guilt hit me hard. How could I forget Dad? Why didn't I feel it now, like I did back then? I bit my tongue hard to fight off the tears. "What are you remembering?" Imposter Lexie snapped. "Cause that's not the way you need to go." I shook my head as I opened my eyes. I wiped my face before looking up at her.

"Nothing, I just..." I didn't know how to explain. Imposter Lexie's eyes ran over me, her face softened.

"Memories fade, Alexis," She told me firmly. "That doesn't mean the person didn't mean anything to you, time does that to all memories." I met her eyes.

"How did you know that was what I was thinking about?" I asked suspiciously.

"You have an expressive face. It said guilt and sorrow a moment ago," She explained, then tilted her head to the side. "It's not that hard to figure out here but this isn't the time for a discussion on that topic. What was the first memory that came to you? The one you pushed away?"

"I was with my friends," I said. I wasn't giving her more than that. Imposter Lexie nodded.

"Then use that one," She told me. "Now, close your eyes and picture yourself in that memory." I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. It was after Miles came home from Nevada. Everyone was at Miles' house, in the family room for a videogame marathon. I was sitting between Asher and Miles on the floor in front of the big sofa. Isaac's head was on one leg near my knee as he munched on popcorn, Ethan's head was laying on my other leg as he watched the battle happening on the big screen. Zeke was snoring away on the big sofa behind us. My fingers were playing with Isaac's hair, my head resting on Miles' shoulder. I was almost asleep, someone said my name, I made a small noise, Zeke shifted on the couch, one of his hands found my shoulder. It was the safest and most relaxed I had felt in a long time. I fell asleep that way. I remembered that memory. With the feel of Miles' shirt against my cheek as I smelled leather mixing with wintergreen, vanilla, spice, and limes, I felt that peace again. Suddenly, my barrier drop. The energy of the Veil swept through me like a hot wind blowing across my soul and mind.

"Good," Imposter Lexie said. "Now open your eyes." I opened my eyes slowly. Around me was a dome of shimmering energy, like golden waves of heat rising from the ground, it surrounded me. "That is your energy, your control," Imposter Lexie explained. "Now, you're going to push it out away from you." She walked around me and out of my sight.

"How?" I asked quietly, afraid I'd throw my barriers up again.

"Think about it for a moment," She said patiently. I closed my eyes and cleared my head. Will, I had to will my energy across the Veil just as I did with the ghosts at the house. I focused. I wanted to stretch out across the Veil. I concentrated on that need and pictured it in my mind. There was a strange stretching sensation in my chest, but I ignored it. My energy began to creep over the Veil. I could feel it, the soil dry, cracked, and parched for water, that's when I realized it.

"The Veil is dying," I said quietly, still focusing on moving my energy.

"Yes, it is," Imposter Lexie said. "Now, open your eyes." I did as she said. The shimmering wall of gold had moved across the ground from me. I looked around, I had managed halfway to the walls in every direction. My control wavered, the wall flickered before rushing back to me and my barriers slammed shut as if I was stepping out of the blazing sun and into the shade. The difference was shocking. While I was still disoriented, Imposter Lexie walked around me again. "That wasn't bad for your first try," She announced, her eyes running over me appraisingly.

"The Veil is actually dying," I said again, still unable to believe it. Imposter Lexie nodded. "Without the continuous flow of energy from the dead moving on, the Veil will collapse. And the world will change in ways you wouldn't believe," She said her voice serious. I looked up at her.

"What are you?" I asked. She smirked.

"What do you think?" She countered. I didn't want to play games. I wanted an answer. When I wouldn't play, she started walking off. She paused, turning back to me. "If you get into trouble again, just call for Imposter Lexie." Then she disappeared, I sighed deeply. What the hell was she? How the hell did it know so much? I decided to put it out of my mind for tonight as I pulled myself back and up.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 2

Friday

I was cursing as I walked away from my Blazer in the student lot. I was struggling to close the zipper on my bag and juggle coffee at the same time when someone grabbed my arm and jerked me backwards. I stumbled back against someone as a yellow car shot by. Heart slamming, it took me a minute to realize that I had almost walked right out in front of that car, damn. I looked up to see Clay. He had a friendly face with okay cheekbones and a decent chin. His black hair was still cut short to his head. His brown eyes were glaring at the car that finally parked two rows over and he was still frowning when he looked back down at me.

"You okay?" Clay asked, his hand still on my arm.

"Yeah, thanks. I'm just..." I rubbed my eyes with one hand.

"Scattered?" He offered. I dropped my hand and smiled up at him.

"That obvious?" He grinned as his eyes went to my sweater then back to my face.

"Your sweater is inside out," He informed me. "It's a dead give-away." I looked down and saw that he was right. I groaned, he chuckled as he let go of me.

"Thanks, Clay," I said as I looked back up at him. His chocolate eyes were running over my face.

"No problem, just... be careful," He half-grinned down at me before taking off. I picked up my now empty travel mug before walking across the lot, this time, paying attention. I hadn't slept much last night. I kept having nightmares even with Hades next to me, add that to all the ghosts yelling all night outside the house, it's no wonder I'm scattered. I met the guys at our usual outside spot and dropped my bag onto the table.

"What's wrong, Ally?" Asher asked before taking a drink out of his travel mug.

"Oh, I wasn't paying attention in the parking lot. Clay Ordin had to yank me out of the way of a car," I admitted absently.

"Are you alright?" Miles asked immediately. I smiled at him.

"Yeah, just a bit scattered today," I admitted. Miles' eyes ran over me before he looked away.

"Your sweater's inside out, Lexie," Miles said. I snorted and nodded.

"I'll stop by a bathroom on my way to class." I pushed some hair out of my face while Asher shook his head.

"Come here, Ally girl," Asher said as he sat on a bench sideways and patted the spot in front of him.

"What?"

"Your hair has already fallen out of your braid." Asher pointed at my shoulder. I looked down to see that he was right, I growled in frustration. "Come here, I'll fix it," He offered. I smiled to myself as I sat down in front of him and took out my hair tie. Asher's fingers ran through my hair taming the mass of curls. It felt so good that I had to fight not to close my eyes.

"Why are you so scattered this morning?" Miles asked gently.

"It's the dead camped out at the house," I explained wearily. "They stand out there screaming all night, making it impossible for me to get enough sleep."

"Hmm, I'll be back in a minute," Miles said before heading towards the cafeteria. That's weird, he hated having to go into the cafeteria. Asher's fingers were brushing against my back, making my back tingle as he continued braiding. He's just a friend, he's just a friend. I hated that I had to keep reminding myself.

"Is it just the ghosts?" Asher asked quietly. I went still.

"A few nightmares," I said. I looked down at the bench as his hands stopped braiding. He moved closer to my back, until he could see my face over my shoulder.

"How bad?" he asked, his voice was worried. I met his warm eyes and my heart raced. He was so close, his vanilla and cinnamon scent filled my lungs, focus Lexie, focus.

"Not that bad," I said. "Just the usual." I didn't want to tell him about the twins' little sister rotting in my dreams. Ever since I learned about Sophia still being here, I had dreams of not being able to cross her in time. With all the extra energy floating around, it was possible that she'd pick some of it up and start rotting inside like Mary Summers. It was my worst fear at this point. He gave me a small understanding smile before he leaned back and started braiding again. I looked up to see the twins walking towards us. Isaac was sniggering, and Ethan had his irritated face on. I smiled to myself.

"Hey," Isaac said before bending down and giving me a raspberry on my forehead. I pushed him away and wiped my forehead. Isaac just chuckled as he sat down on the right side of the table.

"Hey, what did you do to Ethan?" I asked as Ethan sat across from us. Isaac snickered evilly.

"The jerk messed with me when I was in the shower," Ethan growled.

"It was just some dye in the showerhead," Isaac said sarcastically. Ethan flipped his brother off. Asher held his hand over my shoulder for the hair tie, I handed it to him.

"What happened?" I asked, smiling.

"Isaac put dye in the showerhead, so that when I went to take a shower I was covered in pink dye," Ethan said dryly. "I'll be skipping Gym today." I bit back a smile.

"Your skin is pink?" I asked, trying not to laugh. Ethan nodded, still looking at his brother like he was thinking of revenge, which he probably was.

"Let me see?" I asked, smiling now. Ethan gave me a sexy grin.

"Show you my chest? Anytime, Beautiful," He said in his smoky toe curling voice. It was such an obvious flirt that I ignored it as he pulled

down the neck of his black thermal, his skin tinged pink. I burst out laughing.

"It's a pretty color on you," I offered. Isaac chuckled, and Ethan shot a look at his brother. Asher squeezed my shoulder.

"That should hold most of the day," Asher announced. I turned until I was sitting normally on the bench.

"Thanks, Ash." He moved to sit next to me properly.

"No problem," Asher said as he smiled at me. Miles came back from the cafeteria carrying a paper cup. He handed it to me, "Coffee with cream with two sugars," Miles announced. I gazed up at him adoringly.

"Thank you, Miles." I picked up the coffee cup. "You are definitely my hero for the day." His cheeks tinged pink as he moved around the table to the other side.

"You're welcome," Miles muttered. I gave him a smile.

"Hey, I fixed your hair," Asher pointed out, acting like he was offended. I smiled at him.

"You're my hero for the day also," I assured him. "Today I have two."

"That works for me," Asher said as he grinned at me.

"Lexie!" Zeke's bark didn't even faze me this morning. I sighed, rolled my eyes, then spotted him striding towards us. His shoulders were rigid, his strides long, he was pissed about something. When he reached us, he towered over me, glaring. "Why the hell didn't you call last night?" It took me a few heart-beats to realize what he was talking about. Crap, I didn't give him a 'who messed with me' report. I sighed deeply and reminded myself that I loved Zeke. That killing him would make me sad.

"Because I did Veil work and forgot," I explained. I was really getting sick of this probation crap. Zeke scowled at me.

"I'm adding another week," Zeke announced. My temper flared.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I snapped. "I miss one call, and you add another week?"

"Damn straight," He growled. Pissed off, I got to my feet.

"You want a report? Fine," I growled back. "Got catcalled four times yesterday, and some asshole said I had a nice ass. There you go, there's your fucking report!" I grabbed my coffee and bag then I started walking off, my blood boiling.

"You know about probation-"

I turned and glared at him. "I don't know shit!" I yelled at him. I couldn't help it. I was tired of this probation shit. Tired of wondering what it meant, pissed that I didn't tell him one thing and he stopped trusting me. "I'm your friend, Zeke, not someone for you to fucking order around." He looked at me as if I had slapped him, I didn't care. I was frustrated, tired, and sick of his 'do as I say' attitude lately. I strode off down the hall, cursing him with every step. I walked past my locker and noticed the note was gone. It made me stop. Wondering if I got another letter, I opened my locker. There was a piece a paper inside.

I can understand not wanting to date anyone after a breakup, but I would still like to get to know you. You're usually smiling, laughing, and covered in paint, are you an artist? Or do you just paint a lot of houses? And yes, we have met. -Your Secret Admirer

I snorted at that. I pulled out my notebook and wrote back to him.

You know what, this note thing is ridiculous. Here's my phone number, text me. 555-7369. Yes, I'm an artist. I love it, though I'm still struggling with some of the techniques for painting. What about you? What do you like to do? – Lexie

I tore out the page, closed my locker and taped it to the door. The bell rang for class. Damn it, I still needed to turn my sweater right side out. I hurried to the bathroom, I was going to be late this morning.

I was packing up my stuff in English when someone got my attention.

"Hey Alexis," Eric's voice had me looking up as he was picking up his bag. He was a good-looking guy with brown hair, killer amber eyes, and a dimple, but that was about everything I could say about him. All I knew was that he was afraid of Zeke, and frankly, I didn't care.

"I heard you're singing with Under Fire now."

"Yeah, Ethan needed a favor," I said, closing my bag and slinging it over my shoulder.

"I hear that you're good," Eric offered. I gave him a small smile.

"I can hold my own," I admitted before stepping into the hallway.

"See you around, Alexis," Eric said, before heading off to his next class. I automatically started walking to meet with Asher and Zeke before Algebra. I stopped in the hall, I was still too pissed at Zeke to see him. I turned and took a longer way to class. The late bell rang just after I walked into the classroom. I hurried to my seat and sat next to Laura.

"Morning Lexie," Laura greeted me. Since October, Laura had become a semi-friend. I had given her my number, but she had only called once. She was extremely shy, usually hiding in her long straight brown hair. I didn't understand that. She had a sweet face that was always clear of makeup, but when she smiled, she glowed. I really wanted her to see herself that way one day.

"Hey, how's it going?" I asked as I sat down in my desk. Laura shrugged.

"The usual," Laura's eyes ran over me. "Are you okay?" I sighed.

"Zeke and I yelled at each other this morning," I grumbled. Laura gave me a sympathetic smile.

"We're fighting every day now." I mentally shook myself and gave her a smile. "How are you doing? Have you talked to Michael yet?" Laura instantly blushed. Michael was a guy in Laura's history class that sat behind her that she had a big crush on since November.

"Yeah," Laura admitted. "We talked yesterday, during our group project. Tiffany Hall kept talking over me and he told her to be quiet and let someone else talk." We both giggled at that. Her face became scarlet.

"Hmmm, sounds promising," I told her, smiling. "You should talk to him." Laura rolled her eyes.

"I'm working on it," She assured me. The teacher called for everyone's attention then class started.

I was on my way to Chemistry when Jessica, Asher's twin sister, spotted me in the hall.

"Oh, look. It's the town bicycle," Jessica announced loudly. I rolled my eyes, flipped her off, and kept walking. Jessica and her friends kept talking loudly about how easy I was. I just kept walking, ignoring her completely. To be honest, I was getting tired of her shit. I was halfway to Chemistry when my phone rang, it was Zeke. I ignored it, I was still frustrated with him and didn't trust myself to not yell at him. My phone vibrated, Zeke had sent a text message.

Zeke: What's with you? You agreed to probation.

I wanted to throw my phone just then, but instead, I texted back.

Alexis: I didn't get much of a choice.

I was about to walk into a hallway when he replied.

Zeke: There's always a choice.

Was he kidding me?

Alexis: Oh really? Then tell me, what would have happened if I didn't agree to do probation?

A part of me didn't want to know, but the rest of me was fed up. I stood outside the hall waiting for an answer for a solid three minutes. I didn't get one. That was answer enough for me.

Alexis: See, you'd cut me out, right? If it's that easy for you to stop talking to me, then fuck you.

I was still looking at his text when I ran into someone with my shoulder. I stepped back and looked up to see an equally surprised guy holding his own cell phone. He was tall, lean, had a broad-shouldered build, with shaggy dark hair and dark heavily lidded eyes. I instantly recognized him as the guy I ran into in the hallway before Christmas break. His eyes moved over me quickly before going back to the ground.

"We have to stop meeting like this," I said seriously. "Our insurance rates are going to go up." He grinned before looking at my face. He had a nice face and a cute dimple on his right cheek. Ugh, dimples killed me. "I'm Lexie," I said.

"I'm Morgan," He said as he looked at me. "How's your painting going? Have any more Viking funerals lately?" I snorted.

"No, not as many. I'm finally making some progress. Except for waves, they hate me," I said seriously. He gave a small laugh. "How about you?" He shrugged.

"Lots of things to juggle," He said. "Sorry, I can't be late for class."

"Me either, sorry about the crash, it's nice meeting you," I said as I hurried down the hall.

"You too," He replied. I checked my cell as I turned the corner to the class room. Zeke still hadn't responded. I was cursing under my breath as I walked into Chemistry.

The classroom was actually a lab, it was made up of high counters that stretched out from the walls instead of desks with tall stools to sit on. The guys were already at our group table, the second table against the left wall. I dropped my bag on the counter and sat down next to Miles.

"Hey Red, still mad?" Isaac asked, pulling out his notebook.

"It's Zeke, so, what do you think?" I took out my notebook. Ethan winced.

"You might want to cut him a little slack, Beautiful," Ethan began. "His shoulder is hurting him pretty bad today." I shot him a look.

"What? So, that means he can punish me all he wants?" I said, sarcastically. The boys all exchanged looks. I ignored it.

"He's punishing you?" Isaac asked, confused.

"All this probation crap," I bit out. The guys exchanged a worried look.

"Red, probation-"

"Notebooks out," Mr. Turner announced. I turned around and started taking notes on today's lab.

We were setting up the equipment when Mr. Turner called my name. I turned to find Zeke standing in the doorway.

"Delaney, you're wanted in the office," Mr. Turner announced reading from the call slip in his hand. I didn't buy it for a second but I packed my stuff and walked out of class. Zeke's stony face told me nothing as he led me out away from the hallways and out to the football field bleachers. There were no classrooms nearby, it was a good place to yell at each other. Zeke ran his hand through his hair before turning around and looking at me.

"What the fuck is this, Lexie?" Zeke demanded, holding his phone up.

"What does it fucking look like, Zeke?" I shot back. I didn't want to fight anymore, but I wasn't going to just lay down and let him yell at me. His gaze ran over me before meeting my eyes again.

"Ethan said you think I'm punishing you," Zeke growled, his voice deep. Thanks, Ethan. I had it.

"I didn't tell you one thing, Zeke," I said, my voice hard. "And you stop trusting me, then put me on probation. What the fuck am I supposed to think it is?"

Zeke turned back his face hard. "They were treating you like shit! That's not something small," He snapped.

"You don't tell me anything, and I let it go," I pointed out. "We had a fight yesterday. We're fighting almost every day now! And you haven't told me why you're looking for a fight."

"It has nothing to do with you!" He snapped. My heart ached.

"Fine, that has nothing to do with me," I said calmly, my voice dead. "But this probation crap does. What would have happened if I didn't agree to probation?" I asked. He turned away and ran his hand through his hair as he walked a few paces. His shoulders were tense, his posture rigid.

"I can't, fucking, believe this," He grumbled under his breath.

"Answer the question," I demanded. He looked back at me with heated eyes, when he didn't answer, my eyes burned and my throat closed. "If you can throw me away that easily, then I'm not going to wait around for it." Fighting back tears, I picked up my bag and started walking away.

"It's not a punishment, Lexie," Zeke said wearily. I turned back to look at him. He moved down the cement steps to sit on the top row of the

bleachers.

"Then what is it?" I asked, my voice tired. "Cause it sure feels like you're punishing me."

His eyes were on the field as he answered. "It's..." He sighed deeply. "It's a trust exercise." I couldn't have heard that right.

"What?" I asked, baffled. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"A trust exercise," He growled as he put his feet up on the row in front of him and rested his elbows on his legs. He rubbed his eyes with one hand. Everything about him screamed that he hated this conversation, I walked back and sat down next to him.

"I don't understand," I admitted calmly as I looked out at the field. "You said you didn't trust me anymore."

"And I didn't but," he sighed "it's mostly me and my shit." He dropped his hand from his eyes and continued, looking out at the field. "I have this issue," His voice was the quiet, softer one he occasionally used when he talked to me. "I have to know the people I care about are safe and okay."

"I know that-"

"No, Baby, you don't." He turned to me. His bright eyes were dark with shadows. "It's not just something I do, it's a compulsion. Like, Miles with his needing everything put away in its place thing." He looked back out at the field and continued. "It's not an option for me. I need to know that you guys are okay, I need to know that everyone is safe. Or I don't sleep, and I freak the hell out." He ran his hand through his hair, cringing. "Add that to my major trust issues... My old shrink said it made getting to know me a fucking minefield." He turned back to me and met my eyes again. "I know myself very well. I know how I react to things," He said, his face was pained as he ran his eyes over my face. "When someone lies to me or gets to me, I automatically want to shove them away, cut off all contact and never speak to them again. It's my gut reaction." He met my eyes again. "Haven't you wondered why everyone else has other friends, and I don't?"

"What about the guys you hang out with at parties?" I asked softly. He shook his head.

"I bullshit with them but I don't even have their phone numbers, and I don't want to." He looked out at the field as he continued. "I shove people away as far as I can, it's my first reaction when new people come around." He looked back to me, his eyes were warm as they ran over my face again. "You were different. I was comfortable with you from day one, so I didn't do that with you." He took a breath and looked back out at the field. "So, when you didn't tell me about those bitches treating you like shit, it was a hard hit. The fact that you didn't trust me with it, made me instantly not trust you. My instinct was to cut and run." I watched him swallow hard. "But like I said, I know myself very well. I know that's not a normal reaction, not to the degree that I felt it. So, I asked you what I had to know immediately and put you on probation." He turned back and looked into my eyes. "Probation isn't a punishment, Lexie. This is me asking you to help me with my shit. It's me, asking you to help me work my way through wanting to push you away." My eyes burned, so I looked out at the field.

"How does this trust exercise work for you?" I asked, needing to know.

"When you call me every night and tell me what happened during your day, I know you're at home and safe," He explained. "That no one has hurt you."

"You didn't think to explain that?" I asked. The ache in my chest easing, he was quiet for a few seconds.

"Honestly? No. I didn't think about it," He admitted. "I keep forgetting that you're new. That you don't know certain things about me, the stuff that all the others know." I looked back to him and met his ice blue eyes.

"Then maybe you should tell me," I told him softly. His gaze ran over my face again before looking down at the bleachers in front of us.

"Maybe," He whispered. We were quiet for a while as we both watched the snow blow over the football field.

"You still haven't answered the question," I pointed out before I looked at him again. He was still watching the field. "What would you have done if I didn't go along with probation?" He licked his lips.

"I didn't answer, because I don't have a fucking clue," He admitted. "I guess, I would have called my old shrink and tried to figure out a new way

that would work with you." He looked over at me, his face worried. "Did you really think I'd just... cut you out?"

I looked out at the field before I answered. "Yeah, that's what it felt like."

"Baby." He said softly. He reached out and wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, his fingers massaging. "I wouldn't do that to you. I'd never just cut you out of my life," He said quietly. I nodded that I heard him. "You're not disposable, Lexie, not to me."

"It sounds so stupid when I say it out loud," I said, trying to make a joke of it.

"I'm not bailing on you," He stated, his deep voice confident. "You hear me?" I snorted.

"I hear ya," I answered. His fingers gave my neck one more squeeze before he ran his hand down my back and dropped away. After a while I looked up at him. "How the hell did you get me out of class?" He chuckled as the tension left his shoulders.

"Ethan swiped a bunch of blank call slips from the main office at the beginning of the year," He grinned down at me. "We use 'em to get out of class once in a while." I scoffed dramatically.

"How do I not have any of these?" I asked in my highly-offended voice. He smirked as I reached for his bag. He snatched it up and held it out of my reach.

"Hell no, go after Ethan's," He told me. "He still has a stack of 'em." I started laughing and Zeke wasn't far behind. Just like that Zeke and I were okay again.

"Fine," I growled playfully at him. He just smirked at me. I checked the time, we still had a few minutes before classes were out for lunch. My mind went back to what Ethan had said earlier. "Ethan said your shoulder was hurting again?" I said. He sighed.

"Shoulder, back, no real difference anymore," He grumbled. I looked out at the field.

"Is it bad enough to want that massage?" I asked. I was quiet as he thought about it.

"Not yet," He muttered. I nodded.

"Try those heating pads. It'll loosen up your muscles," I offered. He nodded.

"I'll give it a shot," He said as he checked his watch. "Class is out." We both got to our feet and headed back towards the hallways.

We walked into the cafeteria to see the others already at our usual table. Riley's eyes went wide when she saw us together. Miles' gaze went from me to Zeke then back again.

"Are you two alright now?" Miles asked.

"Or do we need to take cover?" Ethan added. I grinned.

"Nah, we're fine," I announced. Then I pointed a finger at Ethan. "You, however, owe some call slips." Ethan groaned as I sat down next to Isaac and pulled out my lunch.

"I'll bring you some tomorrow," Ethan said begrudgingly. Zeke sat next to Riley and pulled his own lunch out. Eventually, Riley and I were talking about the Winter Formal next weekend.

"Why don't I set you up with one of my friends?" Riley offered again. I sighed.

"Because I'm not looking for a date," I reminded her. Riley waved her hand dismissively.

"I know three guys who are perfect." Riley tried again. I looked her in the eye this time.

"No," I said firmly. "I don't want a date. Besides, someone else there is bound to be going solo too."

"No one goes to those things stag," Asher said, looking up from lunch. I shot him a look.

"Oh, yeah? Who are you going with?" I countered. Asher smirked.

"Lisa Cantrail," He announced. I went still. No, this was good. It'd help me get over him, right? Then twins started laughing. "Is-isn't she a lesbian?" Ethan asked as Isaac kept laughing. Asher nodded.

"Yeah, but her parents still don't know yet, and they're chaperoning," Asher admitted. "I heard her say she needed a cover so they don't get suspicious. So, I offered." He pointed at me. "The point is, these things are for couples, without a date you're going to be bored."

"Even some couples don't go to those things," Riley said sweetly, her voice had a hard edge to it. Zeke clenched his jaw but said nothing as he continued eating his lunch.

"Red, do you even know how to wear a dress?" Isaac asked, drawing everyone's attention off Zeke and Riley. I knew exactly what he was doing so I joined in.

"I may not wear skirts or dresses, but I can glam up with the best of them," I said confidently. Isaac burst out laughing.

"Yeah, right," Isaac said, chuckling. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Let's make a bet," I offered. "If I can make your jaw drop when you see me, I get a foot massage Sunday morning after brunch." Isaac shook his head as he grinned at me.

"Deal," Isaac said instantly. "But it's going to take a lot to make my jaw drop." I smirked at him.

"We'll see," I said vaguely. Conversation went back to normal, though Zeke and Riley both were quiet after that. The guys were making plans for tonight when Miles looked across the table to me.

"Lexie, don't forget, that play is tonight," Miles said. I nodded since I was taking a drink of water. The table went dead quiet.

"Where are you taking Beautiful?" Ethan asked suspiciously.

"To a play down in Missoula, the University there is putting one on," Miles answered.

"Miles wants me to see that not all Shakespearean plays are tragedies," I told them. "He figured you guys wouldn't want to go." The others chuckled and agreed. I took another bite of my sandwich as Asher started telling

everyone about something that happened in his homeroom this morning when my phone vibrated. It was a number I'd never seen before.

Unknown: It's me, your secret admirer. Or a girl gave me a wrong number, if that's the case, sorry to bother you.

I snorted. Secret Admirer guy really was shy.

Alexis: It's me. I don't give out wrong numbers. If someone asks and I don't want them to have it, I tell them so. It saves everyone time and keeps everything clear.

Unknown: Lol, well, I'm glad I didn't just annoy some stranger.

Alexis: Are you going to tell me your name so I can add you to my phone?

There was a long silence.

Unknown: Not yet, I'm sorry. We've met and if I make an ass of myself I'd like you not to know who I am. If that makes any sense.

I smirked.

Alexis: It makes sense. So, you obviously got my note. Are you going to tell me your hobbies?

Unknown: Well, lately, I've been really interested in biomedical engineering. I like the idea of making artificial hearts and organs from mechanical parts.

Wow. I was impressed. This guy sounded highly intelligent. Before I could respond my phone vibrated.

Unknown: And that sounded creepy, like I'm Frankenstein or something, I'm just interested in how it would work and all.

I snorted as I texted back.

Alexis: No, it's interesting. Think about how many lives it would save, if they could make a permanent heart? No one would have to wait for someone to die to get a transplant.

Unknown: That's the first time I've gotten that response, most people look at me as if I'm insane.

I smiled at that.

The bell rang for sixth period.

Alexis: You're not. Class, gotta go.

Everyone got up and grabbed their bags. Miles walked with me out of the Cafeteria.

"Who were you texting with?" Miles asked, curious.

"Just Secret Admirer guy, I gave him my number," I said. "I figured if we talked he'd tell me who he is."

"Any luck?"

"Nope," I admitted dryly. Miles grinned.

"The play starts at seven, so I figured that I'll pick you up at five. There's a restaurant I think you'll like that I know," Miles said as we walked down the hall. Butterflies took off in my stomach. This was sounding more and more like a date. Knock it off Lexie, he doesn't think of you that way.

"Sounds good to me," I said, trying not to let him know how excited I was about spending time alone with him. Miles gave me a small smile before taking off towards his next class. I let out a deep breath. Please don't let me make a fool out of myself.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 3

Friday Night

I looked at my reflection for what had to be the twentieth time in ten minutes. Black skinny jeans disappeared into my knee-high black boots, while a thin emerald green sweater brought out my eyes. My long hair was in smooth curls down my back. I made sure to keep my makeup looking natural, using dark eyeliner and mascara to highlight my eyes. I looked good, the outfit showed off my curves without showing too much skin. All together it was my usual sexy, not too obvious until you got close. I let out a breath. Now for jewelry, I went to my new jewelry box and opened it. Ethan had kept his promise, after Christmas he took me jewelry shopping. All of it was gold because Ethan said it looked better on me than silver. I managed to keep him from going overboard with a few pieces and a jewelry box. I put in my gold trinity knot stud earrings, I had loved them the minute I saw them. I slipped on the matching necklace, the pendant rested just above my neckline. I looked in the mirror again. Okay, now it felt like a date. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It's not a date Lexie. He's your friend, just your friend. I didn't like how I had to keep reminding myself of that. There was a knock on the door downstairs. I grinned. Miles was still the only one who ever knocked anymore.

"Lexie, Miles is here!" Rory called.

"Coming," I called back. I pulled on my jacket, my black scarf with white skulls, and headed downstairs. Miles was talking to Rory while he waited. He was wearing black slacks, a dark green button down, and nice dress shoes. He even had his black wool coat over his arm. He looked.... drool worthy. I stopped on the stairs, I was underdressed. I was debating whether to run upstairs to change when he turned and spotted me. He gave me a warm smile.

"Hi, are you ready?" Miles asked. I sighed as I came down the rest of the stairs.

"Yep," I bent down, petted Hades and said goodbye.

When I straightened, I looked at Rory. "When's curfew?"

"You're with Miles and going to Missoula so..." Rory thought about it. "I'll give you 'till midnight in case of traffic. If you think you'll be a minute late, call." We said good-bye and went out to Miles' 2009 Nissan sedan. It wasn't long before we were on the highway headed toward Missoula. I played with Miles' radio until we agreed on a station.

I had to ask. "Am I underdressed?" Miles frowned. He looked away from the road to look at me, his brow drawn down.

"What are you talking about?" Miles asked, confused. He looked back to the road, frowning. I bit the corner of my bottom lip before explaining.

"I didn't think about the fact you'd probably want to go to a nice restaurant," I explained. He smiled.

"Lexie," His voice was the smooth, silky one I loved. "I'm only wearing this because my Mother asked me to donate a check to the drama department at the college while we're there. Otherwise, I'd be wearing jeans and my Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy shirt." I chuckled. When I calmed down, he continued. "Besides, I don't like those upscale restaurants either. I've got somewhere else in mind."

"Where?" I asked, suddenly dying to know. Miles smiled that smile that showed how handsome he really was.

"This small place I know that makes the best Italian food around," He said. I grinned at him.

"Oh really?"

"Yes, you're going to love it," He assured me. I relaxed. He changed the subject to a documentary he watched last night which we talked about on the rest of the drive to Missoula.

"Oh, my God," I mumbled behind my hand around a bite of Tiramisu. Miles chuckled. I swallowed my bite. "You were right. This place is fantastic," I admitted. Miles' ears turned pink as he took a fork full of the dessert we were sharing.

"You'd be surprised where you'd find great food," Miles said before eating his bite.

I eyed him. "How did you find this place?" The entire place looked like a diner and not a bistro and the Italian food surprised the hell out of me. I finished another bite before he answered.

"About a year ago, I was stuck at the Opera with my parents," He began. "Earlier we had dinner at the most lavish restaurant in town."

"And you hated it," I guessed. He nodded. I took another bite of dessert.

"I hated it. Their food was great," He shrugged. "But I'm not a big fan of French cooking. Especially, when snails are involved." I snorted and covered my mouth. He grinned at me as he continued. "So, I was at the theater up the street watching... I don't even remember what it was. Anyways, I was hungry so I slipped out of the theater and looked for a place to get a quick bite."

"And you found this place?" I asked. He nodded as he speared more dessert.

"I was looking for a hot dog vendor or something," He admitted. "But I saw this place and figured I had the time to sit and eat."

"You've been coming here ever since?" I asked, smiling.

"I've been coming here ever since," He said.

"Don't tell Asher, but the pasta here is even better than his," I whispered to him. "I didn't think that was possible." He chuckled.

"They make their pasta from scratch," Miles told me. "Asher hasn't got the technique yet." I watched as Miles took a bite of dessert. He was different tonight, relaxed, I didn't get to see him that very often. It was like his smile. A secret side of Miles and only I knew it existed. I looked away before he caught me staring.

"So, tell me something." I looked back to him and met his eyes. "What University is the brilliant Miles Huntington planning to go to after next year?" Miles chuckled

"Well, the best I've found is MIT. But there's Harvard, Cambridge, even Stanford. There are a few top schools with amazing Astrophysics programs that I'm hoping to be able to choose from," He said, putting his fork down. He met my eyes again and gave me a small, sad smile.

"You're not going to college, are you?"

"No, I mean not right away at least. Taking art classes would help, but I'm looking to get an apprenticeship after Graduation. And most apprenticeships don't pay, but they have lots of hours. So, I'll probably be waitressing and learning at a shop, hopefully," I explained. "This summer I'm going to try to get a part-time job at the tattoo shop in town so I can learn more about the whole process." Miles face was concerned.

"Apprenticeships don't pay you?" He asked.

"According to my research no, some you even have to pay for to prove you're serious," I said. He frowned. "Miles, I'm going to be okay. I'll find a job that pays the bills while I try to find an apprenticeship."

"Where?" He asked. I looked down at the table.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I haven't figured it all out yet. I just know I'll have to move to a large city to get the best apprenticeship I can. Valerie Vargas would be amazing, her work is incredible. Julie Becker's color use is astonishing. Nick Baxter does these amazing large pieces that have the most incredible detail that I want to be able to pull off. There are a lot of tattoo artists that I wish I could learn from, but my chances of working with them are slim to none." Miles was resting his chin on his knuckles with a strange smile on his face. It made me pause. "What?" Did I have food on my face?

"You really are passionate about tattooing," He said his voice soft. "What is it about it that you love?"

I bit the corner of my lower lip before I answered. "For some people, it's artwork they'll carry around all their lives. For others…" I met his eyes as I leaned forward. "You can show yourself, what you've survived, and put it in your skin. It's a visual representation of who you are, of what made you. In a world where you can hide and disappear, people with those tattoos say 'no.'" He gave me a warm smile. "They refuse to hide, they refuse to disappear. They stand and say I'm here. This is me, take it or leave it but

I'm not going anywhere." I looked down at the table and shrugged. "It might sound corny or overly romantic-"

"It doesn't," Miles said quietly. I looked up to meet his warm gaze. "I can see why you love tattoos. You practice every day, every chance you get. I think you won't have a problem getting an apprenticeship."

I smiled. "Thanks, hon." I eyed him. "So, Astrophysics," I said. He chuckled softly.

"Yeah," He sounded embarrassed.

"Your turn," I said. He squirmed. "What is it about Astrophysics?" I asked. He sighed then leaned on his forearms on the table and met my eyes.

"It started with Astronomy," He began in his silky timber. "When I was a little kid I was fascinated by planets, stars, and galaxies. I read everything I could get my hands on. As I got older, I became more fascinated by the fact that we can figure out why planets move the way they do, that we can figure out and theorize why stars are formed. It's basically you're trying to understand the universe and our place in it." I rested my chin on my hand as I listened. "It's immensely vast, and there's so much out there that we don't understand. But it all follows rules that we haven't completely figured out yet..." Miles' eyes met mine as he trailed off. "And now you're bored out of your mind,"

"No, I'm not," I assured him. "I like hearing you talk about it. You get excited." His cheeks tinged pink.

"The guys usually stop me around the five-minute mark," He admitted. I gave him a small smile.

"Talk all you want," I said softly. "Tell me something I don't know about. In layman terms."

He smiled that smile again as he started talking. The longer he spoke, the more animated he became. He told me about the recent discovery of seven new planets, like earth, about forty light-years away from us. What it means that they are all in the habitable zone near a star. I listened and fell a little harder for him, I didn't bother trying to fight it this time. Fifteen minutes later, the waitress came with the check in its black holder. I reached for my wallet to pay my half but Miles snagged the check.

"Miles," I warned.

"Lexie," He replied as he pulled out his wallet and put a couple of twenties into the holder.

"You bought the tickets," I reminded him. "Let me buy dinner."

"No," He said instantly. He put the holder back on the table.

"I want to pay my half," I tried again.

"Lexie, I'm rich," He reminded me. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"I don't care," I countered. A slow smile spread across his face.

"I know," He said, quietly. "But I can't let a girl pay for dinner. It's not in me."

"It's really easy," I tried again. I pointed over his shoulder. "You look that way, and I'll pay the check while you're not looking." He spotted my fingers getting closer to the check. He grabbed the check, got up then went straight to the cashier and paid before I could do more than get out of my side of the booth. I grabbed my jacket and walked up behind him. I pinched his waist.

"Cheater," I hissed. He looked over his shoulder to smile down at me.

"You started it," He reminded me. I wrinkled my nose at him.

"You two are such a cute couple," The cashier said. My face caught fire as I stepped back from Miles. Was I flirting too much? Shit, I had to rein it in.

"Um, we're just friends," I told her. She looked at me with a doubtful look. I busied myself with pulling on my coat while Miles got his change and thanked the waitress. When we got outside my face had cooled off some, though Miles' ears were still pink.

"The play is going to start soon, we should, uh, head over to the campus," Miles suggested stiffly. His shoulders were tense as we walked to his car, I instantly missed relaxed Miles.

The campus was beautiful, snow covered trees and pathways. After the play, we walked down a wide tree-lined walk toward a large bear statue in the middle of what seemed like a large lawn courtyard. It had taken half the first act but Miles had eventually relaxed again sitting next to me in the theater. I looked around the pathway. The street lights looked Victorian, but they were modern. The yellow light was glowing against the snow. I didn't have to be home anytime soon, so we looked around the campus.

"What did you think of the play?" Miles asked. I smiled as I stepped up onto the edge of the snow covered lower ledge of the statue. It looked like there were flowers here in the summer, but now they were just snow piles.

"I really liked it," I said as I started walking along the lower rim. Miles kept pace with me still on the paving stones. "It was funny. I didn't expect that from Shakespeare," I admitted.

"He didn't always write tragedies," Miles told me.

"Just the ones that my English teacher makes us read," I grumbled. He chuckled. "There was one part I really enjoyed."

"Which one?" He asked. I followed the ledge around the flowerbed. Miles was still right next to me.

"When Puck messed up, and everyone saw things from their rival's point of view," I smiled looking over at him. On the ledge, I was only an inch taller than him. It was odd. "They realized it sucked," I added. He chuckled.

"I always liked that part too," He admitted. My shoe touched the ice and I started losing my balance. Miles' hand reached up to grab mine, giving me steady support so I could keep my balance. I stepped over the ice and kept going. Miles kept his hand held up in mine just in case I slipped again. I smiled my thanks as he continued. "Everyone got a deeper understanding of the other's situation, how it really wasn't as great as it seemed on the outside."

"Exactly, that's why I liked it," I said as I took another step still following the ledge. "Plus, the funny chaos." He smiled as I followed the ledge's turn.

"Maybe next time we'll see a tragedy, and you might actually enjoy it," He offered. I snorted.

"Maybe," I sighed. "But I see enough tragedy on a daily basis. So, don't get upset if I don't." I looked down at him. He was looking at the snow-covered buildings with unfocused eyes. "Speaking of tragedies," I said. He blinked then looked up at me. "What happened with you and Autumn?" I asked gently. He took a deep breath then let it out slowly.

"I told her I wasn't happy with the on and off relationship we've had for the last year," He said matter-of-factly. "I asked if she was willing to stay in a relationship with me. She pointed out how much time we'd spend flying to see each other, and that we both have other things we need to do instead." He shrugged. "So, we broke it off." My eyebrows shot up.

"Mutually, as in you both agreed? Just like that?" I asked, stunned. I have never heard of a breakup being mutual before.

"Well, it wasn't easy. It was painful, for both of us," He explained. "But I wasn't getting what I needed from the relationship, and she hadn't been either. In the end, we both agreed that it would be better if that part of our relationship was over."

"Are you two going to still play games?" I asked, hesitating to mention it. Miles warm eyes met mine.

"Yes, we're still going to talk and game together. We were a big part of each other's lives for the last four years. She's one of my best friends, and that isn't going to change," He said, simply. I ran my eyes over his face. He really did seem alright with it.

"So, no tragedy?" I asked, hoping to make him smile. It worked, the butterflies went crazy.

"No tragedy. Just an end." His gaze ran over me. "Speaking of ends, how are you doing with the whole Dylan situation?" He asked, gently.

"I'm doing great, now if he'd just leave me alone," I said, my voice showing my irritation. He chuckled. "I get that he made a mistake and that he regrets breaking up with me which I understand." I shook my head as I looked down at the ledge carefully placing my feet as I continued. "He said some messed up shit to me. He hurt me on purpose and that, I don't understand. That I can't forgive." I caught Miles frowning out of the corner of my eye.

"Lexie, have I-"

"Miles," I stopped walking to look over at him. "You've never hurt me, not even on accident." The worry in his eyes started to clear. "You never would." He nodded, agreeing with me. I smiled at him before hopping off the flower bed to the ground. He pulled me closer with my hand until I was looking up at him.

"Dylan is an idiot," He said, his voice soft as his eyes ran over my face. "He doesn't deserve someone as incredible as you." Warmth poured through me from my heart, making even the cold breeze seem like nothing.

"Believe me, I know," I said as I smirked up at him. He smiled as a big snowflake landed on his glasses. I looked up to see the sky full of big falling flakes. I closed my eyes, smiling as they hit my face. I loved it when snow fell, it filled the air with magic and for just a little while it made anything seem possible. I looked back at Miles who was still smiling. His eyes were bright as they met mine, the rest of the world faded into the distance. Grinning, he reached over to wipe the melting snow off my cheek. My sweet, brilliant, handsome Miles. His gloved fingers slowed as they moved along my cheekbone, heat growing in his eyes. My heart raced. What would his lips feel like? There was a slow, low, hard flip in my stomach. My eyes went to his lips, I wanted to know. I really wanted to know. Should I...? Before I did something stupid, I stepped back, letting go of his hand as I focused on looking at the buildings on campus. I took a deep breath. Shit! Wasn't it bad enough I had a crush on Asher? I had to feel this way about Miles too? What was wrong with me lately? I noticed Miles cleaning his glasses out of the corner of my eye. It gave me a chance to get myself back under control. I swallowed hard, my mind was blank. I couldn't think of anything to say.

"W-we should head to the car," Miles' voice was quiet but deeper than usual. Please tell me he didn't notice me drooling over him.

"Yeah, it's getting late," I agreed, putting a smile on my face before looking up at him again. Miles was looking everywhere but at me, his ears pink. FUCK! He noticed. I felt like panicking, then I remembered it was Miles. He wouldn't say anything. He'd never ask about it or even mention it. I didn't know whether to be happy about that or disappointed. We headed back toward the car. Walking quietly, too quietly, damn it. "Thank you for bringing me to the play."

"Of course."

The drive was also quiet, but not uncomfortably so. I was running around in my head trying to figure out what the hell was going on with me and Miles seemed distracted himself. So, there was no pressure to talk during the hour-long drive home.

Miles pulled up to my house. Okay Lexie, say goodnight and get out of here before you do something stupid.

"I had fun tonight, Miles," I said cheerfully. "Thank you." Miles' ears turned pink.

"You're welcome," He said, quietly as he shut off the car. "Let me walk you inside."

"You don't..." I didn't bother to finish my sentence, he was already getting out of the car. I sighed and got out before he could open my door for me. My heart was racing as I met him at the walkway. I glared at the ghosts on the lawn, for once they stayed back. Miles put his hand on my lower back, sending hot shivers through me as we walked to the door. I unlocked the door and stepped inside, pretending I wasn't as tense a guitar string.

Miles stepped just inside the door. The great room was empty. Rory had probably gone to bed. Great, Miles didn't bother to close the door. I took off my jacket and hung it up by the door before turning to him. I gave him a big smile.

"See, I'm inside," I teased him. I was trying to hide my nerves from him, but he probably noticed. He noticed everything.

"Thanks for trying the play, Lexie," He said uncertainly.

"I had fun," I usually gave him a hug good-bye. I stepped closer to give him his hug. He opened his arms and slid them around me. I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him. Wintergreen filled my lungs as my body flipped low and hard. Damn it, Lexie. "Thanks again Miles," I said, my check against his chest. I didn't know what else to say right now.

"You're very welcome," He replied, his voice soft. His arms loosened and we stepped back from each other. "Good night." He turned and went out the door. I locked it behind him. My heart was hammering. Damn it, how the hell was I going to deal with this? I pushed it out of my head and went upstairs with Hades following. Lying down on my bed next to Hades I closed my eyes.

I dropped down to my center almost immediately. It was only a split second before I was standing in the Veil. The sky boiled above, still angry and green. Tonight, I didn't waste time. I sat down in the dirt and concentrated. I thought of the guys, we were in the living room at Miles' house and playing Munchkin again because I refused to lose to Isaac. The others were helping by using every curse or poison card they had on Isaac. By the end, Miles had won, and Isaac's character was naked. It was a fun night, I remembered that peace that I had felt that night. My barriers dropped hard. When I was ready, I opened my eyes. That shimmering gold dome was there, I took a deep breath and focused on pushing that wall out. I watched as it moved across the Veil. My body was dry, cracked, dying of thirst, I accepted that the Veil was dying, I accepted that this was how the Veil felt at this moment as I pushed my will further. I reached the edges. I looked up at the smoky walls of the Veil, time to climb. I imagined that shimmer climbing the walls, I needed to reach the sky. The golden shimmer rose up the walls. I gasped as I touched the fog closing the Veil off. It felt gross, like black tar clinging to you, only it wasn't tar. It was made of menace, and... anger. Whoever had done this was furious about something, and they used that to close off the Veil. It filled my mind as I pushed higher. I was halfway up when I couldn't take it and started to fight against the anger, to push back against it and instantly lost focus. The shimmer slammed back to me almost knocking me backwards. Gasping, I sat there and eyed the walls, I got half way up. I thought about trying again, but I could feel how tired I was. I left the Veil troubled that night.

I was half asleep when my phone vibrated on my desk. Grumbling I reached over and found it.

Secret Admirer: How was your night?

It took me a few blinks to read it and realize who it was. I checked the time, it was almost midnight.

Alexis: Tiring but good. I was asleep when you texted. If this comes out as gibberish, it's your fault.

Secret Admirer: Sorry, I was just laying here and wondered how your day was.

Alexis: Its fine, how was yours?

Secret Admirer: Great, I got to text with you.

I sighed. I didn't need to be hit on in the middle of the night.

Alexis: That's sweet. But I'm really tired and falling asleep as I type.

Secret Admirer: Go back to sleep. Sweet dreams.

I put the phone down and rolled back over to cuddle with Hades. I wasn't awake for much longer.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 4

Saturday Morning

I managed to block Maddie's punch and struck back with my own. I made light contact to her stomach. Not enough to hurt, just enough to sting, she grunted. Then she moved in, I instantly moved back and circled breathing heavily. I learned early to never let Maddie get close, she liked to grapple, and I wasn't that great at it yet. My best bet was to keep out of arms reach. Sweat was pouring off me as I eyed her, she was breathing heavy too, good. At least I was making her work for it. I planned my attack and moved in fast. I feinted a swing at her

jaw, she blocked it. Then I threw an uppercut and I made contact. She growled through her mouth piece as I moved back again.

"Good feint, Lexie," Dave called from the side of the octagon. "Maddie, don't be timid. Go after her." Maddie reversed her circle and started coming closer. I kept moving to avoid getting cornered. Maddie came in hard, I didn't move fast enough. She moved in close and tried to grab me. I grabbed her wrist on my shoulder and brought my other elbow to her head with a thud. It wasn't full strength, but it was jarring enough I slipped out of her grip. Maddie cursed but didn't back off. She landed a hit to my side, the smack was loud. I grunted as I moved back feeling the sting. I backed up a few steps and circled Maddie, she wasn't playing around anymore. Alright, fine by me. I moved in. I swung, jabbed, kicked but she blocked it all. She started pushing back, I countered. I didn't retreat, but I couldn't move forward. I blocked, dodged, and slipped her moves. I was holding out as long as I could. Finally she snapped. I made a swing, she dodged by bringing her head down around my waist, she shoved with her shoulder as her hands grabbed the back of my knees and pulled, I went down hard. She followed me down landing on her knees between my legs, her head on my stomach. The air knocked out of me, I was stunned as Maddie moved to my side and dropped her bodyweight over my chest. I

tried to counter as she wrapped an arm around my shoulders, the other around my ribs. I cursed when I realized Maddie already locked her hands. I tried to bridge my hips, but she just pressed her weight more on my chest. I didn't know how to get out of a side control hold, I was screwed.

"Shit," I gasped as I went limb in her arms.

"Tapping out?" Maddie asked with her mouth piece still in.

"Tapping out," I grumbled. Maddie got to her feet and helped me up, she was a spunky girl who I had just started sparring with this month. Her black hair was shoulder length and back in a braid. Her brown eyes were smiling, and she took off her gloves and pulled out her mouth piece.

"That elbow to the head rattled me," Maddie admitted as we both made our way out of the practice ring and to Dave's side.

"Good, because you knocked me on my ass," I countered. We both chuckled.

"Grappling Lexie, you need to practice grappling," She reminded me. I looked at her then leaned in.

"The guys I train with are hot as hell," I reminded her.

"And?" She asked pointedly. I sighed.

"Rolling around on the floor with a hot guy, you can't hit on," I explained. "That just sounds frustrating." She laughed.

"Good point," She said as we reached Dave. Dave was about a head taller than me, his blonde hair and blue eyes were average. There wasn't much about Dave that stood out, except for his skill in the octagon of course. He was a four-time world champion. His gaze went to Maddie first.

"Maddie, you need more blocking and hit practice," Dave began. "You know Lexie's weaknesses, you need to exploit them." Maddie nodded. Dave looked at me.

"Lexie, good job making Maddie chase you but you need grappling practice. Once you hit the mat, it's over," Dave told me. I nodded. He was right, I was just going to have to suck it up.

"You girls are done, get outta here," Dave announced. We both headed for our lockers. I was halfway done taking off my pads when someone stepped up to the side of my locker.

"You're Lexie, right?" He asked. I turned my head to see the guy who had once overheard me talking to the guys about my 'seizures.' He was a cutie. His sweaty face had an angled jaw and straight nose, his big green hazel eyes were friendly, his brown curly hair was damp from his workout, and he had a sweet smile which he flashed at me.

"That's me," I said.

"I'm Jordan. I've seen you around here for a few months now," He said as he went to his locker and opened it.

"I know. You eavesdropped on a conversation with my friends," I reminded him. He chuckled.

"I kinda couldn't help it. You have one of those voices that catch a guy's attention," He said as he smirked at me before starting to take off his gear. Wow, he's going right for the flirt, really?

"How so?" I asked, wanting to get him to stop flirting with me. He grinned.

"Your voice has a melody all its own," He explained. "It's soothing to the ear." Damn, that was a good line. I eyed him playfully.

"Been practicing that line a long?" I asked.

He chuckled as his cheeks turned pink. "Long enough." I shook my head and pulled my jacket out of my locker. I spotted Maddie sitting on a bench tying her shoe as she eyed Jordan.

"Do you want to get some coffee?" Jordan asked drawing my attention back to him. I gave him a smile.

"I can't. I have a coffee date already planned," I said, politely before I pointed over at Maddie. "But she might be interested, her name's Maddie, and she's funny as hell." Jordan turned to look at Maddie. He looked back at me with a grin.

"Maybe another time," Jordan said before grabbing his bag and heading to the bathrooms in the back. I rolled my eyes and closed my locker. "Hey Red, where's the fire?" Isaac asked as all of the guys came toward the lockers.

"I'm shopping today, remember?" I reminded him. "I still have to go Dulcet."

Isaac groaned dramatically as he lay down on a bench, the others taunted him.

"Are you coming to Vegabond tonight?" Ethan asked as he started taking off his wraps.

"I don't have the gas to go to Dulcet twice," I pointed out. Ethan shrugged.

"Ride with us," Ethan offered. "I won't leave you there." I snorted.

"So, if a hot girl came up to you and asked you to take her home for a good time, you'd say 'no I have to drive Lexie home?'" Ethan thought about. The guys chuckled.

"Everyone else is going tonight, so, if that does happen, you'd still have a ride home," Ethan pointed out.

"Don't worry Ally, that has never happened to Ethan before," Asher announced as he put away his gear. Ethan got a dreamy expression.

"One day it will," Ethan sighed. I threw a towel at him and hit him in the face. I shook my head at him then pulled on my jacket and checked to see that I had everything.

"If you give me a ride, I'll go," I agreed.

"Yay! Red's coming!" Isaac shouted as he waved his arms. Then his arms dropped. "I need a nap." I laughed as I walked over to look down at Isaac.

"What's wrong, Cookie Monster? Not sleeping?" I asked in a pouty voice. He sighed.

"Not last night," Isaac admitted. I bent down and kissed his forehead. When I straightened, he was smiling. "Thanks, Red. That might help."

"Anytime. Also, if you need a cuddle, I can come up with an excuse to crash at Miles' house," I offered. Isaac's smile widened.

"Red, are you offering to sleep with me?" Isaac asked, straight-faced. I laughed.

"Not anymore," I countered, still laughing. He made a pained face while the others snickered.

"I'll see you guys later," I said as I headed out. The guys said bye before I went out the door and headed home.

I was in the shower when I started to think about Ethan and Isaac's flirting lately. I don't remember when it started, but it had quickly turned into a little game. The twins would flirt, and I'd shut them down. They seemed to think it was fun and to be honest, it was. I quickly finished my shower. As I walked into my bedroom in my towel, I noticed my computer was on. Odd, I didn't remember turning it on. Deciding to ignore it, I focused on getting dressed. I was going to be changing a lot today, so I chose my comfiest clothes. I grabbed my blue bootcut jeans, a black cami, and an oversized indigo sweater that sometimes fell off my shoulder. I made sure to wear my new black snowboots, I was not falling in the snow today. I quickly used a hair dryer and threw the mass up into a messy bun. When I picked up my wallet, I paused. I was going to be changing a lot, and I didn't want to lose everything. I grinned as I pulled out the purse Miles gave me for Christmas from the closet. The black leather bag was cut-like scales to reveal the red silk underneath. I called it my dragon bag. I threw my cellphone in, my wallet, tissues, and even a Lexie Kit. Zeke had made me promise last night that I would take one since I was going shopping with Jake and he had no clue about my abilities. He was right. Ever since the bowling alley, I usually carried one in the pocket of my coat, though this didn't hurt either. I did my usual makeup and was out the door on time.

I met Jake in Dulcet at a little corner café he loved. It might have had something to do with the cute boy baristas that worked there, I know I didn't mind the view. I walked into the almost empty café. Jake instantly got my attention by waving to me from our usual nook. I smiled a big smile and hurried over. Jake got to his feet, his short-styled blonde hair had lighter blonde highlights, his pretty green eyes were smiling as he headed toward me.

"Hey sweetness!" Jake greeted cheerfully. I hugged him tight.

"Hey sexy!" I said as he squeezed me back. I felt light and airy around Jake. He was so easy to talk to, and he never judged me for crushing on Asher and Miles. A part of me felt bad about not telling him about my abilities, but I couldn't. I tried once, yet every instinct I had screamed at me not to. I pulled away, took off my jacket, and sat down in the leather armchair across from him. He sat back down in the other.

"So, how's it going with the hotties?" Jake asked immediately, he was grinning like the Cheshire cat. I leaned forward, rested my elbows on my knees, covered my face, and groaned with frustration. Jake started laughing. I dropped my hands while my face was on fire.

"That good, huh?" He asked. I shook my head not knowing where to start. Thankfully one of the hot waiters came up and asked if I'd like anything, I ordered a large mocha latte. The server sent Jake a flirty smile and went to fill my order, Jake, however, didn't seem to notice. I raised my eyebrow at him. "So, how was your week?" He asked. Over the next half hour, I gave him the highlights, almost getting hit by a car, fighting with Zeke. I finished with the twins chasing me through campus and Isaac throwing me over his shoulder and smacking my butt. He dramatically acted faint and fanned himself after that one. Then he gave me the highlights from this week. Aaron hitting on a lesbian, and her girlfriend yelling at him for it, Derrick had a recital that ended with him getting a standing ovation and Dylan was being a big enough dick that their friend Luke threw a clipboard at him at the store. Luke managed to hit him in the head. I tried not smiling at that one. Thomas managed to score a date with a blonde girl who was just as grumpy as he was, I snickered when I heard that one. During our conversation, the hot barista kept coming over to check on us, though he seemed to only have eyes for Jake. Oddly, Jake didn't notice. I was about to say something when Jake asked.

"How was the theater last night?" Jake asked, excitedly. I covered my face and groaned.

"I almost kissed Miles," I mumbled through my fingers.

"Say that again, sweetness?" Jake asked. I dropped my hands and looked him in the eye.

"I almost kissed Miles last night," I said clearly. His jaw dropped.

"You mean my tall, lean, and sexy? Shame on you!" Jake smacked my hand making me laugh.

"And what do you mean almost?" He asked, leaning in. I sighed.

"I didn't expect last night to feel like a date, but it did," I explained. I went on to tell him every detail about my evening with Miles. Even about how he noticed me looking at his lips. His mouth was gaping by the end.

"That sounds like a date to me, Lexie," He said, his voice confident. I shook my head.

"No, he just wanted me to see that Shakespeare didn't always end in tragedy," I reminded him. Jake raised an eyebrow and looked at me doubtfully.

"Lexie. Dinner. A play. And romantic walk on a tree lined campus at night in the snow," Jake said slowly and clearly. "What does that sound like to you?" I went still.

"A cheesy romantic comedy?" I offered sarcastically. He kept waiting. I sighed. "A date," I said hesitantly. Jake nodded. I shook my head. "If Miles liked me, he had the perfect opportunity to make a move last night, he didn't even try to hold my hand."

"It's Miles!" He said, enthusiastically. "He's a shy boy." I sighed.

"He doesn't think of me that way, Jake. I don't think he ever will," I told him adamantly, even though it made me sad to. He sighed.

"Well, what about Asher?" He asked. I shrugged.

"I don't know if he even notices I'm a girl anymore," I said. His eyes narrowed.

"I bet he does and you just aren't paying attention," He countered. I snorted.

"I don't know," I admitted. "All I know is that I have to ignore these feelings until they go away." Jake rolled his eyes.

"Or, you kiss one of them and find out what happens," He offered.

"Okay, say I do that," I offered. "Then he says he doesn't feel the same about me. How would we get past that and still be friends with him knowing how I feel?" Jakes smile disappeared, and shadows filled his eyes.

"When you figure it out let me know," He mumbled as he drank his coffee. I put two and two together.

"Hold on," I said, pointing at him. "You like somebody." It was Jake's turn to blush and look away.

"Isn't that barista hot?" He asked, trying to distract me.

"Oh, no you don't," I declared. "He's been flirting with you all morning, and you didn't even notice. You don't get to try that now." Jake looked back at me. "Who?" I asked getting excited, his face turned crimson. Oh, this was going to be good. The door to the coffee shop opened but I ignored it and focused on Jake.

"It's..." He began painfully.

"Hey, guys," A voice surprised us. I looked up to find Derrick, another friend of Dylan's. I smiled. Derrick was one of Jake and Dylan's grumpy friends, who also happened to be an extremely talented pianist. He wore black from head to toe, his dark hair was spiked and still streaked with purple. He had a nice average face, though with the nose ring, eyebrow stud, and lip ring you wouldn't notice. "Didn't expect to see you two here," Derrick said as he grinned at us.

"Hey, heard about the recital Mr. Standing Ovation," I teased. Derrick's face tinged pink.

"It was nothing. I screwed up part of the overture and no one noticed," Derrick grumbled as he took the arm chair next to me.

"But you did," I chimed. He snorted.

"Yeah, it's been bugging the hell out of me the last three days," Derrick admitted. "I finally had to play it over and over until I could play it in my sleep."

"That's why you got into Julliard, that drive for perfection," Jake pointed out.

"No one can be perfect. I strive to be better than yesterday," Derrick countered, his cheeks turning pink again. Derrick checked his phone. "And that means more practice," Derrick grumbled. He looked up at us. "It was good seeing you guys."

"Have fun at practice," I taunted. Derrick snorted as he got to his feet and headed to the counter, I turned back to Jake in time to see him checking out Derrick's ass. Oh, my God! My mouth was gaping when Jake turned back to me and realized what I saw. He shot me a deadly looked and put his finger in front of his lips. I shut my mouth immediately and watched Derrick walk out the café door. I turned back to a red-faced Jake. "Holy crap!"

"Shh!" Jake tried shushing me.

"You like Derrick!" I barely managed to keep my voice at a quiet level. "Since when?" Jake sighed.

"Since forever. Why do you think I never actually have a boyfriend?" He admitted, painfully. He leaned forward and covered his face with his hands. "He's just so cute, smart, and talented." He groaned.

"Is he...?" I asked. He dropped his hands.

"Honestly? I don't think so. He's had girlfriends in the past."

"But so did you," I pointed out. Jake nodded. "Is he dating anyone now?" I asked.

"No, not for the last couple months," Jake said. "He said since he was going to New York after next year he didn't really want to leave anyone behind." I frowned at that.

"We're Juniors," I countered. "He's not going to date anyone for the rest of this year or our Senior year?" That sounded a little odd to me, I wanted to get to the bottom of that. I fought the urge to run after Derrick and grill him. Jake nodded sadly. "Wait, so all this time you knew about Asher and Miles, and you didn't say a word about Derrick," I accused him. He grinned at me mischievously. I smacked his leg hard, he just snickered. "You shithead!"

"Oh, come on, I had to wring the whole Miles and Asher thing out of you!" Jake countered. I chuckled because he was right. I pointed at him

threateningly.

"No more secrets, we're going to share our mutual misery," I declared. He chuckled and nodded. My phone vibrated, I pulled it out to check my messages.

Secret Admirer: Morning, what are your plans for the day?

I looked up at Jake who was eyeing me.

"Speaking of secrets," I began. "I've got a secret admirer." Jake's jaw dropped, I texted back while Jake was still gaping.

Alexis: I'm in Dulcet shopping today for a Winter Formal dress. But I'm planning on hitting Vegabond later tonight. You?

When I was done, I handed the phone over to Jake. He immediately began reading out texts.

"Who is this guy?" He asked getting excited.

I shrugged. "No clue."

"Are you interested?" He asked practically glowing.

"No, I'm not interested, and he knows it." I took back my phone as it vibrated.

Secret Admirer: University applications, I'm behind. And picking up some electronic parts.

"Oh, he's a Senior," I announced. Jake got up and came over to sit with me in my armchair.

Alexis: What Universities?

"How many Seniors do you know?" Jake asked.

"None that I know of, I don't ask everyone what grade they are in," I pointed out. He chuckled as my phone vibrated.

Secret Admirer: Georgia Institute of Technology and John Hopkins. They're the best schools for biomedical engineering.

"Wow, he's a smart one," Jake announced as he read over my shoulder. "Ask him what his shoe size is." I burst out laughing. Before I could recover, Jake snagged my phone and started texting. I reached for it and

tried to get it back, but it was a no go. He had sent his question by the time I got it back. It vibrated almost immediately.

Secret Admirer: Whoever this is, give Alexis back her phone, now.

I quickly explained.

Alexis: Sorry, that was my friend Jake, he stole my phone. How'd you know that wasn't me?

Secret Admirer: You don't talk that way. I've got to go, I'll text you tonight.

I looked at Jake and shook my head.

"You shit. He knew it wasn't me," I told him. He rolled his eyes.

"You're really not interested in this guy?" Jake asked. I shot him a look.

"I'm already interested in two. Do I really need to add to that?" I countered. He sighed.

"Good point," He grumbled before smacking my leg. "Come on, we have shopping to do."

We headed for Jake's Aunt's Boutique. I followed Jake to Main Street and found a parking spot down the street from the store. Jake met me at the Blazer, looped his arm around mine, and walked with me down the street. We were across the street when we passed Dylan's Dad's store Miller's Hardware. I sighed and kept walking. Jake lead me into a cute little clothing store filled with racks of clothes.

"Hey, Aunt Fey!" Jake shouted once we walked in. A woman around my height came from the back of the store. Fey had to be nearing her 60's. Her hair was spiked and red, as in blood red. She was a round little woman that seemed to glow with warmth. Her green eyes lit up as she spotted Jake.

"Jakey-poo! Come hug your Auntie!" Fey said in a cloying voice. Jake's face turned red instantly.

"Jakey-poo?" I whispered out of the corner of my mouth. He shot me a look.

"Yes, I am her Jakey-poo," He stated confidently without a hint of embarrassment, except for his face. "Got a problem with that?" I shook my head as he went to hug his Aunt. When he pulled back, he kept his arm around her. "Fey, this is Lexie. She's in dire need of a gown that doesn't make her look like a princess." Fey smiled a big smile.

"Sweetheart, you came to the right place. Come on in, and let's get started," Fey said warmly. Fey took me around the racks asking my opinion on different dresses. It took some time, but eventually Fey smiled. "I think I have your taste down. Go get in the dressing room, strip down, and we'll bring the dresses to you." I didn't argue, I went into the dressing room and waited. Soon the curtain opened, and Jake passed me a dress. Then he eyed me in my underwear.

"What?" I asked. He frowned.

"Cotton? Really?" He asked, painfully. I flipped him off as he dropped the curtain. He just laughed. I took the dress he gave me. It was satin and tulle, but black. I stepped into the dress and held the bodice to my chest. I came out into the dressing room area. Jake was waiting. I turned.

"Zipper please," I asked sweetly. Jake zipped me up as Fey walked into the dressing room area pulling a rack of black gowns with her.

"Okay, in front of the mirrors," Fey ordered. I walked over to the three mirrors and looked at myself. The dress was strapless, the bodice black satin, and the skirt was black tulle.

It was pretty, but I could already feel it sliding down my chest and said so. Fey nodded.

"Okay, no strapless," Fey announced. She gestured for me to go back into the dressing room. She handed me another dress and closed the curtain. It went on like that for an hour. Eventually, we just left the curtain open, I was the only one in the store and Jake wasn't interested. I was about to give up when Fey lit up. "Oh, I know the perfect dress!" Fey ran off into the back of the store. I hung up the short black and lace dress I had just tried on.

"We're going to need to hit a lingerie shop after this," Jake announced looking pointedly at my bra. "Cause you need satin, sweetness." I snorted.

"No, I don't. Plain and functional works just fine for me," I countered. He huffed.

"Not for a formal gown," He shot back. I rolled my eyes. Jake eyed me. "So, do you have a date for this thing?" He asked.

"Nope, in fact, I was wondering if you wanted to be my date," I asked in my sweet voice. He snorted.

"No, I'm not getting in a tux unless it's for a certain purple haired guy," He said, his eyes meeting mine. "But I heard you turned Dylan down pretty hard."

I went still. "What are you talking about?"

"He said he asked you and you shut him down cold," He told me.

"Yeah, I shut him down," I admitted. Jake eyed me.

"You couldn't have done it gently?" He asked. "I mean, you broke the guy's heart-"

"Wait. What?" I asked confused. "I broke his heart?"

"Yeah, when you broke up with him," Jake said. I snorted and shook my head. That was funny.

"Jake, I didn't have Dylan's heart. I didn't have his anything," I told him. "*He* dumped *me*." Jake's brows went sky high.

"What?" Jake asked, stunned.

"Yeah, he came down, said some real shitty stuff to me, and dumped me. Then I told him to fuck off," I explained. Understanding filled his eyes.

"So, that's why you don't want to talk to him or return his calls," He said, his voice sympathetic.

"Pretty much."

Fey walked through the dressing room doorway and handed me a shapeless black dress on a hanger. "Trust me, put this on. I guarantee you'll

love it," Fey announced. I took the dress, unzipped it and stepped into it. I pulled it up, then slipped my arms through the straps and waited for Jake to zip me up. Not expecting much I walked over to the mirrors and looked up. Holy shit. It was perfect. Fey and Jake helped me pick out accessories and shoes that would go perfectly with the dress. As I handed over Rory's credit card, I was starting to get excited about the dance.

Carrying my bags, we headed back down Main Street towards my Blazer.

"You're going to need a thong, Lexie," Jake warned. I snorted.

"I do not need a thong," I countered.

"In this dress, you do. Your panties will ruin the line of the dress," Jake insisted. I snorted.

"I'm not going underwear shopping with you," I shot back, laughing. I was still snickering when I felt that chill run down my neck like a finger. I stopped laughing and looked straight ahead. Three ghosts were talking as they strolled down the sidewalk of Main Street. One woman and two men in clothes from the 1800's and they seemed to know each other. Their energy hit my barriers hard enough they vibrated. I put tissues to my nose as Jake kept talking about how I needed a thong to make the dress line work. The ghosts were coming straight at me. My stomach knotted. I stepped behind Jake fast, my barriers shook hard as the three walked by, my stomach rolled badly. I stepped around Jake and ran for the alley just a few feet away. I hurried down the alley and I made it around a big green dumpster where I dropped my bags, fell to my knees, and threw up.

"Lexie? Shit!" Jake said as he spotted me. I held the tissues to my nose, my other hand braced against the brick wall. Hands were on my back and shoulder. "Okay, get it all out, sweetie." I was sick again. "There you go." Footsteps ran towards us. "She just started-"

"Did she bring a kit?" A husky voice demanded.

"A what? She brought a black purse," Jake said, his voice confused. My stomach lurched but noting came up, great dry heaves.

"Move, Jake." The husky voice was closer. Hands left me while a wrapper was torn. "Lexie, here," The voice registered. I held out my hand.

The familiar weight of a nausea tablet settled in my hand. I popped it into my mouth and chewed, cherry filled my mouth. I braced my arm against the brick again and kept my eyes closed.

"What's going on?" Jake demanded.

"She's having a seizure." The husky voice... shit. It was Dylan. Who else in Dulcet know how to help? I mentally cursed my luck as my stomach started to stop cramping. "She'll be okay in a bit. She's just hurting now, and light sensitive," Dylan explained to Jake. As I felt better, I realized Dylan's hand was rubbing between my shoulder blades. I knocked his hand away from me but his hand came back to rest on my shoulder. I smacked it away again, harder.

"Dylan, she's saying she doesn't want you touching her," Jake said, his voice firm.

"Touch her again, and we're going to have words." Dylan sighed. When my head stopped hurting enough that I could open my eyes, I did. I blinked and waited for my eyes to adjust.

"What are you doing, Dylan?" I asked, my voice rough.

"Helping. I was looking out the shop window when I saw you run down the ally. It didn't take much to guess what was happening," Dylan said, his voice matter-of-fact. I snorted which, of course, hurt my face. I got to my feet, still bracing a hand on the wall.

"This is exactly what you wanted to avoid, remember?" I pointed out. I pulled my tissues away from my nose, it stopped bleeding. I stepped back from the wall to see him watching me, his face worried. Dylan had a boyish charm that had made my heart raced, well, it did before. His brown hair was more of a mess than usual. His sapphire eyes met mine. "You didn't want to deal with my seizures," I reminded him as I stepped back again and threw my tissues into the dumpster.

"I've changed my mind," Dylan announced. I looked at him and couldn't quite believe his balls.

"It doesn't change the things you said to me," I countered.

"Lexie-"

"Thanks for the assist," I said before I turned and walked back to my bags. Jake had the dress bag over his shoulder. I picked up the rest and headed out of the alley.

"Make sure she's okay to drive, Jake," Dylan called. I rolled my eyes.

"Already was," Jake shot back from behind me. We walked back to my Blazer in silence. Dylan's words that night kept running through my head. *You have a lot of problems, and I can't take care of you all the time.* I huffed. The guys managed just fine, and they didn't think of me as someone they had to take care of, that jackass. We were loading the bags into the back when Jake broke the silence.

"What did he say to you that night?" Jake asked.

"Let's just say, he knew exactly where to hit to cause the most pain possible," I said. I looked up and met his eyes. "And he knew exactly what he was saying, and how much it would hurt." Jake's jaw clenched as he looked down the road at Dylan who was walking back to the store.

"The asshole."

"Pretty much."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 5

Saturday Night

I was getting dressed when Ethan called.

"You ready, Beautiful?" Ethan asked.

"I'm getting dressed now," I told him as I pulled my clothes out of the closet and set them on my bed.

"Ooh. Naked Beautiful," He teased. I rolled my eyes as I smiled.

"Not naked." It wasn't a lie either I was standing in my room in my underwear.

"Oh, you just had to ruin it," Ethan grumbled. I chuckled. "Anyway, we'll be there in ten."

"See ya then," I said before I hung up. I pulled on dark blue jeans and a gray boyfriend shirt. I just threw my hair back in a ponytail, and put on some mascara. That was all the effort I was willing to go through tonight. I headed downstairs with Hades following.

Rory was laid out on the couch watching hockey. "Hey Rory, care if I go to Vegabond with the guys?" I asked, already knowing the answer. He looked up and smirked.

"Be back by ten," Rory said and then he looked over at Hades and patted his stomach.

"Come on, Hades." Hades jumped up on to the couch and walked up onto Rory's chest to lay down, I bit back a smile. I never told him how big Hades was going to get, and I was sure the guys didn't either. When Hades is full grown, he's going to climb on Rory like that and I planned on filming it. I was checking my wallet when there was a car honk outside. "Bye, Rory." I was out the door and getting into the front seat of the twins' car. Isaac was in the back seat tapping away on his cell phone. Ethan eyed me.

"You okay, Beautiful?" Ethan asked. I gave him a smile.

"Yeah, I'm going low key. I really don't want to get hit on tonight," I said as I buckled my seatbelt. The boys chuckled.

"Well, that's not going to work," Ethan said. "You're too pretty." I snorted as Ethan pulled onto the road. My heart warmed from the compliment.

"Damn straight," I said proudly. They both chuckled.

As we headed for Dulcet I told them about my barriers holding against the three ghosts earlier. They both cheered. Isaac hugged me from behind the seat. Ethan yelled at him to put his belt back on, Isaac didn't even argue. The twins talked while I changed the radio to a good rock station.

"Hey Red," Isaac called. I turned in my seat to see him.

"If I can't find a date in time, do you want to go to Winter Formal with me?" He asked, grinning at me.

"Sure, why not," I agreed. Isaac shot his arms into the air and cheered.

"You're the best, Red."

"Yeah, I know," I said as I smiled at him. We listened to music and gossiped on the way to Dulcet.

When we arrived, Ethan parked and we headed in. The place was packed. Vegabond was a large warehouse-like bar that let the 16-20 years-old crowd in on Saturday nights. The bar ran along the right side of the building and the dance floor was in the middle, somewhere. Ethan took my hand and led me through the crowd to a table in the back corner. Miles, Asher, Zeke and Riley were already there. Riley and Zeke were both quiet as Miles and Asher made small talk. I slipped into the booth by Asher, Ethan close behind.

"So, what's going on?" Ethan asked the table.

"Ethan, Isaac, you two might want to lay low," Asher warned the twins. "Your exes are here." I cringed. Ethan just shrugged before leaning back in the seat.

"She can bitch all she wants. I don't care," Ethan announced, smirking. Isaac nodded in agreement.

"I was more worried about Ally," Asher admitted.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, innocently.

"Ally," Asher warned. I grinned mischievously.

"Don't worry I'm not going to start swinging," I looked over to a stone face Zeke. "That's Zeke's territory." He shot me a look, I gave him my smart-ass grin. He just glared at me. Okay, time to bring out the big guns. I leaned my elbows on the table and gave him my full attention.

"What's wrong, Zeke?" I asked in my serious voice. "Did someone steal your pink bunny rabbit?" I asked seriously. "Was it a little girl? Did a little girl steal your pink bunny rabbit?" I widened my eyes and whispered. "Was it the purple unicorn this time?" He finally snorted and his shoulders relaxed a little. Riley looked at Zeke then back at me. I shot him a smile before looking at Riley. "Jake sends hugs and kisses." Riley gave me a distracted smile.

"So... how did shopping go?" Riley asked her voice seeming strained. Okay, that was weird.

"It was successful," I declared. She smiled.

"Tell me about the dress," Riley asked.

"Black, sexy, elegant," I said, keeping it vague. She shot me a look. "I have to surprise Isaac. I'm gonna need that foot rub after a night in heels," I told her adamantly. She burst out laughing.

"You have to win the bet first, Red," Isaac reminded me. I sent him a knowing smile.

"Hey, when did you guys get here?" I looked up, Ryan and Oliver stood next to Ethan. I smiled.

"About five minutes ago," I said.

"I'm going to go get a drink," Riley announced. Isaac slid out of the booth to let her out. Zeke clenched his jaw as he got out and followed her into the crowd.

"And I see a possible date to the dance," Isaac announced before leaving the table.

"You guys care if we join you? Everywhere else is packed," Oliver asked.

"Sure," Asher said. Oliver scooted in and Ryan took the outside. Everyone started talking about school, music, video games. It didn't matter, soon everyone was laughing and I was glad I came out tonight. After a while I got thirsty.

"Okay, I'm making a drink run," I announced. Ethan got out of the booth so I could scoot out. "Anyone want anything?" I asked. There were a couple orders.

"I'll give you a hand," Ryan offered as he got to his feet.

"Actually, Ryan I wanted to talk to you and Oliver about our next show at here," Ethan announced. Ryan hesitated.

"Don't worry, I got it," I assured him. Ryan gave me an apologetic smile before he sat back down. I made my way through the crowd. I was almost to the bar when I heard a voice that made my temper boil.

"Oh, it's the boys' whore." Faith's voice had stopped me in my tracks. I turned to see Ethan's ex-girlfriend Faith standing there. Faith was hot, there's no other way to say it. She had the curves that most girls would kill for, her black hair had red streaks running through the pixie cut, her face was pretty, and she was currently glaring at me with amber eyes. I sighed.

"Really? Whore? That's all you got?" I asked, sounding disappointed. I sighed. "You need some new material, sweetie." I went to walk away but was stopped by another voice.

"Wow, you've gotten fat." Cece's voice stopped me. I reminded myself to hold onto my temper. I turned back to see Cece had joined Faith. Cece was a cute little thing with white blonde hair, green eyes and a big chip on her shoulder.

"Nope, I'm actually at a healthy weight," I said matter-of-factly. "Don't put your issues on me."

"Oh, it's you," Trisha said as she stepped up next to the others. Trisha was a beautiful girl with long curly brown hair and sharp eyes. Only that beauty was marred by the bandage over the bridge of her nose and the fading batwing bruising under her eyes. I had a small twinge of satisfaction over that. After all, the bitch had left me for dead.

"Aren't you supposed to be on your back somewhere?" Trisha snapped. I snorted.

"How's the nose Trisha?" I asked, sweetly. Trisha flinched. "What? Still bitter about being dumped because you girls were being bitches?" I asked in my sweet voice. I snorted. "You girls ruined your own relationships, not me." I smiled and started walking away.

"Say hi to your Dad for me, oh wait-"

"Be careful of your next words, Trisha," I growled the warning as I turned. I looked at her with dead eyes. Her face grew white. "No one's here to stop me this time," I reminded her. They looked at me with shocked faces. I turned and pushed my way through the crowd, I was fuming. I don't care who you are, you don't go after someone's family, that was just low. I reached the bar and ordered three sodas. I looked around and spotted Eric talking to a group of people further down the bar. I looked back to the wall behind the bar. I didn't really want to talk to him. I was still waiting for my drinks when my phone vibrated. I pulled it out of my back pocket.

Secret Admirer: You look beautiful tonight.

I grinned to myself.

Alexis: You're at Vegabond tonight?

Secret Admirer: Isn't everyone?

I snorted. He had a point.

Alexis: Then why don't you come say hi?

There were a few beats as I waited for a response.

Secret Admirer: I thought about it but you're with your friends.

Alexis: So?

As I waited for a response, I looked up to see if the bartender was done. He was heading my way with my drinks. My phone vibrated on the bar as I paid and thanked him.

Secret Admirer: Some of your friends don't have the best reputations.

I scowled at my phone. Really?

Alexis: Well, if you're going by reputations, you're not going to like mine.

I tucked my phone into my back pocket, picked up my drinks, and headed back through the crowd.

"Lexie." Dylan's voice came from behind me. I gritted my teeth before turning around. Dylan was standing there with that small smile on his face.

"Hey," I said in a polite tone, though this trip to the bar was killing my good mood.

"I wanted to talk to you," Dylan said, his voice sounding uncertain, I sighed. Be polite Lexie and walk away. When I opened my mouth to tell him no, he started talking. "I know I hurt you and I'm sorry about what said that night, it was stupid, and mean, I never even felt that way. I was just exhausted and overwhelmed from everything going on." I went to say something but he kept talking right over me. "I miss you." He kept talking and I tuned him out, I took a deep breath for control, and looked around the crowd. Ethan was headed my way. I needed Dylan to stop, now. I turned back to him and interrupted.

"Dylan, I'm having a good time with my friends. I really don't want to do an autopsy on our relationship," I pointed out. He was speechless for a few seconds.

"We're not dead Lexie, if you give us a chance-"

"Hey Dylan," Ethan said as he joined us with a strained smile. "How are you doing?" Dylan hesitated before answering.

"I'm alright." Dylan's eyes went back to me. "We were just having a private conversation-"

"Yeah, sorry. But I need to some help from Beautiful. There's a blonde not getting the hint that I'm not interested. I need Lexie to drive home the

point." Ethan took my arm and pulled me to his side away from Dylan. "Sorry about that." Ethan didn't sound sincere at all as he put his arm around me and walked me away from Dylan.

"You're my hero for the day," I told him earnestly. He chuckled. My phone vibrated in my pocket.

"Why didn't you just tell him off?" He asked taking one of the drinks I was carrying.

"I tried to but he started talking again," I admitted. He burst out laughing. He was still laughing when we reached the table. Zeke was in Ethan's old spot, his shoulders rigid and jaw clenched. Riley wasn't with him. I kept my questions to myself as I handed out drinks. I sat down next to Ethan and pulled out my phone.

Secret Admirer: You're different.

I snorted.

Alexis: Not by much. TTYL

Dealing with the girls and Dylan just took away any energy I had. I was tired and ready to go home. I gave Ethan my drink.

"Is anyone ready to go home?" I asked, hopefully.

"I can give you a ride," Ryan offered from inside the booth. Zeke got to his feet and picked up his jacket.

"Come on Lexie, I'll take you home," Zeke said, already moving towards the crowd. I grabbed my coat, thanked Ryan, and said goodbye to everyone before I followed. When I caught up to Zeke, I snagged his belt so I didn't lose him without even thinking about it. His hand reached back and took mine as we made our way through the crowd. Instead of heading to the front, Zeke took me to the side patio door. We walked out and slipped on our jackets on our way to his black '97 Jeep Cherokee. He was quiet as we pulled out of the lot and got onto the highway. We were silent most of the drive.

"What happened? You seemed okay earlier," He asked, his voice quiet. I sighed.

"On my way to get drinks, I ran into the three bitches of the North." I looked over to him. "They insulted me by the way."

He shook his head. "Anyone else mess with you today?"

"Ran into Dylan twice today," I grumbled. Zeke looked over at me before looking back at the road.

"How'd that go?" He asked his voice deeper than usual.

"As you'd expect, Ethan got me out of there before I started yelling at him," I admitted. He cursed.

"Lexie, if you want us to deal with him, we will," Zeke offered. "I'll make it real clear to him to leave you alone."

"I can handle Dylan," I assured him. "Besides if it came to that I'd let you know." He just grunted in response. I looked over at him and asked, "What happened with Riley?" His hands on the wheel tightened until his knuckles were white.

"We're fighting," He admitted. "She got a ride home with her friends." I looked back out the window.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked, gently. He scoffed.

"No, I don't." His voice told me not to push it so I let it go. I reached over and gave his arm a squeeze before looking back out at the trees. We were almost back to town when my phone rang. The caller ID said it was Tara, I didn't even know she had my number.

"Tara?" There was loud background music and voices.

"Lexie, I need a favor," Tara said. Her voice strained, my stomach knotted.

"What's going on?" I demanded. Zeke looked over at me, frowning.

"I got a ride with my friends to the party out at the Thompson house," Tara said, her voice was still strained. "There's a guy here that won't leave me alone, can you come get me? Please?" Her voice was scared. I'd never heard her sound that way. I pulled the phone away from my mouth.

"Tara is in trouble at the Thompson house," I told Zeke. He accelerated.

"I know where that is. It should be ten minutes," Zeke assured me his voice hardening. I brought the phone back to my mouth.

"We're ten minutes out, Tara," I told her calmly. "Stay with your friends, don't go to the bathroom alone and stay in sight of everyone. Got it?"

"Yeah, got it," Tara's voice was stronger, more her. "Thanks." Tara hung up. I cursed as I put my phone away.

"What happened?" Zeke asked.

"Some guy won't leave her alone and her friends drove so she can't leave," I bit out. My knee started bouncing. Zeke sped up even more, adrenaline raced through me. Tara and I didn't really get along, for her to call me for help meant it had to be something bad. Zeke sped through the curves in the road and blasted through town without any trouble.

We made it to the Thompson house in eight minutes. Zeke parked the Jeep behind all the other cars. We both got out and hurried toward the house, Zeke took my hand and led me through the crowd. The Thompson house was big and packed with people. The longer it took to find Tara the more worried I became. Finally, I spotted her at the end of a hallway. She was standing in the corner with a tall guy towering over her. His brown hair was sweaty and his shoulders were broad. He had to be around Asher's size.

"Zeke, over there." I got his attention and pointed. We both watched as Tara tried to walk out of the corner only for the guy to block her, he moved closer until she was practically pinned in the corner. Zeke dropped my hand and strode down the hallway with me one step behind.

"Leave me alone," Tara told the guy, her voice shaking. Zeke grabbed the guy's arm and jerked him away from my cousin. I grabbed Tara then pulled her behind me and out of the line of fire.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? Cornering a girl like that?" Zeke growled. The guy pushed back but Zeke was stronger, he kept the guy against the wall. I turned to Tara and moved her further down the hallway.

"Tara, what did he do? Who is that?" I asked. Tara's hands were shaking.

"Darren Cross. He-he kept saying gross stuff and kept touching me. I told him to stop but he didn't listen," Tara said, crossing her arms over her chest and hugging herself.

"When a girl says stop, you stop, motherfucker!" Zeke snapped. He was furious.

"What did he touch?" I asked, bluntly. She met my eyes before looking away.

"My hair, my face, and my leg. He just wouldn't leave me alone," Tara said. My temper sparked, I wanted to hit the fucker. I turned to Zeke.

"He kept touching her, Zeke," I announced. Zeke punched the guy. Darren cried out and clutched his bleeding nose. He started to slide down the wall but Zeke grabbed him by the throat and pinned him there.

"If you ever fucking touch Tara again or even come near her. I'll crush your throat under my boot," Zeke snarled in Darren's face. Darren's dark eyes grew wide. "Understand?"

"Got it," Darren said painfully.

"Good, now apologize to her," Zeke growled, his fingers tightening. Darren's gaze went to Tara and I.

"Sorry," Darren bit out. Zeke punched him one more time and let him drop to the floor. Zeke stepped back. Darren just groaned against the wall.

"Lexie, get her to the car," Zeke ordered. I didn't argue. I took Tara's hand, lead her through the party, and out of the house. I knew Zeke was just a step behind us. Tara was quiet all the way to the car. I opened the back door for her and she slid in with tears running down her face. I handed her some tissues before I closed the door. I climbed into the front seat. Zeke started the car, peeled out of the driveway, and onto the highway. I turned around in my seat.

"What happened?" I asked, gently. Tara wiped her face before answering.

"My friend Lane was sober driver tonight so we all took her car," Tara began. "We were having a good time when Jason and his friends showed up. Darren wouldn't leave me alone." Tara shook her head. "He wanted to go upstairs and my friends were no help. They kept saying, 'Go, he's a football player.'" I cursed.

"They told you sleep with him just because he was a football player?" I asked, not quite believing this. Tara nodded. "Un-fucking believable."

"There was no way that was happening," Tara pointed out. "I told him to back off but he didn't."

"I'm glad you called, Tara," I said, adamantly. She looked up from her lap and met my eyes.

"Really?" She asked uncertainly.

"Yeah," I gave her a small smile; she gave me one back.

"Thanks, Lexie," Tara said.

"Tara, I want you to show up to the gym on Monday," Zeke announced, his eyes still on the road. "We'll teach you some basic self-defense." His voice told us not to argue. Tara nodded as she looked out the window. I turned in my seat and looked at Zeke.

"I think Isaac would be good to teach her," I suggested. Zeke nodded.

"That's what I was thinking. He's good at laying out the basics," Zeke agreed. The rest of the drive was quiet. When Zeke pulled up to Rory's house he parked the car, I ignored the ghosts on the front lawn.

"Thank you, Zeke," Tara said from the back seat. I blinked. That was the first-time Tara ever spoke to Zeke let alone acknowledged him.

"If you need help Tara, you call. Don't hesitate, don't worry about being wrong, you call. And we'll come running," Zeke said, his voice gruff.

"We?" Tara asked.

"Give me your phone," Zeke demanded as he held his hand out over his shoulder. Tara handed him her phone in its purple case. I smiled to myself as I watched him punch in a bunch of numbers. When he was done, he handed the phone back to Tara. "Send a text to the group named backup. And we'll all head straight to you," Zeke told her.

"Thank you," Tara said again, her voice quiet.

"No problem," Zeke answered. Tara got out of the car and headed inside. I sighed deeply.

"Well, tonight sucked," I announced. Zeke chuckled.

"Mine got better, I got to hit someone," Zeke said as he smirked at me. I snorted.

"Damn, maybe I should have taken a swing too," I pointed out. Zeke laughed.

"Maybe," He agreed.

"Is she going to have Asher's number now?" I asked. He chuckled.

"No, I made it so she had to do a group text and couldn't tell which number is whose," He admitted.

"You sneaky bastard," I grinned at him. He snorted. Then I had to ask. "You're fighting with Riley a lot lately, aren't you?" Zeke rested his head against the headrest.

"Yeah."

"What about?" I asked, gently. He shook his head.

"Don't want to talk about it yet," He said, bluntly.

"Okay." I was about to open the door when he grabbed my hand. I looked up to meet those sky-blue eyes.

"But when I do, I'll let you know," He assured me. I gave him a smile and his hand a squeeze.

"Alright." I reached over and gave him a big hug. The smell of engine grease and leather filled my nose. I took a deep breath. He gave me a big squeeze and kissed my temple before letting me go. "Night Zeke."

"Night Lexie." I pushed through the ghosts as usual. You'd think they'd learn not to swarm me but they haven't. Zeke waited until I was inside before he drove off. I closed and locked the door. When I turned, Rory was looking at me.

"Why was Tara crying?" He asked his voice hard. I walked over and sat in the arm chair closest to the door with tissues at my nose. Hades jumped off the couch and came over to jump into my lap. I grunted under the weight as he settled.

"Zeke was driving me home when she called, some guy was giving her a hard time at a party and her friends weren't helping," I began, keeping my voice down. Rory's jaw clenched. I explained what happened at the party, how Zeke had punched the guy, and what Tara said happened. "I'm taking her to get some basic self-defense with the guys on Monday." Rory nodded, his jaw still clenched. I checked my tissues, the bleeding had stopped.

"Who was the kid?" Rory asked his voice harsh.

"Darren Cross," I answered. Rory nodded his eyes unfocused. "Zeke gave him a clear message." Rory nodded again. Then his eyes focused on me.

"What about you?" Rory asked. "How's the Veil work?" I sighed.

"I'm working on it," I said vaguely. Rory nodded. "Speaking of..." I gave Hades a nudge and he slid off my lap to the floor. I went up to my room and changed into my jammies, black sweats and black shirt.

I laid down on my bed next to Hades and closed my eyes, I sank to my center quickly. It was the same as usual, burnt and dying. I lay down on my back and looked up. The Way was still boiling and streaked with green. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and I thought about the guys. We were sitting at the dinner table at my house doing homework. I had my headphones on and I was getting into the music. Nickelback's "Savin' Me" started in my ears. Forgetting that the guys were there, I started singing. I was halfway through the song before I looked up, the guys had stopped doing their homework and were watching me. Every one of them with a shit-eating grin on their faces, I took my earbuds out and pointed at them.

"Not. A. Word," I threatened. They busted out laughing as I buried my face in my hands and groaned. Ethan put his arm around me and got control of his laughter first.

"We love hearing you sing Beautiful," He said. "It makes us smile." I dropped my hands to glare at him. He burst out laughing again. I just rolled my eyes and went back to my homework with a warm face. I remembered that feeling of belonging from that night. I ignored the hot wind that started

to blow through me and focused on stretching my barriers across the Veil. When I reached the walls, I paused. Don't fight it, Lexie. I took a deep breath and visualized that gold shimmer climbing the walls. The walls were disgusting. That thick, clinging, goo filled me with anger but I didn't fight it. I just accepted that it was there and there was nothing I could do about it yet. It filled my mind as I pushed higher, then I reached the sky. Energy was liked the wind and it batted at me hard, I struggled to hold on to my position but as soon as I tried to strengthen it, I lost it. My barriers slammed closed leaving me gasping in the dirt. Fuck! I rubbed my eyes and face in frustration. The energy was rough as hell. I closed my eyes and pulled myself out.

I was lying in my bed with Hades' big blue eyes watching me.

"This is getting annoying, baby," I told him. He simply closed his eyes and went to sleep. I soon did the same.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 6

Sunday Morning

I pulled into the circular drive in front of Miles' house just in time to watch Isaac bolt out the front door. I put the Blazer in park as I watched him run towards me. Asher came running out of the front door with yellow goop covering half his head and one shoulder.

"Isaac!" Asher shouted as he ran after him. I shut off the truck and got out in time for Isaac to hide behind me.

"Save me," Isaac begged as he rested his hands on my shoulders and pulled me between him and an approaching Asher.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"A pudding filled balloon," Isaac admitted without shame. "The shit was annoying me last night." I snorted.

"I don't think hiding behind me is going to help," I pointed out. Asher stopped directly across from me, close enough that his chest was almost in my face.

"Let her go and you can have a head start," He snapped. I snickered as Isaac's grip on me tightened.

"Oh, no. I'm not that stupid," Isaac countered emphatically. Isaac wrapped his arm around my waist and picked me up. I started giggling as he carried me with him backing away. Asher followed at a steady pace as Isaac walked backwards with me around the Blazar. I didn't bother fighting it, Isaac needed a little help and I was probably the only one who could.

"Put her down," Asher warned, still stalking us.

"Uh-uh. Red's saving my ass," Isaac shot back as he walked backwards towards the front door. I kept giggling.

"Put her down or else," Asher threatened.

"Or else what? If I've got Red, you won't touch me," Isaac countered. Asher smirked.

"Zeke!" Asher shouted. "Isaac's using Ally as a shield!" Isaac cursed.

"Oh, you might want to run," I warned Isaac.

"Uh-uh, we're going to have to live like this now," Isaac announced. I snickered.

"That's going to make using the bathroom difficult," I pointed out.

"We'll manage," Isaac countered as the front door opened. He turned until we could both see Asher and Zeke. Zeke's eyes ran over us then back to Isaac.

"Put her down," Zeke warned in his deep, menacing voice.

"Can you run carrying me?" I asked, innocently.

"We might have to find out," Isaac whispered back. I bit back a laugh. That's when Zeke and Asher struck. Zeke grabbed Isaac and broke his grip while Asher grabbed me and took me out of Isaac's arms. Asher kept me off the ground while Zeke got Isaac in a head lock.

"Give him a head start at least," I managed, still cracking up as Asher set me down.

"That was only if he let you go," Asher pointed out as Zeke let go of Isaac. Isaac took off and Asher was hot on his heels. I was still chuckling as we headed inside. We found Miles and Ethan in the kitchen.

"Morning guys," I said cheerfully as I leaned onto the breakfast bar. Ethan leaned over and kissed my cheek.

"Morning, Beautiful," Ethan said, making me smile.

"Morning, Lexie," Miles called from by the coffee maker. "So, Isaac was using you as a human shield?" I smiled.

"Yeah, it worked for a bit," I admitted as I grabbed a plate and started dishing up my breakfast. Then I caught Zeke adding pancakes to his plate. "Hey, I'm not eating pancakes, you're not eating pancakes," I scolded. Zeke glared at me; I smiled. Zeke had been hounding me about my diet since

October and I ended up losing more weight than it was healthy for me. In an attempt to gain some back, I made a deal with Zeke in December that if he eats badly, I get to eat badly. It has mostly tapered off now since I wasn't trying to gain anymore. But it was still a deal we had going and quite frankly, I liked to give him a hard time by using it.

"I need more carbs than you do just to maintain muscle, Lexie. Besides, Asher made them with that whole-wheat flour," Zeke pointed out. I eyed him.

"Fine, but you have to have turkey bacon or turkey sausage. No pork," I countered.

"Deal." Zeke added pancakes to his plate and I didn't say a word this time. There was shouting out back. I moved to a window with Ethan while Miles and Zeke looked out another. Asher was catching up to Isaac. They were running around the pool when Asher made a flying tackle on Isaac. They both hit the water, I cursed, it was freezing outside and the guys were soaked now.

"Don't worry, Lexie, it's a heated pool," Miles said. "They'll be fine until they get out."

"Let's get the towels," Ethan said sighing. Ethan and I went and grabbed several large towels for both guys from the bathrooms. We walked outside to find the boys in the shallow end, neck deep in the water. Miles and Zeke were there laughing at them. I held up a couple towels.

"Alright boys, make a run for it," I said, smirking. Asher climbed the stairs first and almost immediately started shivering. I threw a towel over his shoulders and handed him the other as he ran into the house. I was laughing as Isaac did the same. We headed back into the house.

"Are they going to be okay?" I asked while I walked back to the breakfast bar.

"Yeah, they weren't out in the cold as long as you were. They should be able to get into the showers," Miles reassured me. I sent him a smile before getting my coffee then headed into the living room.

We were almost done with breakfast by the time Asher and Isaac came downstairs. Asher was in Bugs Bunny pajama bottoms, a white t-shirt, and

a blue blanket wrapped around him. With his wet hair, he was adorable. He sat on the couch to my right.

"Shit, remind me never to do that again," Asher grumbled.

"At least we didn't have to strip you down in the kitchen," I pointed out. He huffed in agreement. Isaac shuffled in wearing green sweats and an orange long sleeve shirt. He had a lime green comforter wrapped around him. He grumbled as he walked around the couches to sit on my left. He immediately laid his head in my lap.

"I'm freezing, Red," Isaac whined. I rubbed my hand up and down his arm and ran my fingers through his hair.

"I have no sympathy for you," I told him bluntly. "You soaked me outside remember?" Isaac kept his eyes closed and nodded.

"Really, really sorry about that," Isaac mumbled as he rolled to his side and buried his forehead against my stomach. The poor guy was curled up in a ball. The others chuckled, Miles shook his head and got to his feet to walk into the kitchen.

"I don't think cuddling with me is going to make you warmer," I told Isaac. Isaac made a humph noise.

"It can't hurt," Isaac countered. I rubbed my hand up and down his back while he snuggled into me.

"Is it working?" Asher asked. I looked at him to see if he's serious. He was.

"Kinda," Isaac answered.

"I'll take kinda," Asher mumbled as he lay down. Surprised, I went still as he put his head on my other leg. I rolled my eyes as I stopped playing with Isaac's hair and rubbed Asher's arm. I tried to rub some warmth back in their arms. "Yeah, it's working," Asher announced. I smiled to myself. I was shaking my head when Miles walked in with two steaming mugs. He noticed the guys' heads in my lap.

"Sit up, this will work better," Miles said as he set the mugs on the coffee table.

"What is it?" Asher asked.

"Hot chocolate," Miles answered. Asher mumbled something but didn't move.

"You go first, this is working fine for me," Isaac said absently. I sighed.

"Boys, drink your hot chocolate," I ordered. Isaac groaned as he sat up. Asher got up without complaint. They drank as conversation went back to normal. Soon the boys got warm and were eating breakfast.

We were talking about what to do next weekend when my phone rang. It was Dylan. I cursed as I got to my feet and walked out into the long hall that ran the length of the house.

"Yeah?"

"Hey," Dylan's husky voice ran down my spine. Only it didn't make me shiver anymore.

"Why are you calling?" I asked, politely. I was tired of the calls, the emails, and the texts. I was just tired of him.

"I wanted to finish our conversation from last night," Dylan said, his voice growing hard. "Ethan should have stayed out of it." That was it.

"There was no conversation last night, Dylan," I said bluntly. "You talked and when I tried to say something, you talked over me. That was a monologue."

"You never let me finish what I'm saying. I only ever get halfway," Dylan shot back.

"Because you've said it all before," I countered, rubbing my temples with one hand. "You've said it over and over. How many times am I supposed to listen to the same fucking speech before you're done saying it?"

"You're being unreasonable. No one's perfect, Lexie. I made a mistake, I know. But we had something pretty great." His voice was sharp now. Good, I was ready for this fight.

"Yeah, I thought so too. Then you said that I had too many problems for you to take care of all the time," I shot back my throat tightening. "You knew that would hurt and you said it anyway."

"Sunshine-" I hung up the phone. I managed to not throw the phone against the wall. Ten points for restraint! My phone rang again, it was Dylan, this time I sent it to voicemail. Still angry, I walked back into the living room. All eyes moved to me. I sighed as I made my way back to my spot.

"So, besides Asher, how much did you hear?" I asked.

"You weren't exactly quiet, Beautiful," Ethan pointed out. I snorted as I put my phone on the coffee table.

"Sorry," I said. My phone vibrated. I didn't bother to check, I knew it was Dylan. I rested my elbows on my knees and hid my face in my hands. Someone rubbed their hand up and down my back. It was comforting right now.

"What did Dylan say?" Miles asked his voice soothing. I sighed.

"The same old I'm sorry, I made a mistake," I explained. "This time he said I'm being unreasonable." The guys all cursed, well, except Miles. He never cursed. My phone vibrated again, I ignored it.

"You're not being unreasonable, Lexie," Miles told me, his voice sincere. I lifted my head and gave him a small smile.

"I know I'm not. I just need to send him a message in a big way," I said before looking over to Ethan. "We're playing next weekend at Vegabond. Do you know any great fuck-off songs?" Everyone chuckled as Ethan grinned. Over the next two hours, we scoured YouTube for 'I'm not taking you back' songs. I found the perfect one to drive it home to Dylan that we were over. Suddenly, I was looking forward to singing next week.

A few hours later and a fresh set of clothes for Isaac, we left the others behind. Isaac had been saying he wanted to kidnap me for a couple weeks now. Isaac and I unsupervised? Hell yeah! I drove and followed Isaac's instructions. When he told me to go off the main road and onto snow-covered gravel one I thought he was nuts, but he knew the area and I had four-wheel drive if we needed it. We ended up parked off the road across from a large, treeless hill. Several other people were here riding sleds and inner tubes down the hill. I hopped out and walked around the truck in time to watch Isaac pull out a plastic sled big enough for both of us.

"We're really going sledding?" I asked.

"Hell yeah," He said, grinning at me. I smiled as I closed the back of the Blazer then followed him. It took a bit but we reached the top of the hill. Isaac set the sled down and held on to the back. "Get on, Red." I shook my head and sat down in the front. Isaac dropped behind me but kept his feet in the snow at the sides of the sled. "Okay Red, do you know how to steer?" He asked. I snorted.

"I've never been on a sled in my entire life," I pointed out. He chuckled as his arm wrapped around my waist.

"Okay, scoot closer to me." I scooted until my butt was against him. He bent his knees and put them on the sled next to my legs. "To steer, we're going to lean the way we want to go," He said in my ear. "Hold on to the rope." I grabbed the rope.

"What does it do?" I asked.

"Not a damn thing," Isaac announced, laughing as he pushed us off. We started slow but picked up speed fast. Soon enough the wind was rushing by and we started to skid to the left. Isaac's arms around me made me lean to the right effectively taking us out of the skid, it was amazing. I was laughing as we slowed to a stop some distance from the bottom. I leaned back against Isaac and looked up at him.

"That was awesome," I stated. He chuckled.

"You've never gone sledding before? How is that even possible?" He asked.

"I've never lived anywhere with snow," I pointed out.

He snorted. "Want to go again?"

"Yes, please." I sat up, got off the sled, and to my feet. Isaac grabbed the rope of the sled in one hand and took my hand in his other as we headed back up the hill.

We were on our tenth trip down when we hit a bump and crashed. I hit my side and rolled a couple times. I laid in the snow on my back laughing as I tried to catch my breath, Isaac hurried over to check on me. "You good, Red?" He asked, smiling down at me. I nodded. Laughing, he helped me to my feet.

"Hey Isaac!" A boy's voice shouted. We both turned to see a guy hurry over with a blonde mohawk and a nose ring. He was followed by two others pulling four inner tubes up the slope.

"Josh," Isaac greeted the guy. "How's it going man?" The blonde, Josh, grabbed Isaac's hand and pulled him into a bro hug, it was very macho. As Isaac stepped back from Josh, Josh was looking me over. It irked me.

"Same old," Josh said, a grin spreading across his face. "Who is this?" Before I could even respond Isaac punched him in the chest, making Josh look at him.

"Don't even fucking think about it," Isaac warned. "Try to touch her and you'll get your head ripped off."

"By who?" Josh scoffed.

"Me for starters," I pointed out.

"Then me," Isaac said. "Then my brother, Asher, and then for dessert, Zeke."

Josh's eyes grew wide as he looked back to me. "Damn, you've got a lot of bodyguards."

"That's just assuming you live past me," I said sweetly with a smile. Josh chuckled.

"Alright," Josh looked to Isaac. "I like her, she'll fit right in." He pointed over his shoulder at the other two as they pulled the tubes up the hill. "Come on, we saw you were here and brought you a tube." Josh headed back towards his friends. Isaac stopped me from following.

"Don't stand next to Josh, he has boundary issues," He warned. I raised an eyebrow.

"How so?" I asked. He sighed.

"You know how Ethan and I are with you now?" He asked. I nodded. "Like that, but he'll know you for less than an hour," Both my eyebrows went up. Damn, that is boundary issues.

"Gotcha," I said. He nodded then led me over to his friends. We reached them, Isaac took one of the tube the rest of the way up. When we reached the top, Isaac introduced me to the other two.

"Lexie, this is Eve," Isaac said as he pointed to the cute pixie faced girl with long bubble gum pink hair. Her eyes were darkly lined and her lip ring glinted at me.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"You too," Eve said as she looked between Isaac and me. "Are you two dating?"

"Nah, she's one of my best friends," Isaac said instantly. I looked at him with fake hurt.

"What? I thought this was a date," I said dramatically. "You bastard!" Isaac burst out laughing. I smiled as he calmed down. He then gestured to the other guy, who towered over the others. His hair was green and his brown eyes were friendly.

"Lexie, that's Wyatt," Isaac said.

Wyatt tilted his chin toward me. "Hey."

"Hi," I replied.

"Okay, everyone load up!" Josh ordered. Eve and Wyatt snickered as they took their tubes. Eve laid down head first and Josh pushed her off. She spun down the hill at high speed. I wondered if she was going to be sick. When she was half way down Wyatt grabbed his tube, ran, and landed on it. He flew off down the hill heading straight for Eve. By now Eve had slowed enough that Wyatt hit her. They both bounced off into different directions. I could hear them laughing from up here. Isaac set the tube down and climbed on. Then he gestured for me to sit next to him. I climbed on and settled in. He wrapped his arm around me and looked up at Josh.

"Give us a shove, man," Isaac said. Josh shook his head. He had a disappointed look on his face as he pushed. We flew down the hill, spinning as we went. I was laughing when we hit a bump and caught air. I barely had time to realize I was in the air before I hit the snow and was rolling down the hill. When I stopped, I was out of breath and dizzy. I sat up carefully. Isaac was a few feet from me still on his back, he lifted his arms.

"Yeah! Ramp time!" Isaac shouted. The others agreed. Soon we were up and building a ramp to tube off of. With all of us working, it didn't take long. Isaac went down first on his back. He caught major air and was off the tube before he even landed. He hit the snow hard, I groaned in sympathy.

"Don't worry, he's fine," Josh said. I watched as Isaac got up, grabbed the tube, and came back up the hill with a big smile on his face. My stomach unknotted. Eve and Josh went by the time Isaac reached me.

"Are you okay?" I asked. He smirked.

"Hell, yeah. Your turn, Red," Isaac announced as he handed me the tube. I climbed on as Isaac held onto the tube. I looked up at him. He was upside down to me.

"Don't spin me," I said. He looked down at me and smirked. Oh shit. "Please?" He sighed.

"Fine," He grumbled before shoving me off. The wind rushed by my ears. My heart raced as the ramp came up. Then I was flying, I hit the snow with a grunt and rolled, I groaned. Okay, that one hurt. I got to my feet and grabbed the tube in time to see Isaac shoot off the ramp face first. My heart clenched as he flipped completely over and landed back on his stomach again. Ouch, I left my tube and hurried to him.

"Isaac?" I called, my voice worried. When I reached him he coughed deeply. "You okay?" Groaning, he rolled onto his back. A big smile spread across his face.

"How many times did I flip?" He asked. I smacked his shoulder.

"Once, don't try for more," I told him. He just snickered as he got up. We walked back up the hill together. Over the next couple hours, I watched as Isaac's stunts got crazier while his friends said nothing about it. In fact, Josh encouraged him. I had stopped going down the hill a half hour ago, because my body was already aching. Isaac grabbed the tube and headed for the start spot.

"Let's try some surf tubing," Isaac said as he put the tube down. What? The others chuckled as Josh and Wyatt held the tube. Isaac stood on the tube and posed. Before I could stop him, the others shoved him. My chest was tight as he raced down the hill. Tell me he wasn't... Shit. Isaac hit the

ramp and he went flying, spun several times, then landed in a snow bank. My heart clenched as I waited to see him move, he didn't.

"He's fine," Josh said dismissively. I barely stopped myself from decking him. I grabbed Isaac's sled, got on, and shoved off. My heart was racing. When I got close, I dropped off the side of the sled and slid to a stop. I was up and running to Isaac just as he started to move.

"Isaac!" I reached him as he sat up. He shook his head and blinked hard. I dropped to my knees in front of him. I held his jaw and forced him to look at me, he blinked at me with clear eyes.

"How much air did I get?" He asked. I wanted to hit him.

"How much air?" I all but shouted, "Are you fucking kidding me?" He chuckled with a big smile on his face.

"Did I scare you?" He teased. I really wanted to hit him. I dropped my hands from his face.

"Yeah, you fucking did," I snapped before moving to my feet. He started laughing but I didn't find it so funny. He groaned as he got to his feet. The others came down the hill, laughing. Josh was off his tube and smiling as he came over.

"Told ya he was fine," Josh taunted. I shot him a look. His smile dimmed a bit. "You caught major air, man." Isaac sighed.

"Yeah, that would have really hurt if I hadn't landed in the snow bank," Isaac admitted. The others chuckled.

"Come on. Let's do one more thing," Josh announced. I grabbed the sled while Isaac got the tube. We followed the others to Josh's brown truck. Isaac threw the tube into the back along with Eve's. Josh reached in and pulled out some rope. He began tying it to the bumper.

"What are you doing?" Eve asked. Josh snickered.

"Extreme tubing," Josh announced. Something dark filled Isaac's eyes, it was so faint I almost didn't notice it.

"Hell yeah!" Isaac shouted. I watched as they tied a tube to the end of ten feet of rope. I realized what they were doing. Oh, hell no! I headed for Isaac. They were arguing over who was going to go first when I reached them.

"Isaac. No," I stated simply. Isaac looked at me surprised. Josh started snickering.

"Oh, looks like your girl is stopping your fun," Josh taunted. I looked at him.

"At least he's got a girl," I shot back. The others chuckled as Josh smirked. I looked back to Isaac. "This is crazy," I pointed out.

"It'll be fine-"

"Bullshit," I snapped. "You're going to hit a tree or worse a car."

Isaac turned to me and sighed. "Red, we've done it before. It's perfectly safe," He said. I couldn't believe him.

"Isaac-"

"I'll be back in ten minutes," Isaac told me moving towards the tube. I blocked him.

"It's perfectly safe, huh?" I asked innocently. Isaac smiled he probably thought I was agreeing.

"Yeah, we've done it dozens of times," He assured me. I bit down my temper and smiled sweetly.

"Well, if it's really safe then you won't mind me going first," I stated simply. Isaac went still. "I mean. If it's safe enough for you, it should be fine, right?" Isaac frowned. I looked over at Josh.

"I'm going first," I stated as I went to get on the tube. Josh headed for the door to his truck smiling. I settled into the tube, hoping I wasn't making a big mistake. The truck started. Shit, I was doing this. The truck started to pull forward as my heart slammed in my chest.

"Stop!" Isaac shouted. The truck stopped instantly. Isaac reached down and lifted me into his arms and off the tube. "You're not doing this, Lexie." He set me back down my feet but I refused to let go of his shirt.

"Why?" I asked directly. His eyes were storming as he looked in my eyes.

"Because..."

"It's too dangerous for me?" I asked. He nodded. "Then maybe you shouldn't be doing it either." He looked at the tube and truck, the darkness in his eyes fading.

"Alright, Red," He said. "You win." I let go of his shirt but took his hand in mine. Isaac looked over my head. "I'm out, man."

"Seriously?" Josh scoffed. "You're letting your girl tell you what to do." I turned around and glared at Josh.

"In this case, she's right," Isaac told him. He started laughing.

"Ah, man, you're pussy whipped and you're not even dating her," Josh said between laughs.

"Why don't you go first, Josh?" I asked pointedly. Josh stopped laughing. "Isaac will drive." Josh's smile faded then he shrugged.

"No one drives my truck but me," Josh stated. I snorted.

"Let's tie it to my truck," I offered, knowing that it wasn't going to happen. "I'll drive," I added. Josh came around the truck, picked up the tube, and threw it in the back.

"I've got to get home," Josh said as he headed back toward the driver's door. I shook my head as I squeezed his hand.

"Come on, Cookie Monster," I said. Isaac squeezed my hand as we headed for my truck. The drive back to his house was quiet. I was just grateful that he had listened to me. But it bothered me that it had been close. I pulled up to the house and parked. Before I could ask if he was alright he leaned over and gave me a raspberry on my cheek.

"See ya later, Red," He said before jumping out to head in the house. I watched him walk away as worry sparked in the back of my mind.

Thankfully it was too early for the ghosts to group onto the lawn. I could get inside with no problem for once. Hades and Rory were on the couch. Hades jumped off the couch to greet me.

"Hey baby, I've got work with Miles today. Then I'll take you for your walk. Sound good?" I asked the dog. Hades licked my hand in response.

"How was hanging out with Isaac?" Rory asked as he stretched.

"Good, we went sledding. I fell off the tube a few hundred times," I said as I got to my feet. "Miles is coming over to do research. Can you let him in while I change?"

"Yeah, no problem," Rory said as he changed the channel. I hurried upstairs with Hades on my heels. When I stepped into my room my computer was on. Had Tara been in my room? I went to my computer and checked to see if anything was open, nothing, huh. I closed my door and quickly got changed into dry clothes. I pulled on blue jeans, a black cami, and an oversized purple sweater. I brushed out my hair and pulled it into a loose braid. I did my usual light make-up, telling myself that it was because I was going out later. Yeah, I lied to myself. I was headed downstairs when girls' giggling reached me, I moved faster. Tara and a couple of her friends were in the dining room area talking over something. It sounded like it was about Winter Formal decorations. Miles was sitting in the armchair facing me. He was bent over petting Hades. I looked to Rory.

"Um, Rory, can we-?"

"Yeah, go on up," Rory said immediately. "Leave the door open."

"Thanks, Rory," I turned to Miles. "Come on Miles, we're working upstairs." Miles got to his feet and picked up the bag of papers that he brought. I walked in ahead of Miles to make sure I had put away my clothes. Thankfully, I had. I closed my computer and moved it out of the way. "You can have the desk if you want," I offered, thinking he'd be more comfortable than if he sat on the bed.

"Thank you," Miles said as I sat on my bed, crossing my legs under me. Miles set down the big bag and opened it. "Okay, I've got four reports back so far and they're not small." Miles handed me a packet two inches thick. I whistled.

"That's a lot of information," I said, impressed. Miles chuckled. Hades climbed up on to my bed and laid back down.

"I was very motivating when I hired them," He assured me. I smiled as I moved until my back was against the wall at the head of my bed. I bent my knees and put my packet on my legs. This one was from a Graduate student at NYU.

"Thank you, Miles," I said before looking up to meet his gaze. "You don't know how much it means to me that you had people trying to find answers."

He gave me a warm smile. "You're very welcome," He said in that silky-smooth voice of his. I opened the packet and started reading. Over the next two hours, I was taking notes and marking pages that I thought might help. Rory checked on us once, but I barely registered that he was at the door. Apparently, the NYU student had looked to the practice of Voodoo for protection. I found lots of information and several seals that looked promising. It was on hour three what I found what I was looking for.

"Miles," I said, not quite believing it. He looked up from his file. "I think I have something." He slid the chair over to the bed as I handed him the report and pointed to the section I had highlighted.

"Voodoo?" He asked absently as he read the entire page. "Yeah, that religion has a relationship with the dead like no other. They believe that there is an invisible world and a visible one. That when you die, you just pass to the invisible world."

"That sounds familiar," Miles said as he looked over the page with a smile. "There's a protection ward." Miles said, surprised.

"There are several kinds in that report," I said as I scooted to the end of my bed and took the report back. Miles scooted closer while I flipped through to my ear-marked pages. Wintergreen tickled my nose as I found what I was looking for. "Look, against the dead, against evil and general protection," I pointed out the three different elaborate symbols.

"We can give it a try," Miles said. I had opened my mouth to say something when my phone rang. It was Zeke.

"Hey."

"I need a favor," Zeke said, his voice full of pain.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" I asked, instantly worried.

"Yeah, I tweaked my back at work," Zeke grunted. "Can I get that massage?" I sighed in relief. I thought he was in a ditch somewhere.

"Yeah, I'll head over now."

"Thanks." Zeke hung up. I looked at Miles.

"Zeke hurt his back. He's finally hurting enough that he's asked for help." I said as I got to my feet and went to my closet.

"Alright, I'll just leave you with one of the other reports." Miles offered as he started putting away his two files.

"I'll look at them after I get back from Zeke's." I said as I finished putting on my shoes. We both headed downstairs. When we got to the door I turned to Rory. "Rory, Zeke hurt himself. He needs a hand, care if I go?" I asked. Rory's eyes narrowed on me as his face filled with concern.

"What happened?" Rory asked immediately. "How hurt is he?"

"He just tweaked his back at work. He's just asking for a little help." I bit back my grin at Rory's worry. He really had adopted the guys as his. At least, that's the way it seemed to me.

"Yeah, go help him out." Rory looked to Miles. "You staying for a bit, Miles?" Miles stiffened as his gaze went to the table full of whispering girls.

"I'm sorry but I've got a project to finish," Miles said, politely. "I appreciate the invitation." Rory sighed.

"I was hoping for some help against the girls," Rory grumbled. We both chuckled. I called to Hades and put his leash on him. We headed outside and out to our cars. Miles gave me a quick hug before heading to his car. I let Hades into the Blazer then drove over to Zeke's.

Zeke's house was cute, there was no other word for it. It was a bungalow cabin crossover with grey shingles and white shutters. It was the complete opposite of Zeke.

I slid out of the Blazer to barking. Tank and Kita were running along the fence barking their hearts out. The wolf hybrids were huge, high energy, and protective, but beautiful. I missed Nadie and Kato, they had been adopted a couple weeks ago. Hades jumped into the snow and walked with me to the front door. I didn't bother to knock, I just stomped my feet to get the snow off my boots and opened the door. Hades immediately started to strain against his leash.

"I'm here!" I shouted. Though I didn't really need to, the house wasn't that big. I was standing in a small dining room with a small white dinner table. There was an archway to the left that led to the kitchen, one ahead, and one to the right that led to the family room. The whole house screamed beach cottage. I still teased Zeke about his cute house.

"Bedroom!" Zeke shouted back. I hung my coat up and let Hades off the leash. The dog hauled ass down the hall across from me. By the time, I reached Zeke's room, I found Zeke lying on the floor on two heating pads while Hades went crazy licking his face. I chuckled as he kept telling Hades to stop. While he struggled with Hades kisses, I peeked around his room. Zeke's room looked lived in, not messy, but not perfect. His queen-sized bed was against the wall across from the door, its black comforter and sheets still messy from this morning. He had a simple dark wood nightstand with a small metal lamp and alarm clock. The desk was next to the door, his keys and wallet already on it. His only window was at the end of the room above his dark wood dresser. The open blinds showed the woods beyond the property. "Stop snooping," Zeke warned. I snorted and looked down at him, Hades had calmed down and was getting scratches from Zeke. The poor guy was still wearing his boots and coveralls from the garage. The sleeves were tied around his waist leaving a tight black t-shirt hugging the muscles of his chest. I forced myself to look at his face.

"I've never been in your room. I get to snoop," I declared smiling at him. He grumbled as I walked in and sat on the end of his bed. "So, what happened?"

Zeke shook his head as he looked at the ceiling. "I was stupid and bent in a bad way to reach a bolt," He grumbled. "I knew I was in trouble when I stood up."

"You kept working 'till the end of your shift, didn't you?" I asked, already knowing I was right. Zeke glared at me, that was answer enough for me. I shook my head. "Are the heating pads helping?"

"A little, I might be able to move now," He admitted.

"Upper back or lower?"

"Mostly upper," He admitted. I pointed to the floor in front of me.

"Get over here," I ordered. He winced and grunted as he sat up. He turned and moved back towards me a bit. "That's good," I told him. He stopped. I hesitated. Zeke had a trigger when his back was touched. All I knew was that it involved memories and it wasn't good. "You ready?" I asked.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yeah."

"Tell me if you need a break," I warned him. He nodded. I slowly put my hands on his shoulders and cursed, they were rock hard. I ran my hands over his back thinking it was mostly his shoulders. It wasn't. His entire back was rock hard and knotted. "Damn Zeke." I started with big, broad strokes to loosen the muscles a little. I had to push harder than I thought to get any kind of result.

"I know," He bit out. It took some time but when his back was a little looser I started working out the knots on his shoulders and neck. He cursed under his breath and shook his head. I stopped for a second, taking my hands off him. "It's fine. Just a flash," He assured me, his voice tense.

"Would it help if I distracted you?" I asked.

"Actually, it might," He said, his voice a little relieved. I started working out the knots on his neck and shoulders while I told him about what Miles and I found in the reports Miles had gotten. We talked about it until I moved my hands between his shoulders. That's when I felt the first ridge under his shirt. I ran my fingers over the area only to find more. They were thick, round, and far part. Then there were long, thin ones. My stomach knotted.

"Zeke?"

"Yeah?" His voice tense.

"Is this scar tissue?" I asked, softly. He sat up straighter as if to pull away. "I'm only asking because if it is, I need to push harder." I waited as he took several deep breaths.

"Push harder," He said, his voice strained, I pressed harder between his shoulder blades and worked on the knots there. He gave a deep groan as the knots started to release, I moved a little further down between shoulder blades and found even more knots.

"Zeke, what's going on? Cause you're worse than Ethan right now," I asked as I focused on working out a big knot. He sighed.

"I'm fighting with Riley," He admitted. "She's pushing again."

"How?" I asked as another knot let go. He groaned as he hung his head. I moved down a little outward from his spine and worked those knots.

"You know I'm not a real affectionate guy, at least in front of other people," He said quietly. I thought about that as I worked. He was affectionate with me, but now that I thought about it, it was always when we were alone. The most affectionate he'd ever been with me in front of the guys was that hug after Mary Summers almost killed me. I knew he only ever called me baby when we were alone. But not being affectionate? I never even noticed it before.

"So, you're not into PDA," I said, focusing on his back again. "What's the problem?"

"Riley is," He grumbled. Oh, that would be a problem. "Not to mention all that dance bullshit."

"You don't want to take her to the dance?" I asked, surprised.

"Not really," He admitted before adding, "I told her I'd take her, but I wouldn't wear a tux." I smiled. Yeah, that sounded like Zeke.

"She didn't like that idea?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"No," He muttered. I felt another big knot go. He groaned then moved his left shoulder around before relaxing again. I went back to work.

"What's she pushing on? The dance or PDA?" I asked, feeling another knot release.

"PDA," He growled.

"Do you want my advice?" I asked as I moved my hands down further between his shoulder blades.

"I wouldn't have mentioned it if I didn't," He pointed out dryly. I smirked.

"I'd say give it a shot. You could start small, like, hold her hand during lunch," I suggested "Then if you really can't get past it, you can tell her you

tried." I started working another knot. He cursed and I stopped. "Did that hurt?"

"No, I just felt that all the way down my shoulder, it feels like my arm is going to break," He grunted. "Don't stop, I'm just going to make noise."

I snickered. "That sounded so dirty," I teased him. He thought about it for a second then started laughing.

"It really did," He admitted still chuckling. I started working on that knot and the area around it. He grunted again. "You think that would work?" He asked.

"It might," I said. "If you try and can't get past it then she'll have to decide if it's something she can deal with." I pushed harder on the big knot and the area around it.

"Fuck, now it's all the way to my hand," He grunted. I smiled to myself.

"Yeah, I think this knot is right on that nerve," I told him absently. "I think it's causing the problem with your shoulder."

"Weirdest fucking feeling ever," He stated. I chuckled as I kept working on his back. After a while his breathing changed.

"Zeke?"

"I've got a couple more minutes," He bit out between clenched teeth. I hurried and got as many knots loosened as I could. It wasn't much longer until he stopped me. "Stop," He growled. I instantly took my hands off him, he was still as a statue. I slid off the bed to sit next to him on the floor. His eyes were closed, his jaw clenched, and his breathing deep and even. I reached over and took one of his clenched hands in mine. His thumb ran over my knuckles absently as he struggled with whatever memories he was dealing with. It took some time, but eventually his grip on my hand loosened. I gave him one more squeeze before letting go. Zeke got to his feet and started stretching. He groaned. "Thanks Lexie, I can actually move again." I got to my feet.

"No problem."

"I'll be out in a minute," He said as he sat down on his bed and started untying his boots. I called Hades and closed Zeke's door behind me. I walked into the living to hear Kita whimpering at the back door. I smiled as I went to let her in. Kita loved Hades, whenever we were over she had to be inside too. The large white dog shot past me and went into the living room. I remembered to step back a second before Tank came sliding into the kitchen. The giant black wolf hybrid slid across the floor on his side till he hit the cabinets. I laughed as he got to his feet and started wagging his tail happily at me. I closed the door, gave him scratches, and love before heading back into the family room. Kita and Hades were making noises at each other, almost as if they were talking. Tank stayed with me.

As Zeke changed, I took the opportunity to check out the photos that were scattered all over the bookcases. Most were of Sylvie and a non-smiling Zeke, then I found a different one. It was in a white, carved, wooden frame that matched the rest of the book case. I smiled. The little boy looked like Zeke, with a cherub face and a big laughing smile. Just behind him was a beautiful woman with long black hair and big brown eyes. There was something about her that made her face glow in the sunlight as she smiled down at the little boy. Zeke was in front of her in dirty blue jeans and a dusty blue shirt with his arms open wide and balancing on one foot. From the pine trees, it looked like they were on a hiking path somewhere. I was still looking at it when Zeke came into the living room. He turned the corner and stopped, his gaze went to me then the photo, and back.

"Little Zeke," I teased with a big smile. "You were so cute." He grumbled wordlessly. "Who's with you in this photo?" I asked. He gave me a sad half grin as he looked at the picture.

"That's my Mom. Sylvie's her sister," He said, his voice warm. He'd never told me anything about his Mom before.

"She's beautiful."

"Yeah, she was," He said quietly, looking at the photo.

"Where are the pictures of your dad?" I asked absently as I looked over the rest of the case again in case I missed one. When I looked back to him I went still. Zeke's face was hard, his eyes burning on me. "What?" I asked instantly, my gut knotted. Zeke closed his eyes and ran his hand through his hair.

"I forgot that you don't know," He muttered before walking further into the room.

"Know what?" I watched him walk across the room to stand near the couch. He looked back at me, his face strained

"I don't have photos of my father anymore," He said, his voice hard. His gaze went back to the photo on the bookcase, "Because, he killed her."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 7

Sunday Afternoon

"He what?" I asked, not sure I heard him right. Zeke's shoulders were tense as he dropped his hand from his hair, his haunted eyes met mine.

"He killed my mom and then he killed himself," He said bluntly. As I tried to process what he had said, he sat down on the couch. Tank got up and went to sit in front of him demanding Zeke's attention, he grinned sadly at the dog as he started petting him. "My father was an unstable prick. He would have killed me too if Alice hadn't asked me to have dinner with them that night." Holy shit, Alice was Asher's mom. The boys had spent so much time at Asher's house that she might as well have been their Mother too. My heart ached for him.

"Zeke, you don't have to tell me," I said, softly. Zeke shook his head before meeting my eyes.

"No, it's time you knew some of my crap," He said quietly. I walked over and sat in the yellow armchair next to him. Zeke focused on petting Tank. "Alice actually insisted that I stay for dinner that night. She knew things had gotten worse at home and wanted to cheer me up. So, she had all of us over and taught us how to make spaghetti and meatballs. It was my favorite when I was a kid, she saved my life." He kept petting Tank, his jaw clenching. "I found them when I got home. I was eight."

"Zeke," My voice was barely a breath of sound. My heart broke for him, finding his parents dead at eight had to be... fuck. I swallowed hard. Zeke looked over towards me, but not at me. His eyes were unfocused over my shoulder.

"There was a note. It was a confession, and it said the only regret he had was not taking me out too," He said, his tone matter of fact but his voice was rough. I reached over, took one of his hands from Tank, and held it. He gave my hand a squeeze.

"Was he..." I had to ask. "Was he drunk? On drugs?" His eyes focused on me.

"No, the autopsy showed he was clean and sober," He said, his voice bitter. "He just came home, beat the shit out of her, stabbed her to death then hung himself." Tears fell down my face. His face was blank, his eyes unfocused. I wanted to hug him but I knew Zeke. I knew he was dealing with his memories right now and hugging him wouldn't help. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before continuing. "I went into foster care until Sylvie could move back here. About two months." I looked at the floor and tried wipe my face on the sly. It didn't work.

"Stop crying, Baby. I can't stand it," He growled. I rolled my eyes and wiped my face.

"I'm sorry Zeke. I can't imagine coming home to...." I shook my head and wiped my face again. Zeke let go of my hand so he could pull out his handkerchief and handed it to me. I smiled my thanks as I used it to wipe my face.

"I've dealt with most of it. Sylvie made sure of that, she sent me to a great shrink that helped me work through it. Now, it's like any other memory," He said as he met my eyes. "Most days I'm alright, but every once in a while, it comes up and bites me in the ass. Then I have a really hard day." I gave him a sad smile.

"When that happens, you know-"

"I can call," He quoted me. I smiled. Yeah, I had been saying that to him a lot lately.

"Day or night, it doesn't matter," I reminded him gently. His eyes were soft as they ran over my face.

"I will," He promised. Then he narrowed his eyes at me. "No one told you about this?" I shook my head.

"The guys hinted that your home life really wasn't that good with your parents. I think they didn't want you scaring me off," I said. He huffed. "But no one told me why," I added. His mouth twitched and then he raised an eyebrow.

"Not even Rory?" He asked. My brows went up.

"What? Rory knew?" I asked, surprised. He nodded.

"He... was the first cop to get to the house that day," He admitted. "Even if he didn't remember, it would have come up that first day he ran our names through the system."

I shook my head. "Rory never said a word," I assured him. "He's a big believer in people making their own choices." Zeke's eyes became unfocused again.

"Yeah, he is." We were quiet for a few beats. I reached over and touched his nose.

"Boop," I said in my cutesy voice. He chuckled. Those shadows began to disappear from his eyes. I loved that I could do that for him. "So," I said, cheerfully. "Where are the rest of the photos of you as a kid?" He chuckled nervously and shook his head at me.

"No, Lexie," He stated firmly. I grinned.

"They're in your room, aren't they?" I asked, getting excited. He tried to glare at me but he saw my face and started laughing. I rushed to my feet and ran for his room.

"No!" He shouted. I ran down the hallway and into his room. I started opening drawers in his desk. His big, bare feet slapped against the wood floor in the hallway. I searched the first drawer and opened the second. I pretended that I was frantically looking when he came through the door. He grabbed me around the waist, lifted me off my feet, and pulled me away from the desk.

"Not fair!" I shouted, laughing as he tossed me onto his bed and away from the desk. I bounced, rolled, then got to my knees. I pointed at him. "Cheater!" He smirked at me.

"You started it," He countered.

"One pout, a cheater doth not make," I declared dramatically, watching as he moved to stand in front of the closet door. I smirked. "They're in the closet," I said. He crossed his arms over his chest. I climbed off the bed and tried to get past him to the closet. He grabbed my arms but I slipped by, I made it to the door before his big arms snatched me up off my feet again. I struggled and forced him to fight to keep ahold of me.

"You're not getting in there," He stated simply as he carried me away from the door. He threw me back onto the bed. I rolled back to my knees and dove off the bed to try to get by. He caught me and tossed me back on his bed. I growled as I rolled and tried again. I wasn't even trying to get to the photos now, I just wanted to see if I could get past him, then maybe to the photos. This time I jumped off the bed and Zeke caught me. He carried me back in his arms and dropped me on my back. Out of breath, I took a second to rethink my strategy, I didn't realize what he planned until his bodyweight was draped over my stomach. I opened my eyes to find him sitting on the side of the bed and leaning over me. His arm keeping most of his weight off me, but he was still incredibly heavy. I smacked his chest.

"Squishing! Squishing!" I groaned. He lifted his body up enough so I could breathe. "Damn Zeke, how much do you weight?"

"225 and all muscle, Baby," He said as he grinned down at me. "Now, are you going to stay away from my closet?" He asked patiently as the scent of leather and engine grease surrounded me.

"No," I shot back defiantly. "I want to see baby Zeke photos!" I pushed at his chest, he didn't budge. I tried to wiggle out from under him but it was useless. I continued to struggle until I was out of breath, then I playfully glared up at him. "You're cheating," I pointed out. "It's not fair that you get to use your giant ass to pin me and I can't even pout." He started laughing at how serious I sounded. Then his face softened and his eyes grew warm.

"Thank you, Baby," He said in that quiet voice I loved.

"For what?" I asked, softly. He gave me a warm, heart-stopping smile, with teeth. I loved seeing those.

"You're not really trying to get to my photos," He said. "You're trying to make me laugh."

I had to stop myself from squirming under him. "I don't know what you're talking about, Tough Guy," I insisted. "I want embarrassing baby photos of you." Zeke chuckled quietly. He leaned down and kissed my cheek.

"Thank you," He whispered, his breath tickling my skin. I gave his arm a squeeze before he sat back up. "Now, are you going to behave?"

"Never," I scoffed. He chuckled. He got off me and let me up. But before I could do more than stand, he grabbed my arm and steered me out of his room. "I thought I wasn't trying to get to your photos?" I taunted.

"Just in case," He muttered. I snickered at him.

It wasn't long before I had to go home. I gave Zeke an extra big hug tonight, I held on long enough that he snorted and gave me a big squeeze.

"I'm alright Baby, really I am," He whispered before he kissed the top of my head and let me go. I took Hades home. I didn't understand how he was alright. Maybe therapy did help?

I ignored the pain slamming down my neck as I pushed my way past the ghosts outside. Hades was helping, he growled and snapped at the ghosts until they backed further away. When I walked into the house, I had a bloody nose and a smile. The ghosts were learning to respect Hades and I wondered what would happen if Hades ever managed to bite one.

"How's Zeke?" Rory asked from the couch.

"Better, he's moving again," I replied as I unhooked Hades' leash. Hades ran and climbed into Rory's lap. My phone vibrated in my back pocket. I sat down in one of the armchairs and checked it.

Secret Admirer: How was your day?

Alexis: Not bad. Busy, but not bad. How was yours?

I watched the movie Rory was watching as I waited for an answer.

Secret Admirer: The same. Right now, I'm looking through my movies for something to watch.

Alexis: Tremors. Watch Tremors. Awesome movie.

Secret Admirer: I've never heard of it.

I grinned as I texted back.

Alexis: It's an early '90's monster movie. It's great.

Secret Admirer: Okay, I'll find it. But you have to watch one of mine.

Alexis: Deal.

Secret Admirer: A Walk in the Clouds.

I looked up the movie. Keanu Reeves? I had loved John Wick and liked The Matrix. Sure, why not?

Alexis: I'll watch it tonight and let you know what I think.

Secret Admirer: Same here.

Someone knocked on the door. Rory answered it and took the delivery.

"Dinner's here!" Rory shouted up the stairs.

Alexis: Dinner time. TTYL

Dinner with Rory and Tara was quiet as usual. I was almost done when I decided to try and connect with Tara.

"So, Tara, how are the plans for Winter Formal going?" I asked. Tara eyed me like I was an alien from another planet.

"Okay, we just got the light order in and we're spending the next week making decorations," She said carefully.

"What kind?" I asked before taking another bite.

"Well, paper snowflakes, the centerpieces for the tables," Tara began loosening up as she continued. "Silver and white balloons, and all the branches we need to paint. But the rec. center is giving us a hard time about candles. They said if we're going to have a fake snow blowing than we can't have the candles. That it's a fire hazard."

"What's fake snow made out of?" I asked, curious now.

"Styrofoam," Tara stated. "So, we're using those battery LED candles." Tara continued talking through dinner. It was a nice change from our usual tense silence. After dinner, it was Tara's turn to do the dishes, so I headed upstairs with Hades. I got comfy on my bed and brought up Netflix on my computer. Hades instantly had his head in my lap. Once I found the movie, I started it. I put the computer on the nightstand and snuggled with my puppy, my giant puppy. The butt was going to be hogging my bed very soon. Once the movie started, it didn't take long for me to I realized that this was a romance. Damn. I still watched it because I said I would. When it was over,

I was glad it was over. It was a good movie, just not my kind of thing. Seeing the time, I shut down my computer, rolled on my back and went to work.

I was in the Veil again, lying on my back in the dirt as the hot breeze ran over my skin carrying the bite of sand with it. I watched the sky boiling overhead, the lightning stretching across the sky. It was beautiful, or it would be if it didn't mean the Veil was dying. I thought about my last work session. I had reached the sky but the energy there batted at me the same way the walls had. So, I was going to try the same strategy, I didn't bother to sit up, I closed my eyes and pictured the guys. We were all sitting around the coffee table at Asher's house. Isaac was trying to throw marshmallows into Ethan's mouth from across the table. We were making bets on how many tries it would take. I eyed the twins, they were entirely too quiet about it. So, I betted the within five tries, Isaac smirked at me before he started throwing. I cleaned up that night. I remembered that feeling. My barriers dropped and it wasn't so jarring this time. I kept my eyes closed as I focused on spreading my energy over the Veil floor, dry and cracked but I kept going. I knew when I reached the walls, anger and menace flooded through me. I didn't fight it, I just accepted that it was there. I pictured my energy rising higher and higher. A wind blew through me hard, throwing me off balance An intense, boiling feeling of wrong filled me as wind battered through my mind and across my soul. I accepted it, I didn't fight it. I opened my eyes and watched as my energy moved across the Way. The closer I got to the center the harder the winds thrashed through me. I made it half way before I lost it. My barriers slammed shut and my energy slammed into me. I laid there gasping, aching and raw. Halfway, I got halfway across. I smiled to myself as my body ached. I was getting closer, I was almost there. I pulled myself out looking forward to a good night of sleep.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 8

Monday

I held tissues to my nose on my way to our usual outside table, I had opened the door this morning to find all the ghost still camped out on the lawn. Apparently, there was enough energy floating around now that they didn't have to return to their haunting grounds at dawn. Great. I checked my tissues, the bleeding had finally stopped. Just a few more days and I can start crossing souls, I reminded myself as I threw my tissues away. My phone vibrated.

Secret Admirer: I watched your movie last night. Do you really like that movie? Or are you making a joke? Because it was awful.

I rolled my eyes before I wrote back.

Alexis: That's one of the reasons I love it. It's great monster fun. If you want something with better effects, watch Pacific Rim.

I reached the table and sat down next to Miles.

Secret Admirer: I'm weary now.

I snickered.

Secret Admirer: Did you like my movie?

Alexis: It was good for a romantic drama, but not my usual thing.

I had just hit enter when Ethan stepped up next to me. He snagged my phone out of my hand.

"Snoopy!" I snapped as I tried to grab it back, but Ethan dodged and read my texts to my Secret Admirer out loud to the guys. I watched him as I planned my revenge. When Ethan was done, the others chimed in as he handed back my phone.

"He hated Tremors, he doesn't have a chance," Isaac declared, smiling.

"You're still texting with him?" Asher asked, surprised.

"Wait, this guy had a chance to meet you, and he didn't take it?" Zeke asked his voice suspicious.

"Yeah, he was at Vegabond Saturday night," I said, shrugging. Before he could say more, Zeke turned away from the table and coughed.

"That's strange," Miles said quietly.

"No, that's weird," Zeke said his gravelly voice rough.

"Yeah, I thought so too," I admitted. "Then again he seems really shy." I shrugged.

"What's the big deal?" Isaac asked, "It's just texts."

"Anyway," I changed the subject. "Guess what I found outside when I opened the door this morning?" I suddenly had everyone's attention.

"A kitten?" Isaac guessed.

"A pony," Ethan added.

"A mountain bike," Asher joined in with a smile. I shook my head.

"The dead still camped out on my front lawn," I announced. Everyone's faces dropped.

"They're not going back to their haunting grounds anymore?" Miles asked, lowering his voice. I shook my head. Zeke's face became hard, Miles brow drew down, Asher started rubbing his neck, and the twins cursed.

"It'll be okay guys, I'm pretty close to getting the Way calmed, I think," I reassured them.

"How close?" Miles asked instantly. I thought about it for a minute.

"I think a couple days at most," I said. Everyone looked relieved. The twins looked excited.

"When you do, we'll celebrate," Ethan announced.

"Hell yeah, anything you want, Red!" Isaac added. I eyed them.

"So, a Lexie movie night?" I asked, grinning. The guys groaned. I snickered, the guys hated when it was my turn to pick movies. My movies

choices could get bad, but I had a few I wanted the guys to watch that I was sure they would like. "You said anything I wanted," I reminded them in my sing-song voice. Zeke shook his head, Miles had a small grin on his face, Asher sighed sounding resigned, and the twins were cringing.

"You did say whatever she wanted," Miles backed me up. I gave him my sweet smile and got one in return.

"Fine, Lexie movie night," Isaac agreed.

"But I want cheesy popcorn," Ethan announced. I smiled. The bell rang for first period so everyone grabbed their stuff and scattered. I went to class feeling like it was going to be a good day.

Everything went on like usual. Teachers announced state testing would start tomorrow. Yay, half days! It was the end of English and I was putting away my copy of Pride and Prejudice when Eric turned to me.

"Hey Alexis, what are your plans for the week?" Eric asked as he pulled on his backpack. It took me a second to realize he was talking to me again. He hadn't really since the football game in October.

"Um, hanging out with my friends, MMA training, you know, the usual," I said vaguely. I pulled my bag over my shoulder and looked up in time to see him frown. I ignored it and headed for the door. He followed me into the hall.

"Are you still friends with Blackthorn?" Eric asked in a tense voice. I gave him a sweet smile.

"Yep," I said innocently. He nodded.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Eric asked. I stopped walking to turn to him. Eric's opinion on my friends was getting on my nerves. I didn't understand why he thought he needed to tell me.

"What?" I asked.

"Blackthorn's not the most stable guy around," Eric began his voice had a sharpness to it. "His reputation for violence goes back years." I tilted my head as I looked at him. What was he trying to accomplish by telling me this? It's nothing I didn't know about him before. Zeke had never really

hidden his dark side from me. But everyone has a dark side, even me, we matched. I grinned at the thought. Eric looked offended, I didn't care.

"I'd trust Zeke with anything," I told him bluntly. "And I don't trust a lot of people." Eric opened his mouth to say more when his gaze went over my shoulder.

"See you later, Alexis." Eric turned and hurried down the hall. I shook my head then turned. Zeke and Asher were coming up the hallway towards me. I rolled my eyes, no wonder Eric ran like a scared rabbit. Zeke had a glower on his face as I reached them.

"Hey guys," I looked up at Zeke. "You look grumpier than usual." He didn't chuckle or crack a smile.

"I'm just tired," Zeke said dismissively. I really took a look at him, his face was pale. I shrugged. If something was wrong he'd tell us. Wait, no, this was Zeke, he'd keel over first.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked again. He shot me a glare.

"I'm fine," He told me before he started walking off to his next class. I looked up to Asher.

"Wow, he is crabby. What happened?" I asked. Asher shrugged.

"I think he's getting sick, he's an ass when he's sick," Asher said. "I saw Eric talking to you. What did he want?"

"He was telling me I shouldn't be friends with Zeke," I admitted and shook my head. "He saw you guys heading this way and ran for it." Asher chuckled. "I'll see you at lunch," I told him before walking off.

I walked to my Algebra class and got in just before the late bell. I went to my seat next to Laura and pulled out my notebook. After our lecture, I was finally able to turn to Laura.

"So, any flirting going on with Michael yet?" I asked curious. Laura giggled.

"Yeah, a little," She admitted.

"Dish, woman," I hissed at her as I pretended to do my math. Pink tinged Laura's cheeks. "We ran into each other in the hallway on Friday, he saw my books, and asked about them. I told him and he said we should make a book club." Laura shook her head. "I told him I'm not great with a big group of people. He kind of gave me this small smile and said, 'Then we'd have to keep it a very small group, maybe just the two of us." My eyebrows went up. Laura's face turned crimson.

"Wow, really?" I asked, excited for her. "What did you say?" Laura shrugged.

"What could I say to that? I nodded and ran," Laura whispered to me with a big smile on her face. I was so happy for her.

"Next time, don't run," I said, smiling down at my paper.

"It's not that easy for me Lexie, I'm not you," Laura countered. I snickered.

"Touché," I admitted. We spent the rest of the class talking about Michael and how Laura could let him know she was interested without going out of her comfort zone.

When the bell rang, I told her to call me with details later. Laura just rolled her eyes with a big smile on her face.

I was almost to Chemistry when I got a text from Dylan.

Dylan: I miss you.

Well, I didn't miss him. Sighing, I resisted the impulse to text him that and kept walking. Looking up, I spotted Darren Cross walking down the hallway. His face was bruised and he was sporting a black eye. I bit back my smile as I kept walking until he was in front of me, blocking my way.

"Well, isn't it the little bitch that can't mind her own business," Darren sneered at me. I took a step back, getting into a good position to defend myself then I smiled up at him.

"Well, isn't it the dick who won't take no for an answer," I shot back cheerfully. His mouth became a tight line.

"You butted in where you didn't belong," Darren bit out.

"If you're that pissed about getting your ass kicked, take it up with Zeke." I snapped as I went to walk around him. He stepped to the side and blocked me. I glared up at him.

"You have a hearing problem, Darren?" I asked, my voice turning sharp.

"No, I've got a problem with you," Darren spat. "You tell Blackthorn to mind his own fucking business." I narrowed my eyes on him.

"I'm not a messenger," I bit out. "If you want him to know, grow a pair, and tell him your fucking self." I went to pass him, he blocked me again. I backed up a step and sized Darren up. He was bigger than me by a head and a half, he had a lot more muscle and width. But that meant I would be faster. Darren continued to curse at me as people walked by, I kept a bored expression on my face. I watched people walk by, taking my eyes off Darren for a moment. That must have pissed him off because he stepped closer. He towered over me, clearly trying to intimidate me. I just met his eyes and gave him my shit eating grin.

"Back off or we're going to have a problem," I warned him politely. His eyes twinkled.

"Oh, let's have a problem," He threatened. He continued calling me names. I was planning how to incapacitate him when hands grabbed my shoulders and pulled me away from Darren. Morgan stepped between us and got into Darren's face.

"You don't talk to a girl that way," Morgan warned his voice sharp. I blinked.

"What's it to you?" Darren growled.

"You're a real big man yelling at a girl half your size. Why don't you try it on me?" Morgan said, his voice challenging. Okay, this was getting out of hand. I stepped closer to the two.

"Okay, let's all just take a step back here," I said in my calm voice. Morgan didn't take his eyes off Darren.

"Please take a step back," Morgan asked politely while he was still staring Darren down. I backed up a couple steps. Darren shoved Morgan but Morgan only went back a step. Morgan shoved Darren who stumbled back a few steps, his face surprised. Wow, Darren had to outweigh Morgan by about fifty pounds. Morgan was stronger than he looked. Darren eyed Morgan before cursing at him and walking off. I let out the breath I had been holding.

"Thanks Morgan," I said, hating that he felt like he had to get involved.

"You're welcome," Morgan said quietly, his gaze still on Darren's retreating back. He turned to me, his eyes ran over me before going back down the hall. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, just having a bad month with guys it seems," I admitted. I looked up at Morgan. "I'm sorry you felt like you had to get involved."

Morgan frowned down at me. "Guys shouldn't talk that way to girls," He stated. I smiled at him. He was really a sweetheart. "Don't worry about it," He told me.

"Have a good one," I said before I turned around and headed to class. I got into class just before the late bell. I hurried to my spot next to Miles and started taking notes.

"What took you so long, Red?" Isaac whispered to me.

"I got a text from Dylan then ran into someone." I whispered back while still taking notes. Today we were adding lithium to water to collect hydrogen gas. When the lecture was over we got to work. I started setting up the experiment with Miles while Isaac went to pick up the Lithium from the soft metals cabinet. The large beaker of water was ready by the time that Isaac came back from the cabinet.

"So, who'd you run into?" Ethan asked, resting his arms on the counter and stretching his back. I explained to them what happened in the hallway.

"Who stepped in?" Ethan asked.

"A guy named Morgan," I answered. I watched as Isaac opened the small jar with mineral oil and a single piece of Lithium inside. Ethan frowned, his eyes unfocused.

"Morgan?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah." I watched as Ethan shook his head.

"I don't remember a Morgan," Ethan said as we watched Isaac pull out the oil soaked chunk of Lithium.

"I know of a Morgan Reed," Miles offered. "He's a quiet guy." I looked at Miles.

"Tall, lean, brown hair?" I asked. Miles nodded. "That's him." Isaac was holding the soft metal with the metal tongs and glaring at us.

"Guys, hand me the knife before the oil comes off and it starts burning," Isaac snapped at us. I looked at the table. We forgot the knife. I looked in the drawers and there wasn't one.

"Check your guys' side, our side doesn't have one," I told them. Ethan started looking through drawers.

"So, what did Dylan have to say this time?" Ethan asked absently.

"He texted that he missed me," I said as I watched Miles go through his drawer.

"Are you guys kidding me?" Isaac asked, getting agitated.

"Put it back in the bottle," Miles told Isaac. Isaac dipped the Lithium back in the oil but kept it in the metal tongs.

"Did you text him back?" Ethan asked closing his drawer and opening the one in front of Isaac.

"No, I had decided that I'm just going to ignore him when I ran into Darren," I admitted, watching Isaac get angrier.

"No knife," Ethan announced.

"I'll get one from the supply cabinet," Miles announced. He got off his stool and headed across the room. Ethan walked around the counter to stand next to me.

"Maybe you should text him back, tell him to fuck off," Ethan suggested. I chuckled.

"Screw this," Isaac snapped and dropped the whole piece into the water filled beaker container in front of me, I gaped at him. "We'll just collect more hydrogen," Isaac explained. Except the metal wasn't reacting like Lithium should, it was reacting more. "That's not right," I said, dread filling me. Ethan grabbed the bottle.

"It's Cesium!" Ethan shouted. My stomach dropped. Isaac cursed. Ethan grabbed me and pulled me away from the counter. There was a loud bang, shattering glass, screams and curses as hydrogen smoke billowed. Mr. Turner told everyone to stay calm, that the vents were on and will clear the room in a minute. Everyone started coughing as hydrogen filled the room. When my ears stopped ringing, I realized Ethan had me in his arms against his chest. His back between me and the explosion, I looked up at him.

"You okay?" I asked between coughs. He nodded as he coughed.

"You?" He asked, his amber eyes running over my face. I nodded. "Isaac?" Ethan shouted over his shoulder.

"Yeah," Isaac called back. "You guys?"

"We're fine," Ethan answered. "Miles?"

"Right here," Miles said as he found us in the thinning smoke. Ethan relaxed around me and let go, though he kept a hand on my lower back. Miles came straight to me, his eyes running over me making my pulse jump. "Are you hurt?"

"No, Ethan got me out of the way. He was between me and the explosion," I said, looking up at Ethan. He was glaring at Isaac as he walked towards us.

"Is everyone alright? Any injuries?" Mr. Turner called across the room.

"Oops?" Isaac said cringing as he looked at us.

"Oops," Ethan said, his voice boiling. "You could have hurt Lexie, what the hell were you thinking?"

"Didn't you look at the label?" Miles demanded. His voice cold, Isaac winced.

"It was the periodic label. I can never remember those initials," Isaac admitted.

"You fucking idiot. Wait 'till Zeke hears about this," Ethan snapped at Isaac.

"You're going to learn them now," Miles told Isaac, his voice still like ice. "Tonight." Isaac winced. "Or we're telling Zeke you almost hurt Lexie," Ethan added. Isaac's face went pale.

"I'll memorize them tonight," Isaac agreed immediately. The room was finally clear of smoke when Mr. Turner came over.

"So, who dropped that much Cesium in the water?" Mr. Turner asked pointedly. Isaac sheepishly raised his hand and Mr. Turner sighed. "The lab was to put a small slice of Lithium into water, not a whole chunk of Cesium. What happened?"

"I forgot what the periodic abbreviation was for Lithium," Isaac admitted. "I'll have them memorized by tomorrow." Mr. Turner nodded still frowning at Isaac.

"You better, because after school you'll be in here taking a test on it," Mr. Turner said. "And if you fail, you won't be allowed to participate in labs, which as you know, is half your grade." Mr. Turner looked at the shattered glass. For the first time, I looked at where I was standing and my stomach knotted. The beaker had shattered, glass was all over the counter, the floor, and even on my stool. If Ethan hadn't pulled me away, there was no doubt I would have gotten cut up in the blast. I leaned my head against Ethan's shoulder. His arm wrapped around my waist and gave me a squeeze. Mr. Turner gestured to the mess. "Clean this up Isaac. Ethan, good job of getting her out of the way. You three will get credit for today's lab." With that, Mr. Turner turned and went to another group to check their work.

"Thanks Ethan," I said quietly. Ethan kissed my forehead.

"Always," he whispered to me before letting me go to help Isaac clean up. The rest of class went on as usual. No one else made the mistake that Isaac had, thankfully.

When we walked out of class Isaac was quiet, his face drawn. I dropped back to walk with him as Ethan talked to Miles about the best way to blackmail Isaac. I grabbed Isaac's wrist and gave him a shake. He looked down at me, his face dark. I gave him a smile.

"It's okay, Cookie Monster," I told him softly. He shook his head and looked at the floor of the hallway again.

"It's not okay, Red," He said gruffly. "You could have seriously gotten hurt. All because I'm an idiot." That irked me. I smacked his shoulder.

"You don't get to call yourself that," I snapped. "You made a mistake, you're not an idiot." He scoffed.

"I'm an idiot, I should have just put the chunk back in the bottle and waited until Miles came back," Isaac groused.

"And you will next time," I countered. "And you'll double check the initials, right?" He gave me a smile.

"Triple check," He agreed. I gave him a big smile and wrapped my arm around his waist. He lifted his arm and wrapped it around my shoulders. "I'm sorry, Lexie," He said softly. I gave him a big squeeze.

"It's okay, I'm fine, everyone is fine. The only damage was to the beaker," I reminded him. He sighed then leaned down and kissed the top of my head. "Love you," I said in my cutesy voice. He snorted.

"Love you too," He mumbled as he straightened.

When we reached the Cafeteria, Isaac let me go. We walked inside and everyone started to applaud, there were even a few cheers. Isaac's face became beet red.

"Zeke might already know," Miles observed. This wasn't good.

"One way to find out," I offered as we headed for our table where Asher, Zeke, and Riley already sat. Zeke's gaze found me, he immediately looked me over. Oh yeah, he knew. I reached the table before Isaac who was now walking behind Ethan.

"You okay?" Zeke asked. His voice deeper than usual.

"Yep, perfectly fine, not a scratch.," I said quickly. Zeke looked at the others.

"How about you guys?" Zeke asked.

"We're fine," Miles answered for them as he sat down next to Zeke. Zeke took a breath and looked at Isaac.

"What happened?" Zeke asked, almost calmly. Well, calm for him at least.

"The label was the initials," Isaac said. "I've never been able to keep them straight. But I'll memorize them tonight."

Zeke nodded. "Damn right you will. I'll be there to make sure," Zeke promised Isaac.

"Works for me," Isaac agreed. Everyone sat down. I sat next Ethan. Zeke's stare came back to me.

"Now, what happened with Darren Cross?" Zeke demanded.

"Nothing much," I hedged. He just gave me that look he has, the 'don't fuck with me' look. I sighed and explained what happened while I took out my lunch. Zeke fired off questions and I answered them, not bothering to argue. He was fighting enough with Riley. When he was satisfied that Darren hadn't touched me or really threatened me, he went back to his lunch.

"So, we have half days coming," I announced. "What kind of trouble should we get into?" There were several chuckles. The twins were throwing out suggestions when Ryan strode through the crowd to reach us. His eyes ran over me.

"I heard that Darren Cross went at you today," Ryan announced, his voice hard. His grey eyes were sharp as they met mine. I shrugged.

"He just yelled at me and wouldn't let me get by," I said, nonchalantly.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked through his teeth.

"Yeah, it was no big deal," I said. Ryan nodded and then shared a look with Ethan before walking off.

"So, Ryan, huh?" Riley asked, with a smirk on her face.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Ryan likes you," Riley told me.

"Yeah, right," I snorted. Riley just grinned at me. We went back to making plans for our free afternoons. It wasn't long before we were interrupted again. Clay Ordin stepped up to the table next to me.

"Are you alright?" Clay asked. "I heard Cross was yelling at you in the hallway today."

Ethan and Isaac looked like they were going to bust a gut. Their faces were even red from holding in their laughter.

"I'm fine. He was just having a tantrum," I told Clay instantly. His eyes ran over me then back to mine.

"Are you sure?" He asked gently. I sighed

"Yeah, I'm fine," I assured him. I was starting to feel like a broken record. He nodded, his face still concerned then he reached out and took my phone off the table.

"Here's my number. If Darren comes at you again, just call me," He said. "Or if, ya know, you want to talk or something." He handed me back my phone.

"Thanks, Clay."

"I'll, um, talk to you later," Clay said, his face red, before heading back to his table of friends. The twins finally burst out laughing. I rolled my eyes.

"Clay Ordin?" Riley asked, smiling a big smile, I sighed as she laughed too. I realized not everyone was laughing. Zeke was watching me, Asher was rubbing the back of his neck, and Miles was tapping out that staccato rhythm. The twins kept teasing me as lunch went on.

After Zeke finished his lunch I looked pointedly at him, then to Riley and back to him. He gritted his teeth, then reached over to take Riley's hand. Riley's head snapped around to look at him, her face surprised. After a few seconds, he pulled her hand off the table and out of everyone's view. Riley was still stunned when she looked around the group, I gave Zeke an encouraging smile which Riley noticed, looked at Zeke, and back to me. It wasn't long until the bell rang. I got my stuff and headed off towards Gym class.

"Lexie!" I turned in the hall to watch Riley hurry to catch up to me. "Can I talk to you for a sec?"

"Talk as long as you want, I don't mind missing Gym class," I offered smiling. She gave an odd chuckle.

"Did Zeke talk to you about me and him?" She asked bluntly.

"Yeah, a bit," I admitted. Riley took a deep breath and let it out.

"What did you talk about?" She asked.

"He asked me for advice," I hedged. Riley tucked her lilac hair behind her ear.

"What kind?" She asked. I stopped in the hall and looked up at her.

"Whatever you're trying to ask, just ask," I said, bluntly. Riley pressed her lips together and fiddled with her fingers.

"Want to ditch?" Riley asked. "This might take a while."

"Sure, let's head over to the football field, there's no classrooms over there," I said. Riley gave me a small smile as we started walking. She was quiet until we reached the bleachers and sat down.

"Did Zeke talk about our relationship? What we've been fighting about?" Riley asked awkwardly.

"He told me that you're not happy with the way things are," I hedged again. She sighed.

"Zeke doesn't hold hands with me," Riley announced. "He doesn't really hug me in front of other people, he doesn't want to do the couple stuff."

"Like dances?" I asked, sympathetically, she nodded.

"My boyfriend doesn't want to take me to Winter Formal, what does that mean?" Riley asked wearily.

"Did he say he didn't want to take you, or did he say he didn't want to wear a tux?" I asked gently. Riley sighed.

"He said tux," She admitted. "But I want to see him in a tux. He'd look so... kissable." I smiled at the wishful look on her face.

"You know Zeke," I said gently. "He's stubborn, if he doesn't want to wear a tux, he's not wearing a tux." Riley sighed.

"I know," Riley said before looking at me. "We've been together a month now and he's never even kissed me in front of you guys. It's like he doesn't really like me." "That's not it," I tried to explain. "He just isn't into PDA. He has only hugged me once in front of the others and it was after a seizure that almost killed me in October." Riley nodded.

"So, it's not just with me?" She asked.

"Nope. It's not just you," I told her. She nodded, then looked at me.

"Lexie, he doesn't like me touching him," Riley said in disbelief. Now that I had felt Zeke's back through his shirt I had a hunch why, but I couldn't tell her that.

"Touch him in public? In general, or his back?" I asked carefully. Riley thought about it.

"In public, and his back," She answered. "Okay, I understand his PDA thing, but what's with the back thing?" I thought about how to answer her. I wasn't going to tell her what Zeke told me, it was private but she needed to know it wasn't her.

"Riley, it's a trigger," I began. "It's connected to something that has nothing to do with you. I can't tell you why, or what it is, but it has nothing to do with you." I didn't know how else to explain it.

"Really?" She asked.

"Really," I said firmly. She rolled her eyes and scoffed.

"I've never been so insecure with someone in my life," Riley said. "But with him, I feel like I don't know where I stand." I knew the feeling.

"Then ask him," I told her bluntly. She looked at me, her brow drawn down. "Just ask him. Zeke won't lie to you about it, he'll tell you the truth," She snorted with disdain.

"He won't even tell me about his parents, Lexie," Riley said her voice quiet.

"That has nothing to do with you, Riley," I reassured her. Riley eyed me.

"Are you sure?" She asked. I nodded.

"Positive," I said confidently. "He's just not ready to talk about it with you yet. You have to give him time." Riley looked out at the football field and sighed.

"Alright, I'll ask him," She announced.

"Good."

"But what if I don't like what he has to say?" She asked absently before looking to me. I shrugged.

"Then you'll have something to think about," I said lamely. I didn't know what else I could say to her at this point.

"Okay," She said, sounding resigned. We spent the rest of the period gossiping. When the bell rang for seventh period, Riley hugged me goodbye. I just hoped I helped. The rest of my day went on as usual.

"I don't know about this," Tara said as I pulled into the parking lot for the gym. I parked the Blazer and looked at her. Tara was wearing grey yoga pants, a pink t-shirt, and her jacket. Her hair was back in a ponytail and her makeup was minimal. I'd never seen her without a full face of makeup before, she was prettier without it.

"Tara, you're not going to be learning the same stuff I am. You're getting basic self-defense," I reminded her. "It's honestly something every girl should know." I opened my door and looked at Tara. Her fingers twisted on themselves as she eyed the gym.

"There's going to be a bunch of boys in there," She said.

"So?" I asked, not really seeing the problem.

"I just..." Tara looked at me, cringing. "I've never worked out around guys." I bit back my laugh and managed to just smile.

"Tara, you're not working out," I told her. "You're going to learn some moves and how to defend yourself. Isaac's a great teacher, you'll learn fast."

"I'm going to suck at this," She muttered. I laughed, I couldn't help it. Tara shot me a look.

"Tara..." When I was done laughing I tried again, "I get my ass kicked every time I come to this gym. You start out sucking but then you get better,

that's how it works." When she still didn't move, I added, "No one cares if you suck at this." She took a deep breath and nodded. We got out and hurried inside. Tara followed me as I walked towards the benches where the guys were.

"I'm here for my usual torture," I announced cheerfully as I went to my locker. The guys chuckled as they finished getting their gear ready. All the guys said hi, they even said hi to Tara. I pulled out my hand wraps and sat down on the bench on the other side of Ethan. Tara sat next to me, quieter than I have ever seen her before.

"It's not that bad, Beautiful," Ethan said smiling at me. I scoffed.

"Depends on who I'm with today?" I asked, looking down the line. "Is Isaac taking Tara?" Isaac nodded then looked at my cousin.

"I'm going to teach you how to hit someone if you need to, using your fists, elbow, feet, and knees," Isaac said. Then he pointed to Miles. "Then Miles is going to teach you how to get out of holds." My eyebrows went up as I looked at Miles. His ears were already pink.

"Is that gonna work for you, Miles?" I asked, uncertainly. Miles looked down the bench to me.

"The others will be helping," Miles said. I nodded.

"Well, you'll probably have an easier time with her than you did with me," I said cheerfully. "She's a cheerleader and all."

"After Miles, Asher will run you through some scenarios to help you put it all together," Isaac told Tara. Tara seemed to relax and nod, I looked at the others.

"Then that leaves me with..." I groaned. Zeke chuckled darkly.

"You're stuck with me," Zeke taunted. I stopped wrapping my hands long enough to flip him off. The guys laughed, even Tara chuckled a bit. Everyone got up and went to start their routines. I hung around Tara's lesson with Isaac until she seemed comfortable, it didn't take long. Isaac was a good teacher. In training, the goofy jokester disappeared and there was just Isaac, the MMA fighter. It was interesting to watch from this side of the mat. Eventually, Zeke told me it was time to get to work. I had a feeling I was going to want to puke today.

Two hours later, I dropped to the mat, not because I got knocked down. I was just out of breath, hot, sweaty, and tired. Isaac came over to look down at me.

"Red?" His eyes were concerned. I waved my hand weakly to let him know I was okay. He chuckled before he dropped to the mat next to me and rolled onto his back. "Giving up?" He asked. I pointed in the air.

"Never!" I said in a defiant voice, and then dropped my arm back down to my chest.

"Maybe." We both giggled. Isaac elbowed my arm.

"So, what's the deal with your Secret Admirer?" He asked. I shook my head.

"I don't know," I admitted. "At this point it's getting a little weird that I don't know who he is."

He chuckled. "I wasn't going to say anything." He muttered. "What's his deal?"

"I don't know, he didn't come up and say hi at Vegabond because of you guys," I explained. "But I was standing at the bar for a while. He could have come up then."

"Yeah, it's not that hard to find you in a crowd around here, Red," He pointed out. I rolled my eyes then looked at him.

"So, have you found a date to the dance yet?" I asked, curious.

"Not yet, I'm asking a friend of a friend later," He grumbled. Isaac's name was called across the gym. He groaned as he got to his feet, then he reached down and helped me up before heading off to his own training. I started walking through the gym, un-wrapping my hands as I went. It was probably about time for Tara to be done with the guys so I headed towards the front.

"Hey Lexie," A guy's voice said from behind me. I jumped and turned to find Jordan standing there. Sweat dripped from his forehead as he began un-wrapping his hand wraps. He gave me a crooked smile. "Didn't mean to scare ya."

"I just didn't see you there," I admitted as I walked towards the front of the gym. Jordan moved to walk beside me.

"How did your training go today?" Jordan asked, cheerfully.

"Not bad, still getting my cardio up to speed," I admitted. "How about yours?"

"The usual, two steps forward and one step back," Jordan said as we reached the lockers. I opened mine and started putting my wraps away. "How have your seizures been?" He asked, surprising me.

"That's none of your business," I pointed out as I closed my locker. "I'll see you around." I left the lockers and walked back into the gym to the mat room. I was just in time to watch Tara drop Asher to the mat. I chuckled as I walked up to them.

"Now, that's what I'm talking about, Tara." I smiled as she turned to me. Her cheeks were flushed and she had a small smile on her face.

"It's not as hard as I thought it would be," Tara admitted as Asher got to his feet.

"She's got it down," Asher announced as he looked to me. "She's all set."

"Thanks, Ash," I said as he walked off the mat.

"No problem, Ally girl," He grinned down at me as he headed toward the lockers. I looked at Tara.

"Let's get out of here. The smell of dude sweat is rank." We grabbed our coats, got in my Blazer, and headed home. "So, what did you think?" I asked. Tara thought about it.

"It was kind of fun. Not as fun as cheerleading, but still, not so bad," Tara said. I got curious.

"What is it you like about cheerleading?" I asked, carefully. Tara smiled.

"It's the gymnastic I really like, the tumbling and flips," Tara admitted as we pulled on to our street. "There isn't a gymnastic center around here and I can't really go to Missoula three times a week, so, I started

cheerleading." That made sense. I parked the Blazer. "Thanks Lexie," Tara said before getting out and heading to the door. I smiled to myself. Maybe Tara and I could be friends after all, it would just take time. I was crossing the grass when Tara stopped at the door, she bent down and picked up a bouquet of flowers.

"Who are those from?" I asked as I reached her. Tara huffed then looked at me.

"They're for you," Tara said sharply. She shoved them into my hands and walked into the house. I sighed, so much for being friendly. I looked at the small note attached to the stems.

I heard you had a bad day today, just wanted your day to end with a smile. - Your Secret Admirer.

I smiled. It was extremely sweet. Then another thought hit me, how did he know where I lived? The question bothered me as I walked into the house. Hades jumped up from his corner of the couch and ran to me. I bent down, pet him, and told him what a good boy he was. I put the flowers on the dinner table and opened the back door. Hades ran outside and immediately started peeing. I pulled out my cell phone and texted to ask.

Alexis: I found your flowers, thank you. They did make me smile.

I didn't have long to wait till he answered.

Secret Admirer: I'm glad, you have a beautiful smile.

Alexis: How did you know where I live?

There were a couple heart beats before his response.

Secret Admirer: Phone book. I heard you were living with your Uncle and there was only one Delaney in the phone book, so I took a shot.

My nerves eased. He was just being sweet.

Alexis: Thank you, I love them.

Secret Admirer: You're welcome, what are your plans for the night?

Hades came in, I gave him a treat and told him he as a good boy. He went off and munched away.

Alexis: Relax, dinner with the family, and research a paper. You?

Secret Admirer: About the same. Working on a robotics project. That's about it.

I walked over and sat down on the couch. Hades joined me, laying his head in my lap.

Alexis: What's the project?

Secret Admirer: I'm working on an exoskeleton glove to enhance and support the movements of a person's arm.

My brows went up.

Alexis: Wow that sounds complicated.

Secret Admirer: It's not that difficult, once you understand the parts and how they work together. Maybe you should try doing something with robotics.

I thought about what I would do with a robot and smiled.

Alexis: If I did anything with robots, it'd be to make one for Battle Bots.

Secret Admirer: Lol.

Alexis: Seriously, that looks like fun!

Secret Admirer: But all that work, just to destroy it?

Alexis: The point is to destroy the other robot, not yours.

Rory came into the house carrying plastic bags.

"Hey, I brought home dinner," Rory announced as he closed the door.

"Great, I'm starving," I countered. He grinned as he went into the kitchen. Hades abandoned me and followed the smell of food.

Secret Admirer: Yeah, but I would watch a match and just think 'that probably took over a hundred hours of work.'

Alexis: You have a point, but still, it'd be awesome. My Uncle's home, time for dinner. TTYL

I put my phone in my pocket and got up.

"Tara! Dinner!" Rory shouted. I went into the kitchen, picked up plates and silverware, then walked back to the table. We were dishing up the Italian food when Tara came downstairs. It was quiet until we started eating.

"Okay girls, I have news," Rory began. I looked over to him. His face was relaxed. "Every year, I work nights for a couple weeks to give the night shift officers vacation time. My two weeks start tomorrow." I blinked at that. Rory was going to be working nights? Tara bit back a smile as he continued. "Now, let me make something clear." Rory pointed up to the corners of the room. I followed his finger and spotted the cameras and Tara's smirk disappeared. "I have cameras in the living room and kitchen, which I can access at any time from my phone or laptop in my cruiser."

"How long have those been up?" I asked, suddenly suspicious. Rory smirked at me.

"Since the day after you brought the boys over to study for the first time," He said unapologetically. I chuckled. He looked back to Tara. "There will be no parties and no sleepovers." He then looked to me. "The boys can stay, but they need to leave by eight, and no boys upstairs unless I'm here," He told me in his cop voice. I nodded my agreement. He looked to Tara. "Do we understand?"

"Yep," I answered instantly.

"Yeah," Tara grumbled before she took a bite.

"Good," Rory said, with a satisfied look on his face. We went back to eating. It wasn't quiet long though. "So, how was the gym, Tara?" Rory asked pointedly, Tara froze. Then she looked at me with cold eyes. Oh, come on.

"You told him?" She practically yelled, her face turning red.

"I kind of had to," I said matter-of-factly. Tara scoffed and slammed her fork down.

"Lexie did the right thing, Tara," Rory stated. "This was something I needed to know about. The only question I have is why didn't you tell me yourself?" Tara went to get up. "Sit your butt back down," Rory's voice was hard and sharp. I went still. Tara sat back down, her face storming as she

crossed her arms over her chest. I looked down at my plate and pretended I couldn't hear. "Answer me," Rory demanded.

"It's none of your business," Tara shot out. Rory dropped his fork to his plate. I examined my dinner carefully. Oh, look, carrots.

"None of my business? Some boy corners you and you think it's none of my business?" Rory's voice had gotten deeper. Okay, time to leave.

"I'm going to give you two some privacy," I said quietly as I grabbed my plate and quickly made my exit to the stairs.

"You are my kid. Anything that happens to you is my business, Tara," Rory told her, his voice still angry. I climbed the stairs as quietly as I could. Rory's voice changed. "I expected you to come tell me and you didn't. Why?"

"Because..." Tara hedged. I was in the hallway upstairs when Tara continued. "I didn't think you'd care." I went still. Huh? I listened in, shamelessly.

"Of course, I care. You're my daughter," Rory's voice softened, but still was firm. "You and Lexie are the most important people in my life." I smiled at the warmth in Rory's voice. I remembered hearing it in Dad's. Tara scoffed.

"I'm not important to you. Not since Lexie came around," Tara grumbled. "Since she's been here you let her get away with shit I never could."

"I treat Lexie differently because she's gone through a lot," Rory explained. Tara snorted at that.

```
"Oh, please-"
```

"Tara-"

"This is bullshit-"

"Have you ever had to take your Mother to the ER for a drug overdose?" Rory asked pointedly. I winced, which time was he talking about? The silence was thick for several heartbeats.

"No," Tara said quietly.

"Lexie has. Then she dealt with the doctors, and sat with her until she could take her Mother home. After that, Lexie turned around and went to school," Rory informed her. My stomach knotted. Tara didn't need to know that. No one needed to know that stuff. "I treat Lexie like an adult because she has been one for at least two years now. She makes good decisions, and if the day comes where she doesn't. Then she'll be grounded just like you." When Tara didn't say anything, he continued. "Now, explain to me again why you didn't tell me?" I slipped into my room and closed the door quietly.

I sat at my desk and played with my food as memories ran through my mind. I remembered the first time that had happened. I had just come back from working at the gas station when I found her on the floor. I had tried to wake her up but she'd been out cold, her skin had been cold and clammy. I had just cleaned up the vomit on the floor when her breathing had slowed down, her lips began turning blue. That's when I called an ambulance. I put down my fork and rubbed my hand over my face. By the time I followed the ambulance to the hospital, they had her on oxygen and in treatment. The doctor asked if I wanted Social Services called, since I was sixteen he said he'd leave it up to me. Looking back, I wish I had said yes. Everything spiraled out of control from there. My cell phone rang. It was Ethan.

"Hey."

"Guess what?" Ethan said cheerfully.

"What?"

"You don't have to go to Winter Formal with my dumbass brother," He announced. I grinned.

"Oh no!" I said in fake disappointment.

"I know. Tragic, right?" Ethan said dryly. "He said unless you want to go as a threesome, to raise some eyebrows and create some rumors." I chuckled.

"Thanks, Snoopy, I needed that," I said, smiling. He was quiet for a heartbeat.

"What's up, Beautiful?"

"Just... old memories creeping up," I hedged.

"I know all about that," He said in a soft, smoky voice that I had never heard before. "What memories are bugging you?" I hesitated only a moment.

"The first time I had to call an ambulance for my Mother," I admitted. I explained about Tara and what I overheard Rory tell her. Then I told him about finding my Mother, and with everything that came after. "When I got home that night after work, she was already drinking again."

"Eso esta jodido," He muttered.

"What?"

"I said, 'That's fucked up.'" Ethan explained gently to me.

"Eso..." I tried to remember the rest

"Eso esta jodido," He said clear and slowly.

"Eso esta jodido," I tried again.

"You've got it, Beautiful." His voice sounded like he was smiling.

"I'll have to remember that one," I thought out loud.

"Keep it up and I'll have you speaking Spanish in no time," Ethan offered. I scoffed.

"Not likely," I said dryly. He chuckled. "What memories are bugging you?" I asked gently as I went to lay down on my bed. Ethan sighed.

"How I hurt my back," He hedged.

"The car wreck?"

"Yeah." Ethan's voice thickened. My chest tightened at the sound. Miles had told me that a car wreck had killed their little sister Sophia. "I don't really want to talk about it, Lexie."

"Okay," I said softly. "Just know that if you do, you can call me." He was quiet for a couple heartbeats.

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Good. Now, who is Isaac taking to the dance?" I asked. Ethan and I gossiped for another hour before he had to go do dishes. I hung up and took a deep breath. Talking to Ethan had made me feel better. He had his own

memories that got to him at times. I looked at the time and sighed then I decided to take the night off. I was tired and the ghosts outside weren't making it easier to get any sleep. I changed into my pajamas, cuddled with Hades, and read more of the report on Voodoo.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 9

Tuesday

The next morning, I was on my way out the door when I pulled up short. Thirteen souls stood on the other side of the salt line and every one of them was furious. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as they eyed me.

"I'm close," I told them quietly. "A couple more days should do it." They looked at each other, hope filling their faces, the McClains eyed me. Mr. and Mrs. McClain were an odd couple of ghosts. Her blonde hair was up in a French twist, her skirt suit perfectly pressed and her blue eyes were full of arrogance. Mr. McClain was a portly man with a walrus mustache and a bullet through his forehead, put there courtesy of his wife. And yet, here they stood together, trying to bully me.

"Really?" Mrs. McClain asked doubtfully.

"Yeah, I've been busting my ass for you. Now, cut me some slack," I told her as I pulled tissues out of my nose and headed for the Blazar. For the first time, I didn't have to shove them out of the way, they moved on their own. I figured it was progress. I was almost to our usual outside table at school when my nose stopped bleeding, I had just thrown my tissues away when my phone vibrated.

Secret Admirer: I saw you with tissues this morning, are you getting sick?

I frowned and mentally went over my steps from the parking lot. I hadn't really seen anyone. Then again, I wasn't really paying attention.

Alexis: Just a nose bleed, happens when it's dry out.

Secret Admirer: Are you sure?

I rolled my eyes.

Alexis: Yep. How's your morning going?

Secret Admirer: Better now that I know you're okay.

I blinked at that. That was a little much. I hadn't even officially met the guy.

Alexis: Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself. TTYL

I put my phone away as I reached the table. Ethan was holding two coffee cups as he walked over.

"Here Beautiful, figured we could all use a pick me up," Ethan said as he handed me one.

"Oh, you're my hero for the day," I announced gratefully. The guys chuckled as Zeke turned his head away from the table and coughed a deep nasty cough. I eyed him, his face was still pale and he didn't look that great. "Zeke, are you feeling alright?" I asked. He nodded.

"Fine. I just need to wake up." Zeke's usually gravelly voice was rough. I kept eyeing him.

"So, what are we doing with our freedom this afternoon?" Isaac asked grinning.

"How about a movie at the theater?" I offered, still watching Zeke out of the corner of my eye. A movie wouldn't be too hard on Zeke right now. Isaac went to object but I caught his eye, looked at Zeke, then back to him. Isaac took another look at Zeke.

"Sounds good to me," Isaac agreed instantly. Miles checked his phone and told us what was playing. We debated a good five minutes before deciding on the latest action flick. I thought about something for a few minutes.

"Do you guys mind if I invite Secret Admirer guy? It's getting kind of weird to not know who I'm texting at this point." I asked all of them. They all looked at each other. Asher started rubbing the back of his neck, Miles started tapping his staccato rhythm on his coffee cup, and Ethan started twirling his rings.

"We'll all be there so, yeah. Invite the guy," Isaac said matter-of-factly. The others nodded in agreement. I put my coffee down and pulled out my

phone.

Alexis: My friends and I are going to a movie at one. Want to meet me there?

I picked up my coffee as I waited for an answer. I didn't have to wait long.

Secret Admirer: With your friends? If it was just you, I'd be there. Your friends, though, concern me.

I rolled my eyes.

Alexis: If you are ever going to meet me, it's going to be around them, they're protective that way.

Secret Admirer: You're right, I'll be there.

I smiled. About time.

"He's in," I announced. The others nodded then exchanged looks. I ignored it as I sent him the movie and time. The bell rang and we scattered. More State testing, joy.

As usual, State testing was boring as hell, we all got out of there as fast as we could. Well, everyone but Isaac. He had to go to Mr. Turner and take that periodic element test.

We were sitting in the back row of the Spring Mountain Cinema and we pretty much had the place to ourselves since it was a weekday, that didn't bother us a bit. Everyone was talking and jabbering away, well, except Zeke. He was at the other end of the row, holding Riley's hand again. It was clear by his rigid shoulders that he was uncomfortable, it bothered me. Didn't Riley see how uncomfortable he was? I shook my head and went back to my conversation with Miles.

"I heard your leaving town this weekend?" I asked Miles as he took a drink out his soda.

"Yes, there's a gaming convention in Seattle that I'm signed up to compete in," Miles explained.

"It's a big tournament, and I'm looking to make it to the semi-finals." I raised my eyebrows.

"Wow. Don't forget to do the tourist thing and take lots of photos for me. I've never seen Seattle," I told him. Miles gave me a small warm smile.

"I will," He promised. Miles looked over the back of the chairs to the door of the theater. "He's a no show?" I sighed and looked at the empty seat next to me.

"Looks like it," I admitted. I turned back to Miles. "I mean, I get shy but this is another level that I don't understand." Miles offered me his popcorn. I smiled and took a handful.

"It seems so. Were you... interested in him?" Miles asked gently.

I shook my head. "No, but he was smart. Someone you could have a good conversation with," I told him. "If he wants to let fear rule his life, that's on him. I can't live that way." Miles smirked.

"I've noticed that about you," Miles said, almost under his breath. I raised an eyebrow. "If something scares you, you work through it and get past it." I looked back at the screen showing ads as my face warmed.

"I don't like being afraid," I admitted, sounding a little defensive.

"There's nothing wrong with that Lexie, it was just an observation," Miles explained softly. Before he could say anything else, Ethan leaned across Miles.

"Hey Beautiful, did you hear about Darren Cross?" Ethan asked, his eyes sparkling.

"Hear what?" I asked instantly. For Ethan to be this excited it had to be good.

"Someone beat the shit out of him," He announced.

"What?" I asked, stunned.

"Yeah, I heard he broke his arm, a couple ribs, and his nose," Ethan snickered. I leaned forward and looked down the row at Zeke.

"Zeke, what did you do?" I demanded. Zeke looked down the line to me, frowning.

"What are you talking about?" He snapped.

"Did you beat up Darren Cross?"

"No. If I had, I would have said something," He shot back. I blinked. Good point.

"Oh, sorry," I said before leaning back in my chair. "Did he say who did it?" I asked Ethan.

"That's the weird part, he refuses to tell anyone," Ethan explained.

"Watch, it was a girl," I snickered. The boys chuckled as the lights dimmed. "Why wouldn't he say who beat him up?" I whispered to Miles.

"Maybe he was threatened." He took a drink from his soda. The door to the theater opened. I half expected my Secret Admirer to show up, but it was Isaac who took the seat next to me.

"What I miss?" Isaac asked.

"Ads. How was the test?" I countered. He winced.

"I passed, barely," He admitted. "Mr. Turner said my supply cabinet privileges are revoked, but I can still participate in labs."

"Sorry hon," I whispered. He shrugged as he watched the screen.

"It's the least I deserve," He mumbled. The movie started and I was quiet. I wondered what Isaac meant by that but I pushed the thought out of my head and watched the movie.

After the movie, we all filed out to the parking lot. Isaac was describing his favorite part of the movie when I spotted my Blazer. There was a bouquet of flowers on my hood and an envelope under the windshield wiper.

"What the...?" Ethan's voice drew everyone's attention.

"That's what I was thinking," I admitted as I walked up to the Blazer, picked up the envelope and opened it.

Alexis, I'm sorry I didn't come in. I bought my ticket and opened the door to see you joking around with your friends. I just couldn't come in, I'm sorry. – Your Secret Admirer.

I sighed and shook my head.

"He showed up, saw all of us, and bailed," I announced. This was getting ridiculous, and I was getting tired of it. Riley picked up the flowers.

"At least he got you flowers..." Riley frowned and looked at the stems of the flowers.

"Wow."

"What?" I asked. Riley handed me the flowers.

"Look on the stems," She said. I looked at the stems of the bouquet. Surrounding the stems was an emerald ring. The emerald was square and set in a vintage gold band.

"What the...?" I couldn't quite grasp this. The guy gave me an expensive ring? I haven't even really met him.

"What is it?" Zeke demanded. I handed the bouquet to him.

"Shit," Zeke bit out. "He gave her an emerald ring." The others looked just as stunned as I was.

"It might not be real," Isaac offered.

"Real or not, it looks expensive," Miles pointed out, his eyebrows drawn down as he examined the ring.

"Is anyone else getting creeped out too?" I asked the group. Ethan and Isaac nodded. Miles had his thinking face on, Asher was rubbing his neck, and Zeke was running a hand through his hair.

"It is very strange to get a girl you haven't introduced yourself to, a ring," Miles admitted carefully. Riley grabbed the flowers and the ring from Miles then handed them back to me.

"A little bit," Riley agreed cautiously. She looked at me. "Maybe the guy is a romantic? I say enjoy it until you know one way or the other." I gave her a smile.

"Yeah, you're probably right," I agreed, not really believing it. I took the ring and the flowers and put them in the Blazer. Everyone headed home. I couldn't help but check my mirrors the whole way home.

Outside the house the ghosts were just socializing with each other. It was like a big party at this point. For once they didn't harass me on my way in, it made me smile. I put the flowers in a small vase and eyed the ring. It was gold and vintage. Something told me the emerald was real, I hoped I was wrong. I let Hades out and waited in the doorway as he found a place to pee. I needed to focus on other things tonight. I was so close to calming the Way that I wasn't going to wait until later to work on it. I had gotten a good night of sleep last night, so today was the day. Hades came in, I gave him a treat and love before heading upstairs. I was hopeful as I lay down.

I was in the Veil again. I really was getting good at this, I sat down in the dirt and looked up. It hadn't been easy but now... it was time to make the Way my bitch. I smirked as I lay down in the dirt. I thought of the boys again. We were over at the twins' house. Everyone was in the kitchen as Asher checked the enchiladas that Maria had left in the fridge for us. Asher and Isaac were picking on Ethan. Who came over to me, hugged me from behind, and rested his head on my shoulder.

"Make them stop picking on me, Beautiful," He begged pitifully. I reached behind me and ran my fingers through his hair.

"Aw, you can dish it out but not take it?" I teased him. He growled in my ear before letting me go and smacking me on the butt, I turned and smacked his arm in return. Ethan backed off as he laughed. I flipped him off then turned back to the others, they had all gone still. "What?" I asked. Everyone unfroze and went back to the conversation.

It wasn't until later when I realized that was the first time one of them had smacked my butt. I made a rule that night that if they smack mine, theirs' becomes fair game. So far only the twins were willing to risk it. I felt my body relax as my barriers dropped. That hot wind rolled over me, my mouth suddenly became parched. I focused on pushing my barriers out. I knew when I reached the wall, fury poured into me making me want to fight it. I accepted the rage. You're not mine, you have no place in me. The rage had nothing to latch onto so it slipped over me like oil. A slap of wind told me I was at the clouds. The energy behind it made me clench

my teeth. That overwhelming sense of wrong filled me. The howl of the wind got louder as my energy crept across the sky, the winds got worse as I got closer to the center. A deep feeling of sickness poured over me, making my stomach lurch and my energy shook against it. NO! My eyes snapped open, my gaze instantly went to the Way above me. Focus! This is the day I'm calming the Way! Not tomorrow, not the day after. NOW! I forced myself to not fight against the energy that made my stomach churn. I kept crawling across the clouds. The closer I got to the Way, the more the Veil reacted. The wind picked up, stinging me with sand, the ground vibrated, lighting striking the ground within inches of me. I ignored it all and kept focus, I wasn't stopping today. My energy finally met in the middle, the Veil went still and silent. Lightning froze mid-strike, sand hung in the wind like pollen in the breeze. My heartbeat was loud in my ears as I looked at the Way. Then I spoke to it.

"I know you're dying. I know you're angry and desperate but I need you to calm down before I can help," I whispered to the Way, believing every word with my heart and soul. I felt that hard feeling in my chest and I was going to use it. "I will find whoever did this to you, I swear. But we need to take care of you first. They can't stop me from bringing souls to you." There was a long silence. The Veil started moving again. The sand dropped from the wind, the lightning raced back up into the disappearing clouds. I watched in amazement as the sky cleared and stars twinkled above me. "Rest, I will bring you a soul tonight," I promised her. I don't know why, but the Way felt like a her to me. There was a sound, like a note played on a flute but it ran over my skin. Unsettled, I pulled my energy back to me and let my barriers rise again. I got to my feet, adrenaline burning through me. "Stay calm, I'll be back," I promised, then pulled myself out.

I opened my eyes in my bedroom. Adrenaline pumping, I jumped up from my bed, threw my door open, and ran downstairs, I grabbed my jacket and ran out the front door. I didn't even bother to close it. The ghosts shouted for me but I ignored them as I jumped into the Blazer and I peeled out on to the street. I had a promise to keep. I sped through town, only slowing down for stop signs on my way to Asher and the twins' street. My heart slammed in my chest as I focused on not killing myself. When I was there, I skidded to a stop between Asher's house and the

Twins', I barely took the time to kill the lights and engine. In a heartbeat, I was out and running down the sidewalk.

"Lexie?" Ethan shouted. I ignored him and kept running. Herbert had to be around here somewhere. I spotted him, pacing in the middle of the road, grumbling to himself. I slowed so I could catch my breath. Running footsteps caught up to me. "What's wrong? Why are you running?" Ethan demanded as he grabbed my arm. I turned to him with a huge smile on my face.

"I calmed the Way!" I shouted, not caring if anyone heard. Ethan's jaw dropped before he hugged me tight.

"That's amazing!" He practically shouted in my ear. I hugged him back tight. "What now?"

"Now I cross a soul," I pulled back and headed further towards Herbert Munich. The old man was in a nice suit. His white hair was perfectly combed, even his nails were immaculate and I had promised he would be one of the first to cross.

"Hey Bert!" I shouted at him from the curb. I really am tactless, he looked up and glared at me. "Wanna cross now?" I smiled at him. His eyes lit up as he hurried towards me.

"Really? Now?" He asked, his hands shaking. I nodded still smiling.

"It might take a couple tries to grab you, but I think I got it down," I assured him. He gave me a big smile.

"What do I do?" He asked eagerly.

"Just, don't fight me or anything that you feel happening. I don't know what's going to happen but, just... be passive," I said, sounding unsure. He nodded. I took a deep breath and remembered what I felt that night with Emily Hann. How I refused to accept that she might die. I wouldn't let her. I looked at Herbert. He missed his wife, he wanted to see her so bad my heart ached. I wanted to take him to her. I reached for him but I kept hitting something. That's when I realized what it was, my beads. I quickly shoved them off in one motion and handed them to Ethan as I focused on grabbing Herbert. I reached for him again. Only now, I could see it. I watched a gold string of light move from me out to him. It wrapped around him. I had

him. "Okay here we go," I warned him. I closed my eyes and dropped down to my Center dragging Herbert with me. It felt weird and a little painful, like swallowing a piece of food that was just a bit too big. You'd get it down but you were going to feel it. Then I was standing on my white sandy plain. I took a breath and looked to my left. Herbert was still here.

"Is this the Veil?" He asked, stunned.

"No, it's my Center. I have to take you to the Veil to cross. It's a long story," I said. I don't know why but I reached out my hand. He gave me a smile and took it; his hand didn't go through mine. Okay, that was new. I thought about the Veil and we flew across the sand. Then we were just there, standing on the stone ledge near the abyss. Startled, I pushed Herbert back further from the ledge. I really needed to work on knowing where to stop when coming here or someone was going to be unmade on accident. The Veil was how I left it, the land still burnt and barren, but the sky was still clear. I turned to Herbert, his eyes showing his confusion.

"Why does it look like this? Where am I going?" He asked, his eyes growing wide.

"Someone cut the Veil off using all the energy that was here. It's not supposed to look like this," I reassured him. "That's why there is so much energy floating around the physical world now." His eyes met mine.

"Yes, that energy is... disturbing. You can take it and do things you can't usually do," He said, still looking around. "But once you get a taste, you just keep wanting more."

I raised an eyebrow. "You mean..."

He looked back to me. "You become addicted," He finished for me. I tucked that away for later. "What do I do now?" He asked, his voice shook. I took a breath and focused. I needed to let him go. Herbert was going to make his choice, I couldn't make it for him. I watched that golden thread disappear, I let go of his hand, and met his eyes.

"I can't force you to cross, Bert," I began, keeping my voice gentle. "You have a choice. Jump off the ledge and leave existence." I pointed up at the sky. "Or move on."

"What's on the other side?" He looked up, his face drawn.

"I don't know, but everyone I've seen cross felt pure joy," I said honestly. "If your wife is anywhere, she's there. And she's probably waiting for you." He swallowed hard, tears in his eyes. My chest ached with how much he missed her. He looked at me again.

"I'm so sorry, about..." -tears falling down his face- "I just wanted to go," He said softly. I gave him an understanding smile.

"I understand." Something to the right moved, I turned as a door made of gold light appeared. It opened. There on the other side was a meadow of grass and flowers. There she stood. She looked like she was in her early twenties with curly, shoulder-length black hair, big blue eyes, and olive skin. She was wearing a soft and airy dress. The way she smiled at Herbert left no doubt in my mind who she was. "Damn Bert, you got real lucky," I said. He laughed, and sniffed.

"I know, I knew it every day I had with her," He said, his eyes never leaving her. "I never even asked you your name."

"Alexis, everyone calls me Lexie." He turned to me, tears running down his wrinkly face, his eyes shining with happiness.

"Thank you, Lexie."

"You're welcome." I tilted my head towards his wife. "Now get your ass over there, she's missed you just as much." He had a brilliant smile as he walked towards the door. As he got closer, he changed. He stood straighter, his hair color darkened, the wrinkles disappeared. He grew younger before my eyes. By the time he crossed the threshold, he was in his twenties again, and not a bad looking guy either. Her eyes lit up as tears fell down her cheeks. He pulled her into his arms and proceeded to kiss the shit out of her. Whoa, didn't need to see that. Thankfully the door closed before I saw more. The door turned into two small balls of light that shot up like rockets into The Way and disappeared. There was a loud thunderclap that knocked me off my feet. Dazed, I watched it move across the Way in waves, it reminded me of waves in a storming sea. Okay, was that going to happen every time? I got to my feet slowly. I had hit the dirt pretty hard.

"Managed it huh?" I jumped and turned. Imposter Lexie was standing there smiling. I huffed. "Yeah, is it going to make that sound every time?" I asked, because if so, I needed to come up with a Veil version of earplugs. The other me smirked and shook her head.

"No, but every soul on earth heard that noise," She told me, her face suddenly serious. "They'll know there is a way into the Veil now and they'll be coming to you." I fought the urge to groan.

"How much pain am I going to be in when I pull out of this?" I asked. The other me tilted her head thinking.

"A small nose bleed, no pain," She said. Then her eyes narrowed on me. "It'll get worse with the more souls you cross over in a twenty-four-hour period. Be careful, otherwise you can burn out," She warned her voice firm. She looked around, something catching her eye on the ground. I turned, there was a small green vine that hadn't been there before. She walked over and knelt in the dirt. "When you cross souls you'll be restoring a balance. Over time, the Veil will open again."

"Just by helping souls cross?" I asked, unable to hide the doubt in my voice. Was it really that simple? The other me stood up and smiled.

"Yeah, but you need to be careful," She came back to stand in front of me. "I'd suggest two tomorrow, three the next day, then four." I raised my eyebrows at the pace. "You need to build this skill fast, and it's going to be unpleasant. You're going to pass out when you hit your limit. After you pass out, don't start up 'till at least eight hours later or you'll fry your brain." I narrowed my eyes at her.

"Why are you suddenly such a fountain of information?" I asked, dryly. She raised an eyebrow.

"Because now I can," She countered. "The one who did this, they're going to know soon enough that someone like you is around. And they are going to try to put it back to the way they wanted it."

"How do I stop that from happening?" I asked. She gave me a sad smile.

"You're going to have to lock the Veil yourself," She said, like it was that simple.

"Huh?"

"If you lock it, it'll keep the other one out," Imposter Lexie explained slowly.

"Yeah, and the dead will never be able to cross here on their own. I'd kinda like to have my life back at some point," I shot at her. This was insane. Lockdown the Veil? More?

"If you're going to do that, then create an alarm to warn you if they come back," Imposter Lexie suggested. "You'll just have to come and deal with them here. That'll take energy manipulation. I suggest you learn it." I just gaped at her. Her or my face turned sympathetic. "Start small, cross souls. Get some of the balance back that we desperately need. Then work on the next part." Her face turned serious. "It's affecting more than just the dead,"

"What do you mean?" I asked. She shook her head.

"Don't worry about that, we're handling it. Right now, get the souls crossing." She said. I nodded, I got it. Cross souls, figure out how to keep the fucker out, and learn how to manipulate energy. Okay, I can do that. Right?

"Who... or what are you?" I asked really wanting to know. She smiled at me and shook her head.

"You're not ready to know yet," She said patiently. Her eyes ran over me. "Now go celebrate or something, there will be plenty to do tomorrow." She seemed to consider something. "If you run into trouble, call for Zahur." Imposter Lexie, no, Zahur disappeared. Just like that, gone. I sighed. Things were going to get more interesting, great. I closed my eyes and pulled myself out. When I opened my eyes, I was on the snow covered sidewalk again. Ethan, Isaac, and Asher were watching me like hawks. I quickly put tissues to my nose and smiled.

"I did it," I announced. Their faces went blank. "I got Herbert to cross."

"Holy shit," Isaac said stunned,

"Ally..." Asher said a big smile spreading across his face. Ethan just hugged me to him and held me tight. I squeezed him back, it was the happiest day of my life. Relief filled me until tears fell down my face.

Asher saw them then reached out and wiped my cheek while Ethan squeezed me tighter.

"Okay, we need to celebrate!" Isaac declared. I smiled as Ethan let me go.

"Hell yeah!" Ethan shouted. Asher wrapped his arm around me as we headed back down the street. The twins got on their phones to tell the others the good news. I couldn't stop smiling as we reached Asher's house. Ethan turned to me. "Okay, go home, we're bringing pizza and we'll have your movie night, Beautiful."

I pumped my arm and hissed. "Yes!" The boys laughed at me, I didn't care. I calmed the Way, they could laugh all they want.

I pulled up to the house. The ghosts were still waiting outside. They looked like they all wanted to say something. Well, so did I. I got out and stepped onto the grass. Before they could start I held up a hand for silence.

"I calmed the Way, and I can cross souls now. But!" I stopped them before they could make their demands. "I can only do one at a time. To do this safely, I will cross two tomorrow, three the next day, and so on. So, instead of hanging out here at my house all the time and keeping me awake, I'll make you all a deal." They were all listening. I made my voice firm, but calm. I wanted them to know I wasn't messing around. "Go to the Cemetery, I'll cross one of you in the morning and one at night, unless there is an emergency. You, as a group, will decide who crosses next. You will not come to me bitching and moaning about how your need is more important than anyone else's. Does everyone understand?"

"We understand perfectly," Mrs. McClain said politely. "We will go now and discuss who will go next." Everyone nodded in agreement. As a group, they began to leave. Some walked down the street, chatting like old friends. Some glared at me before storming off. I didn't care. They were gone. I was so happy I did a dance right there in the front yard, before going inside. My fierce watchdog was out cold on the couch. I immediately pounced on Hades who retaliated with puppy kisses. When the fight was over I sat down and called Rory.

"Hey kid. Is the house still standing?" Rory asked dryly.

"I did it," I announced. "I calmed the Way and got a soul to cross." Rory let out a big sigh.

"Lexie, that's... amazing," His voice was so relieved it brought tears to my eyes.

"I've also got the ghosts meeting me at the cemetery in the mornings to cross. They won't be hanging around anymore," I told him still smiling as Hades put his head in my lap.

"Damn kid! You're on a roll!" He shouted into my ear. I snickered as I stroked Hades' ear.

"Do you care if the guys are coming over with pizza and bad movies?" I asked, my voice pleading. He chuckled.

"As long as they're out by curfew," He warned me.

"Deal," I said instantly, unable to stop smiling.

"That's my girl, I'll talk to you tomorrow." I hung up as the front door opened and Tara walked in.

"Hey, Tara," I said, cheerfully. She eyed me.

"What are you so cheerful about?" She snapped. I ignored it.

"The guys are coming over with pizza to watch movies. Are you in?" I asked.

Tara blinked. "Everyone?"

"Yeah," I said. Tara grinned.

"Yeah, I'm in," She said. "I'm going to go change." Tara headed upstairs. That's weird, why would she change? I went to the movie collection and started picking up movies I've wanted to make the guys to watch for a while now. Army of Darkness, check, Sucker Punch, check. I was still looking when the front door opened. Zeke came in looking pale.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" I asked, eyeing him. He didn't answer. He strode towards me and picked me up with his arm under my butt. I giggled as he hugged me tight. I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face in his neck, taking a deep breath of leather and engine grease.

"Isaac said you crossed a soul," His voice was rough in my ear.

"Yeah," I whispered back. He squeezed me tight, his face moving to my neck. He took a deep shuddering breath. I hadn't realized how worried he really had been. "I'm going to be okay, Tough Guy." He nodded, his stubble rubbing against my skin as he held me.

"You had me worried, Baby."

"I know. But the souls have agreed to back off and wait their turn," I told him quietly. He pulled back and looked up at me.

"What do you mean?" He demanded his brow furrowed. I leaned back so I could see his face, until he was just holding me up.

"I mean when I got home and told them that they were going to back off, choose who was to cross tomorrow and leave me the hell alone," I explained bluntly. A big smile spread across his face, one with teeth! Two in a week! Was hell freezing over? It must be because, he's smiling.

"That's my girl," He said quietly.

"Yes, a raging bitch," I pointed out. He snorted as he put me down on my feet. Zeke went to sit down on the couch as I headed into the kitchen to find something to drink. Someone knocked. I asked Zeke to let Miles in. Miles walked in with a couple plastic bags in his hands. His eyes found me. He made his way straight towards me. He set the bags down on the counter and for once he didn't hesitate. He pulled me into a hard hug, his hand cupping my face, and holding me against his chest. I smiled as I breathed wintergreen. Everything inside me relaxed.

"You really did it?" He whispered. I squeezed him tighter.

"Yeah, I did." He kissed the top of my head surprising me. Miles never kissed me.

"What about the ghosts outside?" He asked. I grinned.

"I have all the leverage now. I told them to go away and take turns like preschoolers," I said dryly. He chuckled before pulling back to look at me. His emerald eyes were warm as they ran over my face.

"You would do that," He said. I gave him a big smile before he let me go. He pointed to the bags. "I brought vanilla, chocolate, strawberry ice cream, and toppings. I figured a Sundae bar would be fun."

"You're the best, Miles," I said as I looked through the bags. He grinned as I put everything away so it wouldn't melt. A door upstairs closed, I turned in time to watch Tara step off the stairs in a short plaid skirt and black shirt. I went still. She had a big smile as she went over to say hi to Zeke. She sat next to him and tried to talk to him, like she had with Asher in October. Oh. My. God. No, no way! I looked at Miles and tilted my head towards the two on the couch. Miles' face was stunned as he nodded. I wanted to groan. And a small part of me wanted to yank Tara upstairs and tell her to keep her hands off of Zeke. I turned away and opened the fridge. Where the hell did that come from? Zeke wasn't mine, he was dating Riley. I grabbed a few bottles of water and passed them out. I sat in the armchair on the left of the couch.

"So, Zeke, how's Riley?" I asked, cheerfully. He turned to me and began to answer.

"Who's Riley?" Tara asked. I looked to Tara.

"Zeke's girlfriend," I said, casually. Her face fell. Oh, come on. Really Tara? The others showed up with food and the party started. Isaac noticed what Tara was wearing and bit back a smile as he even managed to squeeze his big butt between the two on the couch. I relaxed and enjoyed my night with my friends, and tried not to kill Tara.

Hades' soft bark woke me up. I looked over the edge of the bed. Hades was at my door, scratching. I checked my alarm clock. It was only 2:27 am. Maybe he needed to go out? Still rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I opened the door. Hades raced into the hall and down the stairs, barking and growling the whole way. Okay, that wasn't normal. I followed Hades down the stairs and turned on the light for the great room. Hades was at the back door, still growling, his entire body was tense. Something was wrong. I turned on the backyard light and looked out the glass of the French doors. There was nothing out there except falling snow and pine trees. Hades stopped growling, but kept pacing along the door. I looked down at him and saw it. My stomach dropped. There were footprints in the carpet of untouched snow. They came up to the back door then left into the tree line. My heart slammed in my chest as I checked the door. The deadbolt was locked. Dread filled me as I backed away from the glass. When Hades calmed down, I relaxed. I went to my coat, got my phone, and took photos

out the door. I'd show them to Rory tomorrow. There was no reason to freak him out now.

"Come on, Hades. Let's go to bed," I said quietly, a knot in my stomach. I went back to bed, after I shut off the light, closed my bedroom door. Tonight, I locked it. I went to bed, and curled up with Hades.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 10

Wednesday

Those footprints were on my mind as I drove to the Cemetery the next morning. I hadn't seen Rory yet, but I was going to show him those pictures the minute I did. I pulled into the cemetery and found where a group of ghosts waited. I hopped out and approached them.

"Okay, who's first today?" I asked, cheerfully. Carl Mason stepped forward. He was wearing work pants, a dirty t-shirt, and work boots. The only thing missing was the helmet. His friendly face was smiling. I smiled back. He'd been waiting a long time. "Alright Carl, just stand there and be passive alright?" He nodded with a big smile on his face. I took off my bracelets and put them into my pocket.

I looked at Carl and felt how much he wanted to move on. I focused on feeling that need. That golden thread formed and gently wrapped around his wrist. He looked at me and smiled happily. I closed my eyes and dropped to my center with Carl. It didn't hurt as much as last time, but I still felt it. We were under that golden sky almost instantly. I didn't say a word as I took his hand and focused on where I wanted to be in the Veil. We shot across the sand and stopped exactly where I had pictured. Yay, I wasn't going to throw someone into the pit on accident!

Carl was gasping as he looked around. I pulled that thread back, let go of his hand, and stepped away.

"Why does it look like this?" He asked, stunned. I gave him a warm smile.

"Someone fucked with the Veil, and I'm trying to fix it," I said bluntly. He nodded.

"It looks like it," He admitted.

"Carl, I can't make you cross," I began, just as I had with Herbert. "You have two choices, either cross over or be removed from existence." His gaze shot to me. "It's your choice. I can't make it for you."

"What... what about God? Purgatory?" He asked, his voice shaking.

"I have no clue. I only know that if you cross over, you'll find out," I said gently. He looked around the Veil. This time I spotted a golden ball of light come down from the Way. When it reached the ground, it formed a door. It opened. A little girl around four years old with pigtails and a smile was on the other side at a playground.

"Daisy," Carl gasped. Tears feel down his face instantly. That's when I knew, when I felt it. She was his daughter. Carl sank to his knees as he watched her in disbelief. My heart ached for him, to lose your own child... I couldn't imagine. I didn't have to, I could feel his pain. It was soul crushing.

"She's waiting, Carl," I reminded him gently. "She's been waiting for you. Don't make her wait anymore." Carl nodded.

"Thank you," He whispered.

"You're welcome," I said quietly as he headed for the door. His appearance didn't change as he crossed but he pulled his little girl into his arms and sobbed. The door closed and changed to two balls of light that shot into the Way. I wiped my face and looked around the ground. There was a small white daisy pushing its way up through the dirt, I couldn't help but smile. I closed my eyes and pulled myself out.

I opened my eyes and immediately grabbed my tissues. I held them to my nose as the other ghosts watched.

"He's crossed. I'll be back later tonight for the next one," I promised. They all looked relieved. I jumped into the Blazer and drove to school. I met the guys at our usual table, everyone but Zeke was there. Miles eyes ran over me as soon as I got there.

"How did it go?" Miles asked.

"Great, I managed to get Carl Mason to cross," I said, smiling. The others relaxed. I shot them a look. "Did you guys really doubt me?" They all instantly denied it. I shook my head as Isaac's gaze went over my shoulder.

"Zeke, you look like shit," Isaac announced. I turned. Zeke's face was pale and sweaty, his eyes were half closed as he stopped at the table and leaned against it.

"I'm fine," He growled his body shook as he broke out into wet coughs. I heard the crap in his lungs. That was so not fine. I reached up and felt his cheek with the back of my hand, the fact he didn't push me away alone was enough to worry me. If that didn't, his hot skin against my fingers did.

"Zeke, you're burning up," I said as I moved my hand to cup his face. He was hot to the touch, he shook his head.

"It's just the flu," He grumbled wearily as he held my hand to his cheek. "Your hand is freezing."

"And it feels good, doesn't it?" I asked, pointedly. He eyed me, his eyes bright. "That means you have a fever, Tough Guy." He moved my hand away from his face.

"I... it's just hot out..."

"It's January. You're going home, Zeke," Miles ordered, his voice telling him not to argue. It was rare to hear that from Miles. Zeke sent Miles his 'don't fuck with me' glare, it surprised me.

"I'm not sick. I'm fine," He snarled. Pushing away from the table, he turned to walk down out of the courtyard and into a hallway. We were all one step behind him.

"You can't even walk in a straight line!" Ethan shot at him. Zeke flipped him off over his shoulder.

"Come on, I'll make you Maria's soup if you go home," Asher tried.

"Fuck off," He snapped. Isaac moved around him to stop him.

"I'll take you home now and Ethan will bring your jeep home for you," Isaac offered. Zeke just shoved him out of the way. Isaac cursed as he hit the lockers. Even sick, Zeke was a strong guy.

"Lexie?" Miles whispered to me.

"On it." I moved around Zeke. I put my hand on his chest; he stopped dead. He looked down at me.

"Zeke, you are sick," My voice was hard and had an edge to it. "I'm not fucking around here. You are going home now." He blinked at me, opening his mouth as if to deny it. I held up two fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?" I demanded. He looked at my fingers and blinked. That wasn't good.

"Three," He offered. Shit, how high was his fever?

"Two." I dropped my fingers, reached up and held his chin so he had to look at me.

"You are sick, and I am taking you home now. Even if I have to pull you by your ear, you hear me?" He exhaled hard and I heard the crap rattle in his chest again. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth.

"I hear ya," He bit out through clenched teeth. I held out my hand.

"Give me your keys, I'll drive you home in your Jeep." I softened my voice, trying to be soothing. He sighed, but ended up coughing again. He dug into his jeans then handed them over. I pulled mine out and handed them to Ethan. "I'll stay with him. Can you bring my Blazer over after school?"

"Of course." Ethan eyed him. "You sure you want to stay with him? He's even more of an asshole when he's sick," Tough Guy glared at Ethan like he wanted to kill him. I wrapped my hand around the back of Zeke's tricep and started pulling him down the hall.

"I'm not worried about it," I assured him. He weaved into me, making me stumble a couple steps. Asher caught up and grabbed his other arm, Zeke tried to jerk away from him.

"Zeke, if you drop, Ally can't get you back up," Asher pointed out. "I'm just getting you to the Jeep." Zeke cursed under his breath but when Asher grabbed his arm, he didn't pull away again. Asher helped steady him as we started down the hall. Miles walked beside me.

"I'll pick up medicine and some groceries," Miles' voice was quiet, as if he didn't want Zeke to hear him. I couldn't blame him, Zeke was cursing the whole way out to the parking lot.

"Thanks, and please pick up lots of orange juice. If he has the fever I think he does, he'll be craving it," I said in a low voice. He nodded as we reached the parking lot. Miles headed towards his car as I walked faster to unlock the passenger side of the Jeep. Zeke bitched as he got in and shut the door. I sighed then grinned up at Asher. "Thanks Ash." He nodded, his face worried.

"I'll follow you. You might need help getting him in the house," He said absently, watching Zeke lean his head back and close his eyes.

"Thank you," I chimed in my cutesy voice. Asher snorted then grinned down at me. Worried about Zeke, I moved around the Jeep, threw my bag in back, and climbed in. I had to slide the seat forward, Zeke had freaking long legs. I started the Jeep then looked at him and realized he hadn't put his seat belt on. "Zeke, seatbelt," I ordered. He growled as he buckled in. I headed towards his house with Zeke bitching under his breath the whole way. "I know Tough Guy, I'm a bitch, I know."

"Didn't say that," He muttered, his eyes still closed. I smiled.

"It's for your own good, Zeke." He flipped me off. "Love you too," I grinned. It wasn't long before I pulled up to Zeke's house. I shut off the Jeep and moved around to the passenger side. He opened the door, put his feet on the ground, and heaved himself to his feet. He instantly caught himself against the Jeep. I reached out to steady him as much as I could. Asher shut off his truck then hurried over. He took my spot and wrapped Zeke's arm over his shoulders.

"Come on buddy, let's not drop your fat ass on Ally, huh? You'd crush her," Asher's voice was matter of fact as Zeke leaned against him. I hurried to the door to unlock it. By the time they got there, I had it open and Zeke was mumbling under his breath again. Something about a pain in the ass short girl and orders, I smirked and assumed he meant me. Asher helped me get Zeke's jacket off then he helped Zeke down the hallway. I pulled off my coat, hung it up, and followed. Zeke was sitting on the side of

his bed, sweating heavily and out of breath. Asher helped him take off his shoes while I felt Zeke's forehead. He was roasting.

"Zeke, we need to get you cooled off," I said gently. I started to pull his shirt up to take it off him. He didn't realize it until I had it up to his ribs. I was trying to ignore those muscled lines when his hands knocked mine away.

"Don't," He growled.

"Zeke, you are sweating. We need to get you into something cooler," I kept my voice gentle and soothing. My hands went to his shirt again. He grabbed my hands, his grip hard, his fevered eyes met mine.

"No," His voice was hard this time. It took me a second to remember why. My chest burned.

"Zeke, you told me about the scar tissue, remember?" I said softly. Asher finished taking his shoes off and straightened. "I'm not going to ask questions, I just want to get you cooled down." An edge of panic slipped into his eyes.

"Zeke, you're changing," Asher snapped. "Now either she can help you or I will. But you're changing into cooler clothes. Now who's it going to be?" Zeke took a breath that sent him into another coughing fit. His hands never left mine.

"Asher," He growled when he finally had his breath back. I let his shirt drop back down to his waist. I didn't care if it was Asher or me, I just wanted him comfortable. I gave him a small, understanding smile. He let go of my hands, glaring at the door. I looked up to Asher.

"I'll go find the thermometer," I told him, before heading into the hall and closing the door behind me.

In the bathroom, I started looking through the drawers and cabinets. I found a simple electric thermometer. I pulled a washcloth out of the towel cabinet and got it wet. Shouting started coming from Zeke's bedroom.

"I'll bring Ally back in here to help you if you don't knock it off!" Asher's voice made me smile. He was threatening Zeke with me? That was funny as hell, not the reason why, but just that it was happening. I was wringing out the washcloth when Asher opened the door. Zeke was sitting

on the side of the bed, still sweating and still cursing. He was wearing black mesh shorts that reached his knees and a black crew neck sleeveless shirt. Asher walked into the hall, his face angry. "He's all yours, Ally. I'll be in the kitchen or I'm going to hit him." Asher's voice was hard as he walked down the hall. Wow. What did Zeke say? I moved into Zeke's room and touched his shoulder. His eyes opened, he looked up at me, not all there.

"Open your mouth, Tough Guy. I need to take your temp." My voice was soft and soothing again. Zeke grumbled but did as I asked. I put the thermometer in, he closed his mouth then his eyes. I put the wet washcloth across the back of his neck. He groaned in his throat. He lowered his head until his forehead was resting against my upper stomach. Surprised, I ran my fingers through his hair and rubbed his neck gently. His hands were hot as they rested on the outside of my legs, just above my knees. He must really feel like shit. When the thermometer beeped, he didn't move. I leaned back a little to see his face and take it out of his mouth. It read 103. "Shit." I ran my fingers down his face to get his attention. He grumbled. "Zeke. Lay down. You've got a high fever." He made grumbly noises as he pulled away to flop on to his bed. He groaned. "I'm getting you some more wet washcloths. I want to cool you down as much as I can," I told him before I went into the bathroom and hurried to bring them back to him. I put one on his forehead, another on the front of his throat, and one on the inside of each forearm. Zeke looked like he passed out. I left him alone, hoping that Miles would get here soon with something for a fever. I walked down the hallway and into the kitchen where Asher was looking at the fridge. "He's got a temp of 103." His eyebrows went up.

"Damn." He shut the fridge and went to a cabinet. I leaned against the sink worrying about Zeke. Asher pulled out a plastic sandwich bag from a drawer. "He told you about his scars?" He asked quietly as I watched him fill the bag with ice.

"Not in so many words," I admitted. "When I got those knots out I felt some raised spots on his back. The only reason I asked about it was because if it was scar tissue I needed to push harder." I rubbed the back of my neck. "He said push harder." "Humph." Asher pushed a lot of air out of the bag then sealed it. "Did he tell you what they were from?"

"No," I answered quietly. "And I didn't ask." Asher gave me a small, sad smile before handing me the ice bag.

"Are you sure you want to deal with him?" He asked, his face worried. "He's really hard to deal with when he's sick." I gave him my mischievous grin.

"I have my ways," I said, cheekily. He smiled and shook his head. "I can handle him. I'm cute and bitchy." He chuckled as I played with the ice bag.

"Hell Ally, if anyone can, it's you." His eyes were warm as they ran over my face. My pulse sped up, as my eyes met his. Those butterflies went crazy, I blinked and looked down at the ice in my hand.

"I try," My voice was quiet as I shifted the ice around for something to look at besides him. I really needed to get a handle on this crush thing. The front door opened and I practically ran out into the front room to get away from Asher. Miles had brought in several plastic bags and was setting them down on the table.

"I have more in the car," Miles announced as he pushed his glasses up his nose. He grabbed two bags and handed them to me. Asher headed outside to bring the rest in. "This is all the medicine I thought he might be able to use," He said. I looked in the two bags, it looked like he bought out the store. It made me smile. Sweet, caring, handsome Miles. Damn it Lexie, stop it. Now isn't the time. I started going through the bags.

"Thanks Miles, he has a temp of 103," I told him as I pulled out fever meds.

"I'll get the doctor over here," Miles said instantly. I looked up to see him already pulling out his phone.

"Thank you," I said immediately. Miles emerald eyes ran over my face before meeting mine.

"Of course, but..." His mouth made a tight line as his gaze went to the hallway, then back to me. "I'll be fine at least he barks less at me," I reminded him. He thought about that then nodded.

"That is true." He agreed. I winked at him. He grinned as he dialed. I took the medicine I thought would work then headed down the hall. Zeke was sprawled out on his bed, eyes closed, still sweating.

"Zeke," I called softly from the door. Zeke opened one eye. He wasn't asleep, just miserable. I walked in, sat on the edge of his bed next to him, and opened the stuff for his fever. "I've got some medicine for your fever and it'll help with the muscle aches too," I said softly. He winced as he sat up. I handed him the small cup. He drank it down fast, then made a face.

"Ugh... grape," He groaned. I laughed at the face he was making.

"Sorry, I didn't know."

"Miles did," He grumbled as he lay back down. "He's punishing me." I raised an eyebrow. Miles punishing Zeke?

"For what?"

"Yelling at you," He mumbled.

"You didn't yell at me," I reminded him. He just nodded with his eyes closed. I put the ice pack on his forehead. He groaned, grabbed it, and put it on the back of his neck.

"... good...." He mumbled. Poor guy, I picked up the washcloths, went to the bathroom, and soaked them again. I sat back down and wiped his red face with one. He made small feel-good noises. It made me grin as I wiped down his face, neck, and arms. I really didn't like his temp so high. Then something occurred to me.

"Zeke, I can call Riley and have her come take care of you, if you want?" I offered.

"No," He bit out. That surprised me. Why wouldn't Zeke want his girlfriend to take care of him?

"Shouldn't I tell her you're sick? She's going to be worried," I tried again.

"Don't care..." His voice was groggy as I wiped his neck again with the wet cloth.

"She'll probably stop by after school anyway," I thought out loud.

"Never been here... don't want her here..." He mumbled. I raised an eyebrow at that. Riley had never been to Zeke's house? Well, then again, it made sense since I only saw it for the first time a few weeks ago. I wet the washcloths again and kept trying to cool him off. There was a knock on the front door, I put down the washcloths so I could head back up the hall to the front room. Miles had let in the doctor. Dr. Zimmer was near his fifties, he'd mostly retired years ago. Miles and his family were his only patients now. His black hair was graying and neatly combed. He wore slacks and a button down with a matching blazer. For a retired guy, he was rather fashionable, I was impressed.

"Thank you, Dr. Zimmer," Miles greeted him politely. "He's down this way." Miles led him down the hall to Zeke's room while I went into the kitchen. I found a large mixing bowl while Asher was cutting carrots. I put a few ice cubes in it, and was filling it up when shouting came from Zeke's room. Damn it. I turned off the faucet and ran to his room. Zeke was sitting on the edge of the bed snarling at Miles while the doctor simply waited by the door.

"I don't need a fucking doctor," Zeke snapped bitterly. His eyes were glowing with his fever. I walked in the door and stood directly in front of him. He blinked up at me.

"Zeke, you have a fever of 103. I can hear crap rattling around in your chest," I told him clearly, my voice hard and clipped. "You need a fucking doctor." He scowled at me. I didn't give in. "So, sit there and let him check you out so we don't end up taking you to the E.R." His fevered eyes ran over my face. Then he let out a big breath; I knew I won. I stepped to the side, giving the doctor room but not far enough to leave Zeke's sight. Dr. Zimmer came over and gave him a quick exam. Anytime Zeke started to snap, I put my hand on his shoulder, reminding him that I was right there. He'd clench his teeth and did what the doctor asked. It didn't take long.

"Alright Zeke, you've got bronchitis, and a high fever, probably from the flu," Dr. Zimmer announced. "It's a good thing Miles called otherwise you'd end up with pneumonia soon." He pulled out a prescription pad then started writing. "I'm giving you an antibiotic, I also want you to take a decongestant and cough all that up, you need to get it out." He pulled the prescription off the pad before he handed it to Miles. "Once the fever

breaks, you'll feel a lot better. Bronchitis won't keep you down, it's just the fever that's doing that right now." Zeke's head was already starting to hang, his eyes were closed. I touched his shoulder.

"Zeke, lay down," I told him gently. He didn't argue, he just laid down. The doctor was still talking to Miles when Zeke started to snore lightly. I had to fight back a grin, that medicine must have finally kicked in. We filed down the hall and into the front room.

"He'll be up and terrorizing you guys again in a couple days," Dr. Zimmer reassured us.

"Thanks doc," I said.

"My pleasure," Dr. Zimmer said before he headed out the door.

"I'll go get his prescription." Miles told me as he pulled on his coat and headed out the door too. I sat down on the couch with my head back. Heavy footsteps moved across the floor.

"Are you okay, Ally girl?" I nodded before opening my eyes to look up at him.

"Yeah, I'm just worried about his fever," I told him. Asher sat in the yellow chair next to me.

"He'll be okay, he's a tough bastard," He assured me. I nodded. "How do you calm him down anyway?" I looked at the TV and shrugged.

"I think it's just me being a girl," I said honestly. He shrugged.

"Maybe. I need to get back to school, unless you want help with him?" Asher offered.

"Nah, I got him. He's too sick to run from a pout right now," I said. Asher laughed. When he calmed down, he was smiling.

"That's true." He pointed at the kitchen. "I've got a big pot of Maria's soup heating on the stove. It's the only thing he'll eat when he's sick like this." He got up then leaned over to kiss me on the top of my head. Hot shivers ran down my neck. "If you need anything call," He said. I gave him a wink.

"Will do." I held my breath until Asher was out the door. Then I went limp against the couch. This crush shit sucked. How long was I going to have these feeling for Asher? And Miles? I sighed, stupid move Lexie.

It wasn't long before Miles was back with Zeke's prescription and a great decongestant. I told him to go back to school. He frowned at me.

"Are you sure? Zeke isn't exactly the friendliest guy right now," He warned. I gave him a smile.

"I can handle him Miles, don't worry about it," I reassured him. "If I need a break I'll call." His eyes ran over my face several times before he nodded. I made Zeke a bowl of soup and got a glass of orange juice. Making sure I had his antibiotics and decongestant, I headed down the hallway. His face was sweaty and red as he lay on his side facing the door. I bit the corner of my lower lip. I wanted to check his temp again but I knew it probably hadn't changed. I set everything down on the end table before sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Zeke," I called softly, checking his temp with the back of my fingers.

"Baby...?" He slurred his voice deep with sleep.

"Yeah, it's me, Tough guy," I said softly. He opened his eyes slowly. "I have your meds for you, and soup." He groaned, burying his face into a pillow. "You need to eat something with these." My voice told him not to argue. He rolled over grumbling then sat up against the wall, his eyes only half way open. I gave him the meds, decongestant, and the juice. He took them, drinking down the entire glass. I took it back then gave him his soup. He took a deep breath, then started coughing. I waited until he was done so he could take his soup. While he ate, I picked up the washcloths and put them on the nightstand. When I went to get up he lifted his head from his soup.

"Hmm?"

"I'm just going to the kitchen. I'll be right back," I told him, keeping my voice soothing. He nodded, still groggy, as he went back to eating. I went to the kitchen and emptied the big bowl of water. I put in a few cubes again. I was filling it when I realized it. I had just woken Zeke up, without a problem. It took almost a minute for that to sink in. He must really feel like shit. I carried the bowl back to his bedroom and set it on the nightstand.

He was almost asleep, the bowl in his hand about to tip over. I snatched it fast, just before he spilled it all over himself, that had him lifting his head. "Lay down, Tough Guy, I've got some cold water to help cool you off." He nodded, he laid back down on his side, facing me again.

I sat back on the edge of the bed, dipped a washcloth, wrung it out, then put it on the back of his neck. He made a feel-good groan again. I had a small smile as I added another one to his forehead. I was wringing out another when Zeke moved. He rolled a bit to his stomach and moved his arm. His thick, muscled forearm laid over my leg that was bent under me, his hand wrapped around my other knee. I went still, too stunned to move. Okay... Zeke was a cuddler, I did not know that. It took me a couple minutes to wrap my head around that. Then I was back to trying to cool him off. I really wanted to wipe down his back, but with the way he reacted when I tried to take his shirt off told me he wouldn't like it. Screw it, I started wetting down the back of his shirt. I was a little worried he'd be uncomfortable until he started snoring again. I kept wiping down his face, neck, arms and back until the red in his face was gone. I went to get up but his grip wouldn't let me. "Zeke, I have to get up," I whispered. He groaned, let go of me, and rolled over. I smiled as I went into the living room. I sat on the couch and pulled out my phone. Rory had called. I winced, the school probably called him. I called back.

"Where the hell are you? And why aren't you in class?" Rory snapped into my ear.

"Zeke's sick," I said instantly. "He came to school with a 103 temp and he could barely walk. So, we took him home and I'm taking care of him." There were a few heartbeats of silence.

"Fine," Rory said sleepily. "Just... call next time."

"I promise," I assured him. Rory hung up. I must have woken him up. I noticed I had several text messages.

Secret Admirer: I stopped by your house last night to introduce myself and apologize for not showing up at the theater. But your friends were over so I thought discretion was a better idea. I'm sorry again for not coming into the theater.

Secret Admirer: Did you get the flowers last night? Did you like your present?"

Secret Admirer: You're not at school. Are you okay? What's going on?

I frowned as I kept reading.

Secret Admirer: Tell me you're alright.

He was acting like a possessive boyfriend. It was starting to creep me out.

Alexis: I'm not at school. One of my friends is sick and I'm taking care of him. I did get the flowers and present. I don't know if I can accept the ring, it's too much.

I got a response almost instantly.

Secret Admirer: I was worried about you.

Secret Admirer: Of course you can keep the ring, it's perfect for you. I bet it fit perfectly.

Alexis: I never put it on. Like I said it's too much, how can I get it back to you?

Secret Admirer: Why didn't you put it on? It was a gift. You should wear it, I want you to have it.

I blinked at my phone. I didn't understand this guy and I was tired of this.

Alexis: You had the chance to meet me and you didn't take it, again. If you can't handle my friends, then you probably can't handle me. I'm a lot like them, loud, foul-mouthed, and a smart-ass. I'll leave your ring in an envelope on my locker when I come back to school.

My phone instantly started vibrating.

Secret Admirer: Don't say that, you're nothing like them.

I ignored the texts coming in and sent a message to Rory to call Zeke's phone if he needs me. He was still texting me when I shut off my phone. Dread settled in my stomach as I thought about all those texts, it was creepy. A door opened down the hall, Zeke's Aunt Sylvia walked in wearing her purple plaid pajama's. Sylvia had one of those faces you would

never forget. Not exceptionally beautiful. The kind of face where her personality shined through and that's what made her pretty. She pushed back her black shoulder length hair.

"Lexie? What are you doing here?" Sylvia asked. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Zeke's sick," I explained what happened this morning. She sighed as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"He's been spending too much time working at that garage at night," Sylvia grumbled. "Thank you for taking care of my baby." I smiled.

"No problem," I told her. Sylvia went into the kitchen as my eyes went to the photo of Zeke and his Mom. Sylvia came back in with a steaming mug and sat in her favorite yellow chair. "Sylvie, I probably shouldn't ask this," I announced before looking to her. "What was Zeke's Mom like?" She stirred her tea and smiled a sad smile.

"Julia was sweet and great," Sylvie began. She looked up from her tea and met my eyes.

"She was too nice, too forgiving." Sylvie seemed to weigh something, then came to a decision.

"His father was a biochemist at one of those big companies in the city. But, he had a mean streak and a temper even before Zeke was born. She forgave him a lot, even when she shouldn't have." Her eyes ran over my face. "I think that's why Zeke likes you so much."

"Why?" I asked, not getting it.

"You would tell someone to fuck off before putting up with the shit she did," Sylvia said firmly. "That's all I'm going to tell you."

"That's okay," I told her quietly. She gave me a warm smile. There was cursing from down the hallway. I growled as I got up and hurried down to Zeke's room, to find him trying to get up.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I can take care of myself," He shot back as he unsteadily got to his feet. I stepped forward and gave him a small shove. He dropped back to the bed and cursed at me. "No, you can't. Not with a 103 temp," I countered.

"I feel better." He bit out. I grabbed the thermometer and stuck it into his mouth. When it beeped I checked, it said 102.

"You still have a high fever, so what do you want?" I asked in a gentler tone. He frowned

"O.J," He muttered.

"I'll get it. Keep your ass in bed." I turned to walk out of the room.

"Can I take a leak by myself?" Zeke countered sarcastically. I smirked as I pretended to think about it.

"No shit, Zeke," I shot back smiling. "I can't do that for you and I have no intention of trying." The corner of his mouth twitched before I headed down the hall. Sylvia was laughing her butt off in the kitchen.

"Oh, I love how you handle him," Sylvia announced. "I can barely get him to behave when he's sick."

"I'm just majorly bossy," I offered smiling. Sylvia smiled as she filled up a glass then headed back down the hall. Zeke was sitting on the side of his bed again when I walked in. I handed him the juice. He took it without grumbling, and drank the juice down. "Lay down, get some rest," I told him softly. He nodded, his eyes already half closed. He laid down on his stomach this time. A phone rang, I found his phone on the desk. "Zeke, its Riley. What do you want me to tell her?"

"Tell her I'm sick and leave me the fuck alone," He growled into the pillow. I snorted and answered the phone.

"Where are you?" Riley demanded.

"It's Lexie," I said as I sat down on the side of the bed and reached for a wet washcloth.

"Where's Zeke? Is he okay?" Riley asked instantly.

"He showed up at school this morning with a high fever, so we brought him home. I'm babysitting the big baby."

"Fuck you," Zeke growled.

"See, big baby," I pointed out to Riley.

"Okay, give me his address and I'll be over to help," She offered. Shit. Zeke didn't want her here, and if I gave him the phone he'd be an ass to her.

"Riley, hon, he's being a real prick," I said.

"Love you too," Zeke grumbled. I bit back a laugh.

"And he said he didn't want to be that way to you. So, I can't give you his address," I said, cringing. There was dead silence for several heartbeats. "He's being such a dick that Asher almost decked him."

"Wow, that bad, huh?" She sounded impressed.

"Yeah."

"Um, okay. If he changes his mind give me a call. Tell him I said get better and stop being a shit," Riley said in a strained voice. Shit.

"I will, I'm sorry Riley," I said again.

"No, I get it. If he treated me that way he'd be pissed at himself for a week," She offered.

"Yeah, I'm family so I'm fair game," I grumbled. She gave a strange half laugh.

"Talk to you later," Riley said before hanging up. Zeke was going to pay for that call when he got better. I was putting his phone in my pocket when he half rolled over.

He looked half asleep when he asked, "Am I being an ass to you?"

I sighed. "No, actually you're behaving remarkably well for me. At least according to the guys. I was just trying to ease the sting of rejection for your girlfriend." He nodded then buried his face in the pillow again. "Do you want me to soak down your back again?" I asked, he nodded. I grabbed a wet cloth and started soaking his back. He groaned in a happy way. I kept bathing down his neck and arms. He wrapped his arm around my knees, his hand going around my ankle. I smiled as I kept cooling him off. When he was out, and his face no longer red, I tried to move his arm off my legs, the butthead was too heavy. "Zeke, I need to get up," I whispered softly to him. He grumbled and rolled over to his other

side. I snorted as I walked into the living room, time to find some mindless TV.

Later that evening, I was in the kitchen heating up Maria's soup on the stove. Sylvia came in wearing her waitress uniform and cursing.

"I'll be so damn glad when this semester is over and I can take the damn Bar," Sylvia growled. I grinned. The dogs outside barked as lights ran across the windows of the house.

"Do Dunner and Clive still want to hire you?" I asked as I stirred the soup. Dunner and Clive was a law firm over in Northridge. Sylvia had already interviewed with them and she had a job waiting. She just needed to finish the semester and pass the Bar.

"Yeah, and I'm looking forward to it," She said vehemently.

"Just think you'll be able to see the sun," I teased. Sylvia chuckled.

"That would be a change," She countered. "Night Lexie, thanks again for taking care of him."

"No problem," I assured her. She was heading to the front door when it opened. Isaac and Ethan barged in, Hades burst past him and ran to me. I bent down and gave my baby some loves.

"Sylvie!" Isaac cheered. He all but tackled her for a hug. Sylvia chuckled as Ethan quickly joined him. I was laughing as she got two kisses on the cheeks.

"Hey sweeties." Sylvia pulled back to look up at them. "Ugh, you two have gotten taller. Stop growing." The twins snickered. "I'm off to work, help Lexie, alright?"

"You got it, Momma," Ethan assured her. Sylvia gave them each a kiss on the cheek before heading out the door. Isaac came into the kitchen and hugged me tight, I chuckled and hugged him back.

"How's our surly giant of the North?" Isaac asked.

"His temp is down to 102," I began. "I'm about to take him his meds and food again."

"I'm going to go pop my head in," Isaac announced before he left the kitchen. Ethan came in and leaned against the counter next to the stove as I filled a glass of juice.

"So, guess who's still not talking about who kicked his ass," Ethan said smiling at me.

"Darren?" I asked, smirking as I filled a bowl of soup for Zeke.

"That's right," Ethan said. "I'm starting to think it was a girl."

I chuckled. Shouting erupted down the hall. I cursed, grabbed the bowl and glass then headed down the hall. Ethan was one step behind me. I walked in just in time to watch Zeke throw a pillow at Isaac.

"What are you going on about now?" I demanded. Zeke sat up on the side of the bed and tried to get up. I handed the bowl and glass to Ethan then stopped Zeke by blocking him.

"He turned on the light," Zeke grumbled. I turned on the nightstand lamp then shut off the overhead.

"Better?"

"Yeah," Zeke admitted as he blinked up at me.

"It's faster to just ask, and not bitch," I told him bluntly as I got his antibiotics and handed them to him. "Take them," I ordered. He grumbled as I took the juice and bowl from Ethan. Then handed the juice to Zeke. He took his meds, I grabbed the glass, and handed him the bowl. "Eat." He didn't even grumble this time. I stood there watching him until he was done. The twins walked out into the hall leaving him to me. I took the bowl and handed him the rest of the juice. "See if you can drink that," I said in a softer voice. When he was done, I felt his forehead, he was still hot.

"Do you want me to wet down your back again?" He nodded, already half asleep again. He flopped onto his stomach like a little kid. I smiled to myself as I soaked his shirt down again.

"Baby..." He mumbled.

"Yeah, Tough Guy?"

"Will you feed the dogs? They don't know anyone else," He muttered.

"I'll take care of them." Hades came in, jumped up on the bed, walked around Zeke to lay on the pillow next to his head. Hades sniffed Zeke's hair then snuggled down.

"Thank you." He shifted until Hades' fur was under his nose, then fell asleep. When his back was soaked, I headed back to the front of the house. I walked into the kitchen as the twins were in the living room, fighting over what to watch.

I got Tank and Kita's meals ready the way Zeke had shown me a couple weeks ago. Three scoops of dried food and one can of the wet each. I had asked why so much. Zeke had explained since its winter, the dogs needed more energy to stay warm, which means more food to keep healthy. It made sense to me. I took the two large metal bowls in one arm, switched on the light in back, and opened the door. The backyard was huge, about four acres in the fenced in portion alone. The dogs weren't in sight, I shut the door behind me, stepped further away from the door slowly, then whistled the two tones that Zeke taught me. Tank and Kita appeared. Tank was running full out.

"Tank, easy," I ordered. Tank dropped his butt into the snow and skidded to a stop before he could take me out. I let out the breath I had been holding. "Tank, sit," I said firmly. Tank sat and waited, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. I watched him carefully as I set his food in his spot. "Good boy." Tank moved to his dish and started chowing down. I smiled as I moved away and towards Kita's spot. Kita was already there, her tail between her legs. That wasn't a good sign. "It's okay Kita, it's dinner time," I said in a gentle, soothing voice. Kita had been abused badly by some guy in Colorado. Zeke said she'd been making progress, it was slow but still progress. I made sure not to tower over her as I bent down to put her food on the ground. She growled, I froze. "It's okay Kita, Zeke's inside. I know this is weird, he's just sick and can't come out right now." When she stopped growling, I put her food down slowly. I was pulling my hand away when she lunged. Her teeth bit into my hand. I cursed as she jumped back. I bit back the impulse to yell at her. "Kita, no biting," I told her firmly. I held my bleeding hand to my chest and backed up. Tank moved between us and growled at Kita. I went still, that wasn't good. "Tank, I'm okay," I told him in a soothing voice. His ears flicked back towards me as I backed up some more. Tank moved with me. The farther away I got from Kita, the less Tank

growled. When I reached the door, he was fine. "Tank, food." I ordered as I opened the door. He moved off to his bowl, but kept his eyes on Kita. I walked in and started cursing under my breath. My hand was throbbing as I moved to the sink and started trying to wash it out.

"What happened?" Isaac asked as he heard me.

"Kita was on edge and bit me," I grumbled as I cleaned my hand. Isaac opened a cupboard and pulled out a first aid kit.

"Are you okay, Lexie?" Ethan asked from the door.

"Yeah, I just got bit by Kita," I said absently before Isaac poured the antiseptic over my hand. I cursed a blue streak as my hand felt like it was on fire. When my hand was clean I started to wrap gauze around it to stop the bleeding.

"Lexie!" Zeke bellowed.

"Shit," I bit out. There was a loud thud in the hallway. I hurried out of the kitchen and down the hall. Zeke was leaning against the wall just outside his room, Ethan was shouting at him to get back to bed. I rushed down the hall to stop him from trying to keep going.

"Go back to bed," I ordered.

"Show me your hand," He growled. I shot a look at Ethan and held out my hand.

"I'm fine, I think she knows you're sick. She was on edge and I moved too fast for her," I assured him, while he examined my hand carefully.

"No stitches," Zeke mumbled.

"Yeah, no stitches." I reached up and grabbed his chin to make him look at me. "Now let Isaac help you back to bed and I'll bring you some ice cream. Mint chocolate chip, your favorite. Then I'll let the terrors in so Kita can see you're okay." Zeke frowned at me, but eventually nodded. Isaac moved around me and helped get Zeke back into his room. I headed back down the hall to the kitchen, Ethan in tow. "Snitch," I hissed at him. He snorted as he picked up the bandage and helped me wrap my hand.

"You know, if we could figure out what it is about you that calms him down, we could make a profit from it. Imagine, Eau du toilette of Alexis,

Calmer of Assholes," Ethan offered in a dignified voice. I started laughing as he finished bandaging my hand.

"Can you get his ice cream while I let the dogs in?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm on it," He headed for the fridge. I went to the door, opened it, then whistled.

Kita ran through as if her tail was on fire, she headed straight for the hallway and Zeke's room. Tank however ran in, slipped, and slid into the cabinets by the sink before he scrambled to his feet and followed Kita. I was laughing so much that it took me a couple minutes to close the door and take Zeke his ice cream.

Zeke was lying down in bed as Kita buried her face into his armpit whimpering. Zeke petted her gently and spoke softly in a soothing, rough, raspy voice.

"You're okay Kita, I'm not mad, you're not in trouble," He whispered down to the trembling dog. Even Hades snuggled up to Kita's side to try and help calm her down. Tank sat next to the bed, patiently waiting for his turn. I waited at the door until she stopped shaking. Only then did I walk in slowly. I handed Zeke his ice cream and sat on the side of the bed facing him. Tank immediately put his head in my lap, I started scratching his head.

"She was really upset," I said quietly. He nodded his eyes still on Kita.

"Yeah, she's making progress but it's slow." He looked up and met my eyes. "I'm sorry she bit you. I wouldn't have asked if-"

"It's okay, she was scared. I made sure not to yell at her or raise my voice. I just told her no biting, firmly." He gave me a tired small grin.

"That's exactly what you needed to do, thank you," He said in his rough voice.

"And Tank almost ripped her a new one," I added. He snorted then looked at Tank with his head in my lap.

"You've spoiled that dog. Whenever you leave he looks at me likes it's my fault you aren't here," He said. I smiled and leaned down to kiss Tank on the forehead.

"That's because he's my other baby," I said in a cutesy voice. Zeke's lips twitched. He was already half asleep, he reached out and stroked Tank's head. Tank instantly licked his hand. I grabbed his uneaten ice cream off his stomach and got to my feet. Tank instantly jumped onto the bed and took my spot while keeping his head under Zeke's hand. I smiled at the fact that Zeke was surrounded by dogs who loved him. I was about to walk out into the hallway when his voice stopped me.

'Thanks for taking care of me..." He mumbled.

"Anytime, Tough Guy," I said softly back. I headed into the living room in time to see the twins setting out blankets and pillows. I was about to ask why when the front door opened. Asher and Miles walked in carrying movies and sleeping bags. I smiled, what else did I expect with these guys? "Anyone want ice cream? Zeke didn't eat any of it," I asked the room. Ethan instantly raised his hand so I walked over and handed it to him.

"Lexie, what happened to your hand?" Miles asked pointedly. Before I could answer, Asher took my wrist gently and looked at the bandage.

"Oh, Kita just bit me," I said casually. "It's okay, I already cleaned it out and the bleeding has stopped."

"When was your last tetanus shot?" Miles asked instantly. I thought about it.

"I... don't know," I admitted. Miles pulled out his phone. "Miles?"

"I'm calling Dr. Zimmer to come out and take a look," Miles said in a firm voice. He wasn't going to be persuaded and his voice told me not to try. I sighed as I sat down.

"I'm starting dinner," Asher announced as he headed for the kitchen. "Any requests?"

"Food!" The twins and I shouted at the same time. We started giggling as Asher sighed patiently. Ethan took a vote on what to watch, Sherlock won. Ethan was putting in the DVD when Zeke's phone rang in my pocket. I pulled it out to see, it was Rory.

"Hey Rory."

"Hey kid, how's Zeke doing?" He asked. He sounded more awake than he had been earlier.

"He still has a high fever and he's being a shit. He also won't listen to anyone but me," I said. "I think I'm going to have to crash here tonight."

"I don't think that's necessary," Rory said. "I'm sure the guys can handle him."

"Um, Rory, they really can't," I said emphatically.

"Lexie," He said, in his patient Dad voice.

"Rory," I said in an exaggerated deep voice. "Just come over and see what I'm talking about. And if you can say 'go home' after that, I will," I offered. Rory sighed.

"Fine, I'll be over before I leave for work," He agreed.

"Oh, can you bring my emergency bag from my closet, my laptop, and some of Hades' toys?" I asked sweetly. He snorted.

"Yeah, but I still think you're coming home," He warned.

"We'll see."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 11

Wednesday Night

I was busy dishing up Zeke's dinner when someone knocked on the door. Asher opened it and let Rory in. Everyone said hi.

"So, all of you are crashing here?" Rory asked. I could hear his smile in his voice.

"Yep. Family smothering back to health, it usually works," Isaac explained. "Plus, it normally takes three of us sitting on Zeke to make him stay put." Rory shook his head as I came into the front room.

"How's he doing?" Rory asked.

"He's awake, his fever is down a bit, but he's still bitchy as ever." I offered. Everyone chuckled.

"I'll go check on him." Rory started for the hallway.

"Here, take him his dinner, and make him take his antibiotics," I told him. Rory took the bowl and glass of water from me before heading to Zeke's room. I went back in to the kitchen and made my own plate. Before I sat down, I wanted to make sure Zeke took his antibiotic, so I headed down the hall. Rory and Zeke's voice had me stopping.

"101," Rory sighed. "That's shitty. Are you drinking enough orange juice? Taking your antibiotics?" Rory asked pointedly. I smiled to myself.

"Yeah, yeah, Lexie's on me about it," Zeke grumbled. Rory snorted.

"Good." Rory said. There was the rattle of a pill bottle. "You're supposed to take one now,"

"You're as bad as she is," Zeke grumbled. "You're supposed to be on my side." I bit back a laugh.

"I am, that's why I'm making you take it." Rory countered. "You need anything?"

"A body that doesn't hate me," Zeke said dryly. Rory snorted.

"Well, I already talked to your boss and told him you're sick," Rory said. "He said to take as much time as you need to get better."

"I could have done that." Zeke pointed out.

"Tough shit," Rory shot back. "I wanted to make sure he didn't pull any 'if he wants his job he better come in' bullshit." My heart warmed as I listened to them, it seemed as if Rory had adopted Zeke. I smiled to myself. "If you listen to Lexie, she'll have you up and about in no time," Rory added. Zeke cursed.

"Why... why didn't you tell her about my family?" Zeke asked, his tired. There was silence for several heartbeats.

"Because it's your past and you should be the one to decide who to share it with and when," Rory explained patiently.

"You know what he did," Zeke said confidently.

"Yeah, I was the first one on the scene." Rory's voice grew quiet. "I'll never forget finding you. You were holding your Mom's... you were trying to stop the bleeding."

"It was pointless. She was already gone." Zeke pointed out.

"But you still tried." Rory countered. "I called it in, picked you up, and got you cleaned up." There was a long silence as I pictured an 8-year-old Zeke trying to save his Mom. My heart ached and my eyes burned.

"And the crap after?" Zeke asked, his voice quiet with an edge to it. "You hear about all that too?"

"I arrested that piece of shit myself." Rory's voice was hard. "He may or may not have fallen down the stairs at the station a couple dozen times." What were they talking about? Zeke's Dad was dead.

"Why the fuck do you let me hang out with her?" Zeke asked, his voice dark and hard. "You know what he did. You saw it-"

"You are nothing like your Father, and I knew that bastard." Rory's voice was hard. "You are a good kid, Zeke. You're angry, hell, anyone would be after what you've been through, but you're not him." Zeke scoffed. "Besides, Lexie gives you shit, and you need that. And its fun as hell to watch." Zeke snorted. I decided to sneak back up the hall before they realized I was there. Rory stayed back there with Zeke for some time and I didn't eavesdrop again.

I was washing my dish when Rory came into the kitchen.

"Lexie, he's okay, you don't need to sleep here," Rory stated.

"Rory, he had a temperature of 103," I told him patiently. "I've been soaking down his shirt every other hour, and that's the only reason I think he's lucid right now."

"The guys can take care of him." Rory countered. I raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah?" I said doubtfully. I walked to the kitchen doorway. "Can one of you go ask how Zeke feels, I need to make a point." Isaac groaned as he got to his feet.

"If it looks like suicide, don't believe the note," Isaac warned us before heading down the hall. Shouting erupted in Zeke's room, glass shattered and Isaac hurried back out. "That was mean, Red." I chuckled then looked at Rory.

"My turn," I said before walking into the kitchen, getting the broom and dust pan, then heading down the hall. Rory waited outside the door while I walked in. "Where's the glass?" I asked.

"Leave it. I'll get it tomorrow," Zeke muttered

"The dogs are in here. So, no, where is the glass?" I asked again. He grumbled, then pointed to the corner of the room. I went over and swept up the glass then dumped it into his small metal can next to his desk. "You're getting plastic cups in here like a little kid. So, stop acting like a baby or I'll treat you like one." I clicked the dustpan back on the broom as I noticed his face was getting red again. I leaned the broom against the wall then went to him and felt his forehead. He was getting warmer. I took his temp, it was 103. I grabbed the fever medicine, poured it, and held it out to him.

"No. Nothing to wash my mouth out with," Zeke protested.

"Well, then you should have thought of that before you threw your water. Now drink it," I told him firmly. He cursed under his breath as he drank it down. He made a pinched face that I had a hard time not laughing at. "Do you want me to soak down your shirt again?" I asked gently. He nodded and rolled to his side. I soaked down his back and put a wet cloth on the back of his neck.

"Thanks, Baby," He mumbled half asleep.

"No problem, Tough Guy," I said softly as I ran my hand over his hair. I went into the hallway to give Rory a 'see what I mean' look. We both walked down to the front room.

"I see what you mean," Rory admitted, looking back toward Zeke's room. "Alright, you can stay."

"Can I skip tomorrow if he still has a fever?" I asked. "It's a half day of State testing."

"Yeah, State testing's bullshit anyway," Rory said. "Come get your stuff out of the car."

I brought in everything I asked Rory for. As the others watched movies, I sat in the small dining room and worked on my essay for Pride and Prejudice. It wasn't due for a week, but I had finished the book and wanted to get it over with. When I was finally done, I checked on Zeke. He was out cold and surrounded by dogs. Smiling, I went back into the living room and joined the boys. It was a fun night, considering Zeke was sick.

I jerked awake with a gasp, something was touching me, my heart raced in my chest as I looked around trying to figure out where I was. Limes filled my lungs. Isaac. I took deep breaths as it all came back to me. I was at Zeke's, in the family room, Isaac was snuggled up to me, his cheek against my back. Sweat kept streaming down my face.

"Red?" Isaac mumbled.

"I'm fine. I just need to get up," I whispered back. Isaac let go of me and rolled over. I used the light from my laptop to make my way into the kitchen. I had finished washing my face when someone came in behind me.

"Beautiful? You alright?" Ethan asked, his smoky voice startled me. I dried my face on a paper towel.

"Yeah, fine. Just a bad dream," I mumbled before turning around.

"What kind?" Ethan asked, stepping closer so he could whisper. I tried to remember but only found hazy impressions of running.

"I don't remember," I admitted as I brushed my hair out of my face. Ethan reached out and pulled me to him. He hugged me tight, his arm running up my spine so his hand could cup the back of my neck. It was an Ethan hug, and I loved them. I took a deep breath of spice as I squeezed him back. "I'm okay," I told him in a shaky voice.

"I know, but I don't like seeing that look on your face," He whispered back. He kissed my hair before letting me go. "Want to snuggle on the couch?" He asked, grinning at me. I was considering it when Tank and Hades came into the kitchen. They both whined at me.

"I'm going to check on Zeke first," I told him. Ethan turned to see the dogs.

"Good idea, I'm going back to the couch," Ethan said before he walked out of the kitchen. I followed the dogs down to Zeke's room. Zeke was on his back, jerking in fits and starts, his face was red and pinched as if in pain. I sat down on the side of the bed and felt his forehead. He stopped jerking. His skin was hot to the touch again.

"Zeke, wake up a bit for me," I said softly. He stopped wincing. I tried again in a firmer voice. "Tough Guy, I need to check your temp." Zeke barely opened his eyes, though he did open his mouth. I put the thermometer in. "Under your tongue." As I waited, I grabbed a wash cloth, wet it in the bowl of water and wiped it over his face. When the thermometer was done, I checked it. It was 103.8. I poured the fever medicine again and turned back to him. "Zeke, you need to take this." He opened his eyes and took the cup from me. Still mostly asleep, he drank it and laid back down. I grabbed the bowl of water and headed into the kitchen. I poured it out and refilled it with fresh ice water. I was on my way back when Ethan sat up.

"What's wrong?" Ethan asked in a quiet voice.

"His temp spiked. I got him, go back to sleep." I answered before heading back to Zeke's room.

I set the bowl on his end table and soaked a wash cloth again. Since he was laying on his back, I soaked down the front of his shirt. He made little happy noises in his sleep between light snores, he coughed hard, his lungs still full of crap, then he settled down again. When his face wasn't red anymore, I put the cloth back. Zeke started moving again as his face pinched. It looked like he was having a nightmare.

"I'm sitting right here, Zeke," I told him gently. He turned his head toward me in his sleep. "I'm right here, and I'm not moving. So, whatever you're dreaming about can fuck off." I reached out and ran my fingers through his hair carefully. He gave me a small smile and my heart melted at the sight. He looked so relaxed when he was asleep. The difference was surprising enough that I had to stop and look at him. His jaw wasn't clenched, he wasn't frowning, and his eyes weren't glaring. I rested my hand on his chest, thinking he would be okay. His face pinched again so I started talking again. I made up stories about sea turtles and frogs, I told him about books I had read and what they were about, which ones I liked and which ones I wanted to set fire to. It didn't matter. As long as I kept talking, he slept peacefully. I kept cooling his face and neck down when he started to grow red again, but I kept talking. Eventually, I fell asleep sitting up.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 12

Thursday

The light filling the room woke me up slowly. I was in a weird position, and I couldn't remember why. The scent of leather and engine grease surrounded me. Zeke? I was half laying on something hard, something heavy was around my waist, and something was tangled in my hair. I wondered what woke me up. A camera clicked. I opened my eyes. Isaac was smirking as he lowered his phone. I flipped him off. He winked at me before heading into the bathroom across the hall. I tried shifting a little but Zeke's fingers tightened in my hair, his arm tensed around my waist.

"Baby...?" Zeke whispered as he half woke up.

"Still here, Tough Guy," I mumbled as I sat up slowly. Zeke's hand dropped from my hair to his chest as he woke up. I reached for the thermometer and held it out. He opened his mouth, I put it in and used the time to try and remember what happened. Zeke's fever had spiked, I remembered he looked like he was having bad dreams, I remembered talking to him... and that was it. The thermometer beeped, it said 101. Still in a half daze, I poured more fever meds, handed that to him, and wrung out a new cloth which I put on his forehead.

"Go to bed, I'm all right." Zeke said as he was waking up.

"You need food, meds...." I ignored him as I went through what he needed. I got up and went into the kitchen. I microwaved some of Maria's soup and poured him a glass of orange juice. I was zombie-walking back to his room when I realized Isaac was at Zeke's door.

"-to sleep," Zeke said, I wasn't paying attention.

"Got it," Isaac said as I passed him. "Red, he's okay. You need to get some sleep."

"Fuck off," I said bluntly as I sat down on the side of the bed and put the soup on the nightstand. I handed Zeke the juice then gave him his antibiotics. "Take those." Zeke did without bitching. When he drained the glass, I took it and handed him the bowl. "Eat." Zeke glared at me.

"Lexie," He began.

"Eat, and I'll sleep," I promised in a grumble. Zeke ate his soup quickly then handed me the empty bowl. I set it down on the nightstand. I eyed him before I felt his forehead again, he didn't feel any warmer.

"Go get some sleep, Lexie." Zeke tried again.

"Last time I did, your temperature spiked." I pointed out.

"I'll behave for the guys if you go to sleep." He countered. I was half asleep already. I sighed,

"Fine," I muttered as I got up. Isaac wrapped his arm around me and steered me into Sylvie's bedroom. I didn't mind, I knew Sylvie. I barely remembered lying down.

Shouting had me bolting up in bed. I was moving out the door before I was completely awake. I stepped into the hall and headed for Zeke's room. All the guys were in the hallway blocking my way.

"-don't need ya!" Zeke shouted. I tapped on Asher's shoulder. He turned, sighed, then moved out of my way.

"You're gonna wake up Red!" Isaac snapped back. I put my hand on his shoulder as I zombie-walked around Isaac to sit on the side of the bed. Isaac cursed. Zeke was glaring at everyone again.

"What's up, Tough Guy?" I asked, still mostly asleep as I reached for the thermometer.

"They won't leave," Zeke growled.

"No shit. Open." I demanded. Zeke hesitated only a second then opened his mouth. I put the thermometer in. "I was asleep and someone needed to stay in case your fever comes back." I felt his face, it was hot again. I grabbed a wash cloth, wrung it out, and put it on his forehead. When the

thermometer beeped, I took it out of his mouth. "101. No wonder you're still bitchy," I grumbled. The guys chuckled in the doorway. I half turned to them. "Can someone bring a glass of orange juice, please?" Asher headed down the hall. I poured the fever medicine into its cup.

"Not taking it." Zeke snapped.

"You're fucking taking it, or I'm pouring it down your fucking throat," I growled. The guys laughed. "And you know I'll fucking win." He grumbled as I handed him the cup. He drank it down. Asher walked in and handed me the glass. Zeke made his ick face, so I gave him the juice. He drank it down then handed it back and laid down on his side facing the door. "Want me to wet your back down?" I asked in a gentler voice.

"Please?" He mumbled into his pillows. I grabbed the wash cloth and started soaking down his shirt again. The guys headed out into the hall.

"Did he just say please?" Asher asked.

"Holy shit, Red's a miracle worker."

"Did he just let her touch his back or am I hallucinating?" Miles asked dryly.

"She's the Zeke whisperer!" Ethan added. I ignored them as I soaked down his shirt. When I was done, I put a wet cloth on his neck.

"Didn't mean to wake you up," Zeke muttered. "Go sleep."

"I would, but apparently, if I'm not around you, you're an asshole." I pointed out dryly. He grumbled before shifting over in bed. He patted the spot he just made.

"Sleep," He ordered. Too tired to argue, I laid down on my side facing the door. "Tank," Zeke called. The dog jumped up on the bed. "Guard Lexie," Tank laid down between us.

"Is that really necessary?" I grumbled.

"If I fall asleep, yeah," He muttered.

"I woke you up last night." I pointed out.

"What?"

"Several times, you didn't have a problem," I said my voice getting quieter as I started to slip under.

"Let's not push it," Zeke replied as I fell asleep.

"Whoa." Someone's voice brought me to the surface. Footsteps walked away. I was sinking back under when they came back.

"Check this out," Isaac whispered.

"Shit," Ethan said.

"Tank is between them," Miles pointed out.

"She must have refused to leave this time." Asher offered.

"Sounds like her." Isaac agreed.

"Can someone get her out of here? I can't stay awake anymore." Zeke growled. "Tank, heel." Vanilla and cinnamon filled my nose as I was lifted to a hard chest. I rubbed my cheek on Asher's shirt.

"Zeke, you ass," I grumbled. The guys chuckled.

"I know," Zeke replied. I fell asleep as Asher carried me out of Zeke's room.

I woke up with a jerk, my eyes darted around the empty living room.

I pushed off the blanket, got up, and immediately went to check on Zeke. He was sitting up, petting Hades as he watched a movie on the old TV on his dresser. Tank and Kita were lying on the other side of him. I walked in and sat down on the side of the bed.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" I asked as I reached for the thermometer.

"Better." His voice wasn't so rough now. "Lexie, I'm fine-"

"Shut up," I ordered before I popped the thermometer into his mouth. Then I felt his forehead. He felt a little warm but not by much. The thermometer beeped. I checked it, 99.6.

"You're almost normal," I said. He snorted as I grinned. Neither one of us were normal.

"Yeah, I'm good enough that the guys headed home," He said. I shook my head.

"Those shits," I grumbled. He grinned, and then eyed me.

"Did you really wake me up last night?" He asked doubtfully. I nodded.

"Several times, you were mostly asleep, but you knew it was me." I told him. His face went blank as he looked at me.

"I didn't grab you? I didn't swing at you?" He asked carefully. I shook my head, his brow furrowed.

"Just go with it, Zeke," I grumbled as I pushed my hair out of my face.

"Come on, you haven't eaten all day," Zeke said as he moved Hades off his lap.

"I'm fine. I'll get it," I said as I got to my feet. "You stay here and rest some more." I headed into the hallway with Zeke a step behind. I didn't bother to argue. When I walked into the small dining room, I noticed my computer was on. "I thought you said the guys left?"

"They did."

"Then who was using my computer?" I asked.

"That's strange," Zeke said. I put it out of my head and went into the kitchen. I microwaved soup while Zeke got a glass of orange juice. Still half asleep I sat down at the table. Zeke put the glass of orange juice in front of me. "Drink that," He ordered.

"I'm not sick, I'm just tired." I pointed out.

"Yeah, you're tired, and I was sick. That can make you sick, so, drink it." He ordered. I sighed and drank some juice. He waited until I was done before breaking the silence. "Thanks for taking care of me, I know I'm an asshole when I'm sick."

"That's what family is for," I said with a small smile. He smirked back.

"Now, I want you to go home and get some sleep." His voice was the softer one I rarely heard from him. I hesitated.

"What time is it?" I asked reaching for my pockets. I pulled out Zeke's phone. "Shit, I have band practice." I put his phone down, got up, grabbed my bag, then hurried down the hall. "I'm using your shower," I warned over my shoulder.

"I figured." Zeke called back. I rolled my eyes and rushed to get ready.

I made it. I was late, but I made it. My hair was still damp, my makeup was non-existent, and Hades was still with me, but I made it. I shut the Blazer door and hurried up the alley to Ryan's garage. Hades ran ahead of me and jumped on Ethan. Ethan bent down and gave him loves.

"Hey guys, sorry I'm late." I began. Oliver waved his hand.

"Don't worry about it. Ethan told us you were taking care of Zeke." He assured me, I gave him a smile.

"Thanks," I said as I watched Hades run over and sniff Ryan.

"This is one awesomely ugly dog," Ryan announced as he bent down to pet Hades.

"Hey, he's not ugly, he's adorably ugly." I countered. Ryan laughed as he picked up Hades.

"Damn. He's heavy," Ryan grunted.

"Yeah, and he's three months old," I said. Ryan's jaw dropped as he looked to me.

"Seriously? How big is he going to get?" He asked as he carried the puppy over to me.

"His head should be around my belly button," I smirked up at him. He chuckled as Hades licked his face. He pulled his face back from Hades' reach and scratched his head.

"You're going to be a giant dog," Ryan told Hades. I watched Ryan as he played with my puppy. His knuckles on his right hand had scraps, a couple bruises, and scabs over them. Ryan put Hades down, then straightened. I was about to ask him what happened to his hand when Ethan spoke up.

"Let's get going. Ma's made tamales for dinner tonight." We got to work. We had a whole new list of songs to practice for Vegabond on Saturday night.

We worked until we had them down. It took hours. When we were finally done, I grabbed Ethan's arm.

"What's up, Beautiful?" He asked. I stepped close so the others wouldn't hear.

"Can you follow me out to the cemetery? I need to move on two souls tonight, and I might need a hand," I whispered quickly. He gave me a warm smile.

"Yeah," He said, like it was obvious. "Head on out, and I'll be right behind you." I gave him a grateful smile. I said goodnight to the others and called Hades.

The cemetery was dark as I pulled in, but it wasn't hard to find the ghosts. Hades started barking as I parked. I left him in the car and went out to the group.

"You didn't show up last night." Mrs. McClain instantly started complaining.

"A friend of mine was sick, I was taking care of him," I explained.

"So, the living mean more than the dead to you?" Mr. McClain accused me.

I met his eyes and said quite plainly. "In this case, yes." Mr. McClain seemed to realize what he had said. I looked at the group. "Okay, who is first?" I asked. Mrs. McClain stepped forward. Great. I took off my bracelets and tucked them into my pockets. My barriers shook.

"Can everyone else back up more please?" I asked. They did without a complaint. I wanted to get this over with fast.

"Lexie, what the hell did you do?" Ethan was cursing. It was cold, but part of me was warm. "Wake up, Beautiful." I opened my eyes slowly. Ethan was holding me against his chest, one hand blotting my nose with a tissue.

"Hmm?" I mumbled, not quite understanding.

"What the hell happened?" He demanded, his voice shaky. I weakly reached up and took the tissues as I ran over what I remembered. Mrs. McClain had moved on through a door that looked like a street in Paris, Mr. McClain had moved on to a sailboat, then nothing.

"I hit my limit. I thought that might happen." I admitted. He cursed.

"You couldn't wait for me?" He snapped. "You could have cracked your head open on a headstone or something."

"Sorry," I mumbled as I listened to his heartbeat under my ear. He sighed.

"You're just lucky I didn't call Zeke." He pointed out.

"Yeah, he would have killed me."

"Next time, wait until someone is with you," Ethan told me, his voice strained. I opened my eyes to look up at him. His face was worried, and fear flickered in his eyes.

"Promise." I agreed, he sighed in relief. Ethan held me until I was ready to move. Though to be honest, I liked smelling his cologne. Where'd that come from? When I was ready, he helped me up and followed me home. He waited until Hades, and I were inside before taking off. The house felt oddly empty. I went upstairs and knocked on Tara's door, no answer, she must have stayed at her Mom's tonight. I didn't bother taking a shower, I just climbed into bed and passed out.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 13

Friday

After the best night sleep I had in weeks, I actually got ready this morning and I even did my hair properly. I was wearing blue jeans and a purple oversized sweater that I loved. I felt great. I had to cross the dead every day, but if the tradeoff was a full night's sleep? No problem. When I reached the table, the guys all seemed relieved.

"What?" I asked.

"Is your phone on?" Isaac asked. I pulled it out of my back pocket and realized it wasn't. I snorted.

"Oops," I said as I turned it on. "Sorry."

"Oops? You scared the crap out of us." Isaac looked at me like I was nuts. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Explosion in Chemistry," I reminded him. His face turned pink and he instantly dropped the subject. I was going to enjoy using that one. I sat next to Isaac as everyone started making plans for the afternoon.

"What are your plans, Ally?" Asher asked.

"I'm heading out to Serena's this afternoon. Then it's pampering time before the dance," I said as I frowned down at my phone. It kept vibrating as I received all my texts from the last couple days. There were a lot. What the...?

Secret Admirer: It would mean a lot to me if you kept the ring.

Secret Admirer: Why aren't you answering?

Secret Admirer: Are you alright?

Secret Admirer: I'm going to assume your phone died. Let me know that you are okay tonight.

Secret Admirer: You aren't at school again. Are you okay? Did something happen to you?

Secret Admirer: Are they hurting you?

Secret Admirer: Do you need me?

I blinked in astonishment as I read more and more texts. This had passed weird and gone straight to creepy.

Alexis: Relax, you're acting nuts. My phone was off.

I hit send. My phone vibrated almost instantly.

Secret Admirer: Are you okay?

Alexis: I'm alright, I just forgot to turn my phone on.

Secret Admirer: Did those guys make you turn it off? Did they touch you? If they hurt you, I'll kill them.

I frowned as dread filled my stomach. Okay, this was passing creepy.

Alexis: Big girl here, I can take care of myself.

Secret Admirer: You have no idea what those guys are capable of. I don't think you should hang around them anymore, it's not safe.

I blinked at that. Okay. Now we've officially crossed into beyond creepy and into disturbing.

"Um, guys," My voice was quiet. I looked up to find everyone watching me. "I might need some advice here." I held up my phone.

"Is it not working?" Miles asked as Ethan took my phone and looked through my messages. Ethan cursed.

"This guy has lost it," Ethan announced. "She has fifty-eight texts from him in the last two days." Ethan began reading them off to the others. Everyone else but Miles cursed as Isaac ran his hand up and down my back, comforting me.

"Beyond creepy, right?" I asked when Ethan finished reading. Everyone nodded. Zeke took the phone from Ethan and ran through it himself.

"How was he acting before you turned off your phone?" Miles asked. I thought about it.

"He was normal, at least, until I told him I was going to return that ring," I told them.

"How did he react to that?" Asher asked, frowning.

"He... kind of got weird. He was rather insistent that I wear it." I admitted. The guys sent looks to each other as Zeke put my phone down in front of me.

"Tell him to fuck off and cut off all contact," Zeke ordered, his voice told me not to argue. I met his boiling eyes.

"You think that'll work?" I asked. He nodded.

"Yeah, I think it will," Zeke said, his voice serious. I sighed and picked up my phone.

Alexis: Your aggressive texts have made me feel uncomfortable; I won't be texting back anymore. Your ring will be in an envelope on my locker. Goodbye.

I showed Zeke what I wrote before I hit send. I tucked my phone into my back pocket. It started vibrating, I ignored it. The guys came with me as I walked to my locker and taped the envelope with the ring to the door. When the bell rang, everyone scattered, except Zeke, he hesitated.

"Zeke, class, go," I told him pointedly. He was frowning as I walked off. And to be honest. I wouldn't have minded if he had followed me to class.

I was waiting for school to be over. My English State Test was already finished when my cell vibrated for the tenth time. Thinking it was one of the guys I pulled out my phone and checked it. It wasn't one of the guys.

Secret Admirer: You're not talking to me because of those guys, right? They're stopping you from talking to me.

Secret Admirer: Can't you see how bad they are for you?

I debated what Zeke said about cutting off contact. I didn't know what to do. Class was over so I put my cell in my back pocket and grabbed my stuff. I was walking out to the parking lot when I heard my name. I turned to see Jordan jogging over.

"Hey, where have you been?" He asked. "You never miss the gym."

"I was taking care of a sick friend," I hedged as I adjusted my bag on my shoulder. "I have to get going. I have an appointment." I flashed him a smile and headed for my Blazer. I didn't look back as I jumped in and drove off. My mind racing as I headed for the highway and drove to Northridge.

Serena's store was cute. It looked like a log cabin, complete with a front porch. I climbed the front steps and opened the door. The smell of incense filled my nose until I wanted to sneeze.

"Serena?" I called as I looked around the shop. The store was cluttered with rows upon rows of items. I didn't understand how Serena could breathe in here like this. The back curtain opened to show a smiling woman. She was stunning with skin the color of mocha. She had high cheekbones, a small chin, and big silvery eyes. She was a sight to see. Her brown hair was back in a clip that matched her green dress and she was barefoot, as usual, in her store. For some reason, she never wore shoes inside.

"Lexie, how are you?" Serena asked with a smile. I held my arms out and spun in place for her. She chuckled. "Yes, I saw your barriers. They're much stronger than last time."

"Yeah, they've had to be." I sighed. I met Serena's gaze. "We need to talk." Serena blinked then gestured for me to join her in the back. I slipped through the curtain and took my seat at the two-seater table.

"So, what's happened?" She asked as she set the kettle on. I took a breath and told her everything. Reapers, the Veil, the Way, even about Zahur. When I was done, I was tired. I'd been hiding more than I realized from the guys and Rory. Serena sighed.

"Reapers," Serena said thoughtfully, her eyes unfocused. "That does make sense." She blinked then focused on me.

"I think I've found some wards that should work to keep the dead away. Can you take a look? Tell me if they're bullshit?" I asked. Serena nodded. I handed her the wards I copied from the reports Miles got for me. Serena looked through the drawings, her brow drawing down further and further as she went. She looked up at me, her eyes hard.

"Voodoo?" Serena asked, her voice sharp. "What are you trying to do, Alexis?"

"I'm trying to keep the dead from coming into my house," I reminded her. "They are cooperating right now, but I don't know how long that's going to last." I pulled out some pages from the report. Over the next hour, I showed her what we found. Serena listened carefully.

"What do you need from me?" She asked.

"I need to learn how to manipulate energy," I began. "I was hoping you could teach me." Serena raised an eyebrow.

"Said this thing impersonating you." Serena pointed out. "Just because this, Zahur, helped a couple of times, that doesn't mean it's on your side."

"You don't want to teach me." I guessed. Serena sighed.

"It's not that I don't want to," She began. "It's that manipulating energy is... for the living. It should be used for the living, not the dead. Besides, it's dangerous to mess with that balance." I blinked at her. She wasn't going to help me? What the hell was going on?

"I'm not trying to manipulate energy in this world, I have to do it in the Veil," I explained patiently. "I have no intention of using it at all here. I'm just assuming the technique will transfer to the Veil." Serena gave me a small smile.

"That doesn't mean you won't in the future." She explained gently with a sweet look on her face. "People change over time, Alexis. If I give you that knowledge, I can never take it back. And one day, you may decide to use it here."

"The Veil is dying, Serena," I stated. Surprise spread across her face. "I just barely have souls moving back through it. If whoever did this, realizes what I'm doing, they could kill the Veil before I can stop them." Serena was quiet for some time as she looked down at her tea. Then she sighed.

"It is visualization, focus, and will," Serena announced. "Anyone can do magic if they work hard enough at it. Talent or no, they just need the right book, the right incantation, and bang, they've got the idea.

"The right book?" I asked doubtfully. She nodded.

"Witches have taken great pains to gather all books with real magic and either hide them or destroy them." She explained as she got to her feet and moved to the front of the store. I followed and watched as she walked behind the counter. "I don't work with the dead, but that doesn't mean I lack the knowledge." Inside, I went still. That's not what she told me back in October. My shoulders tensed and my hand shook as I held on to my temper by my fingertips.

"You lied to me," I said calmly, though my words were heated. I met her gaze, there was no regret there.

"Witches have been protecting real magic from those who have no business-"

"No business?" I shouted. "I was being attacked by a ghost, and you could have done something about it!" I couldn't fucking believe this. I started to pace in the store. My hands running down my face as it hit me. "You could have stopped her. She might even still exist today if you had!" Serena's eyes flashed as she slammed her palm onto the counter.

"You salted and burned Mary Summers' bones. You destroyed her soul. That is on you and your friends." Serena declared. I scoffed.

"You gave me the books with the instructions, when you could have done something else instead." I reminded her harshly. "You are just as guilty of it as we are." She flinched, then her jaw clenched.

"Magic is for the living." She declared.

"And what the fuck am I?" I snapped. I held my fingers to my neck. "I have a pulse, I'm still breathing. What does that make me?"

"A Necromancer," Serena stated quickly. "Your powers come from death. Traditionally, it's a road that never ends well." I went still. Serena closed her eyes as if she regretted her words the second she uttered them.

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. She shook her head. Then she met my gaze.

"You need the education to save the Veil," She stated. "I'll give you that. Then we will reassess, and I'll decide if you need to learn more."

"Why doesn't Necromancy end well?" I asked. Serena ignored my question and knelt on the floor behind the counter. She moved a rug to reveal a safe in the floor, she punched in a combo and opened it. I waited as she found what she was looking for. Why the sudden turn around? Was it just so I'd stop asking questions? Why did Serena lie to me when I first came to her? She could have helped in October. Mary Summers... I locked the thought away. It wouldn't do me any good. Nothing can change what happened, so there was no use looking back and saying what if. There was a loud clank as the safe closed. Serena got to her feet again and set an old thin book on the counter.

She met my eyes. "In the physical world, you'll need incantations to give direction for your energy. Visualization exercises and ways to get in touch with that power. That's the first level. But in Veil, I don't know how it works."

"I can do that in the Veil already, by dropping my barriers," I admitted. Her eyes snapped to me.

"Really?" She asked, doubtfully. I nodded and I explained to her how I calmed the Way. She blinked at me, her face a little pale. Then she took a deep breath.

"Alright," She muttered. She looked down at the book in her hands. "This is the very basics of Magic. Small things, but you're smart, you'll be able to get more out of it than you'd think."

"You're still giving me the first level?" I asked, not quite believing it. I could do everything she said I needed to learn already. Why wouldn't she give me the next steps?

"Yes," She said, her eyes flashing molten silver.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I'm not willing to give you the second level until I know for a fact that you know what you're doing." She told me. That's when I knew. She was lying to me again. But she was my only source on this, I needed to play by her rules. I nodded. Serena handed me the old book. I went to take it, but she didn't let go. I met her eyes.

"Never lose it. Keep it on you at all times, or in a safe place. If this fell into the wrong hands, it could be devastating. Not just to us, but to the world," She told me, her voice stern. Her words didn't quite have the impact they probably should have had.

"I promise," I stated. Serena took a deep breath and let it out. Then she let go of the book.

"Read the book, practice in the Veil. Never in the physical world, not without me." Serena's voice was firm as she gave me my rules. I nodded then put the book in my bag. Serena looked around as if expecting someone to be watching.

"Thank you, Serena, it should help in the Veil." I offered, still uneasy. She gave me a small, friendly smile. I gave her one back. There was a long, tense pause. I casually checked my phone.

"Shit! I've got to go get ready for the dance." I said dramatically. I gave her an apologetic look.

"Thanks, Serena, I'll let you know how Veil practice goes," I called over my shoulder as I went out the door. I was back in my Blazer and headed out of town. My mind was full of questions, but only one thing was clear, I couldn't trust Serena anymore.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 14

Friday Night

Winter Formal

I spent the rest of my afternoon alone, doing my nails, and reading the book Serena had given me. My phone was finally silent. I hadn't had a text message from my Secret Admirer since that afternoon. He must have finally gotten the message. I was soaking in the tub when someone knocked on the door to the bathroom.

"Kind of in the tub here," I called out.

"Just letting you know that Tara is spending the next week at her Mom's," Rory said through the door. I cursed, Tara had promised to help me with my hair. With Tara, it always felt like three steps forward and four back.

"Alright," I said.

"Get home by midnight," Rory reminded me.

I snorted. "You got it."

"See ya, kid. Take photos!" Rory said before he walked away from the door. I sighed, and enjoyed my soak. When I was relaxed, I got out and pulled on my panties and the black silk robe that Tara had gotten me for Christmas. I opened the door to let the steam out and put my clothes in my hamper. I smiled when I looked at my dress hanging on the closet door. I was going to look amazing. I went into the bathroom and started my hair. I managed to get my curls smooth and glossy. But that was about it, it was almost down to my butt, and I just needed more hands to do anything with it. I cursed. I was going to have to call for help. I picked up my phone and dialed.

"Hey, Ally girl." Asher's rich voice filled my ear. I smiled.

"Hey, can I ask a huge, giant favor?" I begged, cringing.

"Sure, what's going on?" He asked. I sighed.

"I kind of have an emergency. Tara was supposed to help me with my hair, and she bailed. I need help." I admitted, cringing. "I have too much hair, and not enough hands." Asher chuckled. I rolled my eyes and waited him out.

"Yeah, I'll help," Asher said sweetly. "I'll be over as soon as I'm dressed." An image of Asher in only his boxers flashed through my mind, I bit my lip. Oh, yum.

"Kay. Thanks." My voice was strained before I hung up. I closed my eyes and groaned. I really needed to stop crushing on Asher and Miles. I pushed it out of my head and started on my make-up, for once I was doing a full face of makeup. Isaac was going to lose the bet hard. I smirked as I worked on blending my foundation. My mind went to Zeke and Riley. What were they doing tonight if not going to the dance? I hoped they were talking things out. I pushed all that away as I started on my eyes. Tonight, I was going to the Winter Formal, I was going to be glammed up, and hopefully get a slow dance while I'm there. I was going to have fun tonight and forget about the dead for once. The door downstairs opened and closed.

"Ally?" Asher called.

"Upstairs bathroom!" I shouted back. I started working on my other eye by the time I heard him on the stairs. I focused on not messing up my makeup. When I was done, I turned to find him standing in the doorway of the bathroom. I went still. He looked fantastic in the tux, it fit him perfectly through the shoulders and chest. His hair was brushed, gelled, and his eyes were glowing. I had to remind myself to breathe. He smiled as his eyes ran over me.

"I think you need to dress up a little more, Ally," Asher said as he reached my eyes. I shot him a look. "Your hair is cute, though." He said smiling. I smiled back.

"Thank you. I got this far, now I'm stuck." I grumbled. "Seriously, I'm going to kill Tara for bailing." He stepped into the bathroom and gestured for me to turn around. I did, ignoring the way my pulse picked up. This was Ash, come on Lexie, get over this. Yeah, so what if he's hot? Sweet, a

cooking god, with amazing ocean eyes... I needed to stop thinking about this.

"What did you want? Up or down?" Asher asked. I watched him running his eyes over my hair.

"I don't care at this point, as long as it's not.... this clown hair," I told him honestly. I watched him smirk in the mirror.

"Ally girl, you don't have clown hair," He reassured me. "You have thick, long curls going on, which should work." He looked up and met my eyes in the mirror. "Anything I do is going to be pretty basic."

"Anything will be better than my usual down." I gave him pleading eyes, he chuckled.

"Alright, you have bobby pins, right?" I grabbed the pack of them and held it up. His hands went to my hair, and he went to work. I held up the bobby pins one by one as he went.

"Your hair has gotten really long." He said as he took another bobby pin from me. "Are you going to cut it or are you just going to grow it to your feet?" He asked. I rolled my eyes at the image.

"Yeah, I just haven't gotten around to it," I admitted. "It's almost to my butt now, so it's catching on more stuff." The mirror showed me his smirk.

"What are you getting caught on?" He asked around the bobbin pin in his mouth. I sighed.

"The usual. Door knobs, my backpack, my own weight when I try to roll over in my sleep." He chuckled. "I need to cut it, but I don't know how short to go. Maybe I should just cut it all off, buzz my head." I joked. He frowned. "What? Did my hair do something crazy?"

"No, it's..." He said as he grabbed another pin. "Ally, without her long hair going everywhere, is a picture I can't really imagine." His eyes met mine in the mirror. "You're Ally, crazy long red hair kind of, well, fits you." I smiled.

"Okay, I won't shave it," I groused. He grinned and went back to work. When he was done, my hair was back in a loose bun type thing near the top of my neck. A few little strands had slipped out and were hanging near my

face. The whole thing looked soft and, well, romantic. It was going to look killer with the dress.

"Well?" He asked cringing. I turned around and hugged him.

"Thank you so much, Ash!" I practically shouted. His arms went around me. "You totally saved my ass." He gave me a light squeeze. I tried not to feel that flip in my stomach, but my body wasn't listening.

"No problem, Ally girl," He assured me quietly. I let go and turned back around to finish my makeup. He went to the doorway and leaned against the doorjamb. "That'll work for your dress, right?" He asked. I talked while I put a little gold in a line along my lashes.

"It will work perfectly." I told him. "There's a lot of lace on the dress." I noticed an eyebrow went up out of the corner of my eye. I smiled, I loved surprising the guys. Asher watched me do my makeup, seeming content to just watch me get ready for tonight. It was... new. It felt like this was my secret world, and he was looking around.

"So, do I get to see it?" He asked, grinning at me. "I did just save your butt and all," He pointed out smugly. I smiled.

"Go ahead, it doesn't look like much on the hanger, though," I warned him. "It's on the closet door." He walked off as I concentrated on putting a thin layer of blush on my skin and blending it in, so it didn't look like I was wearing anything. He came back as I reached for my lipstick. I peeked at him in the mirror. He had a small grin on his face.

"Lace and beading," He said in his teasing voice. "Ally girl, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were a romantic." I smiled.

"It was the only dress I liked, and the beading makes it sparkle like black diamonds," I said, then looked over my shoulder at him. "Besides, I'm a girl, I do sometimes like girly things." He chuckled as I turned back to the mirror and concentrated on putting my lipstick on. I went with a natural rose tonight. When I looked in the mirror, Asher was still watching me. Something about the way he was looking at me sent hot shivers through me. I focused on grabbing a tissue.

"I know you're a girl, Ally." His voice wasn't teasing now. I looked up at his reflection, he was rubbing the back of his neck, his gaze running over

me. His eyes were warm and growing brighter. My pulse raced. Then he blinked and his eyes were normal again. I focused on blotting my lipstick. Did he...? Did he like me? The same way I liked him? Nah, no way. This was Ash, he probably was just.... making a point to notice I was a girl? I decided to ignore it as I turned to him.

"Good, because I need to ask another favor," I announced. He looked up from the floor, his ocean eyes met mine as he raised an eyebrow. "I need someone to zip up the back of my dress," I said, smiling sweetly. His eyes got a bit wider, then he seemed to wince.

"Ally, I'm a guy. I am not helping you get in that dress." He said adamantly, his cheeks turning pink. I chuckled at what he thought I meant.

"I don't need help getting in," I said, still laughing. "I can get in, put it on, and zip it up to a point. But there's only so far I can reach." He looked relieved.

"Okay, that I can do." He said, his cheeks were still pink, but it was fading. It wasn't often that I could make Asher blush, but it sure was fun. I gave him a big smile and slid by him.

"You are the best, Ash!" I all but gushed as I hurried into my bedroom and closed the door. I quickly yanked off my robe and grabbed the dress. Almost feeling giddy, I unzipped it carefully, stepped in and slipped it on. Because of the V in the back, I couldn't wear a bra and to be honest, it didn't really matter in this thing. I reached back and pulled the back shut as much as I could. The black lace and beaded gown on the hanger was shapeless but on me, it ran down my body showing all my curves. My tucked-in waist, the flare of my hips. I wasn't super curvy, but I did have enough to make the dress look killer. I had a small hourglass figure that I usually didn't completely show off. It ended up looking like a trumpet cut dress, but I could move in it. The v neckline wasn't showing as much as the other dresses, but it was still showed a little skin between my breasts. The fabric was midnight black lace, the black beading that covered it made it glitter in the light. And with the hair Ash managed, it looked amazing.

Then I noticed it. In the line of the dress down my hips, there was a bump on both sides. I felt it. Damn it, it was my underwear. Shit, I didn't have a thong or anything like it in my drawers. I hated that Jake was right. I

looked at myself in the mirror. Those bumps really ruined the line. Screw it, I reached up my skirt and shimmied my panties down my legs. I picked them up and tossed them into the laundry basket. I held the back of the dress again and smiled. That fixed it. As long as I didn't have a wardrobe malfunction, I'd be okay. I reached back and zipped the dress up over my butt and up to my lower back. I couldn't get the last couple inches so I made sure everything was in place and opened the door. Ash was leaning against the bannister at the top of the stairs waiting for me. When he saw me, his mouth dropped open and his eyebrows went up. I smiled, thoroughly pleased with myself.

"Shit," He said. It seemed that that was all he could get out. I snickered. I loved his reaction. He was looking over the dress when he managed to say something else. "Ally, you look beautiful," He said, his voice soft and rich. I was sure I started to glow, at least it felt like it.

"Thank you." I waited a beat. "Told you that I could bring it." I giggled at myself. He nodded taking in a deep breath.

"And you definitely did." He admitted. I turned around and pointed to the zipper. He came over and zipped me up carefully. "I can't wait to see the other guys' faces." He mumbled. I chuckled.

"Want to film it?" I asked, looking up at him over my shoulder. His eyes were warm when they met mine.

"Maybe, I'll think about it." He looked like he wanted to say something else, but stopped himself. He backed up a couple steps as he started to rub the back of his neck. "Anything else you need help with?"

"Nope, you are my hero for the day," I told him in my sweet voice. He smiled.

"Then I need to go get my date." He turned and headed down the stairs. "See ya there, Ally." After Asher left, I walked into my room and put on my jewelry. Jake and I picked out a thin gold y-chain and matching earrings. I looked in the mirror and smiled. The thin y-chain set a teardrop shaped fake diamond pendant just above my breasts and the small matching tear drop earrings were understated but sparkling and I loved them. I picked up my gold glittered clutched and filled it with everything I would need tonight. Then I pulled on my black four inch heels which sparkled just as much as

the dress. I sighed. I hated heels, but they looked great with the dress. I carefully made my way downstairs. Hades was on the couch, stretched out on his back asleep. I blew him a kiss before I slipped my coat on and headed to the Rec. center.

I ended up parking a couple spots down from Asher. He got of his truck with a petite blonde who wore a dark, blood-red satin gown that screamed 40's femme fatale. Her blonde hair was perfectly curled to her shoulders and her makeup was flawless. I loved her dress instantly. They both walked over to meet me at the back of the Blazer.

"Ally, this is Lisa." Asher introduced us. I shook her hand.

"It's nice to meet you," I said. Lisa's eyes ran over my dress.

"You too. I love your dress," Lisa said, smiling.

"I was just thinking the same about yours, where did you get that?" I asked. Lisa chuckled.

"I made it. I can never find anything I like." Lisa admitted.

"Wow, okay, I may need to hire you next year," I warned her. Lisa chuckled.

"Give me a couple months' notice, and I'll help you out." She promised.

"Ladies," Asher said. "It's a bit cold out here, let's get inside." Lisa rolled her eyes as we headed towards the doors. Asher started texting on his phone.

"What are you doing?" I asked, being careful of where I stepped in the parking lot.

"I'm telling the guys to get in the foyer," Asher admitted. "I think Isaac's going to lose that bet." I snickered. Lisa looked at us with an eyebrow raised so I explained. When I was done, she chuckled.

"Oh yeah, you're going to win," Lisa assured me. As we neared the doors, Asher stopped me. "Wait here, I'll text you when to come in," Asher said. Lisa laughed as they walked into the Rec. center. It wasn't too long before I got Asher's text. I headed into the foyer grinning mischievously as I walked. I spotted them first, Asher and Lisa were to the side with a perfect view of the boys. Isaac was in a black tux with a tie, his blue hair brushed

and held back for once. Ethan was in a simple black suit, tie, and black dress shirt. When they spotted me, Isaac's jaw dropped. Ethan chuckled then whistled loudly as I walked toward them.

"Damn. Beautiful," Ethan all but shouted as he smiled at me. I was laughing as I took off my jacket and hung it up on the rack. "She's showing skin. She's showing skin!" Ethan announced in an excited voice. I shook my head, laughing as I walked toward them.

"That is the most skin you've ever shown," Isaac announced, his voice still stunned. I smiled sweetly up at him.

"I win," I declared. The guys burst out laughing, Isaac turned crimson as he nodded.

"Yes, yes you do." Isaac agreed. The brunette next to Isaac elbowed him. He turned to her and smiled awkwardly. "Nell, this is our friend, Lexie." Isaac introduced us. Nell was about my height, with a sweet face and eyes. Her dress was a particular shade of mauve that I loved. I shook her hand.

"It's nice to meet you," I said. "Thank you for saving me from having to go as

Isaac's back-up date." Nell chuckled, then relaxed as she let go of my hand.

"Where's your date?" Nell asked. I sighed.

"I'm solo," I admitted without shame. Nell gave me a sympathetic smile but I ignored it.

"Hey, if we don't get photos Ma will kill us all," Ethan announced. I took Asher's phone and moved back far enough, so everyone fit into the shot.

"Say 'my feet hurt!" I said. The girls chuckled. I got a few great pictures like that. "There, photos are done." Ethan shook his head and handed his phone to Nell while Lisa took Asher's out of my hands.

"Lexie, get in there with the guys," Lisa ordered. I rolled my eyes as I walked over to them. Asher was behind me, and the twins on both sides. The twins each wrapped an arms around me as the girls took pictures and

Asher's hands ended up on my shoulders. I took deep breaths and reminded myself to stay calm. When the girls were done, Asher took his phone back.

"Hold on Ally, let's get a few with just you for Rory," Asher suggested. The twins moved off to the side as Asher took a few more pictures.

"I'm done," I announced then walked over to the girls. The guys chuckled. I was listening to Nell talk about where she got her dress when the boys grouped up behind us.

"What are you doing?" Isaac asked in a hushed voice. Asher snickered.

"I'm sending a picture of Ally to Dylan, with the message 'you're an idiot." Asher said matter-of-factly. I smirked as I half listened to Nell. It wasn't long before Asher chuckled.

"What did he say?" Ethan asked.

"He said, 'believe me I know." Asher read out loud, they all snickered as I bit back a smile of my own. It was always good to know that your ex realized what he lost.

"Alright, I have to get back," Ethan announced, drawing everyone's attention as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "Can you bring us some water bottles after the first set?" I smiled up at him.

"You got it," I answered before I eyed him. "Do you need me now?" He gave me a reassuring smile.

"I already had my pre-show freak-out." He admitted quietly. I reached up and squeezed his chin between my fingers.

"You'll be great. You have this set down and you are a singing badass." I reminded him. He smiled, then gave me a squeeze and headed inside. As a group, we soon followed. The large hall was decorated as a winter wonderland. Fake snow covered the floor here and there, white and blue twinkle lights were everywhere and the LED candles sat in silver glittered holders on blue table clothes. It looked amazing. I walked with the others to claim a table near the dance floor. I set my clutch down as the crowd applauded. We watched as Ethan, Ryan, and Oliver walked out on stage. Apparently, they were all wearing matching suits tonight. Ryan yanked at his tie as he settled behind the drums. They didn't bother announcing themselves, they just started playing. Everyone went on to the dance floor.

We danced, moved to the music, and had fun. I eventually spotted Tara, she wore an ice blue strapless dress that looked amazing on her. I thought about going to tell her how great the decorations were. But before I could, she spotted me and shot me a look. Oh well, I decided to ignore her. Asher spun me under his arm and back. Isaac danced with me as well.

I was having a blast until the band started a slow song. I made my way back to the table and sat down alone. I looked around the room, Asher had been right. This really was a couple's thing. I sighed and watched the couples on the dance floor. My phone vibrated in my purse. It was Miles.

Miles: Asher sent me a photo, you look incredible.

I bit the corner of my lip as I fought off a girly giggle. Miles had only been gone a few hours to that gaming tournament, and I already missed him.

Alexis: Thank you. Too bad you aren't here to see it.

I hit send before I thought about it. Then I realized what I had done. Oh, God, I just sent a flirty text to Miles. Maybe he wouldn't notice? I quickly did damage control.

Alexis: Because Asher was right, you need to have a date to one of these things.

I held my breath wondering if I made it worse. It was more than a few heartbeats before Miles replied.

Miles: I thought you didn't want a date?

I relaxed. Yeah, he didn't notice.

Alexis: Yeah, I said that. But now I'm sitting here, all glammed up, and no one to dance with. Hurts a girl's ego.

Another slow song started. I rolled my eyes.

Alexis: And they're playing another slow song. I think Ethan is doing it on purpose.

My phone rang. It was Miles, he wanted to face chat. I smiled as I got to my feet and walked out into the empty foyer before I answered. My phone showed Miles' face and a small window of what he saw in the top right corner. I instantly brought my phone up to face height. He didn't need to be looking up my nose.

"Hi," I said smiling. His emerald eyes ran over my face as he grinned.

"Hi, how's the dance really going?" He asked, concerned. There was background noise, but not a lot of it, it looked like he was out in a hallway.

"I'm being tortured by my shoes, but I'll survive," I said dramatically. He chuckled. "How's the gaming tournament? Are you kicking ass and taking names?" He sighed and winced at the same time.

"I'm already out." He admitted. "I left a bag, on the tarmac by my car, which had my competition deck."

"I'm sorry hon, maybe next year," I said. "Do you need someone to pick up your bag?"

"If you don't mind?" He asked, cringing in an adorable way. "You know I hate to ask-"

"I'll get your bag, just tell me how to get to it," I assured him. He gave me instructions on how to get into the small private section of the airport just outside of town. He made me repeat the combination for the gate five times and promised to text it to me after he got off the phone.

"Does this mean you're coming home early?" I asked, as I sat down on a wooden bench next to a plant.

"No, I ran into some friends that I haven't seen in a while." He said. "There's also a few game previews and panels I want to see." I smiled at him.

"So, the only reason you called me was because you needed a bellhop?" I teased him. I gave him my mischievous grin so he'd know I was joking. He grinned at me.

"No, it's not the only reason." He said in that silky-smooth voice I loved. "I wanted to be sure you were alright. I can't always tell if you're joking in your texts." I gave him a warm smile.

"I'm okay, Miles," I assured him. "I was mostly joking. I can survive a little ego hit."

He looked at me puzzled.

"Lexie, you're kind, wonderful, and funny." He began. "Just because no one is dancing with you, doesn't diminish that." My face caught fire as my insides melted.

"Okay, ego restored," I said, desperately needing him to stop. If he kept going, I'd be a puddle on the floor. His eyes ran over my face.

"Are you blushing?" He asked, his voice surprised. I shook my head.

"Nope, it's just hot in here." I lied, he grinned.

"Then why did you only turn red when-"

"Miles, just give me this one?" I asked as my face burned hotter. He chuckled.

"Alright," He said gently, still smiling. The background behind him was getting louder, Voices were getting closer. "Speaking of my friends..." He looked away from the phone. "I'm on the phone. Could you give me a few minutes?" Miles asked someone off camera.

"Tell them you'll talk to them later, there are a couple hot girls, dressed as River Tam and Kylie, that are throwing a party up in their room." A guy's voice said. Miles was frowning at whoever was off screen.

"It's okay, Miles," I said, forcing a smile on my face. "Go have fun with your friends."

"Wait, is that a girl?" Another voice asked.

Miles' frown deepened. "Do you guys mind? You're being-" The screen went wild as if a drunk had it. "Kyle!" Miles' voice snapped. A ginger haired, pale boy filled the screen. His eyebrows went up, almost into his hair line.

"Wow, it is a girl! And it's not Autumn!" Ginger boy, who I assumed was Kyle said.

"Is she cute?" Another voice asked off camera.

"Give me back the phone, Kyle." Miles' voice was growing colder.

"Yeah, she's cute," Kyle said. The screen went wild again as another boy with brown hair and grey eyes came on screen. Kyle was asking Miles why

he didn't tell them about me. Brown hair boy's eyes ran over me. The screen went wild again, someone cried out, then the phone steadied on Miles' face.

"I'm sorry about that, Lexie," Miles said calmly. Someone was complaining off camera about his wrist.

"She's got a great rack," Someone's voice said, off camera. That was it.

"Excuse me?" I snapped. Miles' eyes were like cold as he looked at whoever had spoken off camera.

"You are aware that I'm face chatting with her, right?" Miles asked, his voice icy.

"Oh shit." Someone said.

"I'm sorry about my friends, Lexie," Miles said, his voice growing colder. "I'll have a word with them."

"Oh no, let me. Miles, turn me around please," I asked politely. Miles' eyes sparkled as he grinned at me. Miles turned the phone so I could see that brown hair boy's eyes were wide, Kyle was paler, and that there was another silent, tall boy with glasses and black messy hair.

"Yes, I can hear you and see you," I said in a firm voice. "Just so you're aware, I don't appreciate some guy, I don't know, checking me out and telling me I have a 'great rack." Brown hair's face turned beet red. "It's rude. I know damn well that you wouldn't say that to me in person, so don't say over the phone. Got it?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry," Brown hair mumbled, his eyes were still wide.

"I accept your apology. It was not so great meeting you two," I said. Miles turned the phone back to him. "Go have fun, Miles. I should be getting back to the dance anyway."

"Are you sure? I can stay on longer if you need," Miles offered. Butterflies took off in my stomach at his soft voice.

"Thanks sweetie, but the slow song is over. It's safe to go back inside," I told him. He chuckled.

"Alright, but if you want company for another song, give me a call," He offered sweetly. I grinned.

"I will, have fun."

"Bye."

I hung up the phone and headed back inside. The music was going with hard, driving beats that made me want to dance. When I got back to the table, Nell was sitting down with a water bottle in her hand.

"Hey, Red," Isaac smiled at me. "Want to dance? Nell's tired already." Nell rolled her eyes. Something told me that Nell just didn't want to dance with him.

"Sure, Cookie Monster," He took my hand and led me out on the floor. I had a good time dancing with Isaac; he never got too close or too far away.

We ran into Clay and Doyle, we waved to each other and moved on. Eventually, Asher cut in and danced with me. He spun me under his arm and made me laugh. Then a slow song came on, and I was sitting in my chair again watching the crowd dance. It was the middle of the song when Eric walked by and spotted me.

"Wow, Lexie." His eyebrows went up, and a smile spread across his face. I grinned at him. Eric looked pretty good himself. His tux looked like a suit, and he looked good in it.

"Wow yourself, Eric," I said. His cheeks tinted pink.

"Thanks." He shrugged. "Where's your date?"

"I'm going solo tonight," I told him.

"Really?" He said. "That's a shame." Eric looked at the dance floor.

"Where's your date?" I asked. Eric sighed and sat down in the chair next to me.

"She was giggling with some friends, then she said something about a bathroom run." He shrugged. "That was fifteen minutes ago."

"That's not good," I said, hesitating. He shook his head.

"Not really, no." He admitted. "But I brought her, so I'll make sure she gets home." I smiled at that. "There she is," He said, looking through the crowd. "I'll see you later." Then he was gone, walking after his date. Soon the song ended.

"We'll be taking a short break," Ethan announced. The music switched over to club music. Before the others came back, I went to the concession stand and bought four bottles of water. Then I headed back to the table and the guys.

"Alright, I'm headed backstage," I announced. "Can I borrow one of you gentlemen to help me get up the stairs without falling?"

"Sure," Asher volunteered. We started moving through the crowd. When we got to the stage stairs, Asher held up his hand. I bit back a grin as I took it. When I was at the top, I let go.

"Thanks, Ash."

"No problem, Ally," Asher told me before he walked back into the crowd. I pushed the curtain away and went back stage. I found the band sitting in a circle, fanning themselves, as they cooled down. When Oliver spotted me, he whistled. I smiled. Ryan looked up and saw me. He clutched his hand to his chest dramatically; I chuckled at that.

"Lexie, you look beautiful," Oliver announced.

"You do usually," Ryan chimed in. "but tonight you look like you feel it." I smiled.

"Thanks, guys. Looking great yourselves." I said as I handed out their water. "You guys are sounding great too." Ethan grabbed a folding chair and set it up for me before sitting down again.

I smiled my thanks as Oliver answered. "We're actually killing it tonight."

"So, how's going solo working for you?" Ethan asked smirking. I shrugged.

"Not bad, bored on the slow songs, but I'll live," I admitted. "That's what cell phone games are for, right?" Ryan's lips twitched.

"You're dateless tonight?" Ryan asked, his voice full of disbelief.

"Yeah. Shocker, right? With my winning personality," I said dramatically.

They chuckled as Ryan shot a look at Ethan. "She could have sung with us tonight," He pointed out.

"Not if you wanted her to be able to sing at Vegabond tomorrow night," Ethan countered. "She still gets a raspy voice after singing one set with us."

Ryan sighed. "Good point," He grumbled. I listened as they talked about their next set. I gave them any feedback I heard from the crowd. Unfortunately for me, it seemed that the crowd wanted more slow songs. Oliver checked his watch.

"Almost that time guys," Oliver announced. Everyone got up. I put my folding chair away while the guys started taking off their suit jackets. Ethan was rolling up his sleeve while Ryan was off to the side yanking at his tie and grumbling under his breath.

"Need a hand?" I asked, grinning at him. He sighed and looked at me, clearly frustrated.

"Yeah." He admitted begrudgingly. I chuckled as I stepped closer to Ryan and looked at his tie. He'd somehow managed to get the thin side longer than the front, and the knot tight as hell. I grinned as I loosened the knot a bit and got it down far enough so he could take it off. I looked up to find he was watching me. His eyes were soft and heated as they ran over my face. I met his eyes, he blinked and it was gone. "Thanks, Lexie." His voice was gentler than I'd ever heard before as he pulled up the tie over his head. I stepped back not quite sure of what I saw in his eyes, or if I actually saw anything at all. It was gone so fast it barely registered. I put it out of my mind as Oliver and Ethan took off their ties.

"Okay boys," I announced. "I need someone to help me not fall down the steps in these heels, please," I announced. They all chuckled.

Ryan grinned down at me. "Here, I'll-"

"I've got her," Ethan said as he moved to my side. I said goodnight to the others as Ethan opened the curtain to the stage steps. He helped me down the steps carefully. When I was on solid ground, I looked up at him and smiled. "Thanks, Snoopy." He smirked down at me.

"You're welcome, Beautiful." He replied. "Enjoy the rest of your night."

"I'll try," I said dryly as I started to walk off. Ethan snorted before heading backstage again. I was walking through the crowd when I realized how ready I was to leave. It's not like I had a date, I could go home. I found everyone at the table. Lisa was chatting with a cute brunette who was holding her hand under the table, Isaac and Asher were playing a game on their phones. Nell was nowhere to be seen.

"I think I'm going to head home," I announced. Isaac looked up then frowned at me.

"You okay?" Isaac asked.

"Yeah, I'm just done with being in a dress and heels," I reassured him. Isaac chuckled at that. I said good night to them. Isaac gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek and Asher gave me a hug good-bye before I headed out.

I was walking through the foyer toward where the coats were hanging when I spotted a familiar face leaning on the wall across from the bathrooms. Morgan was in a tux that looked like a suit. His shaggy brown hair was trimmed and neat, he looked good. Especially with the pink sequined clutch in his hand.

"Hey, Morgan," I greeted him with a smile. He looked up from the floor and spotted me.

"Hi." He straightened from the wall to his full height. His eyes ran over me, his cheeks tinting pink. "Wow, you look incredible."

"Thank you, you do too," I said. I couldn't help but add, "And that pink really brings out your eyes." He blinked at me then looked down at his hand.

"Oh, yeah," He said, his face turning red. "My date is in the bathroom." He shrugged.

"I figured it was something like that," I teased. I headed for the coat rack and grabbed my jacket.

"You're going home?" He asked, frowning. "It's only nine, what about your date?" I gave him a sweet smile.

"No date, I flew solo tonight," I told him as I slid my coat on. "I didn't realize how dull these things were without one." I shrugged as I added,

"Learn something new every day." I got my keys out of my clutch. I looked up to him. "Have a good night."

"You too," He said as I turned to leave.

I walked out to my Blazer thinking about why I really didn't have a date. Asher and Miles, it was that simple. I cursed myself as I carefully climbed into the Blazer. The idea of coming to the dance with anyone but one of them, bothered me. I wanted to go with one of them. I knew I had crushes, but this... What the hell was I going to do? I tried to find an answer as I headed out towards the airport. Thanks to Miles' directions, I got through the gate and found his bag by the trunk of his car. I put it in the back then took a picture of it. I climbed in and giggled as I sent the photo to Miles along with a message.

Alexis: If you ever want to see your precious bag again, you'll have to give in to my demands.

He answered almost instantly.

Miles: Not the bag! Tell me your demands, and I'll make it happen.

I snickered. That sounded kind of dirty to me.

Alexis: First, I want waffles for breakfast on Sunday. Second, a hug. Third, the right to hunt the twins and Zeke through your house with a paintball gun. Fourth, a paintball gun and ammo. Fifth, the rule that the boys can't have paintball guns or ammo.

I was laughing at myself when he responded.

Miles: I can take care of the first two, the next three might be more difficult.

Alexis: No cops and we can negotiate.

Miles: How about a day of paintball with everyone? Will that save my bag?

I smiled.

Alexis: Do I get infinite lives?

Miles: Of course.

Alexis: Done. Your bag is safe.

Miles: Oh, thank goodness.

Alexis: Your bag misses you.

Miles: I miss my bag too.

Alexis: Night.

Miles: Good night.

I was smiling as I put my phone away. I pulled out of the gated section of the airport and headed home. I ran over my texts with Miles and wondered if I had flirted without meaning to. This crush thing was getting complicated. Why did I like both Asher and Miles? Could someone really care about two people at the same time? In that way? I had no idea. Was I just fooling myself?

I was running around in circles in my mind when the Blazer rocked. I tightened my grip on the wheel as rubber slapped the road. I cursed, it felt like I had a flat. Spotting a cul-de-sac like pull off on the side of the road and pulled into it. I shut off the truck and slid out to the cement. It didn't take me long to find the flat, it was my back-driver's side tire. I cursed long and hard. I looked down at my dress and cursed again. I really didn't want to ruin my dress. I was in the middle of nowhere on the side of the road, with a flat, in a formal gown and heels. If I had to ruin the dress, I would, but I wanted to try and avoid it. I went back to my door and grabbed my phone.

"Hey Lexie, how's the dance?" Zeke's gravelly voice filled my ear.

"Hey, I'm kind of in a jam," I said, looking at the stupid tire.

"What kind? What's wrong?" Zeke demanded. I cringed to myself.

"The kind of jam that has me on the side of the road with a flat tire, in heels, wearing an expensive formal dress that I'd really like to not ruin tonight," I said sweetly. Zeke chuckled in my ear. I totally sounded girly, I know. But damn it, this dress was expensive and it took forever to find one I liked. "Can you come and change the tire for me? Please?" I asked sweetly. He was still laughing. When he didn't stop after a couple minutes, I gave up. "Fuck it, I'll ruin the dress." I was about to hang up when he got control of himself again.

"Lexie, hold on." He was still catching his breath. "Where are you?" He asked. I gave him the directions to get to me. "Okay, get in the truck and lock the doors until I get there. Don't unlock them for anyone," He ordered before he hung up. I rolled my eyes and did as he asked. I looked out the windows, it was a stunning spot. There was a big meadow out to the right of the road that was covered in untouched snow. The white blanket bounced the moonlight off, making it look even brighter. The night was quiet, and everything was still. It was peaceful. I turned the truck on and blasted the heater as I waited.

It wasn't long before Zeke's Jeep pulled into the turn around and parked behind me. I sighed in relief as I unlocked the door and slid out of the truck. Zeke left his lights on as he got out. He was in his usual black jeans and a black zip up hoodie. I was walking towards him when he saw me.

"Damn Lexie...." Zeke said, his voice stunned as his eyes grew wide. I pulled the jacket off and then spun around showing him how awesome the dress was. He whistled as I laughed at him.

"Now, do you see why I called?" I asked as I pulled my jacket back on. "I'd like to wear this thing again." Zeke was looking at me, his face still stunned with an appreciative grin on his face.

"Yeah, I get why you called." He admitted. His eyes were warm when they met mine. "I take it you won your bet with Isaac?"

"Of course," I smiled at him taking the compliment. Zeke didn't give them very often so I held on to them a bit more than I probably should. Zeke stopped looking at me and went to look at the tire. A car passed by on the road, I ignored it. Using the light from his headlights, he opened the back of the Blazer then pulled out the jack and spare tire.

"So, what did you run over?" Zeke asked as he laid down on the ground.

"Nothing, it just went flat."

"Uh-huh," He said doubtfully. I nudged his foot with my shoe as he jacked up the truck. He chuckled. "How did you pop a tire a mile from the Rec. center?"

"Miles left his bag by his car at the airport so I picked it up on my way home. Can I sit on the tailgate?" I asked after he had the truck as high as he

needed.

"Should be fine." He grunted as he got off his back. "So, how was the dance?" I sat down on the side of the tailgate and watched as he went to work taking the lug nuts off the wheel.

"It was okay, and the band played great," I said as I watched him work.

"Then why'd you leave early?" He grunted.

"Believe it or not, a formal gown and high heels are not all that comfortable." I pointed out. He chuckled.

"I bet." He grunted as he pulled the tire off and set it aside. Damn, he was fast. I watched as he lifted the full size spare where it needed to be. He let go. "Why do girls like those things anyway?" He asked as he sat back down on the ground. Another car drove by slowly, probably checking to see that everything was alright.

I swung my foot a little as I answered. "It's a girly thing. Every once in a while, a girl wants to get glammed up, show off what she's got, and slow dance with a guy." I shrugged, trying to make it sound like no big deal. "Getting dressed up makes you feel great, and slow dancing with a guy makes you feel beautiful and, well, special. Like I said, it's a girl thing."

"I guess that makes sense." He muttered as he kept putting lug nuts back on the tire. "Did you get your dance?" He asked, his voice strained as he tightened a lug nut.

"No, but there's always next year," I said quietly as I looked out at the snow-covered meadow.

"Huh."

"So, what were you doing tonight?" I asked, turning to watch him tightening another lug nut.

"I was watching a movie with a tub of popcorn," He said. I smiled, that actually sounded like more fun than the dance was.

"Good call. Asher was right, dances aren't really that fun without a date," I admitted. The headlights showed his smirk. Zeke dropped onto his back on the cold cement again and began bringing down the jack. He didn't tell me to move, so I assumed I was fine where I was. A car drove by

slowly again, I looked this time to see a white Camry going by. "What movie were you watching?" I asked.

"Shaun of the Dead," He answered, I chuckled. I loved that movie. Zeke pulled the jack out, got up, and walked around me to put it into the back.

"It's still early, want to come over? Watch a movie?" He asked, pulling his handkerchief out of his back pocket. He started wiping the grease off his hands.

"Yeah, but I'm in a formal dress." I gestured at my body. He chuckled.

"I can give you a shirt that will feel like a dress," He offered. I smirked. Zeke's shirts went down to my knees. He thought it was funny, I just felt small.

"How about you come over to my house, and we watch a movie?" I offered "You know, after I get out of this get up."

"Sounds good, but first..." Zeke went to the driver side door, opened it, and reached inside. He fiddled with something then turned up the volume. Nickelback's Far Away played through my speakers. I raised an eyebrow at him as he came back around the truck and tucked his handkerchief in his back pocket. He crooked his finger at me. My heart skipped a beat, is he asking me to...? My question was answered when he reached out, snagged my hand, and pulled until I slid off the tailgate. Stunned, Zeke pulled me in close, his other hand going around my waist. Then he began to dance with me. He could have smacked me, and I would have been less surprised.

"Um... Zeke? What's going on?" I asked, still stunned almost speechless. I peeked up at him; he was looking out at the meadow over my head.

"You wanted a dance, you're getting a dance," He grumbled as if it made perfect sense to him.

"You know how to dance?" I asked, still amazed. He looked down at me with sharp eyes.

"Lexie, shut up and enjoy your dance," He growled as his cheeks tinged pink. I looked up at him smiling in surprise. He was looking out over my head again, his jaw clenched. I was vaguely aware of a car going by, but most of my attention was on the way he held me almost against him. His tall frame dwarfed mine, his big hand practically spanned my entire lower back. My hand disappeared into his, my other rested on his left arm just below his shoulder. He was a little overwhelming up close like this.

"Who taught you how to dance?" I asked, quietly.

"Maria. She demanded that all of us at least know the basics before we started dating," He said gruffly. "She was big into ballroom dancing when she was younger." I smiled, the twins' mom always made me laugh. She once let me soak Ethan in his bed with ice water for sleeping in late. She was my favorite Mom ever. Zeke started humming along with the song, his bass rolling over my ears, it made me want to bite my lip. I looked up at him amazed. This was Zeke, big, strong, scary as hell Zeke to everyone else. He yelled at me, he argued with me, he's sometimes an overprotective ass who bossed me around, and he was dancing with me just because I didn't get to at the dance. My heart turned to jelly. I couldn't believe how sweet he was being. He brought my hand to rest on his on his chest as he looked down at me with warm eyes and a soft smile. My heart raced as my eyes met his. Our dancing slowed. For the first time, I felt like I was really seeing Zeke. Not the angry, every day Zeke. But the Zeke that he was under all that armor. The one who called me Baby, the one who worried about my health and what I ate. The Zeke that ran out the door without his jacket because I was stuck on the side of the road alone at night. I saw him. And he made my heart skip. My stomach gave a hard, low flip and the butterflies went crazy. His hand moved up my back to just under my ribs. Hot chills ran through me as his gaze ran over my face. I looked at his lips and wanted to... I had to stop staring. I rested my head on his chest just so I couldn't do what I was thinking. Shit, I needed to distract myself.

"So, Maria made you guys learn how to dance?" I asked, a little desperately.

"Um, yeah," His voice was the soft one he used with me. I bit my lip at the sound as he continued. "She insisted before our first dance in seventh grade." His voice was deeper than usual, maybe he needed the distraction too. He continued. "She enjoyed teaching us so much that Miles kept taking lessons from her just to make her smile." I smiled at that.

"That sounds like Miles," I said.

"Don't think you'll get out of it because you're new. I'm surprised she hasn't given you a lesson already," He told me as his thumb ran over my hand.

"Because I'm a bad dancer?" I asked, pretending to be confused. His chest moved as he chuckled, though his arm was suddenly tense around me as his hand squeezed mine rhythmically.

"No, because that's just the way she is...." His voice was distracted. I lifted my head and pulled back to see where he was looking. He was watching as a white Camry drove by again. The song was over so we stopped dancing. I pulled back a bit, but he didn't let go. I peeked up at him. He was still looking out at the road, a frown formed on his face. He seemed to shake something out of his mind then looked down at me. His ice blue eyes were soft when they met mine. "So, do you feel beautiful and special now?" He asked, trying to make a joke out of it. Only his voice was still soft and deeper than usual, and he still hadn't let go.

"Yep." I chirped as I smiled up at him, totally trying to totally kill the mood that we had going. This was Zeke. I didn't need to go crushing on another one of my friends. A little voice in the back of my head was telling me it was too late. He shook his head as he let go and stepped back. I tried again to kill the mood. "Thank you, Zeke, I know that was a huge manly sacrifice on your part," I teased. He narrowed his eyes at me.

"Don't say a word," He growled before heading towards my flat tire. Yeah, that was the Zeke I was used to. I went and turned down the music in the Blazer. Zeke put the tire back in the back of the Blazer as another car went by. I got out of the truck and went to thank him when I realized Zeke's shoulders were tense, his jaw was clenched as he glared at the road. "How many times has that car gone by?" He was using his 'I'm staying calm when I really want to beat the shit out of someone' voice.

"Um, like four or five times now," I answered, realizing how weird that was. "Maybe they're lost."

"Did you see the car before I got here?" Zeke's face was hard, his fists clenching.

"No, you got here first." I didn't understand what was wrong. "Zeke?" Zeke grabbed my arm and started moving me towards the driver's side door.

"Get inside Baby, and lock the doors," He ordered. I almost stumbled because of the heels. Zeke steadied me but didn't slow down.

"Zeke, what's going on?" My voice was hard this time, I was demanding an answer. Zeke got me to the driver side door. I was about to climb in when his hands grabbed my butt and lifted me into the seat. My surprise at his grab didn't last long since he was watching the road again and trying to shut my door. I shot my hand out stopping him. "Zeke!" He looked down at me, his face hard, eyes burning.

"That car has driven by at least four times. No one gets that lost." He looked back at the road. "I have a bad feeling about that car." He tilted his chin towards the road. "I think that's the guy sending you all those texts, and I don't think you got a flat on accident." My heart slammed in my chest, my stomach dropped. If Zeke was right, and he usually was, I would have been out here alone with my Secret Admirer. That was scary to a whole level than I ever expected.

"Shit," I whispered as I looked out at the road expecting the car to come back. Zeke's fingers grabbed my chin and brought my face back towards him.

"Hey, it's okay," He told me calmly, though his grip on the door made his knuckles white. "You are going to drive straight home. I'll be on your ass the whole way," He told me calmly, but it was still clearly not up for negotiation. I swallowed hard and nodded. "Then we'll watch Monty Python or something," He offered. I gave him a small, tense smile, but it was still a smile.

"Okay, straight home," I agreed and turned in my seat; he reached down and lifted the bottom of my dress in before closing the door. I locked it like he wanted and waited until he closed the back.

It felt like an eternity before I watched him get back into his Jeep. I drove home making sure not to go so fast that I'd lose Zeke. What the fuck was going? Was that really him? Did I really get a flat tire on accident? My heart raced as I drove. By the time I reached the turn for Rory's street, my nerves were tight. Give me the dead or a pissed off ghost any day, it's the living that scared me and made me shake. I took deep calming breaths as I parked.

I had just unlocked the door when Zeke opened it, scaring the shit out of me. He ignored my jump and helped me out of the truck. He kept an arm around me as we headed toward the front door. He kept looking around as if he expected the Camry to pull up. I finally got the door open, then we were inside and closing it behind us. I turned the deadbolt. It took me a few seconds before I could step away from the door. I bit down on the corner of my bottom lip as I waited for something to happen. He saw it on my face, I was scared. Zeke didn't like it.

"Lexie," He said, drawing my attention. I looked up to meet his gaze. His eyes melted before he grabbed ahold of my jacket and pulled me into his arms. "You're okay, you're safe." One of his big hands cupped the back of my head, the other moved around my back and kept me pressed against him. I wrapped my fists in the front of his hoodie and clung to him, my body shaking against him. I was so thankful that he didn't go to the dance tonight. I was so fucking thankful that he didn't wait to come out to help me. I rested my forehead against his chest and just breathed in leather and engine grease. "I've got you," He whispered against the back of my hair. "And Rory's in his bedroom with several guns," He added softly.

"No, he's not," I whispered. He grew tense around me.

"Where is he?" He asked, his voice hard.

"He's working nights for the next two weeks, he does it once every year," I told him. "Tara's not even coming home tonight." My stomach was a rock. Zeke cursed and clutched me tighter.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you, Baby," He whispered into my hair. I nodded, my throat tight. "Though, I'm going to pick you up a short crowbar tomorrow." I chuckled at that and took a deep breath. Hades whined at my feet. "It's okay buddy, I've got her right now," Zeke said. I took another deep breath and another. Zeke held me to him until my hands loosened on his hoodie. He let me go when I stepped back. I bent down and picked up Hades who sniffed all over my face and gave me a lick. I smiled at my big ball of love.

"How about you go change while I call Rory?" Zeke offered awkwardly as he ran his hand through his hair. I nodded. I put Hades down and headed upstairs. "And Lexie?" I turned and looked down the stairs. His gaze ran

over me. "Did anyone get a picture of you in that dress?" He asked, his voice serious.

"Yeah, Asher and Ethan did."

"Good," He said quietly. I turned my back and started going up the stairs feeling better. I walked into my bedroom to find my computer on, again. Did I mess with the sleep settings and forget about it? I'd check later. I changed out of my dress and jewelry. I pulled on Asher's Sylvester the cat pajama bottoms, a black cami, and Miles' gray hoodie. Yeah, I looked ridiculous, but I was comfy. I went to the bathroom, washed my face and pulled the pins out of my hair. The mass tumbled down my back. I said screw it and left it down. I was coming downstairs when Zeke got off his phone, his eyes ran over me before meeting mine.

"I'm crashing here. Rory's orders," He announced. The knots in my stomach ease. I took a deep breath of relief.

"Kinda glad to hear it," I admitted. He gave me a half grin. "I'll get you some blankets and pillows." I headed back upstairs to the hall closet and brought them down to Zeke. "Do you want some sweats? I can grab some from Rory's room."

"No, I'm good," He assured me as he sat down on the couch. "Now, what awful movie are we watching?"

Zeke ended up putting on Sharknado. We both laughed and pointed out huge plot holes. I didn't care about those, I ended up bitching that they didn't add the protective film over a shark's eyes when it attacked. It was simple research that bugged the hell out of me. Zeke laughed his ass off then looked at me.

"There are sharks in a tornado, and your issue is that they forgot to put in the thing that happens to shark's eyes when they attack?" He burst out laughing again. I just shrugged, that sort of stuff bothered me. Zeke played with Hades while he gave me control of the remote. Eventually, I fell asleep curled up in the armchair.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 15

Saturday

I woke up slowly. My neck ached, and my mind was still fuzzy with sleep as I sat up. I was in the living room while Zeke was sleeping on the couch. I remembered what happened last night. I had a fuzzy memory of Rory coming home at some point. I looked over at Zeke who was stretched out on the couch. He had taken off his hoodie and was wearing another black sleeveless t-shirt. His shirt had ridden up showing off his hard abs. Zeke would never have a six pack, he just didn't have the build for it, but that didn't mean his lines weren't yummy. Even his small, black happy trail was tempting as it disappeared into his unbuttoned jeans that were low on his hips. He was on his back, his face toward me, his arm on his chest. I took a minute to just look at him. Zeke had always been good looking, just scary good looking. In truth, he was a sweet-heart to me. Why did he dance with me last night? Why did I react that way? I closed my eyes and cursed myself. I knew the answer. Because he was like a wolf that would let only me touch him, that would only calm down for me, that would only listen to me. Lexie, don't think about this. But it was too late, it had been too late for a while. Zeke always got me, even from the beginning. When others flinched at what I told them about my life before Spring Mountain, Zeke just shrugged and said it could have been worse. He understood. I cursed myself. He has a girlfriend, an awesome girlfriend that you are friends with. It didn't seem to matter. Hades woke up and whined in my lap. I put him down then took him to the back door to let him out. I watched from the door as he took a leak, then a dump, and immediately decided to start destroying snow piles. My baby was getting big. He was already up to my knee and still growing. I chuckled quietly as I watched him through the window, destroying snow pile after snow pile.

"What's he doing?" Zeke's voice made me jump. Zeke was standing beside me, pulling on his hoodie as he watched Hades.

"Make some noise, man." I snapped at him. He snorted. I grinned as I turned back to watching my dog. "He goes crazy for snow piles, it's cute," I said.

"Yeah, it is." His voice was rougher than usual.

"Do you want some breakfast?" I asked.

"Sure, I'll get Hades," He offered. I went into the kitchen and started to make bacon, eggs, and coffee. It must have smelled good because Rory came in half asleep. Everyone dished up and sat at the table.

"So, who's going to tell me what happened last night?" Rory asked. My mouth was full so Zeke ran over it quickly, he even threw in my Secret Admirer from school. Rory frowned as he kept eating. When he finished, he pushed his plate away.

"But, nothing threatening happened?" Rory asked. "The car didn't follow you home?"

"No, but they drove by when Zeke was changing the tire, like, five times," I reminded him. Rory nodded his eyes unfocused. Then he looked at both of us.

"It could have been that someone was lost, or they saw a girl on the side of the road with a boy bigger than her, and they were concerned," Rory explained.

"I still got a bad feeling about this, Rory," Zeke muttered. Rory nodded.

"And that's why I asked you to stay last night." Rory pointed out before looking to me. "Has anything else strange happened?" I thought about it then cringed.

"Yeah," I said painfully as I got up to get my phone out of my jacket. I came back to the table and worked my phone. "It was a few nights ago, I completely forgot about it. I woke up to Hades' barking in my room, so, I came downstairs to check. Hades ran straight to the back doors and started growling. I was about to call you when he stopped. I turned on the back-yard light and saw this." I handed him the phone then sat down and pulled my knees to my chest. Rory frowned at the photo. He got up, put the phone down, and went to the back door. He opened it and knelt to look at the locks on the outside of the door. Zeke grabbed my phone and looked at the photo.

"When did this happen?" Zeke demanded.

"Um, Tuesday night," I guessed.

Zeke cursed. "You should have fucking told someone."

"I forgot about it. And it hasn't happened since," I pointed out.

"Well, no one's tried to mess with the lock," Rory announced as he got to his feet. He shut the door and came back to the table. "It could have been someone looking to rob an empty house. They probably ran as soon as they realized someone was home. I'll have a patrol car drive through the neighborhood more often at night until we get a system installed." Rory looked at both of us. "Until we have proof otherwise, I'd say someone was concerned about a girl on the side of the road." Zeke ran a hand through his hair and sighed.

"If you say so," He mumbled. Rory nodded then looked at me.

"Lexie, be extra aware of your surroundings. Keep the doors locked at all times, and you should be alright," Rory said.

"Got it," I said. Rory went back to bed. Zeke picked up the dishes and took them into the kitchen. I picked up the pans to wash.

"Go get dressed for the gym," Zeke said quietly, his face like stone.

"Tough Guy?" I asked, worried.

"I've just got a bad feeling, Baby." He pushed away from the counter and headed for the door.

"I've got to stop by the cemetery first," I reminded him. He nodded as he kept walking.

"Do that. I'll see you at the gym." Zeke walked out the door without another word.

Three hours later I was bent over and gasping for breath. Maddie was doing the same. I had managed to keep her from getting me on the ground enough to wear us both out. I stood up straight and smirked at her. She smiled and shook her head.

"You're going to have to learn to grapple sometime," Maddie pointed out. I chuckled.

"I know, it's on my to-do list," I admitted. We both laughed as we got our breath back. We left the mat room and headed towards the front of the gym. The guys were finishing up with their work outs, so I headed to my locker. I had just opened it when someone called my name.

"Hey, Lexie." Jordan's voice had me turning around. His red tank top was sticking to his chest with sweat as he went to his locker.

"Hey, Jordan." I gave him a smile as I started to take off my protective gear.

"You looked great last night. You disappeared before I could tell you," He said, sending a grin my way. I gave him a small one in return.

"Thanks, I was tired," I hedged. I put my pads in my locker and pulled off my gloves.

"So, you're singing tonight at Vegabond?" He asked. I started unwrapping my hands.

"Yeah, I'm singing one set tonight," I said, wondering why he didn't get that I didn't want to talk right now. He started putting his gear away.

"So, I was thinking. Maybe you'd like-"

"Hey, Beautiful," Ethan stepped between Jordan and me. I looked up at him gratefully, he winked down at me. "Come on, we have that lunch date," Ethan lied. I snorted.

"It's not a date, Ethan," I fake corrected him.

"Yeah, whatever, live in denial." Ethan smiled as he pushed away from the lockers. Jordon's face was closed off as he focused on putting his gear away. I closed my locker and pulled on my jacket.

"See you later, Jordan," I said before turning toward the doors with Ethan at my side.

Ethan held it together until we got outside, he started laughing. I glared at him as I headed for the Blazer.

"That guy doesn't give up," Ethan observed.

"I kind of wish he would," I admitted. Ethan wrapped his arm around me as we walked to my truck.

"Well, I could kiss you good-bye," Ethan offered. "I'm sure he'd get the hint then." I snickered as we reached the Blazer. He dropped his arm from me as I looked up him smiling. Flirty Ethan could always make me smile.

"Don't tempt me," I threatened. His eyebrow rose suggestively. He bent down and kissed my cheek, as usual, then straightened.

"That should do it," Ethan said. I hoped so. "What are your plans for the rest of the day?" He asked.

"I'm headed home for a gossip session with Jake, doing some research, then relax until Vegabond tonight," I replied. He sighed.

"Fine, don't gossip with me." He grumbled.

"Oh honey, I can't gossip with you about this stuff," I told him as I opened the door.

"Why's that?" He asked, leaning against the truck. Then his eyes lit up. "You're gossiping about us." I snickered at the look on his face. He looked like a kid who just found his favorite toy.

"Ethan..."

"You are," He declared, smirking. I shot him a look and climbed in. Then I leaned out until I was an inch away from his face.

"Damn straight." I grinned mischievously. He gave me a pained face as I sat back up giggling to myself.

"That's mean, Lexie," He told me as he stepped back with a smile.

"And the best part," I stage whispered to him. "No one will believe you." He chuckled. I winked at him before closing my door. I pulled out of the space as Ethan just shook his head, smiling at me. I giggled to myself as I drove home.

When I got home, I ran upstairs and took a shower. I pulled on my jeans and a simple shirt for the rest of the day. Then I pulled out my phone and called my second favorite gossip buddy.

"Hey, sweetness," Jake greeted.

"Hey, handsome," I shot back. "How was your week?" I flopped down on my bed next to a sleeping Hades.

"Same old, pining away after a particular guy," He grumbled in my ear.

"I'm sorry hon," I said, wincing. "Why don't you bring him to Vegabond tonight? I could do some digging."

"That's not a bad idea," He said, sounding hopeful. "Think you can manage that after you sing?"

"I can try." I offered. He sighed.

"Maybe if I know, I'll move on." He sounded hopeful. I knew the feeling. "Anyway, how's your crush on your two guys?" I sighed.

"Three," I admitted painfully.

"What?"

"It's three now." I groaned pitifully.

"Three? What the hell happened?" He demanded. I explained to him about the flat tire and Zeke dancing with me in the snow.

"Oh, my God," He said. "Lexie that's seriously fucking romantic as hell."

"I know." I giggled.

"This was Zeke?"

"Yeah, it was Zeke," I said. "Never tell anyone."

"Doesn't he have a girlfriend?" Jake pointed out. I closed my eyes and cringed.

"Yes, a girlfriend I'm friends with," I said, painfully. "And I accidentally flirted with Miles last night."

"Wait, fill me in," He said, curiosity filling his voice. I did then he started laughing.

"It's not funny. I don't know what I'm doing anymore," I pointed out. "I'm fine when we're all together, but get one of them alone and I just... ugh!"

"Are you going to act on any of these feelings?" He asked, pointedly. I thought about it.

"I don't think so."

"Then it'll go away in time."

"Derrick," I countered. He sighed.

"Touché," He said. "What do you want to do, Lexie?"

"I don't know," I muttered.

"Yes, you do," He countered. I sighed and admitted it.

"I want to date one of them," I finally admitted it out loud. "But I don't think they feel the same way."

"Only one way to find out," He pointed out. I frowned.

"Same to you," I said. He snorted.

"I've known Derrick since we were kids," He countered. "That's why you're going fishing." I got an idea.

"Jake, can you go fishing for me?" I asked in my cutesy voice. He chuckled.

"Deal," He said immediately. "I'm not fishing with Zeke, though."

"I wouldn't expect it," I assured him. We went on to talk about what we were wearing that night, who we expected to see, and gossip about his friends and mine. As always, Jake cheered me up and made me feel better. So, when I got ready for Vegabond, I was already singing to myself. Tonight was going to be fun, and nothing was going to ruin that for me.

I pulled up to Vegabond. The place wasn't crowded yet, but the cars were starting to pull in. I parked in the back lot where the staff and band parked. I hopped out then hurried to the back door of the bar. I had been stupid and listened to Ethan about wearing a tank top tonight, perfect for on stage but bad for being outside even with my jacket. I knocked on the door hard. Oliver opened the door for me as I hurried in cursing. Ethan eyed me as I ran my hands up and down my arms.

"You shit head!" I snapped at Ethan. Ryan and Oliver looked at me like I was nuts. I explained.

"He told me to wear a tank top tonight, and now I'm half frozen." The guys laughed. Ryan tried to rein it in as he went to one of the hooks.

"You could have changed here," Ryan said as he put his big coat over my shoulders. I grabbed his jacket and held it closed. Musky cologne filled my noise, it wasn't bad.

"I didn't think it would be that bad," I grumbled. They chuckled again.

"It's 12 degrees outside, Beautiful," Ethan pointed out. I flipped him off then held Ryan's coat shut to get warm. Ethan came over and wrapped me in a hug. He ran his hands up and down my back helping me get warm.

"I'm still mad at you," I warned him. He snorted.

"I kind of deserve it." He admitted quietly. When I was finally warm again, Ethan stepped back and took Ryan's coat off me.

"Thanks, Ryan," I said as I opened my jacket. Ryan gave me a nod as he hung up his coat. I pulled off my jacket. Ethan's eyes ran over my clothes. I wore black jeans and a loose black y-back tank top that had gray writing across it like a book. My hair was down and around me, my eyes were dark and smoky like whenever I sang.

"You look great," Ethan said with a smile.

"Great but freezing, going home I might just steal your jacket," I warned him. He snickered. "I'm going to go get a bottle of water, anyone else want one?" Everyone said yes and gave me their money. I went to the curtain out front and slipped out into the club. It had gotten packed while I was back stage which wasn't unusual on a Saturday night. I made my way to the bar and ordered waters.

"Hey, Lexie," A voice said. I turned to find Eric coming to stand at the bar next to me.

"Hey, how's it going?" I asked, wondering why he was talking to me.

"Not bad, are you singing tonight?" He asked.

"Yeah, just the first set," I said as the bartender brought me the bottles. I paid him and waited for change.

"Are your friends coming tonight?" He asked wearily. I looked at him and smiled sweetly.

"Yeah," I said. I got my change and picked up the bottles. "Gotta go, I'll see ya around." I headed back through the crowd. I hadn't seen the guys yet, but I knew they were somewhere. I was trying to make my way back to the curtain when a husky voice caught my attention.

"Lexie." I took a deep calming breath then turned to see Dylan. His sapphire eyes ran over me, lingering on my angel wings necklace, his first Christmas present to me. It made me wish I'd given it back to him along with the other one. His warm eyes met mine.

"Hi, Dylan," I kept my voice polite when all I wanted to do was tell him to fuck off. I gestured over my shoulder. "I need to get back." He reached out and grabbed my arm, stopping me.

"Can... can we just talk for a second?" He asked softly. I took a calming breath, his bullshit since dumping me had made me not want to even look at him, and here he was. I pulled my arm out of his grip and looked at him confused.

"About what?" I asked sharply. He swallowed hard. Dylan's friends Aaron and Jake found us in the crowd.

"Lexie!" Jake gave me a big smile that lit up his eyes.

"Hey, Jake. You're mine after my set, right?" I asked, smiling.

"Of course," He said like it was obvious as he side-hugged me. I looked up to Aaron and smiled. The guy had broad shoulders and muscles to fill them out. He wasn't bad looking, he had a nice jaw and cheekbones and his brown hair had grown out a little since I last saw him. It wasn't buzzed down to his scalp now.

"Hey Aaron, Jake said you almost got beat up by a lesbian," I said sweetly. Aaron groaned.

"You had to tell her that?" Aaron glared at Jake.

"Oh yeah," Jake shot back. I chuckled.

"I just... wanted to ask how you were...?" Dylan asked drawing my attention back to him.

"Since you dumped me?" I asked, bluntly. His shoulders grew tense, Aaron frowned down at Dylan.

"You dumped her?" Aaron asked, confused. Dylan ignored him.

"Lexie-" he began. I'm sure it would be a good excuse, but I didn't want to hear it. And since we weren't a thing, I didn't have to.

"I'm fine, busy as usual." I slipped out from under Jake's arm and stepped back. I noticed the bags under Dylan's eyes. He was probably working too much again. Oh, well, that wasn't my problem. I looked up at Jake who was smirking at me. "Remember our deal?" Jake nodded. "I'll see you after my set." Jake winked at me. Then I turned around and slipped into the crowd.

"You fucking dumped her?" Aaron's voice reached me, the disbelief in his voice made me smile. Yep, Dylan lied to his friends. I pushed it out of my head, he'd been too big of an ass since then for me to really be upset anymore. Too many phone calls, too many texts that I was finally done answering. I was almost out of the crowd when a hand snagged my arm again. I recognized the rough fingertips instantly. I looked up to see Asher glaring behind me, probably at Dylan. Asher helped move me through the crowd ahead of him and to the stairs where the others were.

"Thanks, Ash."

"What did he want?" Asher asked, getting the others attention.

"Who?" Isaac asked.

"Dylan found her in the crowd," Asher answered. All the guys grunted.

"He wanted to talk," I said sarcastically before I headed to the stairs. "Doesn't matter, gotta get backstage."

"Knock 'em dead, Red."

"You got this, Ally," Asher reassured me. Zeke was oddly quiet tonight, I winked at them then hurried up the stairs and into the small backstage area. I handed out the water bottles to the others as they went over the set

again. It was almost time when Ethan shot me a look. I gave him a small smile as we both stepped away from the others.

"Ethan..." I said gently.

"Yeah, I know. It's just-"

"You could sing row your fucking boat, and you'd make panties drop," I reminded him. "You got this, you know your shit, and you want this, right?" Ethan's shoulders relaxed.

"Yeah, I want this." He took a deep breath, his restless movement slowing.

"You guys have all three sets down," I assured him. He nodded then looked at me with chocolate eyes.

"Thanks, Beautiful." I gave him a big hug, he held me tight. "You remember your cues?" He whispered still hugging me. I nodded and clung to him tighter.

"Yeah, I remember," I grumbled. I still wasn't a huge fan of singing in front of the crowd, but I had managed to actually look over the crowd and hold my shit together now as long as I looked at the back wall.

"You can go off stage after each of your songs for a breather," He reminded me. I snorted.

"Believe me, I know, and I'm gonna," I assured him. He chuckled as he pulled back.

"I can teach you the piano, so you wouldn't have to," He offered.

Haven't do"I'm not joining your band, Ethan," I reminded him. I wasn't a big performer. You had to play the crowd, and I wasn't doing it. Ethan had taught me a little, just so I wouldn't be so awkward on stage. He laughed as he smiled down at me.

"Can't blame me for trying," He pointed out. I shook my head as we joined the others. A breeze came through the open back door that felt nice. Probably because it was too hot back here already. The band threw their hands in, and we threw them up shouting Under Fire. Then the boys went out on stage and the crowd cheered.

As the band played, I ran through my set in my head. As my voice got stronger, the longer my sets would be. I focused on my list. Take Me Down, then off stage, Not Gonna die with Ryan, off stage, back on for Good Enough, off stage for a rest of two songs, then my fuck off song for Dylan. I grinned at that. The manager said she'd be happy with that for now. I still didn't have the stamina for singing an entire set. The first song came to an end. I took a deep breath and picked up the new second microphone for vocals

"You all know our guest singer by now." Ethan's smoky voice rolled through the crowd. "The hottest redhead in three counties." There were actual cheers from the crowd, it surprised the hell out of me. "Give it up for Lexie!" I turned on my mic and walked out on stage with my eyes narrowed playfully at Ethan. I brought the microphone up to my lips.

"I'm the only redhead in three counties, Ethan," I pointed out as I reached my mark. The crowd laughed. Ethan gave an exaggerated shrug.

"And therefore, the hottest. You win by default," Ethan shot back. I shot him a look and flipped him off as the first notes of the Take Me Down played. The crowd burst out laughing. We'd learned over the last couple weeks that fake angry flirting back and forth worked great to make the crowd relax between my songs. I started singing with my eyes closed which still helped. As I was getting into the music, I could open my eyes to look out at the back wall. I sang Take Me Down the way I always heard it, with Ethan's corrections, I didn't hear myself go off key once. By the end of the song, the crowd was cheering. As I headed off stage, Oliver caught my eye and gave me a wink. Apparently, I was doing well tonight. I walked off stage, and turned off the microphone. Damn, that had been fun. I had relaxed out there and got into it. I drank my water and paced as I listened to the next song. The curtain to the bar opened, and Isaac slipped backstage. He hugged me tightly.

"Red, you are kicking ass tonight," He smiled down at me.

"I'm actually having fun," I admitted. He laughed.

"You're going to end up in the band," He predicted. I snorted.

"No, I'll tattoo the band," I reminded him. Isaac just smiled. The song was coming to an end. Isaac let me go and headed back out to the bar.

When the song ended, I turned on my mic again and headed out.

"Lexie will be hopping on and off stage for part of the night. She doesn't exactly have the stamina the rest of us do." Ethan shot over at me, grinning. The shit head had just gone off script. I grinned my mischievous grin at him and brought the mic to my lips.

"Oh, honey. I wouldn't talk about stamina, I've talked to your ex," I shot back. Ethan's face went red as he laughed. The bar roared with laughter as I hit my mark. It was a couple seconds longer before Ryan could get his laughter under control.

"It's not that funny, Ryan," Ethan groused, pointing out to the crowd how our drummer was doubled over. Ryan leaned over to his microphone.

"I always wondered why you couldn't keep a girlfriend," Ryan shot back. Ethan's face was dark red as he shot me a look. The crowd was roaring with laughter. Then the first pounding notes were played. I closed my eyes again and focused, Not Gonna Die was a duet where I had less of a role. Instead of Ethan, Ryan sang into his microphone as he played. Talk about major multi-tasking skills. Ryan sang the first verse, his strong voice belting out the song. I tapped my foot to the beat, I couldn't help it. I loved this song. It was all about fighting when the world was crumbling around you. I joined in when I was supposed to and just enjoyed the song. I gave this song everything in me. You had to, or it fell flat. After the notes had faded away, I walked off stage.

I was drinking my water as Ethan started to sing Lullaby by Nickelback. Everything inside me went still, his voice was different. I walked to the side of the stage and watched as Ethan sang his heart out. He gave the song everything he had, I had never heard him sing it this way before. The song was about reaching out to someone who wanted to commit suicide, that you understood it because you had been there yourself. My heart ached, and my eyes burned as I watched him. He was talking to someone, and I had no clue who it was. Ethan had a lot of friends that I didn't know. Halfway through the song he faltered, he missed his next cue, I didn't think. I flipped on my microphone and started the next verse. I walked out on stage without taking my eyes off him. His gaze met mine as he played. I went to my usual mark and kept singing. When he was ready, he joined in on the chorus, we finished the song together. Ethan took a deep breath, turned his back on the

crowd and took a deep drink of water. His hand still shaking, he needed a second so I turned to the crowd and gave them a big smile.

"Sorry about that. I was taking a drink, and I missed my cue," I offered to the crowd with a shrug.

"Yeah, Lexie, you gotta watch that. You almost hung me out to dry," Ethan said as soon as he could turn around. I shot him a look. Ethan chuckled along with the crowd.

"We're trying something new tonight," Ethan announced to the crowd as he put his guitar down and moved to the keyboard. "This is an older cover, but Lexie says it's a goodie. And as you see, you don't piss off Lexie." The crowd chuckled.

I brought the mic to my lips, "Finally figuring that out, huh?" Everyone chuckled. I smiled at him before looking out at the crowd. Ethan played the first few notes of Good Enough. It was another song you had to give everything into to make it work. I concentrated on my voice, the key and the pitch. I kept my eyes closed until I knew I could open them and still do it right. I looked at the back wall and kept singing. I thought of the guys, they really had helped me feel this way. So, I gave it everything. When the song ended, I walked off stage, turned off my mic, and took a big drink of water. Almost done, almost done. I took another deep breath and another drink. Fuck! Never wearing my hair down again, I was still fanning myself at the end of two songs. Okay, Lexie. Last one. I picked up my mic and bounced on my toes. I had this song down.

It was Ethan's song suggestion to give Dylan the message to fuck off. I grinned, he really needed to get the message, and I was going to really enjoy sending it. The song ended, and I headed back on stage turning my mic on as I went.

"Lexie, being a redhead, of course, has a little rage she needs to let out," Ethan told the audience smiling. I put the microphone to my lips.

"It's not because I'm a redhead Ethan, it's because I'm a small, pissed-off bitch," I pointed out matter-of-factly. The bar chuckled.

"At least you own it, honey." Ryan's voice had me looking over my shoulder. I sent him a smile.

"That I do," I said proudly. The guys played the first few notes of U & UR Hand by Pink.

Then I sang. I thought about Dylan and the way he dumped me, all the shit he'd put me through since, and I got angry. I belted out the song, I got into it, feeling every word. I opened my eyes to see the crowd dancing and having fun. And this time I didn't have a problem. I found Dylan in the crowd near the back with his friends, I met his eyes as I hit the chorus. I smirked at him as I sang. I was sending Dylan a fucking message, and I wasn't subtle about it. Jake was standing next to him, laughing his ass off. I loved how it felt. I stopped giving him any attention. I looked over the crowd, and for the first time, I understood why Ethan loved doing this. When it was over the crowd went wild, I stepped back smiling. I finally got it out, and it felt amazing. If Dylan didn't get the message now, he's not listening.

"That's it for Lexie tonight, wasn't she great guys?" Ethan announced. The crowd applauded and hooted. Someone shouted, asking if I was single. Ethan laughed it off as I ignored it. I took a tired bow and straightened. Ethan wrapped an arm around my waist and gave me a squeeze. I smacked his hand and stepped away giving him a flirty pissed-off smile, he smirked at me. It was all for the crowd. "We'll be taking a short break, but we'll be back in fifteen," Ethan announced. I shut off my mic and headed off stage with the others. We headed out the back doors since it was hot as hell inside. The sweat covering me instantly froze, cooling me down, it felt great. Ryan turned around, he hugged me tightly, lifting me off my feet and spinning me around. I laughed as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. The others laughed as he put me down.

"You have to join the band, Lexie!" Ryan told me immediately. I snorted. "No, seriously, with your voice, we can play just about anything."

"I'm your place holder Ryan, sorry but no," I said sweetly in my now slightly hoarse voice. Ryan looked at Ethan.

"Ethan come on," Ryan pleaded. "When you two get on stage the whole crowd pays attention. They love that whole will they or won't they shit. Every time we play here, the crowd gets bigger." Ethan ran a hand through his sweat soaked hair.

"She doesn't want to be in the band, Ryan," Ethan said again. "She has her own plans."

"At least now you know what you're looking for," I offered, feeling a little guilty. Ryan groaned.

"Yeah, someone with a voice, that Ethan has chemistry with and he won't hit on." Oliver groused. "We're screwed." I groaned. They were right, fuck. I sighed.

"I will stick with you guys 'till you find someone, as much as I can, alright?" I offered. It was all I could do. The boys lit up and Ryan practically tackled me to hug me again.

"Thank you! Thank you!" He hugged me tight. I gave him an awkward hug back.

"But you have to be looking," I told him seriously.

Ryan let go and stepped back. He held up his right hand. "Scouts honor." I was started to get chilled.

"I'm heading in to see the guys. Kick ass on the next set." I walked back inside and Ethan followed. When we were out of ear shot, Ethan pulled me to a stop.

"Thanks for saving my ass out there," He said quietly. I gave him a small smile.

"Are you okay?" I asked, not really meaning to. His eyes snapped down to mine. He took a deep breath and let it out.

"Yeah, I just..."

"I get it," I said. "You know you can talk to me, right?" He gave me a small grin.

"Yeah, I know," He whispered. I reached up and pulled him into a hug. He held me tight, his face in the crook of my neck.

"Love you," He whispered as he squeezed me.

"Love you too," I whispered back. When he let me go, I gave him a big smile and headed back to the front. I headed for the curtain as I pulled my hair up into a ponytail. Club music was pouring through the speakers. I pushed aside the curtain and headed into the bar. I needed to get my tea, my throat was already sore but I didn't make it far.

"Hey, sweetness," Jake said beaming down at me. I smiled back.

"Hi, how'd he take the fuck off song?" I asked, wickedly. Jake snickered.

"It was fucking hilarious," Jake declared before grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the bar. He knew I needed tea after my set. I followed listening as he described Dylan's reaction.

"He actually said, 'Is she talking about me?" Jake said. I laughed.

"I was looking at him in the eye, how could he miss it?" I asked as I shook my head. Jake was laughing too.

"Oh, that's not all," He told me as we reached the bar. I ordered my tea and turned back to him, his eyes were sparkling with mischief. "Aaron actually said, 'No shit Sherlock." I burst out laughing again. "I had to explain to him that you were telling him to 'go fuck himself," Jake said, his face red. "How'd that feel?" He asked.

"That felt awesome," I admitted, smiling a big smile. Then I turned my attention back to Jake.

"So, did you go fishing?" I asked. He sighed.

"As much as I could with Asher," Jake admitted. "I didn't get much, but I can tell you that when you were on stage, he couldn't take his eyes off you." I sighed, trying not to be disappointed.

"That's because he knows I'll grill him about my performance later," I explained. Jake looked doubtful. I eyed him. "Where's Derrick?" Jake smiled.

"On his way over here, he wanted to tell you how great you sounded," Jake told me just before Derrick stepped out of the crowd and leaned against the bar on the other side of me.

"Hey Lexie, great set," Derrick announced. I turned to him and smiled.

"Thank you!" Then I became serious. "Did I go off key? Out of pitch?" I asked.

"No, you were perfect," Derrick assured me.

"I'm off to the bathroom, sweetness," Jake announced. He kissed my cheek before moving off into the crowd. Derrick watched him go with a tiny disappointed look on his face. My mouth dropped, I burst out giggling. Derrick turned to me, his face white. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. I kept laughing. When I could, I looked up at him.

"You-you like him," I said. His face flamed red as he shook his head.

"No, I don't," He insisted. I just started laughing again. Derrick dropped his head onto his crossed arms on the bar. He groaned painfully. I felt a little bad, after all, he wasn't in on the joke. I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and leaned down to whisper in his ear.

"You're gay."

He shook his head. "I'm bi," He grumbled before looking at me while resting his chin on his arms. "I like both. Those jeans make your ass look great by the way," He pointed out with a smirk. I gave him a smile.

"Thank you. And you like Jake," I stated. He sighed wearily.

"For about a year now," He admitted. I snickered, I couldn't help it. He straightened as my tea came. "What's so funny?" He asked. I paid for my tea as I calmed down.

"You need to tell him," I said as I squeezed some lemon into my tea.

"Fuck no," Derrick snapped. "We've been friends since pre-school."

I smiled to myself.

"What's holding you back?" I asked gently before blowing on my tea. He sighed.

"I know I'm bi, but I've never dated a guy," He admitted. "Whereas...."

"Jake has," I finished for him. He nodded. "But Jake has never really dated, has he?" Derrick thought about it.

"Well, no, not really." He admitted. I smirked.

"So, you two might be on more equal footing than you thought," I pointed out. Derrick sighed as he thought about it.

"Maybe," He said uncertainly. "What if we crash and burn?"

"Do you think you two could still be friends?" I asked, curious. He thought about it.

"Honestly, I think so," He said. "I don't see how we couldn't. It might take time but..." I smiled to myself.

"Then tell him, or better yet show him," I said as I wiggled my eyebrows suggestively. He shot me a look. "Seriously, do it. You won't be disappointed." He eyed me.

"What do you know?" He demanded. I snickered.

"Enough to tell you to go for it," I smirked. He looked like he was going to throttle me. I gave him my shit eating grin. He went to say something, but Jake joined us.

"Okay, what I miss?" Jake asked as he stepped up to my other side. Derrick swallowed hard as I got my smile under control.

"Oh, Derrick was about to go for a walk outside. It's too hot in here," I said, nonchalantly. "Why don't you go with him, you know, there might be some drunks out there or something," Jake eyed me. I just smiled at him and gave him nothing.

"Sounds like a good idea," Jake said slowly before looking to Derrick. "Let's go. I could use a walk." Derrick nodded, his face pale. I gave him an encouraging smile before they disappeared into the crowd. I giggled to myself, oh Jake was going to be so surprised! I couldn't wait to hear all about it. I took my tea and walked through the crowd to find the guys on the other side of the bar. I found them in a booth, Isaac scooted over immediately so I could I sit down.

"I know, I did awesome," I announced confidently. They chuckled.

"You really did," Asher said, smiling down at me.

"You even started looking comfortable up there," Isaac chimed in. The guys started talking about how the crowd reacted to each song in the first set while I listened and drank my tea.

"All the girls went crazy when you and Ryan did the duet," Asher told me. "They were all wondering if you two had feelings for each other and how jealous Ethan would get." I winked at him. The guys knew it was an act, and that was it.

"Hey everyone," Jordan said, coming up to the booth. "Lexie, that was amazing." He smiled down at me. I shrugged.

"Thanks, but I'm just place holding 'till they find someone else they could use more permanently," I said politely. I really didn't want to be hit on right now. I was tired and so not looking for anything with him.

"They'd be insane not to keep you." Jordan's voice was nice and smooth. But that was it.

"I'm doing it as a favor to Ethan," I admitted, wishing he'd talk about something else. Isaac bumped my shoulder with his, I bumped back. Jordan ignored it.

Jordan gestured over his shoulder towards the dance floor. "Do you want to-"

"Actually, I need to go get some more tea," I announced before getting to my feet. Isaac followed.

"I'll join ya, Red," Isaac added. I started walking towards the bar. "Sorry man, but if she doesn't have more tea in the next ten minutes, she's going to lose her voice for a few days," Isaac said apologetically to Jordan. Jordan seemed to buy it.

"Yeah, no problem, I'll talk to you after," Jordan said. I just gave him a smile and followed Isaac through the crowd. When we reached the other side of the dance floor, I pulled him to a stop.

"Thanks, Cookie Monster." His amber eyes met mine.

"You were kind of screaming 'get me out of this conversation.' And you weren't subtle." His voice was a matter of fact. I snorted.

"Yeah, I'm so not interested in Jordan," I admitted looking around the crowd. "I'm still dealing with Dylan's bullshit." Isaac pulled me onto the dance floor and slow danced with me. His hands went to my hips, my arms to his shoulders.

"He hurt you, didn't he?" Isaac's voice grew softer. I sighed.

"Yeah, he did," I admitted as I looked up at Isaac. "Then he kept calling, texting, trying to talk to me and it's made it a lot easier to not feel that way anymore," I grinned as he laughed.

"So, Dylan being a dick is making you feel better?" He asked.

"It just shows me the guy I cared about didn't exist," I said matter-of-factly. "I miss what I thought I had, but that's about it at this point. I just wish he'd stop trying to talk to me." Isaac's eyes were understanding.

"If he doesn't stop, I'll kick his ass this time," He offered.

"And I'm going to let ya," I admitted. Isaac chuckled. "But I don't think you'll have to, his friends apparently had the idea that I dumped him. They aren't happy with him either." I smirked. Isaac raised an eyebrow at that. We danced until the song was over then I told Isaac I was tired. He agreed to sneak me out. He took my hand and pulled me through the bar until I was back at the stage curtain.

"Get some sleep Red, you did great," Isaac assured me.

I rolled my eyes and went backstage. "Tell the guys I said night."

"You got it," He said before he dropped the curtain behind me. I went back to the hook where my jacket was and pulled it on. It was freaking cold now, next time I was bringing a sweater to pull on before going home. I eyed Ethan's jacket on a hook, it would serve him right if I took it. I sighed and left it where it was.

I went out the back, and walked through the empty plowed gravel parking lot, humming under my breath. It had been a good night. I did great, and I had to admit it was fun. I thought about Ryan and Ethan asking me to join the band. It would be a lot of fun, but that's all it would be to me, fun. To Ethan and the others, this was their life, their passion. And they needed someone who would be just as dedicated as they were. I sighed as I reached the Blazer. They'd find someone, and it'll be great. I went to pull out my keys when something pressed over my mouth, something hard wrapped around me. My heart slammed as I dropped my keys. I was jerked back against a hard body. Stunned, I froze in a hard grip.

"It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you," A guy's voice whispered in my ear. "I'm going to get you away from them." My chest grew tight, fear

knotted my gut as I realized what was happening. "I'm taking you somewhere safe. Somewhere they can't hurt you." He was going to take me? Oh, hell no! Adrenaline surged through me making my veins burn, I slammed my head back and hit a chest. I tried to drop so I could get an elbow free but his arm tightened around me and lifted. My feet came off the ground as he began moving away from the Blazer. I tried to scream, but his hand kept me from making a loud enough noise. I struggled against his hold and bit down on his fingers. I tasted blood, he cursed. Then he yanked his hand away from my face.

"Asher! Parking lot!" I shouted as he brought my feet down to the ground. I broke an arm free and drove it into his gut, his hold loosened instantly. I moved to the left and drove my fist back into his groin. He grunted as my fist hit solid thigh muscle. I slammed my foot down on his, his arm fell away. I ran, heart pounding in my ears, lungs tighten in my chest. I was jerked back by my coat, I slipped out of it and kept moving.

"Asher! Parking lot!" I screamed this time. A weight hit me, driving me into the gravel; his hard grip went to my arms, bruising.

"I'm trying to help you!" My attacker snapped at me as he rolled me onto my back. He was strong, broad shouldered, he wore a ski mask and all black. That's all I saw before I was fighting back. I swung at him, but he grabbed my arm and pinned it to my chest, I tried to go for his eyes, but his hand grabbed that arm and ground it into the gravel. Rocks bit into my back under our weight.

"I don't want your help! Fuck off!" I shouted back. A hand let go, I grunted with the impact. As pain shot through my face, my anger drove to the surface helping me focus. The fucker had just hit me!

"You don't need to talk like that anymore," He snarled in my face. Big fucking mistake, I grabbed his ear and twisted through the fabric, he cursed, both his hands instantly went to loosen my hold. I yanked him off me to the side, my knee made contact with his gut. I rolled, scrambled, and made it to my feet. I ran towards the bar as fast as I could.

"Asher!" I screamed again just before I hit the cement near the door, my head bounced off the ground. The world spun, a heavy weight was on my back pinning me to the gravel. I blinked and tried to focus.

"You're going to be safe from those assholes who keep hurting you." He shifted his weight off me then I was on my back again as the world spun.

"*You* just hurt me, you dick." I pointed out as the world kept spinning. Another hit, my eye felt like it was going to explode as the world tilted even more. I raised my hand to my head, there was something hot and wet.

"You gave me no choice," He bit out. He gripped my arms, then yanked me up, dug his shoulder into my stomach, and lifted me. I tried to drive a knee into his chest, to hit something, but my world was spinning, and my limbs felt like lead.

"Asher!" I screamed again my voice cracking. A door slammed open.

"Hey!" Asher's voice shouted, feet were running towards us.

"Get your fucking hands off her!" Zeke's bellow was unmistakable. Relief instantly ran through me.

"You're in deep shit now, pal," I muttered. His grip loosened as he hesitated. I drove my knee into his chest then shoved myself sideways off his shoulder. I landed hard on my side in the gravel, hitting my head again. My head throbbed, my body ached, and I felt every scrape I had. Feet were running away. Run bitch, run. I groaned and tried to push myself up, it didn't work. Hands were on me, I smelled limes and opened my eyes.

"Lexie?" Isaac demanded an answer as he leaned over me. I didn't care if I hurt, I was just so fucking happy to see him. I groaned, rolled over, and tried to sit up. He reached out, wrapped an arm around my back, and helped me up. I wobbled so Isaac pulled me to his chest so I could lean against him. He felt perfect right now.

"Someone kill that mother fucker," I grumbled as the spinning finally started slowing down.

"Zeke and Asher are on it. Are you okay?" Isaac bit out, his voice boiling. Huh. The twins got angry the same way, never noticed that before. A car peeled out somewhere.

"I'm fine. I... was dizzy, it's getting better. I hit my head on the ground, twice." I blinked hard, the world was slowing down, it was almost still again. Isaac brushed my hair off my forehead. "I just hit the ground hard again, be good in a couple minutes," I promised.

"You're bleeding." Isaac's voice was still furious. "What happened?" Isaac asked as he pressed his face into my hair. I reached up and wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. My body was so tired it was all I had.

"Fucker tried to grab me, said he was taking me somewhere safe," I said, dazed. "I told him to fuck off. So, he hit me, saying that you guys were hurting me. I pointed out that *he* had just hit me. He didn't see the irony." Isaac snorted into my hair as he rocked me. Running feet on the gravel came towards us.

"Is she-?"

"I'm fine," I assured Asher.

"Let me see her," Asher demanded in his hard voice.

"I'm calling the cops." Isaac's voice was still boiling. He gave me a squeeze, kissed my hair then let Asher pick me up out of his lap. The world spun as Asher stood up, cradling me against his chest. I closed my eyes and rested my cheek against his shoulder, I looked up at him. His eyes were wide, his face pale. He was freaking out. I reached up and stroked my fingers along his jaw. His rough ocean eyes met mine, then he took a deep breath.

"I'm okay. You guys got here in time," I reminded him. He dropped his forehead to mine and took another deep breath.

"I barely fucking heard you, Ally," He whispered, his voice shaking. I cupped his cheek and rubbed his cheekbone with my thumb.

"I need cops here at the back of Vegabond, some fucker just tried to kidnap my friend. Her forehead is bleeding so the EMT's would be a good idea," Isaac snapped into his phone.

"But you did. And you got here in time," I pointed out. I was weirdly calm. I knew I should be upset, but strangely I wasn't. They had me, I was safe.

"Let's get her inside, we'll stay backstage," Asher said as he started carrying me towards the bar.

"I'll call Rory after I get off with them," Isaac told us. Asher held me tight and kissed my forehead.

"Where's her coat? She's shivering," Asher demanded.

"He grabbed hold of it, so, I slipped out of it to get away," I answered him as we reached the back doors of the bar.

"Good thinking, honey." Asher carried me into the backstage area; Ethan's band was still playing.

Isaac was talking on the phone just outside the door. It was much warmer inside than it was outside. Asher stood just inside the door, so it was warm but not too loud for me. My head was throbbing as I watched outside. Zeke finally stopped pacing back and forth, he picked up my coat, then headed back toward the bar. He was furious, it was in his long stride, and rigid posture. Someone moved the curtain.

"What happened?" Riley's voice came from behind us. "You guys took off like a bat out of hell."

"Some guy just tried to take Ally." Asher's voice was hard and sharp. Riley cursed. Isaac finished on the phone and came back in before Zeke reached us. Isaac's face was dark as he moved to the side of the stage.

"Where is she?" Zeke growled as he came back. I waved at him. Zeke's eyes were glowing as he strode over to us with my coat in his hand. "Give her to me." Zeke wasn't asking. Asher handed me over to Zeke, who turned and headed for the private bathroom for the musicians.

"Zeke-"

"Hold on," He bit out through clenched teeth. When we reached the bathroom, Zeke gently set me down on the counter and hit the light. His eyes ran over me before he yanked out the small flashlight on his keys and turned it on. I closed my eyes as he examined my face. There was nothing I could do but wait. "He hit you?" He growled.

"Yeah, twice." I didn't bother lying, I'm sure I was bruising already.

"Asher!" Zeke shouted. Asher and the others were already standing in the doorway to the bathroom. "Get her some ice and a first aid kit. Riley, tell that manager what happened." They both nodded then hurried off. Then Zeke's gaze was on me again. "What else did he do, Lexie?" Zeke demanded. It took me a second to process what he was saying, the world was kind of fuzzy.

"He grabbed me, said he was saving me, I bit the fucker's fingers, got away, he got my jacket. I slipped it, I ran, he tackled. He said he was helping me, I told him to fuck off, he hit me for cursing. I got away again. He tackled me again, that time my head hit the ground, and the world was spinning. I cursed at him again, he hit me again. He picked me up, and you guys came out." I didn't bother pausing, I just hurried through it. Zeke wouldn't be okay without all the details. "He said he was taking me somewhere safe, away from you guys." Zeke's exam moved onto my arms, my hands, my back, and even my knees. He found every scrap, every bruise, and every cut I'd gotten out there. I just let him, he wouldn't be calm down otherwise. Asher was back, he handed Zeke the ice and first aid kit. Zeke took the ice, held my face in one hand, and pressed the ice to my other cheek. Sirens were coming closer. Zeke's gaze ran over my face. I saw the fear in his eyes, there was a lot of rage too, but I saw the fear he could keep hidden from everyone, except me.

"Zeke..." I whispered before I crooked my finger at him. He leaned down and rested his forehead against mine. I wrapped my hand around his big wrist and gave him a squeeze. His hands shook on my face as he took deep breaths. I rested my other hand on the middle of his chest so he could feel and know I was there.

"Baby..." He whispered, his voice shaking. It got quieter.

"I'm okay Tough Guy, I'm a little banged up, but you guys got there in time," I assured him.

Asher's footsteps moved away from the bathroom door, he knew Zeke was having a freak out. So, he left to give Zeke privacy to deal with it. Zeke straightened a little then held me against his chest. I wrapped my arms around his waist as he buried his face into the hair on top of my head. Light footsteps came to the bathroom door. "I'm fine, I'm here, I'm okay. I even yanked on that fucker's ear really hard." I kept my voice soft and soothing trying to help calm him down. Footsteps moved away from the door again. His hold was loosening when there was a shout.

"Where is she?" Ethan snapped

"I'm okay," I mumbled against Zeke's chest. Isaac started explaining what happened. Feet shuffled as the guys moved out of the way.

"My turn, Zeke," Ethan snapped. Zeke grew tense around me, I gave him a squeeze. Zeke took a deep breath, let it out, kissed the top of my head, then moved out of the bathroom. Ethan strode in, his face dark, his eyes ran over my face. "Did you recognize him?" He asked.

"No, fucker was wearing a ski mask and all black. He was tall and broad shouldered." Ethan pulled me to him, his face burying into my neck. I held him as I breathed in his spicy cologne.

"I'm okay. Asher heard me," I reassured him. He held me tighter. "I'm here, I'm all right, I even yanked the fucker's ear." Ethan snorted, his grip tightening. I just held onto him as he took deep, calming breaths.

"Lexie, are you okay?" Ryan's voice came from the doorway. I gave him a thumbs-up as I looked over Ethan's shoulder at him. His face was hard, his mouth a tight line, his hands were clenching into fists, then unclenching. Hell, he looked like he wanted to hug me too, but Ethan wasn't letting go. He was still holding me when the cops pulled into the parking lot.

It was almost an hour later, and I was in the back of the ambulance. No, I wasn't going to the hospital, but the cut on my forehead needed strips to keep it closed. I was wrapped in a blanket. Once the cops showed up, the signs of shock became more apparent. I was still shaking, but it wasn't so bad now, just a tremor. I'd given one of the officers my statement and was just waiting for the guys to be done. Ethan was sitting in front of me, holding one of my hands in both of his.

"What happened?" A husky voice drifted from the crowd.

"I don't know... guys. It's Lexie." Jake's voice reached me. I cringed.

"Lexie!" Dylan shouted. There was movement out near the back of the ambulance. I blinked and looked out the doors. Dylan and a couple of his friends were hurrying over. My guys moved fast, blocking them from reaching me.

"What the hell happened?" Jake asked. "Is she okay?"

"Get the fuck out of the way Zeke, let me see her!" Dylan's voice shouted as he tried to get to me. Derrick's wasn't far behind. The shoving

and shouting had the cops breaking the boys up. Ethan just looked at me as Asher explained who Dylan and his friends were to the police.

"What do you want, Beautiful?" Ethan asked quietly. I wanted to go home.

"Let Jake through, he's a sweetie. That'll calm the others down." My voice sounded tired, even to me. Ethan nodded, he wrapped another warmed blanket around me before he went to the back of the ambulance and got out. It wasn't long before Jake was climbing into the back, his eyes wide, face pale.

"Lexie, are you okay?" He asked as he sat down. His eyes ran over my face. "What the fuck happened? Who did that to you?" He reached out to lift my chin so he could see my full face.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I assured him. "Some guy tried to kidnap me. I broke free, and Asher heard me. The guys chased him off. That's all that happened."

"Shit, what the hell is going on?" Jake asked.

"We don't know yet," I admitted.

"What can I do to help?" He asked. He was such a sweetheart.

"You can get Dylan out of here," I said, bluntly. Jake nodded, his eyes understanding.

"No problem, sweetness." His eyes ran over my face. "Until they find this guy, stick to those hotties like glue." I smiled, which made my lip hurt.

"I'm planning on it," I assured him. His worried gaze ran over me again.

"I'll go get Dylan out of here," He said. He leaned in and gave me a gentle hug. "Stay safe, sweetness." I squeezed him back. He pulled away and went out the back of the ambulance.

The world was fuzzy as I listened to Jake tell the others what happened.

"Lexie!" Rory's shout had me looking out the doors. He was running across the lot to the ambulance. A cop went to stop him, and then the officer noticed Rory was in uniform. He let Rory pass. The world came back hard and fast, my insides shook as he climbed into the ambulance. I started

crying and I don't know why, I've been through worse. Rory sat next to me and pulled me into his arms, I clung to him as I kept crying. He pushed my hair out of my face and looked at the damage. He cursed then held me tighter. "You're okay, it's going to be alright. I've got you, kid." Warmth washed through me as he held me, and kept telling me he was there. It was different than when the guys did it, but still familiar. The ambulance dipped as the scent of leather and engine grease reached me. "What happened?"

"It looks like a guy made a grab for her," Zeke answered, his gravelly voice hard. "She fought back and managed to keep getting free 'till she was close enough to the bar for Asher to hear her. She was over his shoulder when we got out here." Rory cursed. Zeke continued. "She broke free again, and he ran for it. Asher and I went after him while Isaac went to her. He had a car waiting, a white Camry." Zeke sounded so angry that I couldn't stand it. I reached out and grabbed his hand on his knee, he took it and held on tight. I pulled back from Rory a bit and wiped my face.

"When did he hit her?" Rory asked. I snorted.

"When I told him to fuck off," I admitted, looking up at Rory.
"Apparently, he didn't like cursing, so, naturally I did it again." Rory shook his head, keeping his arm around me. He looked at Zeke, his face serious.

"You were right, Zeke," Rory said quietly. "I should have listened." Zeke looked down at the floor, his shoulders tense. Shouting started outside the ambulance.

"Is that-?"

"Yeah, Dylan was at the bar, and now he won't leave," I grumbled holding the ice pack against my face again. Rory got to his feet and went to the back of the ambulance.

"Knock it the fuck off!" Rory bellowed, the scuffling stopped. Rory got down out of the ambulance and stood between Dylan and the doors. "Dylan, she's fine. Banged up but fine." Rory sounded like he was holding on to his patience by a thread. "Go home."

"I just want to see-"

"Well, then you shouldn't have dumped her, huh?" Rory snapped.

"You dumped her?" Derrick's voice was shocked.

"Yeah, you didn't know that either?" Aaron snapped.

"Leave her alone. Go home." Rory wasn't asking. Dylan took one last look at me before walking away. I leaned forward and hide my face in my hands, Zeke's big calloused hand wrapped around the back of my neck, his fingers massaging gently. I just wanted to go home.

Zeke drove me home in the Blazer, he'd given his keys to Asher and asked him to drive Riley home. The ride was quiet as I held the cold pack to my face. Zeke was probably quiet because he was thinking up ways to kill whoever hit me tonight. I didn't mind, I was thinking up a few ways of my own. It wasn't long before we pulled up to Rory's. By the time I got out, Zeke was at my door looking up and down the block. I bit back a smile. He kept my keys as we walked to the door. There was a large manila envelope on the front step with my name on it. My stomach knotted as I picked it up.

"What's that?" He asked as he unlocked the door.

"I don't know," I mumbled. Zeke stuck his head in the door and flipped the light on. When he saw that it was clear, he let me go in. Hades jumped off the couch and ran to me, I gave him a halfhearted pet before I walked over to the table and opened the envelope. It was full of pictures. Black and white pictures of Zeke and I dancing on the night of Winter Formal. Written in white on one was 'I know he made you.' "Zeke," I called, not quite believing what I was seeing. Zeke stopped playing with Hades and came to my side. He cursed. He went through the pictures and found all the ones of us dancing together. He folded them and tucked them into his back pocket, leaving the ones of us just talking on the table. He pulled out his phone.

"Rory, there were photos of Lexie waiting for us when we got here," Zeke snapped into the phone. I sank down in a chair as I tried to grasp what was going on. "Yeah, on the front step." My phone vibrated. It was a text.

Secret Admirer: Alexis, I'm sorry I had to hit you tonight. You weren't acting like yourself, you were talking like them. What those 'friends' are doing to you isn't right. They are changing you and not in a good way, you need to get away from them.

I blinked and read the message again. It pissed me off.

Alexis: You hit me you mother-fucker, I'm looking forward to returning the favor.

I hit send. I was satisfied for about two seconds. Then I wondered if I should have done that.

"Zeke," I said. He looked down at me as I held my phone out to him. He took it, read it and cursed.

"He texted her, Secret Admirer guy said he hit her," He growled into the phone. I sat in my chair, pulled my knees up to my chest, and fumed. I wanted to tear this guy apart. "I'm not going anywhere," Zeke told Rory. It wasn't long before Zeke got off the phone. He dropped both our phones onto the table, then knelt in front of me. His fingers lifted my chin so he could look at my black eye and bruised cheekbone. His face was hard as he met my eyes. "Let's get some more ice on that," He mumbled before getting to his feet and heading into the kitchen.

"I think the ice has done all it can," I said, my voice sharp. Zeke came back, pulled a chair up in front of me and sat down.

"Talk to me," He said, his voice was not asking. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before meeting his eyes.

"I wasn't paying attention," I admitted through clenched teeth. "I was in my head and not looking around as I walked out to the truck." Zeke's eyes flashed.

"He would have come after you even if you were paying attention," He pointed out. "You might have had more warning, but that's about it." I shook my head.

"I tried to head butt him, and I hit his chest, that's the only reason I knew he was tall." I started talking, and couldn't seem to stop. "I tried those moves that you taught me, but he just picked me up and started walking." My eyes burned, I looked down at my knees as I continued. "I felt so helpless there for a second, I hate that fucking feeling." Zeke moved closer, his hands moving around my legs to my hips.

"You still got away," He pointed out. I looked up at him, He was clenching his jaw. "You thought on your feet and kept getting away until

help came. That's exactly what you needed to do."

"I barely hurt him," I countered.

"Baby," he said in that soft voice I loved. I met his eyes. "This guy was at least a foot taller than you, he had to outweigh you by at least fifty pounds and he had a fucking car waiting. He planned this out, and you blew his plans to hell by fighting back." His burning eyes ran over me. "Next time we go to the gym, I'll ask Dave to teach you a better way to get out of being picked up again." I nodded. "Though that knee to the chest was brilliant," He added. I snorted, he half grinned at me which made me smile a little. I sighed, he was right, I got away and that's what mattered.

"Okay," I said. Zeke looked me over again before he backed off. He went into the kitchen and made another ice pack. I was running through what moves I could have done when my phone rang. It was Miles, he wanted to face chat, I answered. Miles' worried face filled my screen.

"Hey Miles," I tried for cheerful, it didn't come out right. His cold eyes ran over my face, taking in my bruises.

"Are you alright?" He asked, his voice icy.

"Yeah, just banged up, who called you?" I asked as Zeke handed me the icepack, I held it to my face.

"Asher did about two minutes ago," He said. "Let me see the damage, Lexie." I sighed, put down my ice, and moved the phone so he could see the left side of my face. "Your forehead has butterfly strips. Did you need stitches?"

"No, the EMTs said it was better safe than sorry," I assured him. "I can take them off tomorrow." Miles' face was blank, but his eyes told me he was furious.

"I'm on my way back tonight," Miles said. "I'll be there in two hours at most." The screen moved as Miles set the phone down. I was suddenly looking up at a ceiling, it sounded like he was packing. "Zeke, what's going on?" I handed Zeke my phone. I held my ice to my face as Zeke explained what was going on with the police. Miles shot back some questions, and Zeke answered them. By the time Miles was in a cab, he knew everything

we did. "Good," Miles said. "Hand me back to her, please." Zeke gave me the phone.

"You don't need to get on the plane now," I pointed out. "It can wait 'till morning." Miles just shook his head.

"Someone tried to abduct you, Lexie." He reminded me, his tone chilling. "I'm coming home now." His eyes softened as they ran over my face again. "Stay with Zeke and don't go anywhere alone," He ordered me. I gave him a small smile as warmth filled my heart.

"No problem," I promised.

"I'll see you in a bit," Miles said before hanging up. I set my phone down and took a deep breath, I couldn't believe this was happening. Hades was in Zeke's lap getting scratches. Zeke watched me carefully.

"I'm going to take a shower," I announced as I got up. Hades stayed with Zeke as I went upstairs. In the bathroom, I looked in the mirror. The left side of my face from my eye almost down to my jaw was black and blue with more black around my swollen eye. The butterfly bandages on the left side of my forehead didn't help either. I took a quick shower.

When I walked into my room in a towel, my computer was on again. Growling, I walked over and shut the damn thing. There, now it would stay off. I pulled on Asher's pajama bottoms, a black shirt, and Miles' hoodie. I didn't want to think about why their clothes were so comforting to me, I just didn't care tonight. I ran a brush through my hair and pulled my hair back into a hair tie before heading downstairs. The boys' voices reached me as soon as I opened my door.

"Where's Red?" Isaac demanded.

"Taking a shower," Zeke's gravelly voice answered.

"How's she doing?" Asher asked. I came down the stairs, the guys were in the living room area.

"I'm fine," I answered for Zeke. Asher got up and came over to me. He lifted my chin so he could look at my face. His ocean eyes were rough as they met mine.

"Are you sure?" He asked quietly. I gave him a small smile.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just wish I caused more damage to that asshole," I grumbled. Asher grinned at that. "What are you guys doing here?"

"I thought a sleepover was required," Isaac announced as he shouldered Asher away from me. Isaac's eyes ran over my face only a second before I was in his arms being squeezed to death.

"Must... breathe," I gasped dramatically. Isaac snickered in my hair before carefully kissing my forehead and letting me go. "So, sleepover, huh? Did Rory say yes?" I asked.

"Yeah, I called and begged," Isaac admitted. I shook my head as he went to his spot on the sofa and flopped down. I went to the far chair and curled up in it.

"So, what's the plan?" I asked.

"Movies," Asher said.

"Games," Zeke added.

"General hi-jinx," Isaac smirked. I rolled my eyes at them, they were really great guys. Asher put a movie on. I didn't care what it was as long as the guys stayed around, I didn't want to be alone tonight. Asher eyed me.

"Are those my pajamas?" Asher asked. I gave him a wicked smile.

"I warned you that you might not get them back," I chimed. He just shook his head and smiled at me.

Eventually, Ethan showed up and hugged me. I pretended I was dying from his stench, being on stage all night made him sweaty. He ran upstairs to take a shower. I laid my head down on the arm of my chair and watched Real Steel on the TV. It wasn't long before I fell sleep with the boys' voices in my ears.

Something brought me to the surface. The guys were talking, but what woke me up? A hand gently touched my aching face as the smell of wintergreen reached me.

"Did the EMTs check for a concussion?" Miles whispered. I smiled as I relaxed completely. Miles was here, wait, he was in Seattle. I took a deep

breath through my nose. Yeah, it was Miles.

"Of course, they checked," Ethan said patiently. "They only did the bandage to help it not scar so much."

"I'll call in a Plastic Surgeon if it comes to that," Miles said absently. "What did the EMTs say?"

"Bumps, bruises, the cut on her forehead, and mostly shock," Asher explained.

"They didn't want anyone to wake her up?" Miles asked. His worried voice brought me closer to the surface, I shifted.

"Change your voice, Miles," Isaac said softly "Or you'll wake her up." Gentle fingers trailed along my unbruised jaw.

"Someone should put her in bed," Zeke muttered. "She slept in that chair last night."

"I'll take her," Miles volunteered. I was still floating in between awake and asleep when arms moved around me and lifted. I loosely wrapped my arm around his neck and snuggled my face into his throat.

"Wintergreen," I mumbled. I was sinking back under fast. We were moving somewhere.

"I'm here," His voice was that silky-smooth voice I loved. I smiled against his skin. Something soft was under me, and the arms let go. Still mostly asleep, I reached out and grabbed one.

"Stay?" I muttered. His fingers squeezed mine.

"As long as you want me," He whispered as something warm and soft covered me. I squeezed his hand again, peace filled me. Everything was fading when lips touched the back of my hand.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 16

Sunday

I woke up to an aching face and a sore body. I opened my eyes and instantly regretted it, the light coming through the blinds hurt my eyes. I tried again slowly, it was less painful, but I was really going to need some Tylenol. I looked around. I was in my bedroom with Hades' feet in my back. I looked down at the snoring dog and smiled, the butthead was hogging the bed. I got up and opened the door. The smell of bacon and eggs wafted in from the hallway. Hades was awake instantly and running out into the hall. I was smiling as I used the bathroom. When I looked in the mirror, I saw that my bruises were darker than last night. More purple mixed in too. Great.

I went downstairs to find the twins still asleep in their sleeping bags. Ethan was on the couch, Isaac on the floor. Zeke and Miles were at the table while Asher was in the kitchen.

"Morning," I said quietly as I walked into the kitchen towards the coffee maker.

"Morning, Lexie," Miles said just as quietly.

"When did you get here?" I asked as I put the carafe away. The guys chuckled.

"Last night," Zeke answered. "He put you to bed."

"Then you latched onto his hand and wouldn't let go for over an hour," Asher added. I winced as I looked to Miles for confirmation. His ears were pink, and he was concentrating on his breakfast harder than necessary. Yeah, I must have done that.

"Sorry, Miles," I said. Miles looked up at me and shrugged.

"It's alright. It's perfectly understandable that you wouldn't want to be alone last night," Miles offered. My heart sank a bit. Yeah, perfectly

understandable, my ass. Asher handed me a plate, eggs, bacon, and waffles. I smiled at my plate.

"Miles said he promised you waffles," Asher explained as he turned back to the waffle iron.

"Thanks, Ash."

"No problem, Ally girl." Asher went back to making waffles. I went to the table and sat across from Miles.

"If you still want your bag," I began in a warning voice. "There are still three demands that need to be met." Miles chuckled. I just smirked as I put syrup on my waffle.

"I'll deliver," Miles promised, his emerald eyes bright. I cut into my breakfast.

"Why do all of you have to be so loud?" Isaac groaned from the floor in the living room. I put my fork down, moved to my feet, and tip-toed into the living room. Isaac was lying on his stomach, his head under his pillow. When I got close enough, I pounced. I dropped onto Isaac's back and wrapped my arms and knees around him.

"Morning Cookie Monster!" I said in an annoyingly cheerful voice. He grunted, groaned, then cursed at me.

"Damn it, Red!" He snapped. Then he moved. I don't know what happened, the next thing I knew I was on my back on the floor and Isaac had my arms in his hands.

"Hey, how'd you do that?" I asked as he pinned my arms to the floor. I didn't even fight, I was too impressed.

"Grappling, try it sometime," Isaac said sarcastically down at me. I snickered as his bare chest settled on me. I tried to squirm out from under him, but he was in too good of a position. His lips went to my neck as he began giving me raspberry after raspberry making me laugh and squirm under him.

"Stop! Stop!" I begged between laughs. "I give up!" Isaac sat up a bit and grinned down at me.

"Get yourself out of this position and I will," He countered then went back to giving me raspberries. I couldn't stop laughing enough to try. Finally, I pulled out the big guns.

"Zeke! Help!" I called. Isaac sat up and glared down at me.

"That's cheating, Red!"

"You just said I had to get out of this position, not how," I countered. Zeke's heavy footsteps came around the couch. Isaac rolled off to lay beside me, his hands up in the air.

"I'm off! I'm off!" Isaac all but shouted. Zeke glared at him as he reached down and pulled me to my feet.

"Don't pin her," Zeke ordered.

"She started it," Isaac pointed out. Zeke's eyes flashed at him.

"And I'm ending it." Zeke bit out. He looked down at me. "Breakfast. Eat. Now." Zeke was in an unusually grumpy mood this morning

"Wow, what crawled up your ass and died?" I asked sarcastically. His eyes were hard as they ran over my face.

"Your bruises are worse today," He growled before turning away to head back to the table. Oh, yeah, that would do it. I kept my mouth shut as I walked straight to the table and started eating. Isaac, Ethan, and Asher joined us at the table. After a while, even Rory came out of his bedroom to grab some breakfast. Everyone made small talk until Rory was awake.

"Alright, here is what we learned last night," Rory announced. The room went silent, Rory's eyes met mine. "Both Dulcet PD and my department are handling this as a stalker case. The bar did have surveillance on the back lot. However, the cameras were tampered with around nine last night."

"So, there's no footage?" I asked, wanting to be clear. Rory shook his head looking at the table.

"Not of the attack or the white Camry," Rory said. "There's footage of you showing up, and that's about it." Rory looked directly at me. "I checked your phone over when I got home this morning. I sent in the number from those texts, and it came back as a burner phone." I blinked at that.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It's a prepaid phone you can buy at the store. No name is associated with it, and it's easily disposable," Rory explained. "Were you aware that you were getting emails in December that are similar to what this guy was writing to you?"

"I was?" I asked, confused. Rory got to his feet, went to the kitchen, and pulled my cell out of a cabinet. He was tapping away as he came back and sat down. He handed it to me, it was my spam folder, packed with emails from that one email address I didn't know.

"Oh, yeah," I said, absently. "I forgot about those. Over Christmas break they kept coming. I wrote back once that they had the wrong email, but it didn't stop. So, I just flagged them as spam." I shrugged looking at the number, 224 emails. Shit, I looked up to Rory. "You think these are from him?"

"They share the same writing style as the ones from your locker," He explained calmly. "It made sense that it would be him. We were able to find out that this email account was created one day before you received the first email. So, it's safe to say it's a dummy account. And with this email carrier, it can only be traced back to the email provider's IP address."

"Huh?" I asked.

"Most emails have the IP address of the sender attached to it. The IP address can be traced back to the physical location of where it was sent from, like your house or a computer in the library at school," Miles explained. "The email service this guy chose doesn't do that. They only get the IP for the email provider." I cursed. Miles looked at Rory with his face worried. "This guy planned how to stay hidden rather well," Miles admitted.

"He's smart, technology advanced, and is escalating already." Rory sighed deeply before meeting my eyes. "This kid is dangerous, Lexie. Do you understand that?" He asked. I pointed at my face.

"Yeah, I think I do," I answered sarcastically. Rory's eyes narrowed on me.

"No. You really don't," Rory's voice was hard. "This kid is delusional. He thinks he's in love with you and that the boys are hurting you." I went

still. "He's already attempted to abduct you once. He will try again." I shifted in my seat.

"What do I do?" I asked quietly.

"You ignore him," He said pointedly. "You don't respond to texts, emails, or anything he does. Any interaction with this guy will reinforce his delusions and push him further towards the edge." Rory looked at the boys. "I'm going to ask that one of you stay with her at night until I'm off the night shift. Any takers?" There was a round of loud yes and hell yeahs from the boys, I bit back a small smile at that. Rory turned back to me. "I'm having a security system installed, but that is going to take time. Until then, the boys will stay at night. Don't go anywhere alone, and don't respond to him when he texts or I will take your phone away." Rory's voice told me not to even think about arguing.

"Got it," I said quietly.

"I'm going back to bed." Rory sighed. We all said night before Rory closed his door. A tense silence filled the room.

"Alright," Miles said. "Let's go over everyone's schedule."

It took them less than an hour to come up with a schedule for nights this week. Afterward, everyone left. Before he left, Asher told me to get dressed for the cold. When I had asked why he just told me to be ready in thirty minutes before he went out the door. I changed into dark blue jeans, a burgundy oversized sweater, and pulled my hair off my face. I was pulling on my boots when Asher came through the front door. He gave me that smile that made my pulse skip.

"Ready?"

"Yeah, but for what?" I asked, suspiciously. Asher just smiled and wouldn't say anything. I finished putting on my boots, pulled on my jacket, and followed him out to his truck.

"So, I take it we're not going to my climbing lesson," I said after I closed the door. Asher chuckled.

"No, we're not going to the climbing center," Asher said as he pulled out onto the street. He didn't say anything else.

"Then where are we going?" I asked, sweetly. He grinned.

"Ice skating," He announced.

"Ice skating?" I asked, just to be sure I heard him right.

"Yep," Asher said then looked over at me. "You're in Montana now Ally girl. You need to at least know how. It's a state requirement." I rolled my eyes at that.

"A state requirement?" I asked, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah, we wouldn't want you to get in trouble now, would we?" He asked innocently. The memory of getting grabbed last night flashed through my mind. I looked out the window as my smile disappeared.

"I'm already in trouble, Ash," I said muttered. He reached over and took my hand, his fingers entwined with mine.

"It's not that bad, Ally," He said gently. "You're with me, Rory's on it, and so are his work buddies. They'll find him."

"I know," I mumbled. He squeezed my fingers.

"Ally, he's going to have to get through all of us to get to you again." He reminded me. I gave him a small smile.

"I know. I just... don't want you guys to get hurt," I told him.

"We won't," He assured me. "This guy is a coward, he went after you when you were alone, with your back turned." Asher pulled into a parking lot next to the lake. "He won't get another chance." Asher parked the truck. "And now, you're going to learn how to skate."

I smiled and got out of the truck. Asher pulled out two sets of skates from the back seat of the cab and met me in front of the truck. He explained the basics of ice skating as we walked over to a bench next to the ice. My bruises got a good share of looks as I passed by other people. Maybe I should have tried the concealer after all? I pushed it out of my mind and sat on the bench. Asher handed me a pair of white skates.

"These are figure skates." He began as he quickly got to work on the laces on his black hockey skates. "Those are easier to learn in than hockey. Let me get my skates on, and I'll show you how to do yours," Asher said as he began to explain what he was doing. I watched, impressed as Asher loosened and tightened the laces on his skates before he put them on. After he pulled them on and got them right, he got to his feet on the ice. Asher turned and knelt in front of me. He took a skate and showed me in detail what he was doing. But he did it so fast that I just nodded along. When my skates were on, he looked up at me. "Got it?" He asked. I burst out laughing.

"Not a bit," I admitted. He chuckled, shook his head and he got up. He held out his hands to me.

"That's okay, it takes practice. Let's get you on your feet," Asher said. I put my hands in his and stood up. It was weird, the ice felt hard and soft at the same time. My feet instantly wanted to go forward. I slid into Asher, he stopped me easily with his body even as he got his feet out of the way of my skates. I held on to his arms with a death grip. His hands went to my waist. "Bend your knees. That will give you more control of where your weight is going." I did as he said and felt the change.

"Oh, okay. That's not so bad," I said in a tense voice. Asher chuckled.

"Now, you're going to walk as you do normally," He instructed as he skated back until there was an arm's length between us.

"Seriously? Just walk?" I asked, doubtfully. He smiled down at me, his eyes bright as he nodded.

"Well, a march really. It's to get you used to the feel of the blades and ice." He said, I held on tight to his hands and started marching. It was strange, weird, and cool at the same time. If I started to slip, Asher kept me standing, If I began to go too fast, he stopped me. When I was more comfortable on the ice, Asher let go and backed up more. "Now you're going to glide. Instead of picking up your feet, you're going to push back with your feet a little." I eyed the distance between us with doubt. Then I did as he said. Instead of falling on my face, it felt like I was flying. Very slowly, yeah, but still flying. It was pretty cool. As I closed in on Asher, he

skated backwards, always staying in within arms-reach of me. We continued like that for a few minutes.

"When did you learn to skate?" I asked when I was sure I wasn't going to fall on my butt.

"For a while, I played every sport I could when I was a kid," He said, his eyes watching me carefully as he skated backwards. "Hockey in the winter, football or sometimes soccer in the fall, and baseball in the spring."

"But you don't play hockey or soccer anymore?" I asked as I pushed off a little harder. I started to pick up speed.

"Nope. Ally, we're going to turn to the right," He said. "Lean your body weight just a bit toward the right and lean forward a little." I carefully followed his instructions. I turned, he turned with me only backwards, it was impressive. When I finished turning I straightened automatically.

"So, why don't you play hockey anymore?" I asked absently. He sighed.

"Dad decided I should focus on football more," He admitted. "He said there was no point in playing a sport that wouldn't get me into college." I stopped skating to look at him.

"You're fucking kidding, right?" I asked. He shook his head, I continued, "As if that's the only way to get into college!" I snapped. I wobbled on the ice. Asher was there instantly, his hands steading me.

"Careful," He warned me.

"That just pisses me off," I muttered as I found my footing again. I met his eyes. "Ash, your grades rival Miles' grades. You don't need football to get into college!" He fought back a grin.

"I know that, Ally," He said, his voice was amused. "But it would help with the cost."

I huffed, "Yeah, if you went to a college that offered it." I pointed out bitterly. His eyes narrowed on me.

"What are you talking about?" He asked. I shot him a 'you know what I'm talking about' look.

"Culinary school," I told him. "They don't have football teams." He sighed.

"Ally..."

"Don't Ally me," I snapped. "You love cooking, Ash. You know you do. So, why don't you admit it? You want to go to culinary school." He looked over my head at the lake behind me, his eyes unfocused.

"It's not that easy-"

"I never said it was," I countered. He looked down and met my eyes. "But you know what you want. So, why don't you go after it?" I asked quietly. His eyes were rough as he looked at me.

"Is that what you do?" He whispered. "See what you want and go for it?"

I was looking into his eyes as I answered. "If I know what I want? Yeah. If not, I hold off until I know," I admitted. He looked away from me with a strained look on his face.

"I'll think about," He muttered.

"Think about it because you want to. Not because I'm telling you to, Superman," I said, my voice soft. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, his eyes were clear as he looked back down at me.

"I know," He said. I gave him a smile.

"Good. Now, how the hell do I stop by myself on these things?" I asked dryly. He chuckled. He went back to teaching me how to skate. After a while, he was able to move to skate beside me. We talked about the guys, Rory, school, anything that wasn't my stalker. Asher got my mind off things for a good hour.

"Okay, I think I've got-" My left foot slipped out from under me, I landed on my butt. Pain shot down my leg, and my butt was instantly freezing. I chuckled as Asher laughed. He came back to me and helped me to my feet. "Ow. Well, I thought I had it," I grumbled as he pulled me to my feet. Asher held my arms tight and pulled me in to keep me standing. Vanilla and cinnamon tickled my nose as I looked up to meet those ocean wave eyes. His smile was warm.

"You're doing pretty well for your first time," He said. My heart slammed in my chest as my lower stomach fluttered. My eyes went to his lips, those soft, perfect lips. I wondered again what kissing him would be like. His fingers gently brushed the hair from my forehead, making me look up and meet his warm eyes. The world disappeared, I should move, I should... Asher's eyes moved to my lips. My skin tingled, my pulse raced. Was he...? Butterflies went crazy in my stomach. His eyes met mine as his fingertips brushed my cheek. Pain shot through my face. I hissed as I pulled away from his hand. "Shit, Ally!" My face throbbed with my pulse. It hurt enough that I had to close my eyes.

"Ow, ow, ow." I chirped.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." Asher's voice was strained.

"I know, but damn that hurt," I muttered. When I managed to open my eyes, they were watering. His face was dark as he watched me.

"Come on, I'll take you home," He offered. I nodded. He helped me to the bench. I managed to get my skates off without cutting myself, a victory in my opinion. We were walking back to the truck when he broke the silence. "What are your plans for the rest of the day?"

"Um, stay home, play with Hades, the usual hiding out thing," I admitted. He frowned.

"Don't let this guy stop you from living your life," He said pointedly. I opened the truck door and climbed in.

"It's not that, really," I told him. "I'm going to try one of those wards to keep the dead out today." Asher's gaze snapped to me.

"You are?"

"Yeah, Miles' Graduate students came through," I said. "Serena says they're the real deal." His eyes ran over me.

"Is it safe to try?" He asked as he started the truck.

"Yeah, it's paint, and a drop of blood," I explained, "Nothing too crazy." He took a deep breath and let it out. I smiled to myself. "Don't worry. Serena said it should work. She would have warned me if it was going to backfire." At least I hoped she would. His shoulders relaxed.

"Yeah, that's true," He said quietly as he drove me home. "I'm still going to worry, Ally."

"I know," I admitted quietly. "But you can worry a bit less."

"I guess," He sighed.

"So, where did you get the skates?" I asked, cheerfully. He grinned.

"I rented yours at a shop in town," He admitted. "I already knew your shoe size, so it wasn't hard."

I gave him a smile. "Thank you, Ash."

"You're welcome, Ally," He said quietly. "I just wish I didn't hurt you." I waved my hand dismissively.

"Eh, it's done. No point in worrying about it," I told him. He gave me a small smile then looked back onto the road. "What are your plans today?" I asked, curious. He sighed.

"Cleaning the house, laundry, my usual Sunday." He groused.

"Why don't you get your sister to help?" I asked as he pulled onto my street.

"I've tried," He reminded me. I got a wicked idea. I felt that chill run down my neck like a fingertip, a ghost was waiting for me outside the house. I ignored it for now.

"Ash, you control the money from your Dad, right?" I asked smirking at him.

Asher parked then looked over at me suspiciously, "Yeah."

"Then why don't you give her an allowance?" I offered with a big smile. "No chores, no spending money." Asher thought about it for a minute before bursting out laughing.

"Oh, that would be great," He said still laughing.

"You can do it," I pointed out. He nodded still chuckling

"Oh, that's going to be a fun conversation," He said, smiling.

"Thanks for taking me ice skating," I said. He met my eyes.

"Anytime, Ally girl," His voice was soft in the cab of the truck. I pulled my eyes from his to look at the ghost on the lawn.

"It looks like the dead are getting impatient," I told him. "There's a ghost on the lawn." I opened the door and slipped out. "I'll see you tomorrow, Ash."

"Be careful. I'll wait until you're inside," He called. I winked at him before closing the door. I turned and met the dead woman. She had to be around her mid-twenties. She looked chic in a pair of men's trousers and white silk blouse, her hair was perfectly curled, her make-up perfect. She looked perfect, except for the blood staining the white blouse between her breasts. I was grateful I was still far enough away not to feel that.

"And you are?" I asked politely. The woman stepped forward. With every step she took, I felt the blade dig deeper into her chest. Damn, that hurt.

"I'm Marian Carter," She said in a confident voice. Her memories peeked through my barriers. Her husband had killed her when he found out she had been cheating on him, with a woman. Wow.

"Your husband was a dick," I pointed out. She smiled.

"Yes, he was," She agreed.

"Are you ready?" I asked gently. She nodded. I focused on her and how she wanted to move on. Her husband was dead now, and she knew he wouldn't hurt anyone ever again. I focused on her need. That golden thread reached out and wrapped around her wrist. Then I dropped down to my center. It was as easy as breathing even with Marian along. This time before we reached my center, I focused on the Veil and where I wanted to be in it. This time when we landed, we were in the Veil, not my center. I gave a small laugh, that would make these trips a lot faster. I let go of Marian as she looked around. She spotted the small plants that had sprouted. She knelt and examined them.

"They need water," Marian informed me. "They're surviving, but without water, it won't be long."

"You like flowers?" I asked gently. Marian smiled at the plants.

"I loved my garden," She admitted. "I had the best flowers in town back in the thirties." She got to her feet and looked around. "This place needs a lot of work." I looked around. The trees were still charcoal, the ground still dry and cracked. She was right.

"The more souls I cross, the more the balance is restored," I explained. She nodded as she looked up at the sky with a small smile on her face.

"What happens after this?" She asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. She looked at me with fear in her eyes. "I only know what happens here." She looked around the Veil again.

"What about God?" She asked in a thick voice, "Any news on that?" I watched her walk to the edge of the cliff and look down into oblivion. I stepped closer in case she lost her balance.

"I don't know," I told her. "I haven't crossed." Her shoulders were tense as she crossed her arms over her chest. "What's wrong Marian? You want to move on, don't you?" She nodded. "I can't make you cross. It's your decision. Move on, or be unmade." I stepped up next to her waiting. Her body was rigid as tears fell down her face.

"I'm scared," She whispered. My chest ached at the pain in her voice. "If God exists is he going to punish me for...." She swallowed hard. "For..."

I realized what she was afraid of, "For being gay?" I asked gently. She nodded, tears still falling down her face. "I don't know if there's a God. But I can't see him punishing someone for something they have no control over."

"That's not what the priests say," She whispered, her voice shaking. "If I'm going to be punished for it I'd rather be unmade."

"Marian. If God existed, would he punish someone for being blonde?" I asked matter-of-factly. She looked up away from the abyss and met my eyes.

"No," She whispered. I reached out and wiped the tears from her face.

"You have no control over who you're attracted to." She shook her head and opened her mouth. "If God made man in his image, then he designed some

of us different. And God doesn't make mistakes, right?" She looked out into the abyss again. Come on Marian, you can do this. "Do you really want to be unmade because of what a priest said?"

"No."

"Then make the decision to move on. And if there's punishment, look God in the eye and ask him why he created you this way if he was only going to punish you for it. Then tell him how fucked up it is," I said, my voice hard. Marian's amber eyes met mine. Determination grew in them as she nodded. I took her hand and walked her away from the ledge. A gold ball of light floated down from the Way. I held her shaking hand as it formed a door and opened. A woman was waiting across the threshold. Her face was beautiful, her milk chocolate skin shining in the sun behind her. Her dark eyes met Marian's, tears filled her eyes as she smiled. Marian took deep breaths.

"Alma," Marian whispered. Alma nodded, Marian lost all doubt. She dropped my hand, then ran into her love's arms and kissed her passionately. Wow. The door slammed shut then turned into two balls of light and shot up into the Way. I smiled this time. Thunder rolled through the Veil. Something wet hit me, I touched my face, it was rain. I laughed as rain fell from the Way as if it had been holding back for centuries. I was soaked in an instant. I looked up and smiled at it. Then I took a deep breath and pulled myself out.

I opened my eyes to the physical world. Thankfully, I wasn't actually soaked. Otherwise, I'd be in trouble. I felt under my nose and for the first time since this started, I didn't have a nose bleed. Sweet. I turned and waved to Asher that I was fine before heading inside.

The house was quiet. Suddenly starving, I made a sandwich as I thought about Marian and Alma. An interracial couple in the US, in the thirties, had been risky. For that couple to be two women would have been extremely so, Marian and Alma had guts, I couldn't help but admire them. I smiled to myself as I put carrots on my plate. I took my plate upstairs to my room. I sat in my chair eating as I looked over the report about voodoo symbols. But I couldn't focus, I was seeing Asher while we stood on the ice. Was he going to kiss me? Would he have, if he hadn't touched my bruises? My heart jumped at the idea. But was that what he was going to do? And what

was with that look before Winter Formal? I covered my face and made a frustrated growl into my hands. Then, of course, there was Miles. I already almost kissed him. Now I almost kissed Asher? I was cursing myself when my phone rang. It was Jake.

"Hey."

"Hey sweetness, how are you feeling?" Jake asked cheerfully.

"Fine, except my face feels like pureed meat," I admitted.

"Does it look that bad?"

"Hold on, I'll send a pic," I told him. I pulled my phone back and took a good picture then sent it to him.

"Damn Lexie. That's bad." He pointed out.

"Yep and it feels about as good as it looks," I grumbled. "So, how'd it go with Derrick last night?"

"Do you really want to know?" He asked impishly. I smiled.

"Hell yeah, tell me," I demanded as I got up to lay down on my bed. Hades was forced to scoot over or be laid on.

"Are you sure?" He teased.

"Jake, if you don't tell me what happened last night then I won't tell you what happened today," I threatened. He gasped dramatically.

"I'll tell, I'll tell," He assured me quickly. "We went for a walk, and Derrick was really quiet. You know, not like Derrick." I smiled. "So, I asked him what was wrong. He turned and just told me he liked me." I fought of a giggle as he continued. "I was so stunned all I said was 'huh," Jake admitted. I bit back a laugh.

"What happened next?" I asked practically giddy.

"He kissed me." He said. I giggled. "He just up and kissed me." Jake's voice sounded stunned.

"And, how was it?" I asked when I could stop giggling. He chuckled.

"Amazing," He admitted, still sounding stunned. "He can really kiss." I snickered.

"So, what happened next?"

"Uh-uh. I'm not telling," Jake stated.

"What? Come on." I begged. "I gotta live vicariously through someone."

"Let's just say we... got touchy," He hedged.

"You did not sleep with him last night!" I said shocked.

"I'm not that easy, sweetie," He assured me. "We just made out." My mouth closed.

"Good, take it slow. Enjoy it," I told him. He snickered.

"Oh, I intend to," He said with a sly voice. I chuckled.

"So, I take it you're dating. Did you tell the others?" I asked as I stroked Hades' sleeping head.

"Not yet, he's coming over to talk about it today."

"Uh-huh," I said in a knowing voice.

"Lexie!" Jake's voice was embarrassed. I loved it. I just snickered. "So, what happened with you today?" He asked. I groaned painfully.

"Asher took me ice skating," I mumbled.

"How sweet," He said.

"And I almost kissed him," I admitted. He started laughing. "Shut up Jake."

"Oh, honey," He said as he started getting control of himself again. "You're not going to make it, you need to tell someone how you feel."

"Oh yeah? Who?" I asked pointedly.

"Well, you know me. I like the tall, lean ones. So, I say Miles." He reminded me. I snorted. "You can't exactly tell Zeke. He's taken."

"I know," I grumbled.

"What are you waiting for?" He asked. I sighed.

"First, what if it goes wrong? We don't exactly have years of friendship on our side." I reminded him.

"What if it goes right?" He countered. I smiled at that. If it went right? It'd be fucking amazing.

"If it went wrong I could lose all of them." I tried again to make him understand what scared me. "I wouldn't be able to hang out with them anymore. I'd lose them all." Jake sighed.

"Okay, yeah. I get it," He grumbled. "But Lexie, I don't think you have to worry about that. These guys love you."

"I know and I love them. I just..." I took a shaky breath. "I can't lose them. Not over a stupid crush."

"I get it. I don't like it. But I get it," He admitted.

"So, when are you going to take Derrick on a date?" I asked in my cutesy voice.

"Next Friday," He admitted. "Though we have to be careful around here, small towns aren't always great for gay couples." An idea hit me.

"Oh! Oh!" I said, suddenly excited "Lisa Cantrail and her girlfriend!" "What?"

"There's a lesbian couple here at our school that are still hiding it from their parents. You guys can double date and be each other's cover," I explained.

"That would be perfect!" He said instantly. "Do you have her number?"

"No, but I can get it from Asher later. He's at work right now." I promised him. We gossiped and talked until Derrick showed up at Jake's house for their talk. As Jake and I said our goodbyes, I sent my love and congratulations to Derrick too. I didn't bother getting up as I pulled the box of supplies I'd gathered onto the bed. I was planning on trying the symbols on some large smooth river rocks. I thought I might be able to place them around the house so Tara wouldn't see. It was the best I had been able to come up with. I pulled my paint out of the box and opened the white paint, then I followed the diagram. The symbol was like an asterisk, with forked ends. I finished painting and blew on the paint to dry it. I finished two more

rocks when my phone rang. It was Dylan, I sent it to voice mail. I was on my fourth rock when it rang again. I set my paint up on my desk and answered.

"What?" I snapped assuming it was Dylan.

"How are you feeling, Alexis?" A familiar voice asked. My heart dropped, my stomach knotted. It was him, thinking fast, I started recording the call.

"You mean after you hit me last night? Peachy," I said sarcastically into the phone as I got to my feet and hurried downstairs.

"Stop talking like that. That isn't you!" He snapped. I reached the living room and headed for Rory's bedroom.

"You really don't know me if you think like that," I countered as I opened the door. I rushed around Rory's bed.

"I know you better than you know yourself," He said, his voice condescending. I shook Rory awake hard. He jerked up, eyes wild. "That's how I know you're lost right now," He continued in my ear. Rory's eyes focused on me. 'It's him.' I mouthed. Rory grabbed his phone. "That's how I know they're hurting you." I chuckled at that.

"My friends are hurting me? You're the one who hit me," I countered. "They have never hurt me and they never would."

"They hurt you every time they touch you," He growled. "Every time they hug you, every time they hold your hand, they are hurting you." Rory spoke into his phone quietly, I stepped further away so he wouldn't be overheard.

"That stuff doesn't hurt," I said simply. "You know what hurts? Getting tackled in a parking lot and getting hit across the face. That's the stuff that hurts."

"More than being beaten unconscious at school and carried out to one of their cars? More than dumping water on you, outside in winter, so they have an excuse to take off your clothes? What about the bloody noses you're coming to school with every morning?" He asked. I went still and looked at Rory. How long has this guy been watching me? Rory gestured to me, his hands moving away from each other. He wanted me to keep him on the line.

"That wasn't them, that's my seizure disorder," I told him. "The bloody noses, and being unconscious has nothing to do with them. They were taking me home so I could be taken care of."

"I saw through the window as they stripped you down in that kitchen," He growled. He was watching? My skin crawled. "I saw you covering yourself, crying and scared of them." Crying? I hadn't been crying, I had been freezing.

"You don't know what you're fucking talking about," I bit out.

"Stop talking like that, that isn't you!" He snapped into the phone.

"Oh, yeah it is," I countered, my temper sparking.

"Don't you see what they are turning you into?" He shouted in my ear. "You're not meant to be with them. You're supposed to be with me!"

"A guy that hits me? Nah, I'm not that stupid," I shot back as my temper boiled.

"I know the horrible things they make you do," He stated sadly. "I know you don't want to."

"What things?" I asked. "Eat healthy? Yeah, I don't want to do that. Workout? Actually, I enjoy that. Homework? Yeah, you're right they're evil." I didn't bother keeping the sarcasm from my voice this time.

"I'm going to make them stop touching you," He insisted. "Make them stop forcing you do things."

"But then I'll flunk out of school," I pointed out in a whiny voice. There was a long silence.

"I'll make them pay for touching you, for making you act this way," He said calmly. "You're sweet and kind-"

"And a raging bitch when I want to be. Stay away from my friends." I growled into the phone.

"You belong to me!" He shouted. "And I'll punish you if you keep behaving this way!" Rory gave me a thumbs-up. I could hang up.

"I belong to no one. Now fuck off!" I shouted into the phone and hung up. I looked at Rory as I fumed.

"Get Hades, you're going to the twins' house. Wait for me and I'll follow you over." Rory told me as he moved to his dresser.

"Did I just make this worse?" I asked. Rory looked at me.

"Maybe, but we might have just found the little shit." Rory said before opening the drawer. I went into the living room and got some of Hades' toys. I pulled on my jacket and made sure I had my wallet. Rory came out and pulled his coat on, I put Hades on his leash, headed out, and loaded him up in the Blazer. Rory got in his truck. I called Ethan on speaker and set the phone in the holder that Miles had gotten for me. The guys knew I refused to use my phone while driving, so Miles got me a holder that Zeke attached to my dash. I was pulling out onto the road when he answered.

"Hey, Beautiful." His smoky voice rolled through the Blazar as I checked my rearview mirror to make sure Rory was following.

"I'm coming to your house," I told him, my voice shaking at the edges.

"What happened?" He demanded. I took a deep breath and focused on driving.

"He called. Rory had me talk to him as long as he needed," I said, a little breathless. "He's following me to your house so he can go in to the station."

"Breathe Beautiful," He told me calmly. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You're okay. You'll be safe here."

"I know... its... this fucker is psycho," I blurted out. "What about your Mom?" He chuckled.

"I'd love to see this guy try to take on Ma, he'd get the beating of a lifetime." I snorted as I pulled onto their street.

"You're sure? I can go to Asher's," I offered.

"Ma's armed, you're coming here," He reassured me. I nodded not realizing he couldn't see it. I parked just in front of Ethan and Isaac's car. I shut off the truck, grabbed my phone, grabbed Hades and got out. Ethan was on the porch with his phone to his ear. I didn't think, I just ran to the porch and into his arms. He held me tight as I buried my face in his neck.

"You're okay, Lexie," He whispered gently. "Rory's going after the sicko." I nodded, still clinging to him.

"I totally pissed him off," I whispered into his hoodie. "He said he was going to punish me for it. What if he comes after you guys?" My throat tightened at the thought, he chuckled.

"I'd like to see him try it," He admitted. "Every one of us can take on someone Zeke's size, even me in a pinch." I took another deep breath and let it out slowly again. "Keep taking deep breaths," He whispered. I nodded and did as he said. He kissed the top of my head and pulled back a little. "Come inside, Beautiful." He kept his arm around me as he opened the door. The smell of something delicious hit me. Hades ran inside and headed straight for the living room, it made me want to smile. Ethan walked me into the living room and sat me down on the couch next to Hades. He crouched down in front of me and took my shaking hands in his. "Ma?" He called as he rubbed my hands with his. Maria, the twins' Mom, came in. Maria had a pretty face, she had lovely brown skin, the boys' beautiful chocolate eyes, and thick black hair that I personally envied. She was even still in her jammies. She gave Hades her 'what do you think you're doing look,' the dog's tail tucked between his legs before he jumped to the floor and sat there. Maria sat next to me and pulled me into a hug instantly. I admit, I clung to her a bit.

"Rory called and told me what's going on," She explained as she squeezed me tight. "You're going to be okay, sweetie." I just enjoyed the hug, I felt oddly starved for it. Maria pulled back, held my face, and looked me over. "Well, I've seen worse," She announced. I huffed. She grinned. "Well, it's true."

"This guy's psycho," I told her. She nodded.

"All stalkers are, honey," She countered with a smile.

"I just totally pissed him off. He said..." I took a deep breath and looked at the floor. "He said he was going to punish me. What if he goes after the guys? You or Rory?" I asked quietly as I ran over the scenarios in my head. She gave me a gentle smile.

"First, Rory's a grown man, and this boy is a kid," She reminded me. She looked down at Ethan who was still holding my hands. "Hon, get Lexie some tea, please?" Ethan was frowning as he nodded and got up to go to the kitchen.

When he was out of the room, she turned back to me. "As for me, I've been armed ever since I left the boys' Father."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 17

Sunday Afternoon

"What?"

"My ex was, well, an emotionally abusive drunk," Maria said casually. "It went on for years. He only did it to me, but I know the boys saw more than I thought." She tucked a stray hair behind her ear. "One day I realized that it couldn't continue. So, I packed the boys up, left, and got a lawyer."

"Did he stay away?" I asked. She gave me a sad smile and shook her head, her eyes unfocused on the piano.

"No. He started stalking me. He'd leave notes, flowers, and call in the middle of the night." She sighed sadly before looking back to me. "One evening he caught me leaving the school, and he hit me," She said. "I got away and he came at me again. I pulled my gun and shot him." My eyebrows went up. "He crumpled to the ground like paper, I called the police and ambulance. They came and took him away." She gave me a smile. "Your Uncle was one of the first officers on the scene. He took one look at me then looked at my ex, who at this point was writhing in pain on the ground." I chuckled. She smiled. "Rory looked at me and said, 'good shot." I gave her a small laugh. That sounded like Rory. "The DA wanted to offer a plea of misdemeanor assault. Then I told them I was three months pregnant with my daughter. With that, your Uncle pushed the DA to make it to Aggravated Assault on a pregnant woman. They eventually gave him 15 years." She took a deep breath and gave me another squeeze. "The point is, I can take care of myself, and stalkers can be dealt with. This will end someday, and if he keeps pissing off Rory, it won't be long." I chuckled. She smiled. Ethan came in and handed me a cup of tea, his eyes storming. He'd been listening.

"I'm going upstairs," He mumbled before walking out. I watched him go, my heart grew heavy. Maria sighed.

"He never told you about Sophie, did he?" She asked sadly.
"No."

"Give him a few minutes then head up," Maria suggested her worried gaze on the stairs. "He needs to talk about it to someone. Lord knows he hasn't talked to me or his brother." She met my eyes. "Maybe he'll talk to you." I gave her a small smile and drank my tea. She went back into the kitchen to finish baking her apple pie empanadas.

When I finished my tea, I took the cup into the kitchen, put it in the sink, and headed upstairs. I pulled my bracelets on before I even reached the top of the stairs. Sophia was leaning against the banister staring at Ethan's closed door.

"He's doing it again," Sophia said. "He's pulling me back, and I can't stop him." She looked at me with pleading eyes. "Help him?" I gave her a small nod before going to his door and knocking.

"Yeah?" Ethan's voice was rough. I opened the door and walked in. Ethan's room was a mix of messy and clean. His clothes were all over the floor, except for where his guitars were, that area was spotless, not even a speck of dust could be seen. Ethan's twin bed was against the left wall, his blankets bunched up at the end of his bed. His walls were covered with so many band posters that I couldn't tell the color of the paint. Wait, there, it's white. Ethan was sitting on his bed, his back against the wall with his legs across the width of the bed. He was staring at the dresser across from his bed. His face dark, his eyes haunted. I went to his bed and sat next to him with my back against the wall. My shoulder, arm, and hip pressed against his. Touch always helped the twins feel better, I was betting now was no different. We sat in silence for several minutes. "You must have noticed that I don't have a sister anymore," He muttered in a rough voice.

"Yeah," I said just as quietly. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"She died." He announced his tone matter of fact, though his voice was pained, "In the car wreck that hurt my back." I reached over and took his hand in mine. He squeezed my hand tight. I didn't say anything, I just waited patiently, I knew Ethan. If I pushed, he'd shut down, he'd lock me out and he'd never let me back in. So, I waited. He sighed deeply then moved to lie down, he rested his head in my lap with his eyes still on his

dresser. I began running my fingers through his hair and waited. "We were on our way home from camping four years ago," He began, his voice strained. Sophie came through the door and leaned against the closet door on the right side of the room. "There was an accident on I-94, a twelve-car pile-up." He took a deep breath before he could continue. "I don't want to talk about it, Lexie."

"You don't have to," I told him quietly as my fingers kept running through his hair. "What was she like?" I asked softly. He let out a deep breath.

"When she was born, she was so tiny," He said, his voice warming. "She was premature and had to be in the NICU for a couple weeks. Doctor said it'd be a month, Sophie surprised the hell out of him." He sniffed and wiped his face. I kept running my fingers through his thick hair. "When Ma brought her home, everyone helped out while Ma healed up. All the guys, even Jessica came over to help." I raised my eyebrows at that. "She was funny and sweet." He grinned a little, his body relaxed against me as he rested his hand on my knee.

"I bet she had all of you wrapped around her finger," I guessed smiling. Sophia grinned and nodded.

"No, well, maybe Zeke," He said. Sophie rolled her eyes. "One look at him with her big brown eyes and he'd give her whatever she wanted." I chuckled. He smiled. "I'll never forget this one summer, all of us were sitting on the porch playing cards. Sophie was four at the time and was sitting on the sidewalk drawing with chalk. When this other kid, I think he was eight or nine, came up and told her he wanted to draw too." Ethan wasn't crying anymore. Instead, he had a grin on his face. "She said okay, and they started drawing. It was fine until this kid started making fun of her drawings. She told him he was being rude and if he was going to keep being mean, he could leave." He looked up at me. "And I swear, she sounded exactly like Ma when she said that." I chuckled as he went back to looking at the dresser. "The kid got pissed and pushed her down."

"Uh-oh."

"Yeah, we were all off the porch in a second and heading toward him," He admitted. "Sophie started crying. Zeke, Isaac, and I chased the kid down

the block while Miles and Asher stayed with her. We caught up to the kid, he got a punch from each of us and threatened with death if he ever touched her again, then we came home." I looked over at Sophie she was smiling. "We thought she was hurt by how much she was crying. She was sitting in Asher's lap, and Miles finally got her to calm down enough to tell us what was wrong. She wasn't hurt, the kid had messed up her drawing when he stepped on it." I burst out laughing, Sophie shrugged. He chuckled too.

"What did you guys do then?" I asked, already suspecting the answer.

"What else could we do? She had been working on it all day. We soaked down the walk way and helped her draw it again. Alice even came out and took a picture of it for her," He said quietly. It was silent for a few heartbeats.

"Tell me another one?" I asked gently. Ethan did. He told me about how Sophie could out prank Isaac. She'd gotten him so many times Ethan was sure that's where Isaac had gotten most of his ideas. He told me how Asher and Zeke would get roped into playing dolls with her, even though Zeke hated it. I tucked that bit of information away for later. Eventually, Ethan was relaxed as he lay in my lap on his back. He was in the middle of telling a story about Sophie scaring the crap out of Isaac with a speaker under his bed when Isaac popped his head in. He eyed us, his face sweaty and red.

"What are you two talking about?" Isaac asked, playfully. Ethan tilted his head back in my lap.

"Gossip," Ethan lied, his mood sobering instantly.

"Oh," Isaac made a face. "I'm going to hop in the shower. Just wanted to see what the giggle fest was about." He winked at me before ducking back into the hallway. Ethan sighed deeply and sat up.

"Don't tell him you know about her," He said quietly. "He won't take it well."

"Why?" I asked gently. He shook his head, he turned to me and opened his mouth.

"Ethan! Lexie! Isaac! The boys are here!" Maria shouted from downstairs. Ethan's mouth snapped shut. He got to his feet and held out his

hand to me, I took it without a word and followed him into the hallway. Sophie gave me a sad smile as we walked out.

When we got downstairs, Asher was being held hostage by a much shorter Maria. I bit back a laugh as she held his jaw and looked at his face.

"Are you sleeping enough?" Maria asked, her voice telling him to answer.

"Yes, ma'am," Asher assured her.

"How about eating?" She asked. Asher smiled.

"Yes, ma'am," He repeated. Miles came over to me, drawing my attention away from Asher and Maria.

"Are you alright? Rory called us and told us about the phone call," Miles asked gently. I gave him a small smile and shrugged.

"I'm worried he's going to go after one of you," I admitted. Miles smirked, his eyes turned cold.

"I hope he does," He muttered. I blinked, and he was back to the same old sweet Miles I've always known. Huh, Miles wanted a piece of this guy too, I didn't expect that. Miles hugged me tightly. I relaxed against him, some tension inside me easing. "Only one demand left, and I get my bag back, right?" He asked, teasing me. I chuckled. He let me go and went to save Asher. Maria then repeated the same questions to Miles. Zeke was looking out the front window, his shoulders tense and his stance rigid, I moved next to him.

"Hey." I greeted. He looked down at me, his eyes ran over me once, before he was looking out the window again.

"You okay?" He growled.

"Yeah, I was shaky at first, but then I got over it," I admitted. He reached out and took my hand without even looking away from the window. I gave his big hand a squeeze. His thumb ran over my fingers.

"It's going to be fine," He said. "They might be picking him up right now."

"True." Before I could say anything else, Maria clapped her hands.

"Okay, if all of you are staying for supper, then a store run is needed," Maria announced. Miles instantly volunteered. Maria shook her head. "No, not you Miles, I'm going to give Lexie her first salsa lesson while they're gone. So, I need you, darling."

"Shit," I whispered.

"Told you, you wouldn't get out of it," Zeke whispered down to me. I giggled to myself. Soon enough all the guys, except Isaac and Miles, were running out the door to the store while Maria went to the stereo system. I went to meet Miles in the middle of the living room after he moved the coffee table. Salsa music filled the room as he stood across from me. Maria came back with a big smile.

"Okay, we're going to start you with basics," Maria began then looked at Miles. "Okay, Miles position one." Miles gave a small smile and stepped closer. One hand went around me to my middle back, the other took mine. I rested my other hand on his shoulder as I tried to ignore the way my pulse picked up. "On the first beat, you'll step forward with your left foot, then back and back again with your right." I nodded and looked down at my feet.

"Don't look at your feet, Lexie," Miles said. I looked up to meet his eyes. He grinned at me as Maria began to run us through the basics. Well, she ran me through the basics, Miles already knew everything. I felt completely and utterly ridiculous until Miles spun me under his arm and back to him. His smile made me smile. At one point, Isaac came down, groaned, then ran back upstairs to hide. For the next hour, Maria taught me how to salsa dance, and I loved it. By the time the guys got back, I was laughing as Miles picked up the tempo and led me through the steps I knew.

"Oh, God no!" Ethan groaned, the others joined in. I ignored them and spun around the room with Miles.

"Oh, shut up," Maria shot at them. "She's good." The guys grumbled as they brought the groceries in. When the song was over, I was out of breath and smiling. "You enjoyed that," Maria said.

"Yeah, it was awesome," I said. "I think I need more lessons." Maria chuckled.

"Well, I can't teach as much as I used to but Miles should be able to teach you. Right, Miles?" Maria offered with a small grin on her face. Miles gave me an awkward smile.

"Sure, I can teach you if you want to learn more," He offered. Maria turned off the music.

"Good, because I'm holding you to that," I warned. He chuckled as we headed into the kitchen with the others.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur of cooking and chaos in the kitchen. Asher helped Maria cook while the twins kept trying to snatch the dessert empanadas. They kept getting their hands smacked. The rest of us played the card game Bullshit. Zeke and I kept losing, he couldn't lie worth a damn, and everyone seemed to figure out when I was lying too. Eventually, Maria called a halt to the game and made everyone wash up and set the table. Dinner was lingua tacos. I had no idea what it was, but it was delicious. After I was stuffed, Isaac told me lingua was cow tongue. I shrugged, it tasted amazing, I didn't care. Isaac immediately deflated as if he expected a big reaction. His disappointed face made me laugh. Hades ended up in Zeke's lap as we played Uno and I didn't mind. He was getting too big for my lap anyway. It was around six when my cell rang, it was Rory. I got up and went into the living room.

"Rory?"

"Hey, kid." Rory's voice sounded tired. "We couldn't find him." My shoulders tensed.

"What do you mean you couldn't find him? I thought you traced the call or whatever," I asked as I started pacing.

"He rerouted the call through several cell towers. By the time we realized that's what was happening he was off the line," He said. "We've been trying to follow the trail, but we just weren't fast enough." I sighed.

"Okay. Then I guess someone comes home with me?" I asked, trying not to get angry.

"Yeah. Don't worry. We'll find him," He reassured me. I bit back my retort.

"I know. I'll go home in a couple minutes," I told him.

"Stay safe," He said before hanging up the phone. I wanted to throw the damn thing, I was still pacing when Asher came out.

"Ally?"

"He got away," I told him. "He pulled some trick with the towers and they couldn't trace him."

"Do you want to come over to my place tonight?" He offered. I stopped pacing and shook my head.

"You've got Jessica," I reminded him. "Last thing we need is for him to possibly switch his focus to her." I needed to move, to walk, to go. I couldn't just stay here anymore. "I'm going to head home." Asher's eyes ran over me, his face worried.

"Let me tell Ethan so he can go with you," Asher said. I nodded, not really paying attention. I was thinking about ways to hunt this guy down when Ethan came into the family room with his book bag and an overnight bag.

"Come on, Beautiful," He said cheerfully. "Let's bail before we have to do dishes." I smiled and got my coat while he called Hades. We said goodbye to the others and headed out to my Blazer. When we got close enough to the truck, I noticed the manila envelope under the wiper. My mind grew quiet as I pulled it off the windshield and opened it. It was pictures of Asher and I skating. There were also some from this afternoon while I was dancing with Miles through the front window. Written over one of them were the words 'touch her and die.' My temper sparked, you don't threaten my family. I climbed in and wordlessly handed the photos to Ethan. He called Rory as I drove home. I was half hoping to see the white Camry on my block so I could run the fucker over, but no such luck. We walked into the house and locked up. I fed and gave water to Hades. Then I went upstairs to shower and get in my pajamas. I was thinking things out as I came back down and sat in one of the arm chairs. Ethan put on some movie, I watched it without really paying attention. I looked at my phone and got an idea. Eventually, Ethan fell asleep on the couch. I turned off the lights, curled up in my chair then looked at my phone. I was done waiting for this fucker. It was time to go baiting.

Alexis: Nice photos, too bad you ruined them with your insane bullshit.

I didn't have to wait long for a response.

Secret Admirer: Stop talking like that.

Alexis: Free country, dickless. I can talk however I want.

Secret Admirer: This isn't you.

Alexis: Oh, yeah it is. And if I were you, I'd run.

Secret Admirer: Your friends can't hurt me.

Alexis: I didn't say you had to run from them, it's me you have to worry about.

He didn't respond. I wasn't scared of this fucker anymore. He was a coward, and I'd treat him that way. I stayed up waiting to see if he'd respond. It was late when Ethan woke up.

"Beautiful?" Ethan's soft voice pulled my attention away from my phone. "What's wrong? Can't sleep?"

"No, I'm waiting to see if this dick has the stones to respond," I admitted. Ethan woke up fast and got to his feet.

"What did you do?" He demanded as he took my phone from me. He looked through the message and started laughing, "Oh, Lexie."

"I'm tired of playing it his way," I admitted. "He's careful, right? So, if I piss him off he's more likely to make a mistake."

Ethan shook his head as he looked down at me. "That's a dangerous game, Beautiful," He warned. "Rory said no contact."

"Yeah, well no contact isn't working," I pointed out. "I want this shit in jail." Ethan sighed.

"Come here, Beautiful." He said gently as he settled back on the couch. I got up and walked over to him. He gestured for me to lie down. I knelt between his knees then laid down on him with my head on his chest. His arms wrapped around me as I took in a deep breath of spice, his hand ran through my hair as I listened to his heart beat under my ear. "You don't need to bait him. He's going to come after you anyway."

"I'm gonna kick his ass," I reminded him. He kissed the top of my hair.

"I know. That's why he's scared of you," He murmured holding me tight. I wasn't sleepy, but the combination of his body head and the sound of his heart beat relaxed me enough for sleep to take over.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 18

Monday

The next morning my phone vibrated as I pulled into the parking lot. Ethan pulled it out of the holder and checked it as I parked the Blazer. He cursed.

"It's your stalker, he says to check your locker," Ethan grumbled. I shut off the truck, grabbed my bag then held out my hand for my phone.

"Then let's check my locker," I said simply. Ethan nodded. He called Miles as we walked through the halls. My temper burned as we got closer to my locker, the guys were waiting by the time we got there. I gave them a small smile before opening the locker. Red rose petals poured from the white locker to the ground. It reminded me of blood pouring from a wound. I waited silently until they were all on the ground. Then I took the note taped to the back of the locker.

'This is my last warning. Touch her again, and I'll kill you.'

That's it. I handed the note to Miles then proceeded to stomp the hell out of the rose petals until each, and every one of them were crushed and dark. When I was done, I was breathing heavy. Isaac raised an eyebrow.

"Feel better?" Isaac asked. I thought about it.

"Yes. Yes, I do," I admitted. The guys chuckled. "I wrote him back last night." Zeke cursed, Asher sighed, and Miles started tapping on his leg in that staccato rhythm.

"What did you say?" Isaac asked. I held out my phone to them. Isaac read it off to the others. Zeke's jaw clenched.

"Damn it, Lexie," Zeke snapped. His burning eyes met mine. "No contact. That's what Rory said. What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I was thinking 'let's piss him off, and maybe he'll make a mistake," I shot back.

"Or he'll escalate," He countered. "He might go from wanting to save you to wanting to kill you." My stomach dropped as my anger disappeared. I hadn't thought about that, I had been so mad that I didn't stop to think. "You just fucked up big time," He growled. He took my phone from Isaac and tucked it back into his pocket. "You're not getting your phone back."

"What?"

"You fucking heard me," He snapped. "You were told not to respond, and you did. You think I'm going to let you keep taunting this guy until he wants you dead?" The tension was thick as we glared at each other. I finally looked away as I realized how stupid I had been. He looked to the others. They split up my schedule between them to walk with me between classes, and I didn't even argue. Because Zeke was right, I fucked up. Pissing this guy off was a great way to get him to want me dead. When they were done, the bell for first period rang and everyone took off, except for Zeke. Zeke walked with me to first period in silence, we were near the door when he stopped me. "Wait until Ethan gets here before leaving the room," He ordered me. I nodded.

"Hey." I looked up to meet his ice blue eyes. "You hear me?" He asked, his voice sharp and hard.

"I hear ya," I muttered.

"Good." He waited until I was in the room before heading to his own class. I could feel everyone watching as I walked to my desk and sat down. This is going to get old fast. When Mr. Matthews got up to teach, his gaze found me.

"Lexie, what happened to you?" He asked in front of the class. I sighed.

"Some asshole tried to kidnap me Saturday night," I told him bluntly. "He didn't like it when I fought back." Mr. Matthews raised a white eyebrow.

"You're here. Good job," He said, then turned his attention back to the class and began our lecture.

That's how it went for the day, one of the guys would pick me up from class, my teacher would express concern, and class would start. It was getting annoying by the time Isaac picked me up from Algebra.

"How's it going, Red?" He asked. I sighed.

"My head is killing me, and if one more teacher asks what happened, I might scream," I told him bluntly. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a side hug.

"Miles usually has something for a headache," He told me as we walked into a hallway. I gave him a small smile when I looked ahead of me. Morgan was walking down the hall, he spotted me, and frowned. He stopped in front of me his eyes running over my face.

"Did he do that to you?" He demanded, pointing at Isaac. Isaac made a rude noise in the back of his throat.

"No, some asshole stalker who thinks I belong to him did," I told him bluntly. "The cops are on it." His eyes were shadowed as they ran over my face.

"I'm sorry to hear that," He said quietly before stepping out around me. "Take care of yourself."

"Thanks," I said before he was out of ear-shot. Isaac was muttering under his breath as we walked into Chemistry. Isaac practically threw his bag on the floor, Ethan eyed him.

"What's with you?" Ethan asked.

"Fucking Morgan asked if I gave Lexie her bruises," Isaac snapped as he sat down still steaming.

"It doesn't matter what people think, Cookie Monster," I reminded him. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"You're right," He grumbled. Miles came in and took his usual spot next to me. He dug a small bag out of his pocket.

"Lexie, here," Miles said, pulling two small disks out of a plastic bag. "These are GPS trackers. I want you to keep them on you at all times," He said as he put them in my hand. It took me a second to realize what he was saying.

"In case he grabs me," I stated. Miles' eyes were troubled as he nodded.

"I'd rather be over prepared than not prepared enough," Miles admitted. "Those have a strong enough signal that we can track you anywhere on the planet and up to one hundred feet underground, as long as you have them on you." A weight lifted off my chest that I wasn't even aware of. I practically jumped on Miles to hug him.

"Thank you, thank you!" I whispered in his ear. He gave me a big hug back.

"You're very welcome," He said softly. "Just keep them somewhere safe on you." I pulled back and instantly slipped my hand down my sweater and tucked one into my bra cup. Miles looked away, his ears turned pink while the twins laughed. I slipped the other into my right shoe.

"That should work, right?" I asked, grinning. Miles nodded, his ears still pink.

"I imagine so," Miles muttered.

"Hey," Isaac said. "Maybe we should talk about code words."

"Yeah, Ma uses them all the time with her class," Ethan nodded.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Like, if you are on the phone with us, and your stalker is standing there with a gun on you, it'd be a way to tell us you're in trouble without coming out and saying it," Isaac explained. Miles nodded, and then looked to me.

"What would you never call one of us?" Miles asked. I thought about.

"Blue eyes?" I offered uncertainly. "I mean, I'd call Zeke a multitude of other things before that." The guys nodded.

"Blue eyes it is," Ethan announced.

Class started, and for the first time, a teacher didn't ask what happened to my face. I was grateful.

We were heading toward the cafeteria when I hesitated, Miles stopped walking.

"Lexie?" He asked gently.

"He's in there," I said. "That fucker is probably in there." I don't know why I stopped, but it just hit me that I knew my stalker and he could be anyone at this point; I knew who hit me and took those photos. Miles' hand was a comforting weight on my lower back.

"Do you want to eat out here? Or in the library?" He asked in that silky-smooth voice of his. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as some of the tension inside me eased.

"No, I'm not going to let him get to me," I told him. "I just needed a second." Miles waited patiently while I took another breath then started walking again. Isaac and Ethan were waiting by the door. They both gave me supportive smiles before going inside. Isaac went ahead of me, Ethan walked in beside me, and Miles brought up the back as if they had planned it. Hell, it wouldn't have surprised me if they did. I felt eyes on me as we walked to our table. I sat down between Asher and Isaac, Zeke was across from me. I met Zeke's gaze. "Can I have my phone now?" I asked sweetly.

"Are you going to respond to people you shouldn't?" He asked.

"No," I grumbled. "I know I fucked up." He pulled it out of his pocket and slid it over to me. I took out my lunch while the guys filled Asher and Zeke in on our code phrase for trouble, they loved the idea. Then they talked about going to my house for homework tonight. We usually went to Miles next but, apparently, that was off the table for now. I was chewing when I realized we were missing someone. "Where's Riley?" I asked Zeke.

Zeke sighed deeply then answered. "We broke up on Sunday." I sat stunned for a whole five seconds.

"Wait, you guys broke up?" I asked trying to be sure I heard right. Zeke nodded before taking a drink out of his water. "Are you okay?" I asked. Zeke's looked at me like I'd grown a third head.

"Yeah," He stated then changed the subject to English essays. I was still reeling when Clay came over. He stood across the table as his eyes ran over me.

"So, it's true. What the hell happened?" Clay demanded as he moved around the table to get to me. He reached out and lifted my chin so he could

see my face clearly. I fought the urge to smack his hand away as his fingers hit bruises. I reached up and gently pulled his hand away from my face.

"She has a stalker, who tried to kidnap her Saturday night," Isaac answered for me. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"A stalker?" Clay asked. He turned to Isaac.

"Yeah, the police are all over it," Isaac answered again. I reminded myself not to kill Isaac, I loved Isaac, and there was no reason to get upset with him. It had to be common knowledge by now. Clay looked me over.

"Are you okay?" He asked gently. I gave him a smile.

"I'm fine, pissed off, but fine," I said cheerfully. Clay nodded.

"If you need anything give me a call," Clay said. "You have my number."

"Thanks, Clay," I said. He looked at my face again then walked back into the crowd. I sighed. I was zoning out when Zeke tapped on the table to get my attention.

"Eat," Zeke reminded me. I didn't bitch, I started eating my lunch again. It wasn't long before someone else came to our table. Ryan came through the crowd and straight to me. I turned in my chair to look up at him. His eyes here hard as they ran over my face, his fingers went to my chin. I winced and took his hand off me.

"Damn Lexie," Ryan muttered. "That's quite the bruising you have going."

"Yeah, redhead's bruises look worse than they really are," I assured him.

"Did they find the guy?" Ryan asked.

"Not yet," Ethan answered. "The cops are on it, though." Ryan nodded.

"Good." Ryan reached out and picked up my phone. He started hitting buttons. "Here's my number, if you need anything call." I was too stunned to say anything. He handed it back to me and met my eyes. "Seriously, you need a walk out to the car, to the store, whatever. Call, okay?"

"I will," I said gratefully. "Thanks, Ryan." He shrugged, his cheeks tinging pink, as he looked at the guys watching us.

"No problem. I'll, um, see you guys at practice," Ryan stammered before heading back into the crowd. I turned back to the table and put my phone down. I didn't know what to say about that, but Isaac did.

"Ryan's got a crush on you," Isaac stated. I rolled my eyes.

"He's just worried about a friend," I countered. Isaac gave me a placating look.

"Yeah, sure Red," He said in a knowing voice. My phone rang, it was Dylan. I sent it to voicemail and put my phone down. I was eating again when Asher's phone rang. He looked at me before he got to his feet and walked away to answer. I figured it was Dylan. We were still talking about how much homework we needed to make up when Asher came back.

"Dylan?" I asked quietly. Asher met my eyes and nodded.

"He just wanted to make sure you were alright," Asher explained. I just shook my head and ate my lunch. The noise in here was getting to me, I kept expecting my stalker to jump out at me any minute. It was ridiculous, but that's how I was feeling. When the bell rang, Miles walked me to Gym. He asked me if I was alright, I just nodded as we walked through to hall. When Miles dropped me off, he was frowning. I didn't know what about, I just went to class.

"Alright Lexie, let's go over it again," Dave said. "You're going to wrap your leg back around mine, then hit my knee cap with the heel of your other foot. Got it?" He asked. I nodded. It was the end of my workout, and I was having trouble at the Gym today. I kept jumping at loud sounds and looking around me, I fucking hated it. I got back into position in front of him. Dave bear-hugged me and lifted me off my feet. I wrapped my left leg around his and hit his knee with my heel. He instantly dropped me to the mat. "Good. Again," He said. We ran through the move again and again until I felt like I had it down cold. Afterward, Dave looked me over. "No sparring or fight training for you," Dave told me. "You're too high strung today." I shot him a look.

"Can ya blame me?" I asked sarcastically.

"No, I can't," He admitted with a smile.

"Thanks, Dave," I said before heading up to the front. I walked past Asher who stopped working out to turn to me.

"Are you done?" Asher asked breathlessly.

"Yeah, you guys can finish. I won't go anywhere," I promised. Asher's eyes ran over me before I turned away and walked back to the lockers. I was taking off my wraps when Jordan stepped up to the side of my locker.

"Hey, I heard about what happened Saturday night," He said, his voice worried. "Are you alright?"

"I have pounded meat for half my face but yeah, I'm alright," I pointed out sarcastically. He chuckled.

"It's not that bad," He said as he reached for my chin. I smacked his hand away hard.

"Don't touch me," I snapped, not caring anymore if I was being rude.

"Whoa, what's with you?" He asked with a forced laugh. I shoved my wraps into my locker.

"I don't want people to touch me," I stated clearly, my voice hard. "Especially my face. It hurts."

"Lexie, what's wrong?" He asked. I gripped my locker door hard enough my knuckles turned white.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my voice getting louder. I looked at him. "I've got some psycho out there who pounded my face in. I don't know who he is and I *really* want to return the favor. He's threatening my friends, scaring the shit out of me, and at this point, I'm ready for him to come out so we can play who can kill who first." Jordan's eyes grew wide, and I continued in a sharp, clipped voice. "And I'd really like it if people I don't know that well would stop trying to touch me. And everyone would just take a hint and back the fuck off." His eyes softened.

"Oh, Lexie." He reached out to touch me. I smacked his hand away again and glared at him.

"What fucking part of that didn't ya get?" I snapped. "Back the fuck off." I grabbed my jacket and slammed my locker shut.

"Fuck you, Lexie," Jordan shouted.

"Not in a million years," I shot back over my shoulder on my way out the door. I was at the Blazer before I could take a deep breath again. All I could hear was the ticking of my life clock just counting down. Don't be ridiculous Lexie, you got this. Rory's going to get this guy, and he's going to jail.

I jumped into my truck and started it. I was still warming it up when Isaac climbed in the passenger side.

"Don't you still have training?" I asked, surprised.

"I'm not going with you. I just came out to check on you," He said, his worried eyes ran over me.

"You yelled at Jordan and I only caught the end. What happened?"

"The guy tried to touch my face," I grumbled. "Clay did it, Ryan did it, and it fucking hurts. So, I smacked his hand and told him I was fed up with people I barely knew trying to touch me."

Isaac's eyes narrowed on me. "What then?"

"He tried to touch my shoulder," I admitted dryly. "I smacked his hand away and asked him what part of that didn't he fucking understand." Isaac chuckled, I smiled. "He said 'fuck you, and I told him-"

"Not in a million years," Isaac finished for me. "Yeah, I caught that part." He chuckled, I snorted, it was pretty funny. "Are you okay, Lexie?" I shrugged.

"I'll live," I said. "Rory's still at home so I should be safe getting there if I don't stop."

"Alright." He went to get out.

"And tell the guys I handled it," I told him. He smirked at me.

"Damn, I was looking forward to telling Zeke that Jordan tried to touch you after you said not to," He said in his 'aw shucks' voice. I chuckled. "Don't worry Red, I'll cover Jordan's ass, and then I'll let him know that I did," He stated before jumping out of the truck and shutting the door.

I pulled out of the lot and drove home more than aware that I was alone. I hated this feeling, and I wanted this over with. I got home without a problem and went inside. Hades jumped off the couch and ran to me. I dropped to my knees and gave him some much needed love. I hurried upstairs and took a shower. I pulled on comfy blue jeans and a charcoal gray oversized sweater. By the time I got downstairs, the guys were already there, except Isaac.

"You guys didn't need to leave early," I reminded them.

"I believe it was that or allow Zeke to beat the crap out of Jordan," Ethan announced as he pulled out his books. I looked at Zeke.

"Why?" I asked wearily. Zeke frowned at me.

"I need a reason?" He asked dryly. I chuckled, he gave me a half smirk as he pulled out his homework. I sat down next to Miles and started working on my mine.

I was working on my history when my phone rang. It was Dylan, I sighed and sent it to voice mail. I was on the next question when it rang again. It was Dylan again.

"Give it to me," Zeke offered. I actually thought about it for a second then dismissed the idea. I just answered.

"What?" I asked, my voice sharp.

"Are you okay? I've been worried about you all day," Dylan said.

"You know I'm fine, you already talked to Asher. What do you want?" I asked pointedly.

"I want a real chance to talk to you," He said. "I want you to hear me out." I scoffed. I had been listening, and all he ever did was repeat himself. I was done.

"And I want people to get the hint when I send them to voice mail. But it looks like neither one of us is getting what we want today," I told him sarcastically before hanging up. The guys burst out laughing. I just shook my head and went back to work. It wasn't long before Asher made dinner, turkey meatloaf, potatoes, and green beans. Rory got up and joined us for dinner. It was our usual noisy dinner. It was normal, and right now, I really

needed normal. After dinner, I was loading the dishwasher as the guys, and Rory took off. Isaac was on the couch with Hades in his lap when I flopped down next to him.

"How was your day, Red?" He asked innocently. I sighed

"Cruddy boarding on bad. Yours?" I asked, resting my head on his shoulder.

"Not too bad," He said as he pointed at the screen. "What are we watching?"

"Oh, there's a new Brooklyn Nine-Nine on Hulu," I offered.

"Hell yeah," He agreed instantly and started getting into our Hulu account. Isaac wrapped his arm around me so I could lay my head on his shoulder and snuggle up to him. He understood how touch made me feel better, at least from the guys it did. We watched the latest episode then went back to the beginning of this season. Isaac had introduced me to the show in December, it was now our show to watch together and only together. Watching alone would cause unimaginable bitching from the other person, and possible bruises.

"Does it bother you to have to stay the night, Cookie Monster?" I asked quietly. He gave me a squeeze.

"Nah, it's fun hanging with you," He answered. "Besides, we can plan pranks on Zeke that will take a lot more time to figure out." I smiled. He kissed the top of my head, and we went back to watching TV.

It was around nine when Hades jumped off Isaac's lap and ran at the door barking. The doorbell rang, I got up and checked the peephole. No one was there. Hades stopped barking but continued to growl at the door, I opened it and looked out, no one was there. I was about to close the door when I saw it, flowers and a manila envelope sat on the front step. I opened the door and looked outside, there was no one there. Stomach knotting, I picked up the envelope and opened it. I took me a minute to understand what I was seeing.

"Red? What is it?" Isaac asked, getting off the couch. My heart dropped. They were photos of me in my bedroom, naked. With the word 'mine' written across the top of them. Shocked, I looked at the next one, and the

next. I couldn't believe it, I couldn't seem to breathe. "Lexie?" Before I realized it, Isaac took the top one from my hand and looked at it. He cursed, then pulled me inside, and slammed the door. "Lexie, are they all...?" He asked. I nodded, he cursed again. He pulled out his phone and called Rory, Isaac handed me the photo back. How the hell had he gotten these? What the fuck was he doing... Oh, God, don't think about that. It was too late, I felt sick as I looked down at the photos. Others were going to see them, cops, they were evidence. In a daze, I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a black sharpie. I ran through the pile putting black bars across my chest and groin. I didn't stop until I finished every photo. It made me feel better knowing no one else was going to see... My stomach rolled.

"Lexie," Isaac said in a gentle voice. I looked up at him. "Zeke's on his way. Rory wants you over at his place tonight." I nodded. I was going to need a bag. I headed upstairs without a word and tried to think about what I needed for tomorrow. Isaac reminded me about underwear and socks, I hadn't thought about that. We were almost done when the door opened downstairs.

"Lexie! Isaac!" Zeke bellowed. Isaac squeezed my arm and left me to finish packing. What else did I need? What the fuck was he doing with... I pushed it out of my head again and tried to focus. I was still standing there trying to focus when the boys came upstairs. Isaac came in and looked in my bag.

"Lexie, did you remember your pjs?" Isaac asked gently. I chewed the corner of my lower lip as I went to my bag and looked through it again, I hadn't. I opened my middle drawer under the bed and pulled out some jammies. I didn't even care if they matched. "Lexie, do you have your hair and makeup stuff?" Isaac asked softly. I blinked.

"No, I forgot." I squeezed past Zeke in the hall and got everything I needed from the bathroom.

"I think she's in shock," Isaac whispered.

"Looks like it," Zeke whispered back.

"The first thing she did was go over those photos with a sharpie," Isaac told him.

"Wouldn't you?" Zeke growled low. I came out of the bathroom and put my stuff in my bag. I zipped it up and followed Zeke downstairs.

"Oh, Hades' toys," I mumbled. I put my bag down and picked up a few of his favorites then stuffed them into my bag. I started pulling on my shoes.

"I'll follow you out to your house," Isaac offered.

"No, Rory wants you here watching the street to see if he tails us from here," Zeke said. "He said it should only take fifteen minutes of someone looking to make sure we're not followed."

"So, I'm making it obvious?" Isaac asked.

"Damn obvious," Zeke said. I finished tying my shoes and grabbed my bag. Zeke called Hades and put his leash on. Isaac gave me a big hug and kissed my unbruised cheek.

"I'll see you tomorrow at school, okay, Red?" Isaac said cheerfully. I nodded, I was afraid if I opened my mouth I'd be sick. Zeke took my arm and walked me out to his old Jeep. I put my bag in the backseat with Hades as he looked around at the other cars on the street. When I climbed in and locked the door, Zeke walked around the car and got in the other side. Isaac was at the mouth of the driveway waiting. Zeke pulled out onto the road and headed out of my neighborhood. I didn't even notice my hands were shaking until he took mine in his big, calloused hand. I clutched his hand as he took back road after back road. He made sudden U-turns and stops to see if anyone was following. It took an hour to get to his house.

When Zeke finally pulled up to his house, he didn't waste any time. He grabbed my bag then got me and Hades inside behind a locked door fast. He set my bag on the small dinner table before going into the kitchen and opening the back door. Kita and Tank ran in and greeted Hades. I took off my jacket, hung it up, and walked into the living room. That horrible question kept running through my head.

"Lexie," He called, his voice gentle. I turned around and looked up. His hands went to my shoulders, a steady, comforting weight when I couldn't seem to focus. "Do you know why Rory wanted you here?" He asked. I shook my head, his warm eyes met mine. "Because only the police have this address, we use a P.O box for everything. He can't find you here." I

nodded that I heard him. It was still hard to breathe, he frowned at me. "Lexie, take a deep breath for me." I took a big shaky breath.

"Why...what did he use those photos for?" I asked the question that was making me sick. I needed him to tell me it was just a scare tactic, that my stalker never even looked at them. His jaw clenched, and his eyes turned murderous.

"Don't think about that," He said in that soft, gentle voice he used with me. Tears fell down my face, he thought the same thing. My chest ached, my stomach was one huge knot, and I couldn't seem to catch my breath. Zeke's eyes melted, he pulled me into his arms and lifted me off my feet. He sat down on the couch and settled me in his lap. I wrapped my fingers in his shirt and cried silently. He held me tight, one arm around me, the other hand running down the back of my hair. "I'm with you, you're safe here," He whispered to me over and over.

"I'm scared, Zeke. Those photos..." My throat closed.

"I know, but we'll find every photo and burn every single one. I promise." He whispered to me. I nodded into his chest. "Rory's on his tail, and this guy is chicken shit. He had the chance to meet you like a reasonable person, he didn't, he wanted you alone and vulnerable. We're going to keep him away from you just by sticking to you." His voice got through the panic the more he spoke.

"Those photos..." What did he do with them? How often did he look at them?

"They aren't you, Baby," He told me. "Those photos aren't you, it's just your image. He'll never touch you." Zeke strangely made sense. He kept talking, telling me that it didn't matter what that sick fuck did with my picture, it wasn't actually me. It's just a picture. He kept talking until the knots in my stomach eased, and I could take a deep breath again. When I finally stopped wanting to be sick, I stayed in his arms.

"I hate this fucker," I told him.

"Me too, Baby." He held me as long as I needed. Until I felt good enough to let him go. It took a while. It was late, he tried to give me his bed, but I pointed out that I could fit on the couch with room to spare. He sighed and gave in. I used the bathroom to change since it didn't have any

windows and came out to find a pillow and several blankets on the couch. I snuggled in as Zeke came from the kitchen wearing his black mesh shorts and black sleeveless shirt. He checked the locks on the doors and the windows twice before looking at me.

"I'm okay on the couch." I pointed down at my feet where Hades was already curled up. Tank was laying in his dog bed in the corner.

"Tank," He called. Tank got to his feet and came to him. "Guard Lexie." Tank moved to the end of the couch and sat, I had no doubt he'd stay there all night.

"Thanks, Tough Guy.

"Anything for you, Baby."

Growling woke me up, I opened my eyes and was confused for a few seconds. Oh, yeah. Zeke's. I half sat up and went still. Tank, Hades, and Kita were pacing through the living room to the front door and back. My pulse picked up as I got up and looked out the blinds. Zeke had the outside lights on, the driveway and the area in front of the garage were bright enough that you could play basketball outside. Something flew through the air, a lightbulb shattered plunging the driveway into darkness. Something moved outside.

"Zeke!" I called, fear knotting my stomach. He was there almost instantly. "Someone's outside, and they took out the driveway light." His face was hard as he pulled me away from the windows and moved me down the hallway. He called the dogs to follow as he put me in the bathroom and called Rory.

"Hey, someone's here. They busted out a light." Zeke's voice was hard as he opened the closet next to the bathroom. "Yeah, I will," He said before hanging up. "Tank, Kita, Hades. Guard Lexie." Zeke ordered as he reached into the closet. The dogs lined up in front of the bathroom door in a line. I would have been impressed, but Zeke had pulled out a shotgun and was loading it.

"Zeke, you're not going out there," I told him in a hard voice, his lips twitched.

"Don't worry Baby, this is in case he grows a pair and decides to come in after you," He said calmly. My heart raced as I tried to stay calm. It was silent except for the dogs breathing. Flickering lights lit up the hallway, Zeke cursed.

"Stay here," He ordered as he headed down the hall. I leaned out the door as far as the dogs would let me. Zeke walked to the front window and looked out the blinds.

"Mother-" He bit off a curse.

"Zeke?"

"It's fine. He just set something on fire," He said as he walked back down the hall to me.

"What did he set on fire?" I asked, he shrugged.

"Nothing important," He assured me. We waited, soon the sirens got louder, when they sounded like they were at the driveway Zeke unloaded the shot gun and put it away in the closet. He grabbed the fire extinguisher, this time I followed him as he went outside. I gaped. The interior of the Jeep was on fire, spray painted across the hood were the words 'It ends now!' Shocked, I watched as Zeke worked to put the fire out. When he finished, the police cars were just pulling up. He looked over and met my eyes.

"You said it was nothing important," I said, stunned.

"It's not."

"Zeke," I snapped. "That's your Jeep!" I knew how important it was to him, how much work he put into it.

"It's a car. You're a person." He pointed out logically. "I'd rather have you safe than a car." My heart melted right there in the snow as tears filled my eyes, Zeke saw it and cursed. He came over and wiped my face.

"I'm sorry, Zeke," I said as guilt ate at me.

"It's not your fault," He said clearly. "Now stop crying." I sniffed and tried to stop. Rory came to us.

"I take it this was our stalker?" Rory asked.

"Nah, I decided to commit insurance fraud for a new interior," Zeke said sarcastically. Rory shook his head. Did Zeke just make a joke? I realized that he had. The other cops came over and got to work.

An hour and a half later most of the other cops left. Rory was going to leave an officer here in the driveway for the rest of the night. It didn't seem like a bad idea to me. He also said he'd send a rental truck over for Zeke to use while his car is dealt with. Zeke tried to protest, but Rory told him to stuff it. It made me smile.

"Tomorrow night I want you two to go to Miles'. At least he has a system and a fence," Rory said. We both nodded.

"How did he find my address, Rory?" Zeke asked, his voice hard.

"I don't know, but I'm sure as hell going to find out," Rory promised. "Nothing else should happen tonight so go get some rest." I hugged Rory good-bye. Then Rory pulled Zeke into a hug too. Zeke took me inside and locked the door, I started walking to the couch when he stopped me.

"No, you're sleeping in my room now." His voice told me not to argue, and honestly, I didn't want to. I walked down the hall and climbed into Zeke's big bed. I made sure I was on the other side near the wall while he watched from the door. I laid down and looked at him with his worried face, his clenched jaw.

"Did you really wake me up?" He asked his voice uncertain. I gave him a small smile.

"Several times, you called me Baby before you even opened your eyes," I reassured him. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly then turned off the light. The bed dipped on the other side, then moved as he shifted and got comfortable.

"Tank. Guard Lexie," Zeke ordered. I smiled to myself as Tank moved to lay between us.

"Night, Baby," He whispered.

"Night, Tough Guy," I answered.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 19

Tuesday

An ear-piercing noise woke Zeke up. I was already awake, I had nightmares all night, and I finally gave up sleeping before dawn. Not to mention that Zeke and Tank on a queen-sized bed was a tight fit. I sat up and scooted down the bed until I could put my feet on the floor, the bed shifted and the alarm shut off. I rubbed my face before getting to my feet and going to my bag on his desk.

"How'd you sleep?" He asked, his usually gravelly voice was rougher than usual.

"I didn't," I admitted as I found my clothes for today.

"You didn't sleep?"

"No. I kept waking up." I pulled my clothes out of my bag. Zeke's hand turned me toward him. I looked up at him.

"Why did you keep waking up?" He asked.

I sighed. "Bad dreams," I admitted. His eyes narrowed on me.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" He asked bluntly.

"What could you do about it? Cuddle with me?" I asked, pointedly. "You had Tank guard me just so you were comfortable enough to go to sleep."

He frowned at me. "You know why I did that."

"Yeah, I do," I told him gently. "It's also why I didn't wake you up, there was nothing you could do about it."

He sighed and let me go. "Feel free to use Sylvie's bathroom, she's not home yet." His eyes were shadowed before he called the dogs and went to let them out. I said screw it and brought my bag into Sylvie's room. I pulled

on dark blue jeans and my faded purple and white plaid with a black cami on underneath in case the buttons popped open. I tucked my shirt into my jeans and went to the bathroom. My bruises were healing, the new green mixed in was proof, right? I said fuck it, I just put on my sunblock and mascara today, it didn't matter. I made sure to put my two GPS locators back in place. One in my bra, one in my shoe. I pulled my hair back into a braid then headed out into the hallway with my bag. I was almost to the front of the house when Zeke's voice stopped me.

"Hey, Lexie. Come here a sec," Zeke called. Curious, I dropped my bag next to the door and walked back into his room. Zeke was in his usual black jeans and his sleeveless shirt holding two different shirts, one dark blue, the other black.

"Yeah?"

"I think Sylvie is fucking with me again, what color is this shirt?" He asked as he held up the dark blue one, I smiled.

"Dark blue," I told him. He cursed, yanked the tag off the hanger and tossed it on the bed.

"She marked it black," He bit out as he sat down and pulled on his boots. "She's been trying to get me to wear a different color for years." He grumbled.

"This happen often?" I asked, grinning.

"A few times a month. I usually send a pic to Miles, but you're here so..."

"It would bring out your eyes," I told him. He growled at me. I chuckled. "How color blind are you?" I asked.

"I have Deuteranomaly, which means my green is fucked up," He explained as he finished tying his boots.

"What do my eyes look like to you?" I asked, suddenly curious. He picked up his shirt and looked at me.

"A dark brown," He stated.

"Seriously?"

He nodded. "Yeah," He said before he headed into the closet.

"Can you tell what color they are at all?" I leaned against the doorframe.

"Not really, but Isaac said they were green last month," He said as he came out of the closet in his black Henley. The shirt hugged his muscles and showed the dip between his collar bones. He picked up his wallet, hooked his chain on his pants, then started putting on his belt.

"Do you see red?" I asked.

"No."

"So, what does my hair look like to you?" His eyes ran over me making my stomach flip.

"I see a darker gold," He said. I chuckled.

"So, to you, I'm blonde with brown eyes?" I asked, the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Pretty much," He admitted. "I mostly see yellows, whites, browns, and golds."

"That's got to be strange sometimes," I thought out loud.

"I've never really thought about it," He said as he picked up the blue shirt off the bed.

"Come on, I need to throw this out before Sylvie tries again."

"You're throwing the shirt out just because it's not black?"

"Next time I might not catch it," He pointed out.

"Give it to me," I told him, holding out my hand. "I can probably do something with it, besides the color works for me." He tossed me the shirt then grabbed his book bag. I headed back down the hall. "Miles' hoodie, Asher's pajamas, and now one of your shirts. I'm building quite the collection," I snickered. He chuckled behind me.

"Soon you'll have a whole set," He teased as I stuffed the shirt into my bag.

"Yeah, but the twins are all that's left, and they smell," I said dryly. He laughed as I picked up my bag. He held the door open for me.

"Come on, we'll grab breakfast on the way," He offered. I happily walked outside and climbed into the truck Rory rented for Zeke. It was black, of course.

We ran through a drive-thru and were finished eating before we reached the school.

We were just walking out of the parking lot when everyone found us.

"Where's your Jeep?" Isaac asked.

"Toast," Zeke said dryly. He explained what happened last night and that we'd been ordered to stay at Miles' house tonight, everyone but Miles cursed. Miles' face was troubled.

"Are you both alright?" Miles asked.

"Yeah, but this guy just pissed off Zeke," I pointed out playfully. "He's a dead man." Everyone chuckled and I smiled when Zeke didn't disagree. My phone vibrated, I checked it.

Secret Admirer: Check your locker.

I cursed and told the guys. Everyone walked to my locker in silence. I took a deep breath and opened it, I froze. Inside was a dead dove, it's feathers soaked scarlet with blood and its wings had been cut off. My pulse raced and my stomach knotted. What kind of sick fuck would do this? When I could tear my eyes from the dove, I saw the message on the back of the locker written in blood.

If I can't have you, no one will.

I went numb, how could someone just kill something like that? Asher's hands were on my shoulders pulling me away from the locker. Miles was on the phone. Zeke slammed the locker shut so hard, it echoed up and down the hall. I took deep slow breaths as the guys cursed and watched Miles. Miles nodded then got off the phone.

"Rory says to tell a teacher so they can keep this area clear," Miles announced. The guys nodded. Miles headed down the hallway and went into the Chemistry lab, it wasn't long before he came back with Mr. Turner in tow. "Lexie, what's the combination?" Miles asked gently. I gave it to him and Miles opened the locker for the teacher.

Mr. Turner cursed under his breath then looked at me. "Are you alright?" He asked. I shrugged, he sighed. "Take her to the office, the police are going to want to talk to each of you," He told us. We agreed and headed towards the office, Asher took my hand as we walked. We were led to a small waiting area in front of the Vice Principal's office. We waited until someone told us what we were supposed to do.

It was almost two hours before a police officer came to talk to us. The Vice Principal joined us as the officer interviewed all of us together, Miles explained about my stalker and how this was just his latest stunt. As the conversation went on, the Vice Principal's face became more and more severe. Mrs. Weaver was a willowy woman with permanent frown lines. Her blonde hair was back in a perfect French twist, her gray eyes were sharp on me as the interview continued. She thanked the officer before he left then turned to the rest of us.

"Alexis, please come into my office," Mrs. Weaver said. Sighing, I got up and followed her through the office door between Zeke and Ethan. I sat down in a chair across from her desk without bothering to shut the door. After all, it was the guys, I was going to tell them anyway. Mrs. Weaver sat behind her desk then rested her forearms on it, and leaned forward a bit. "Now, Alexis, you really should have brought this incident to the attention of the staff instead of calling the police," She said politely. Huh?

"What?" I asked, sure I heard her wrong. She really didn't say that. Mrs. Weaver gave me a sweet smile.

"You should have come to us, and then we would have made the decision on whether a call to the police was necessary," She explained, her voice condescending. My temper sparked. "You brought unnecessary attention to this incident and disrupted classes by calling the police first." Oh yeah, I was angry now. I gave her a polite smile that was about as real as the one she was giving me.

"Well, Mrs. Weaver. I didn't call the police. I called my Uncle Rory, who happens to be a police officer. He's also aware of the history of the situation, unlike the school staff," I said in a polite, reasonable voice. I gestured to my face. "Considering the abduction attempt and assault that had already occurred. He felt it best to call in to the station and try to find evidence of whoever this boy is." Her eyes narrowed on me. "After all, it is

an ongoing police investigation." She cleared her throat then her smile dropped,

"You also did not inform us of the developing situation. If you had come to us to intervene between you and this boy, all of this could have been avoided," She said. She was trying to blame me for some reason, and I wasn't having it.

"If I knew who it was, I would have been happy to," I said innocently. "However, the first physical contact I had with this guy was when he was hitting me in a parking lot." The polite smile was gone, my voice became more sarcastic as I spoke. "So, I couldn't go through your intervention program, now could I?"

"Miss Delaney, I don't appreciate your attitude," Mrs. Weaver declared.

"Mrs. Weaver, I don't appreciate you trying to blame me for something someone else has done," I stated coldly. "You're trying to say I did something wrong. When I know, I haven't."

"When something like this occurs on school property, we are the ones you inform," She declared.

"I did," I pointed out. "And now I'm sitting here pretty damn sure that if I hadn't talked to my Uncle first, the cops would never have heard about this incident. And the possible evidence as to who is stalking me would be gone." Her eyes flashed at me. Oh, she didn't like that.

"We look after the safety of our students," She stated. I raised an eyebrow.

"Then why bitch about the police being called?" I countered. Her face turned pink as her mouth pressed into a tight line.

"You're suspended for two days," She declared. I scoffed.

"Are you fucking serious?" I asked, not quite believing it.

"Watch your language young lady," She snapped. "You have been rude and disrespectful."

"And this warrants a two-day suspension?" I asked, doubtfully.

"Yes, it does," She stated simply. I snorted. This was ridiculous.

"Fine. A two-day suspension," I said directly. I stood up, picked up my coat and bag, then looked her in the eye. "Just so you're aware, that was a death threat in my locker. I've been beaten, had my privacy extremely violated, and now I'm afraid for my life. And your response is to suspend me," I said clearly so she could hear my sum up of the situation. Her face grew a little paler by the time I was done, I turned to walk out.

"If you apologize, I'll lift the suspension," Mrs. Weaver announced. I turned and looked her in the eye.

"Apologize for standing up for myself? For not letting you blame me for things that aren't my fault? Fuck that," I stated. I turned and walked out of her office. The guys were sniggering except Miles. He was frowning at me and shaking his head, I shrugged. "I need to head home to pick up more clothes for tomorrow, can I get a ride?" I asked them.

"I'll take you," Zeke told me.

"Yeah, we're out of here," Isaac announced. The others got to their feet and picked up their bags.

"You guys will get in trouble," I warned quietly.

"So?" They all asked at the same time. I grinned.

Mrs. Weaver came to the door of her office. "Excuse me, gentlemen, you haven't been excused yet," She declared.

"We know," The boys all said at once. Isaac took my arm and pulled me toward the main office door.

"We're not leaving Beautiful without protection for two days," Ethan announced.

"Not with her stalker out there," Asher added.

"We'll be back when she is," Zeke growled.

"Mr. Huntington, you are on track to be your class' Valedictorian. Are you really going to throw that away?" Mrs. Weaver asked.

"Yes, I hate public speaking," Miles informed her coldly. I was smiling as we walked out into the hallway and headed for the parking lot.

"Well, that was fun," I declared, sarcastically. The guys chuckled, I turned and walked backwards to look at the guys. "Are you guys sure about this? Not too late?"

"It's done, we'll have to deal with the consequences later," Miles said.

"Lexie, watch where you're going," Zeke snapped. I turned back around and walked normally. Isaac wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze.

"Isn't your Mom going to be pissed?" I asked Isaac and Ethan. They both chuckled.

"Once Ma hears about the bird, she'll go after Mrs. Weaver for suspending you," Ethan said. I snorted at that. When we reached the parking lot, we stopped.

"I'll take Lexie to get her clothes, Hades, and the Blazer," Zeke said.

"We'll pick up some stuff from our house, Ma will let us hang for the afternoon," Ethan spoke for him and Isaac.

"I'll pick up some groceries for tonight, " Miles announced.

"I'll go with you," Asher said. "I'll have enough time to actually make curry from scratch."

"So, everyone meets back at Miles'?" I asked. Everyone agreed then we scattered.

After we picked up Zeke's clothes and Hades, we were talking about a video game marathon when Zeke pulled up to my house. Dylan was sitting on the front step waiting. Oh, come on, was the universe bored lately?

"What the hell is he doing here?" I grumbled.

"Want me to get rid of him?" Zeke asked, his voice deeper than usual.

"No, I'm done being nice," I told him as he shut off the truck. "I'll meet you inside."

Zeke's gaze ran over my face before nodded. He didn't like it, but he'd let me handle Dylan.

We both got out of the truck, Zeke took Hades' leash. When he met me on this side of the truck, I handed him my keys so he could get inside. Dylan got to his feet and met me halfway across the lawn, Zeke walked past him without a word.

"Dylan, what are you doing here?" I asked, my voice sounding tired even to me.

"I wanted to talk, but I also needed to see for myself that you were okay," He said as he reached out to touch my chin. I backed up out of his reach before he could touch me. "I heard about the locker thing from one of my friends. You don't answer my calls anymore so I figured I'd wait until you got home," He added.

"I don't want to talk, that's why I'm not answering my phone," I pointed out before I went to walk around him. He grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stop. Zeke straightened in the doorway, I shook my head at him, I could handle Dylan. Zeke's jaw clenched.

"Lexie, I really think we need to talk," Dylan said. I was so sick of hearing him say that, I was so done. I turned to him and jerked my arm out of his hand.

"About what?" I snapped. His eyes widened. "About you dumping me? About you using what I confided in you to hurt me?" I asked. Dylan ran his hand through his hair. I kept going, my voice getting louder. "I don't want to talk about it, I don't want to get back together with you, I just want everyone to leave me the fuck alone." I went to walk into the house again, he pulled me to a stop again. I slipped his hold and turned on him.

"Lexie, we can be something great-"

"Stop touching her or I'm going to step in whether she likes it or not," Zeke warned in a growl. Dylan glared at Zeke then looked back at me.

"Lexie, this is between you and me, tell Zeke to go away," Dylan demanded. I scoffed.

"Dylan, a lot of shit has been going on around here. Right now, I don't feel safe with anyone except the guys, and Rory. So, no, I'm not telling Zeke to go away," I told him bluntly.

"Sunsh-"

"If you call me that one more fucking time I'll deck you!" I snapped at him, anger boiling in my gut. "See if I'm joking."

"I know I hurt you-"

"Yeah, Dylan you did. You hurt me, and every time you called, texted, or showed up, you kept doing it." I looked at him exasperated. I didn't know how else to say it. "And you don't care if you hurt me. You only care that you get to say what you want to say."

"That's not-"

"I can recite your speech backwards by now," I snapped. I took a deep breath and gave him a smile. "But I'll admit, you've made it a whole lot easier to get over you." I met his eyes and felt nothing except frustration. "Now, I look at you, and I don't see the guy I cared about, the guy who made me laugh, or even the guy who made me feel beautiful. I see the guy you were that night and have been since. You're the guy who hurt me on purpose, you're the guy who won't fucking listen to a word I'm saying when I tell him it's not going to happen." His face was stricken, and I didn't care. I've had enough.

"I hurt you that much?" He asked.

"Yeah, you did," I said directly. I gave him a small smile. "But not anymore, now you're just pissing me off." I turned away to walk into the house.

"Lexie," He grabbed my arm again. Zeke came out of the doorway. I slipped Dylan's hold and met Zeke before he could reach Dylan. I rested my hand in the middle of his chest and stopped Zeke from passing me

"Move, Baby," Zeke growled, his hands going to my shoulders. He tried to step around me, but I wouldn't let him.

"Zeke, stop," I snapped. He stopped trying to get by me. His eyes were boiling when they met mine.

"I've got it," I assured him, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Baby?" Dylan's voice was suspicious. Zeke's shoulders grew rigid. "You two?" Dylan asked, his voice filled with laughter. That just pissed me off. I turned and gave him an 'are you kidding me' look.

"It's her nickname," Zeke growled at him. "Since before she even met you." Dylan started laughing, that just pissed me off more.

"Even if we were together, it's none of your fucking business," I growled. Dylan looked at me again, his face amused. "If you ever touch me or show up here again. I won't stop him next time." I warned him. "Goodbye, Dylan." Zeke waited until I was behind him and in the house before following. I couldn't blame him, I was about to deck Dylan myself. I walked into the kitchen for... I don't know for what, but I ended up leaning against the counter as I tried to calm down. Zeke shut the front door then came over to stand across from me.

"You okay?" He asked gently, well, gently for Zeke.

"Why doesn't he listen?" I asked, my voice quiet. Zeke took a deep breath.

"He cares about you," He said bluntly. "He was chicken-shit and threw you away, then he realized what an idiot he was." I nodded. That sounded about right.

"Thanks, Tough Guy." He pulled me in for a hug.

"No one messes with," He took a breath. "Our Lexie." I smiled into his chest and relaxed. Hades' whining had me pulling back, he was at the backdoor pacing. "Go pack, I'll let him out," Zeke offered. I smiled my thanks and ran upstairs, I picked up everything I would need for a few days at Miles' house. I even packed my laptop hoping Miles will be able to figure out what was wrong with it. I put Dylan out of my mind, got my stuff together, and headed downstairs. Zeke was playing tug a war with Hades, I giggled quietly as I watch Zeke make faces at Hades as they fought over the rope, the guy really was a big teddy bear... with big teeth and claws... okay maybe he was more of a wolf after all. I came downstairs, and we headed out to Miles' house.

I drove my Blazer over, though Hades was determined to stand on me with his nose against the glass the whole way. It was so cute that I was laughing by the time I reached Miles'. Zeke pulled in directly behind me, he had been on my butt the whole way there and I didn't even want to complain about it.

Once we were inside, I let Hades off his leash, he ran straight for the guys in the living room. I took off my coat and hung it over the bannister as usual then picked up my book bag and took a seat next to Miles. Everyone had their homework out, I figured I might as well finish the rest of my work for the week since I had the time now. I put my laptop on the coffee table and started going through my notes on Pride and Prejudice. The twins were talking about going to the training center early since we weren't in school. They had just gone to change when I looked up to find my computer had powered up on its own, again, I sighed and looked at Miles.

"Miles, my computer keeps turning itself on. Why does it do that?" I asked, exasperated. Miles' head snapped up, his gaze went to my computer. His brow drew down.

"Lexie," he said in his calm voice, "Did you turn on your webcam?"

"I have a webcam?" I asked lamely. Miles looked at me then reached out and shut my laptop.

"I'm going to need my computer," Miles announced as he picked up my laptop. "Come on up with me, Lexie." Miles got to his feet and headed for the stairs. I followed him upstairs and down the hall on the right side of the house where he opened the third door on the left, I walked in assuming it was a study only to find it wasn't, it was Miles' bedroom. It was huge, though you wouldn't know it. The walls and ceiling were painted black, I didn't expect that. Miles walked over to a huge L shaped desk with several monitors, near the bed. My painting of the Andromeda galaxy was hanging above his desk, he actually had put it there. I smiled to myself as Miles sat down at his desk.

"Lexie, do you mind if I go poking around your computer?" He asked with his back to me.

"Not as long as you don't mind me nosing around your bedroom," I countered. He chuckled.

"Look to your heart's content," He said, his voice told me he was smiling. I looked at his floor to ceiling ebony bookcases across from his bed. It took up most of the wall. He had books on everything having to do with Astronomy or Physics, he even had a whole book case dedicated to NASA alone. I was grinning when I turned around and looked at his bed. It

was a queen in a Cherrywood sleigh bed, it was beautiful. Then I saw his comforter and bit back a laugh. His comforter looked like a photo from outer space, complete with stars and gasses, it had lots of blues, greens, whites, and oranges across it. I loved it. On a matching cherry-wood nightstand was a photo of all of us in a simple dark wood frame. We had taken it on New Year's Eve, we were out at a party and Zeke was being a pain about getting a photo with all of us. So, Miles and Asher sat on the couch surrounding him. The twins jumped on the back of the sofa while I hopped into Miles' lap and snuggled into him. Miles had wrapped an arm around my back and over my legs to keep me from falling off the couch. Most of us were a bit tipsy since Riley was the sober driver for the night. Everyone's face was flushed, including mine as I laid my head against Miles' shoulder and smiled. After that photo, it degenerated into a 'pull Lexie down the couch and tickle the crap out of her fight.' Miles ended up saving me from Zeke and Asher by picking me up and getting to his feet, the twins thought it was so hysterical they fell off the back of the couch laughing. It was a great picture. I looked out the window at the snow blanketed backyard still thinking about it, that was the night I realized I had feelings for Miles.

"Son of a...." Miles bit out, jerking me back to the present.

"What?" I walked over to Miles to see the screen. Miles turned and blocked my view.

"Lexie, sit down," He said in his silky-smooth voice. That can't be good. I went to his bed a couple feet away and sat down cross legged. Miles rolled his chair over to me, his face was serious as he met my eyes.

"This guy has been watching you through your webcam," He said. My stomach knotted.

"Anytime the computer turned on by itself, he was the one turning it on," He explained gently. I wrapped my arms around my stomach feeling gross all over again, but Miles wasn't done. "There are a lot more photos than he printed out. I found a hidden cache on your hard drive, full of them." I looked into his emerald eyes.

"Am I naked in those too?" I asked quietly. His jaw clenched as his eyes grew colder.

"From what I can tell from the thumbnails, in some of them, yes," He said gently. I hid my face in my hands, this couldn't fucking be happening. Miles moved closer, his hands resting on my knees. "Lexie, I might be able to find him through the photos." I dropped my hands and looked at him. His face was struggling for blank, but it came out strained. "If he sent these pictures to himself, then I might be able to find his IP address. But I'll have to... look at a few of the pictures. Well, have them on a screen." His thumbs rubbed over my jeans in a comforting way, he continued, "And at least one of them will need to be..."

"A naked one," I finished for him. He nodded, I covered my face and dropped onto my back on his bed. I didn't want anyone looking at those photos, I wanted those pictures not to exist. But if Miles could find this guy... If he could get him in jail... I growled in frustration.

"Fuck it, go ahead," I groaned.

"Are you sure?" He asked softly. I dropped my hands and looked at him down the line of my body.

"Miles, if there is anyone I can trust with those photos, it's you," I said as I met his eyes.

"Find this fucker." Miles immediately turned and rolled over to his computers. He opened a photo of me dressed first then moved it to the right monitor, so it wasn't in his face and started typing. I rolled over so I could watch him and lay down at the same time. Miles went through several photos of me dressed, then he hesitated.

"I'm sorry, Lexie," He said, his voice full of suppressed emotion.

"Just get it over with, sweetie," I said. He took a deep breath then opened a naked picture of me. He immediately moved it over to the other screen and made a point to use the other monitors, his ears were turning pink.

"Miles, would it be easier for you if I left?" I asked gently. He shook his head.

"Actually, that would make it worse. Then I'd be the guy, in his room, alone, looking at naked photos of the beautiful girl he's friends with," He pointed out. I smiled, he really was sweet. I finally looked at the picture, I

had just taken off my towel after a shower. My body was toned, but still had the little cushion I needed. No six pack for me, but at least there was a hint of one, I didn't look too bad.

"At least I have a nice body," I thought out loud. Miles stopped typing.

"Lexie, are you critiquing these photos?" He asked, incredulous. My face warmed.

"I'm trying to look on the bright side here, Miles," I admitted. "I just realized I have a nicer body than in October."

He shook his head. "How do I respond to that without insulting you or sounding like a pervert?" He asked, at a loss, I smiled.

"Just say 'yes, Lexie."

"Yes, Lexie," He repeated before he started typing again. I giggled as he got back to work. He closed that photo and hesitated to open another one. I got up and started opening his desk drawers. "What are you looking for?" He asked, his voice curious.

"Tape and a piece of paper," I told him. Miles' eyes lit up.

"Great idea," He declared as he got into the right drawer and taped a piece of paper to the right screen.

"I do have them on occasion," I teased. His ears went back to their normal color as I laid back down on the bed. I snagged one of his pillows, got comfy, and watched him work. He opened a picture and move it immediately to the right screen under the paper. Then he did whatever it was he was doing, his typing got harder and louder as he went. He started mumbling under his breath. He stopped typing to absently reached into a drawer and popped a couple pieces of gum into his mouth then he began working again. This time deleting photos by groups. When he was done, he opened another screen on the left bank of monitors and turned to it. I watched his profile as he put another window on another screen. His fingers flew over the keys, screens popped up, and disappeared in a blink. I could only see them because of the reflection in his glasses.

"Did you download anything in the last couple of months?" He asked absently.

"Some music but that's about it, I think," I said. He nodded.

"Anything from your email?" He asked.

"I think so," I admitted.

"Can I have your password, please?" He asked. I sighed. I knew this day would come.

"Pikachu, I choose you," I mumbled. He stopped typing and looked over at me.

"Pardon?" He asked, his voice strained. My face caught fire.

"Pikachu, I choose you. The you is the letter, not the word," I said again, hating that I had to tell him. Miles fought it off as long as he could, but he started laughing. He laughed so long it made me start to laugh so I grabbed a pillow and threw it at him which Miles caught it and began to calm down.

"When... when did you make this account?" He asked as he finally stopped laughing.

"Right after Pokemon Go came out," I admitted. "It kept me away from home, and it was free."

He gave me a bright smile. "Valor, Mystic or Instinct?" He asked.

"Instinct, I love underdogs," I answered instantly. He smiled and went back to work.

"We might have to go Pokemon hunting sometime," He mumbled as he started typing again. It wasn't long before the bedroom door opened all the way, Asher walked in frowning.

"What are you guys doing?" Asher asked.

"Her stalker has been accessing her computer, that's how he got those photos. I'm hunting him down," Miles said absently.

"Seriously?"

"Yes, if I can find the Trojan program he's using to get in." Miles kept typing without missing a beat. "I can at least track him to his IP address, and possibly figure out who he is."

"How long will that take?" Asher asked.

"How many interruptions?"

"Gotcha," Asher said then looked at me. "Ally, do you want to come downstairs? We're starting a video game tournament."

"I'm gonna watch Miles work," I said. Asher gave me a smile before he left the bedroom. I watched Miles' face as he worked. He got this little wrinkle between his eyebrows, his emerald eyes were sharp and bright as they ran over the screens. I watched as his fingers flew over the keyboard. He was cute until he smiled, then you could see how handsome he really was. It felt like the world's biggest secret, and I was the only one who knew about it. His intelligence glowed in his eyes whenever he talked about astronomy. He always got excited when he talked about tracking planets, or their moons. Just watching him work had warmth spreading through me until I was wondering what kissing him would be like, again. Damn it, Lexie! What are you doing? You're drooling over one of your best friends! I closed my eyes, and I was feeling the same way around Asher, and now Zeke! I really needed to get over these stupid crushes. But there was a nagging feeling in the back of my mind that was telling me this was something different. I pushed it away. No, it's not. It's the same, just some hormonal crush that will go away. I opened my eyes to find his soft eyes running over my face slowly, before meeting mine. He opened his mouth a bit as if he was going to say something, then he blinked and swallowed hard.

"Falling asleep?" His silky timber slid through my ear, making my skin tingle.

"Nope," I sighed. "Just thinking."

"I wouldn't blame you, computer work's not very interesting to watch," He admitted, looking back at one of the screens.

"It is when you're doing it," I said. He looked over at me again with surprise. I loved that I could put that look on his face.

"Why? Do I make faces or something?" He asked. I grinned mischievously at him. His eyes grew brighter as he waited.

"I should say yes," I teased. He half grinned at me as he waited. "You only make one face, and it's your 'I'm thinking' face," I told him.

"I don't understand how that is entertaining for you."

"It's not, but your eyes get excited and grow bright," I admitted. There was something about his room and our hushed voices that made it not embarrassing to admit to him. "The same thing happens when you talk about Astronomy or Astrophysics."

His half grin turned to a full one as his ears tinged pink. He looked back at the computer screens as he started typing again. "And that entertains you?" He asked softly.

"I like seeing you interested, or excited about something. You... act differently." He stopped typing to look at me.

"Different?"

"In a good way," I explained, my voice still quiet. "You don't worry if you're saying the wrong thing or if you're doing something wrong, you relax. You're just you." His eyes unfocused. I added, "It's just... something I like seeing." He blinked, his eyes focusing again. I shrugged looking up at the ceiling, I had to stop looking at him, my stomach kept making that low hard flip whenever he looked over at me. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before I looked at him again, his eyes were moving off me and back to the screen.

"Well, if that gets old," He said, grinning as he typed. "Feel free to fall asleep. You haven't been getting much sleep lately, and I'll understand completely," He said. I snorted still smiling at him. Miles went back to work while I secretly ogled him. Eventually, I did fall asleep.

"Angel."

"Hmm."

"Lexie, can you wake up?" Miles' silky timber made me smile. I couldn't help it, that voice had the most soothing effect on me. I opened my eyes to find Miles grinning down at me, his warm eyes running over my face. The last light of day was coming through the window.

"Hmm? What did I miss?" I mumbled.

"I found the program," He said. I blinked up at him confused, then his words sunk in. He found the program that let that creep spy on me?

"Really?"

"Really," He said. I beamed up at him before jumping to my knees on the bed and hugging him. He chuckled as he hugged me back

"That's my genius!" I practically gushed. He laughed in my ear as I squeezed him tight.

"I already gave it to Rory. They should be able to find him tonight." I pulled back enough to kiss his cheek. Then I was hugging him again.

"You're incredible, Miles," I told him.

"Not really-"

"Yes, really." I pulled back to sit on my heels, still smiling up at him. "You just saved my ass." His eyes ran over my face, then stopped at my lips. Did he..? His eyes were warm and soft when they met mine. My heart slammed in my chest. He let go of me and stepped back.

"No problem, Lexie," He said, his fingers tapping out that staccato rhythm on his leg. "Asher said dinner was ready before I came upstairs." I gave him a small smile before hopping off his bed and walking into the hall with him. He was acting nervous, like he had when we first met. Does he know...? Oh no, did he know I liked him? I know I almost kissed him at the campus but... I took a deep breath and let it out, we headed downstairs. In his room, I thought maybe he liked me too, at least for a second. But with the way, he's acting now... I told myself not to be disappointed. That it was a good thing that Miles didn't think of me that way, my heart still ached a bit. I walked into the kitchen to the smell of Asher's curry. Everyone was dishing up but Zeke.

"Guys, where's Zeke?" I asked. They all exchanged looks before Asher looked at me.

"He's downstairs in the weight room," Asher offered. "He's working off some anger." I raised an eyebrow at that.

"He was pissed off when he got here. He's been downstairs since he finished his homework," Isaac explained.

"I'll go see if I can get him to calm down," I told them as I walked to the false pantry and opened the door to the cellar. I headed down the carpeted

stairs and opened the door on the far end of the basement. Zeke was in his work out clothes, working out on the heavy bag, hard as if the thing owed him money. I watched him pound into the bag for a few minutes until I realized he still wasn't stopping. I walked through the weight room then stopped out of arms reach.

"Zeke," I called loudly. He stopped hitting the bag, he dropped his hands to his sides and turned to me. His barrel chest rose and fell as he took deep breaths, his eyes a bit wild as they met mine. "What's wrong?" I asked, worried. He waved his hand dismissively as he started to get his breath back. "Zeke, talk to me," I told him, my voice growing harder. My stomach knotted, and he clenched his jaw.

"I'm fine," He bit out as he went to a bench, picked up the towel and wiped the sweat off his face.

"Bullshit," I said instantly as I walked towards him. "This isn't fine, you're really pissed off." He looked away from me as he wiped the sweat off his arms.

"You should go upstairs," He said, his voice hard.

"Why?"

"Because..." He snapped as he ran a hand through his hair, a horrible thought occurred to me. I remembered what Serena said to me about Zeke. If anyone ever got in and hurt him...

"Is this about you and Riley breaking up?" I asked calmly. He chuckled darkly then shook his head.

"That was mutual," He told me. The knots in my stomach eased. Okay so, he wasn't hurting over Riley. But something was getting to him.

"Is it that I got you trouble with the Vice Principal?" I asked uncertainly. He shot me a look. "No, okay," I racked my brain. "Are you pissed about the photos on my hard drive?" I asked. His gaze snapped to me.

"What photos?" He growled. Shit.

"Okay, not that," I tried to gloss over it, he strode toward me.

"What photos?" He snapped as he stopped to tower over me.

"Relax, Miles deleted all of them. As in completely and utterly, they're never coming back deleted," I told him calmly. He made an angry, frustrated noise in the back of his throat.

"But Miles saw them," He bit out between his teeth.

"That's not why you've been down here," I steered my questions back to him. "What's going on?" He walked away restless. He threw the towel at the mirrored wall.

"He thought it was so fucking funny," He growled so quietly I almost didn't hear him.

"Who?" I asked. He shook his head, his shoulders rigid. He turned back to meet my eyes with his scalding gaze.

"Dylan," He bit out. He came back towards me, his eyes never leaving mine. My heart raced, my skin tingled as he towered over me. Leather, engine grease, and sweat tickled my nose as Zeke's eyes stayed on mine.

"What did he think...?" I couldn't think, my heart beat was in my ears as his eyes left mine to move down my face to focus on my lips.

"You and me," He breathed before he bent down and found my lips with his. My heart stopped as I kissed him back. Sunshine washed through me as his lips brushed gently against mine. He kissed me as if I was made of glass and he was afraid of breaking me, all I knew in the world was how amazing his lips felt against mine. I tilted my head back as his kiss moved deeper, his lips moved firmer against mine. I made a small noise in the back of my throat. One of his hands buried in my hair at the back of my head as he carefully pulled me against him with the other on my lower back. My arms slid around his waist as he kissed me tenderly. His lips moved slowly over mine as if he wanted to remember every brush, every stroke of my lips moving with his. I couldn't think, I could barely breathe.

"Zeke!" Isaac's voice barely registered to me. Zeke tore away from me, jumping back as if I had burned him. I met his wild eyes as we both tried to catch our breath. Panic flared in his eyes a second before he walked around me. The door to the weight room opened and closed.

"Come on, man, dinner's getting cold," Isaac said out in the hall.

"Yeah, yeah," Zeke growled.

"Where's Red?" Isaac asked.

"Don't know..." Zeke's voice disappeared down the hall.

My mind was blank as I held my fingers to my burning lips. I sat down on the bench as it hit me, I just kissed Zeke. Oh. My. God. I just kissed Zeke and *really* wanted to do it again. Damn, he was a good kisser. I took deep breaths as I tried to calm down. What the hell was I thinking? Zeke... I kissed him. Panic gripped me as I tried to remember what happened. No, no, he kissed ME. My heart was racing as I remembered his eyes before his lips touched mine, and I kissed him back. Oh, God. He knows how I feel. What did this mean? What-what was going to happen to us now? He started it, then he tore out of here as if he were running from the devil itself. Did he think it was a mistake? Did I think it was? Oh, fuck! I hid my face in my hands as I tried to sort it out in my head. He just ran off after... My chest was tight as I remembered that look of panic in his eyes before he left, I swallowed hard. Maybe I should just forget that this happened? Unless he brings it up? Yeah, that sounded good. At least for now. Okay, I can do this. I can go upstairs and pretend I didn't have the most amazing kiss in my life from one of my best friends. Right? Oh, I was so screwed. I took deep breaths until the tightness in my chest eased. I could do this, I can get through dinner and then freak out tonight in my bedroom. Okay. I got this. I got to my feet and went upstairs. I dished myself up in the kitchen then walked down to the family room, Zeke wasn't there. I climbed over the back of the small couch and dropped next to Isaac.

"Hey Red? Did you get lost?" Isaac asked. I smiled.

"Yeah, I did actually," I lied. Asher shook his head.

"How did you get lost downstairs? It's one hallway." Ethan asked.

"And a lot of doors," I countered. "I might have gotten a little distracted by the steam sauna." They guys chuckled. "We should really think about labeling those doors," I told them.

"Why? So, next time you get lost on purpose?" Isaac countered. I chuckled and bumped my shoulder into his. He bumped back. I relaxed, tucked my feet under me, and ate dinner.

"Where is Zeke anyway?" I asked in a neutral voice.

"He went to take a shower," Isaac said absently before taking a bite of chicken. I finished my dinner and put my bowl down on the carpet. I put my legs over the edge of the couch and leaned back against Isaac. He shifted a little so I was against his chest, and his arm around my waist. It was our usual movie cuddling position on this couch, the fact that it made me feel better right now was just a bonus. The movie was half over when Zeke did walk into the family room. I took a quick glance and saw he was dressed in his usual work clothes and his hair was wet. I looked away and back to the TV before he could catch me. Everyone talked and joked as we pointed out the plot holes in the movie. I could feel eyes on me, I turned my head and met Zeke's sky blue eyes. I gave him a small smile to let him know we would be fine then went back to watching the movie. Over the next hour whenever I felt someone watching me, I ignored it.

Around seven my cell rang, I pulled it out of my bra, it was Rory.

"Hey, Rory."

"We got him," Rory announced. I sat up straight.

"You got him, got him?" I asked to be clear. "As in custody? Cuffs? I can go home?" The movie went quiet, and all eyes watched me.

"Yeah, we got him," Rory told me. "The IP address... It was Dylan, Lexie."

"Seriously?" I asked, stunned.

"Yeah, we even have the photos on his computer," Rory told me. "He's being booked as we speak." I let out a deep sigh of relief. I fought back tears as it hit me, they got him.

"Thank you, Rory," I said, my throat tight. "I'll head home tonight."

"Okay, relax kid. I'll see you in the morning." Rory hung up. I shook my head as I put my phone back in my bra.

"Who was it?" Asher asked.

"It was Dylan," I announced. The guys looked at each other.

"Are they sure?" Ethan asked. I nodded.

"Yeah," I said. "They got him. It was his IP address, he even had photos on his computer." I shook my head at that. I could go home.

"Lexie Delaney, your stalker is now in jail. What are you going to do next?" Isaac asked in his announcer's voice.

"I'm going to go home and relax," I stated. I got up and headed out to the living room.

"I should be going, too," Ethan announced. "Ma will be home soon, and she wants to have a chat." Everyone started grabbing their stuff and headed out. I hugged Miles and thanked him again. He gave me a small squeeze and said no problem. I said bye to the others and headed out to the Blazer. I had just put Hades inside when someone came over.

"Lexie." Zeke's soft voice made me pause as my heart gave a painful throb. I plastered on a smile for him as he came over to stand next to me. "We need to talk," He said quietly. I took a deep breath and looked up at him. His eyes burned right through me.

"I guess so," I whispered.

"I'd talk to you now, but I've got to go to work," He groused.

"You can come over after work to talk," I offered. "Tara's at her Mom's." His eyes ran over my face.

"Are you sure? Your kind of tired," He reminded me.

"Do you want to talk tonight or not?" I asked pointedly. The corner of his lips twitched.

"Yeah," He said. "I'll come over after work." He started walking to the truck but hesitated. He turned back to me. "Rory said they were sure?" He asked.

"Yep" He frowned. "Why?" I asked. He shook his head.

"Nothing, just paranoid," He mumbled. "I'll see you after work." Zeke went to get in his rental truck. I climbed into the Blazer and headed home. My head was racing. Zeke wanted to talk. What kind of talk was this going to be? An I only like you as a friend talk? Or I want to date you talk? For the first time in my life, I wished I could read minds. Okay, how do I feel about the kiss? I fucking loved it. I rolled my eyes at myself, yeah, there

was no point in lying to myself. I cared about Zeke, and Asher, and Miles. But Miles didn't seem to be interested, and Asher probably wasn't. So, maybe... I chewed on the corner of my lower lip as I pulled onto my street. Was I actually thinking this? Did I really want to date Zeke? When I parked the Blazer, I knew my answer. Yeah, I wanted to date Zeke. I snorted at myself as I shut off the truck. Happy that I figured out how I felt, I grabbed my bag and book bag then slid to the road. I left Hades in the truck since I was already juggling my bags and my keys. I closed my door and walked around the truck. What if he doesn't want to date me? My heart ached at the thought, I swallowed hard. Then I'd put on my big girl panties and deal with it. I pulled out my keys and opened the door. Something hard wrapped around my throat and jerked me back. I dropped my keys and grabbed the arm choking me. Panic shot through me, I couldn't breathe. I dug into and pulled against the arm cutting off my air as the world started to spin. I kicked back and stomped, trying to make him ease his grip. But nothing helped, nothing worked. The world was turning dark at the edges. Hades was barking.

"Now, we'll be together," A familiar voice whispered into my ear as the world went black.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 20

Tuesday Night

I woke up on something soft but stiff. My throat ached, and my stomach rolled. I was cold and hot at the same time. I moved onto my side and curled up, groaning as nausea rolled through me. I took deep breaths trying to get through it as I tried to remember what happened. I was at the door to the house and then... no. A hand brushed my hair off my forehead.

"Take it easy, Alexis," He crooned. "It'll take a few minutes for the drug to wear off."

"Don't touch me," I growled. I tried to move away only my muscles weren't listening.

"I know you're going to be angry, but it was the only way to help you," He said in a patient voice. I knew that voice.

"Drugging me isn't helping me, Clay," I snapped. "It's fucked up." There was no warning, the sound of skin slapping skin was loud, my face felt like it had exploded. The world spun even more as I rolled away to the other side of the bed to get away from him. The room was a blur as I tried to get my eyes to focus.

"You don't have to talk that way anymore. They aren't here to make you," Clay said patiently, lecturing me.

"No one makes me do shit," I mumbled as I found the edge of the bed. Footsteps moved across the floor. A hard hand bit into my arm, bruising. I made a surprised pain filled noise.

"Stop talking like that," He snapped. I reached out and feebly tried to get his grip to loosen.

"Stop hurting me!" I shouted back. He fingers eased a bit, but his grip was still hard. Finally, able to see, I looked up at him. His black hair was

messy, his brown eyes were cold as he watched me. When my eyes met him, his face instantly softened. He sat down on the bed next to me.

"Alexis, you need to stop cursing. It's not you," He began in a soothing tone. It grated on my nerves. "You're sweet, caring and incredibly talented." He let go of my arm to run his hand over my hair again. It made my skin crawl.

"You don't know me," I groaned as another wave of nausea ran through me. The room was starting to settle. "What did you give me?" I asked.

"Just some Propofal. It's a general anesthetic," His voice was sweet and patient again, his hand stroking my arm where bruises were probably already forming. My stomach lurched again.

"I'm gonna be sick," I groaned. He got up, reached under me, and lifted me into his arms against his chest. I cringed, but I was going to puke, and I was more than willing to puke on this fucker.

"It's a side effect, it should wear off in another couple of minutes." He explained.

"If you dosed me right," I countered as he carried my limp body into a bathroom.

"My father is a doctor. I checked your dosage twenty-five times," He tried to be reassuring, it didn't work. He set me down on the floor in front of the toilet carefully. I weakly pushed up the lid and promptly started puking. My stomach heaved and rolled until I thought I was going to die. Clay held my hair back and whispered things he probably thought were comforting. I tuned him out and focused on breathing between bouts of sickness.

When I finally stopped, I was shaking. I pushed his hands off me weakly, then laid down on the floor of the bathroom and just tried to breathe. He knelt beside me and went to touch me again, I had enough.

"Stop touching me," I growled. "I don't know you. Don't touch me." He gave me a sweet smile.

"You know me, I'm your soulmate," He told me gently. Yep, he really was nuts. "You'll see in time. That's why we're here at the cabin, to give you time."

"For what? Stockholm syndrome to kick in?" I asked, sarcastically. He chuckled as he ran a hand down the outside of my leg.

"You're so funny, Alexis." He smiled to himself. The room was slowing down.

"Don't call me that, "I grumbled. The drug was wearing off. My body was slowly becoming mine again.

"It's a beautiful name. it's much better than Lexie," He informed me, in a condescending tone. What an ass. He kept talking. "Beautiful, like the paintings you make. I made sure to pick up your art supplies before I brought you here." What? He was in the house? That...

"Hades," I said. He frowned at me. "My dog, Hades, what did you do to him?" I asked. If he hurt my baby at all, I was going to kill him.

"I left him in your car," He said. My temper spiked as I glared at him.

"It's, like, twenty degrees outside," I pointed out.

"It's a dog. You don't need a dog," He snapped, his fingers biting into my thigh. "You don't need anything or anyone but me," He said, his voice warning me. I needed to figure this guy out, I needed him to take me to town or somewhere with people, and I needed to do it without getting hit anymore. Feeling stronger, I went to sit up. He reached out to help me.

"Don't... just... don't," I all but snapped. His eyes flashed. Okay... not a good start. I softened my voice. "My body aches. It hurts when you touch me." His hands pulled back as he winced.

"I'm sorry. It was-"

"Necessary. You said that." I moved until I was leaning against the tub. Clay reached out, flushed the toilet, then closed the lid. "What about Dylan?" I asked carefully. "Putting those photos on his computer, was that necessary too?" He closed his eyes and hung his head.

"Yes. It wasn't hard to get into his computer and use IP address," He murmured. "I'm sorry to betray your trust like that, but the police don't understand," He said. I blinked. Betray my trust? Did he seriously think I wanted him to...? There was a muffled sound, he pulled my cellphone out of

his pocket. He checked it, his face darkened. His expression made me swallow hard.

"Ethan Turner just texted you. He's looking for you. You apparently have band practice tonight," He announced, his voice tight and sharp. I stopped myself from smiling. The guys must have realized I was gone, they were checking on me. "Well, you're not singing in that band anymore," Clay stated. His cold eyes met mine. "What's your nickname for him? I know you have one for all of them." His voice was hard and shaking, he didn't like that at all. I swallowed hard.

"Blue eyes," I told him. "I call him blue eyes." He frowned at me. His hand shot out and grabbed my face in his hard grip. I yelped in pain as his fingers dug into the bruises on my jaw.

"He doesn't have blue eyes," He growled.

"That's the joke!" I yelled as I fought to pry his hand off me. He let go, looked away from me, and took deep breaths. Inside, I was shaking. This guy was fucking psycho, beyond anything I ever imagined. I had to get away from him before he killed me. In fact, I felt stronger and ready to give him hell. I stayed limp against the tub as I sized him up, he was Zeke's height and half his size. Shit, he had reach and strength. All he had to do was grab me. I was going to take Zeke's advice, run and don't get caught. His pleasant face slipped back on.

"Fine. But that's going to stop," He ordered as he texted Ethan back. I looked around the bathroom. There was a small window above the toilet. Small, but big enough for me. I looked back to him. "My fiancé doesn't need other men in her life," He stated. I fought the urge to argue. My phone vibrated.

"He says: 'I get it, at least you got to try something new. See ya soon," Clay bit out through his teeth. His eyes were hard when they went to me. "You won't be seeing him anymore." I nodded as if I agreed with him, when I was actually remembering the GPS locators on me. One in my shoe, the other in my bra. I eyed my phone; that had been in my bra before I passed out. What else did he...? My stomach rolled as I pushed the thought away and concentrated on survival. The guys were coming or sending help.

"I need a private moment," I said in small voice. He looked conflicted. "Please," I begged with my eyes wide, I was more than willing to use every girl card I had. His face softened with understanding.

"Of course, my love," He said sweetly. He got to his feet and stepped out the door closing it behind him. I got up immediately and turned on the faucet.

"I just don't want you to hear me," I explained in a shy girly voice.

"I understand completely," He called through the door. Yeah, I just bet you do you fucker. I looked down at my shirt, it was untucked and several buttons unfastened. Fear rolled through my mind, but I pushed it away. It wasn't going to help right now. He said we were at a cabin, which meant a road. I ran my hand over my bra, I didn't feel the tracker. I pushed back panic as I checked my right boot, it was still there. I sighed in relief as I tied my boot again. I was getting out of here, now. Heart racing, I quietly opened the window. The cold air washing over my face cleared my head even more. I stepped onto the toilet and climbed out carefully. I dropped silently to the snow, the cold bit into me but I didn't care. I got to my feet and ran to the tree line. Arms pumping, my heart pounding, I circled the cabin and found the drive way. I ran through the tree line following it, staying under the trees to where the snow wasn't so thick, where I could touch dirt and not leave such obvious prints. It wasn't long before he realized I was gone.

"Alexis!" His shout echoed through the woods. I fought for breath as adrenaline surged through me, pushing me. I pumped my arms harder and ran faster, silently thanking Zeke for all those miles he made me run for cardio. I kept moving, it was all I could do. I was leaving footprints behind in the snow, all I could do was stay out of his reach now.

It wasn't long until footsteps were behind me. I cursed, I swerved to the right through the trees and tried to use the underbrush to trip him up. It didn't work, I was hit from behind, my face hit the snow. I tried to scramble out from under his weight, but he had a good grip on me. He rolled me over onto my back so I swung and made contact. He cursed as he straddled my waist. I brought my hands up into one fist and slammed them down towards his groin. He blocked my arms, then grabbed them in a harsh grip. I raised my pelvis trying to shift him enough to make him let go. He was too heavy.

"Fucking let me go!" I grunted at him as I tried to get an arm free. His eyes were wild as his fist shot out, I tasted blood as the world went black for a moment.

"You think you can leave me?" He shouted before hitting me again. My head felt like it exploded, the world spun. "I own you," He snarled his hand going to my neck. He started squeezing. Through the haze, I realized what was happening. I reached up and scratched my nails down his face taking skin with me. He cried out, let go of my throat to pin my arm. I took deep gasping breaths as he cursed at me. I could barely understand as the darkness faded from my vision, his weight disappeared. Before I could do anything, he grabbed a fistful of my shirt and dragged me to my feet. I staggered as he pulled me with him back toward the cabin. I fought against him the whole way, until he pinned me against his chest with his hand around my throat. His rich musky cologne filled my nose and was thick on my tongue. Anytime I tried to resist he'd squeeze until I couldn't breathe. "I know you're only fighting because of them, Alexis," He told me patiently, his voice still sharp. I really had pissed him off. A big part of me thought 'good,' the other thought 'stupid.' I didn't know which was the right reaction.

"In time, you'll see. Our marriage will be perfect. Our children will be beautiful," He said confidently.

"Planning to rape me?" I snapped through my teeth. His free hand moved over my body to my breast. He squeezed hard, my stomach rolled as fear filled me.

"This is already mine," He growled in my ear. Nausea tore through me as his hand left my breast and move between my legs to grab me. I shuddered. "This is mine." He squeezed hard, pain shot through me. I whimpered and pushed at his hand. "I'm giving you time because I know those fuckers used you," He hissed in my ear as he let go. I was shaking as he forced me to walk again. I didn't fight this time, I just wanted his hands off me. With terror tightening my throat, he got me back to the cabin without a fight. He shoved me into a wooden chair then lifted my chin. His cold eyes ran over my face and forced my eye lids up. "No damage." He mumbled as he went to the fridge.

"No damage except my throat," I bit out, my voice scratchy. "Oh, and the beating." I couldn't seem to shut up. The guys are coming, they are

sending help, I'm not alone. I just needed to get through this without him touching me like that. I focused on that. I'd do whatever he fucking wanted if it would keep him from touching me like that again. My stomach was beyond knotted, and I felt like I was going to be sick, but no luck.

"Because of that stunt, you've lost any right to privacy," He lectured. "Until I can see that you're you again." I didn't know what he meant by 'the right to privacy, ' and I didn't ask.

Clay made an ice pack, grabbed a chair and sat in front of me. I tried to move away, but his hand went to my knee stopping me. He held the ice to my face, I held it there so he'd let go. He did, so I didn't move. I was too afraid he'd... His hand ran down my hair.

"I know you don't feel that you're my soulmate," He said softly. "But that's because of those so-called friends of yours." His fingers went to my braid and began undoing it. "They tried to keep you from me and they'll pay for it. But right now, it's about you and me." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring he sent me. He grabbed my left hand and looked into my eyes.

"Alexis, will you marry me?" He asked sincerely. I snorted.

"Are you kidding me?" I asked dryly. "You just beat the shit out of me out there. Then you groped me," I growled my temper rising. I wasn't thinking anymore, I was pissed. "You think this is love? You are more fucked up than you realize." His eyes darkened as he shoved the ring onto my finger. It hurt.

"You're my fiancé," He growled. "You'll see in time, when all the other distractions are gone." I smiled darkly.

"It's never going to happen, Clay," I said clearly. What the fuck was I doing? I wanted to stall him not piss him off! But I couldn't seem to stop myself. His eyes darkened. "I am not yours. And I never will be," I growled. He slapped me, I cried out as my eye felt like it ruptured.

His hands grabbed my shoulders and pulled me to my feet, his face inches from mine.

"I own you," He growled.

"Ownership isn't love, it's slavery. And I'm not meek enough to put up with someone who hurts me like this." He raised his hand to hit me, this time I was ready. I blocked his slap and struck him across the jaw. As he staggered, I went for the door. He let out a shout. He tackled me from behind, slamming me to the floor. I rolled out from under him and tried to get away. He snagged my foot and dragged me back under him. His fist went to my stomach, I grunted and instantly wanted to puke. I brought my knee up trying to hit his balls. He blocked then grabbed me around my neck, furious.

"You think a groin hit is funny?" He snarled. He lifted his weight and slammed his knee down between my legs. I screamed in agony as my body tried to curl up, but his body was in the way. He hit me with his fists again and again. Still in agony and seeing black spots from the groin hit, I covered my head and tried to protect myself, it didn't work. He kept getting through. His hands wrapped around my neck then he started to slam my head into the floor, all the while calling me names. His fingers tightened, I couldn't think, I didn't know where I was. I couldn't remember who he was. All I knew was pain and his hands tightening around my throat. I tried to hit them away but I couldn't... The world started to fade. All I could see was his face over me, feel his large body pinning me to the floor boards, the darkness was closing in. A loud crash sounded far away. A blur moved across what vision I had left, and I could breathe again. I took big gasping breaths as pain racked me. I rolled to my side, still seeing stars. Hands touched me. I cried out, my vision still dark, I tried to move away.

"Lexie!" A voice from somewhere called, I swung at it. "Pikachu, I choose you!" I went still. No one knew about that except...

"Miles?" My croak was barely audible.

"It's me, Angel, let me get you out of here," He said in that that quiet, silky timbre I loved. Relief filled me. Tears instantly poured down my face.

"Miles." My voice was barely audible over the fighting going on. Hands touched me, and this time I didn't fight. I smelled wintergreen and clung to him as he picked me up off the floor. My body throbbed in agony and the world spun, but they were there.

"Don't kill him, Isaac!" Miles warned before he took me into the cold. Sirens were loud outside, I buried my face in the smell of wintergreen as he walked. "Angel, I need to sit you on the trunk and look at you," He said before shifting me. I was put on something hard. I gasped as pain shot between my legs. Miles went still. "Lexie, open your eyes." I was panting through the pain as I opened my eyes. Miles' emerald met mine, his eyes were wide, his face strained as he looked at me. "Tell me what hurts," He ordered.

"Everything," I sobbed. I couldn't stop crying, I couldn't... He held me gently.

"What did he do?" He whispered as the sirens arrived.

"Lots of hitting." I managed between deep breaths.

"Any bleeding?" He asked calmly.

"I don't know," I whimpered. He didn't ask me anything else. He just held me as the sirens arrived.

"He's inside, one of our friends might be killing the bastard," Miles announced his voice cold as a glacier. "Where's the ambulance?"

"It'll be here in a minute," Someone said. "Miss, can you-?"

"Don't touch her," Miles warned the cop, his voice cold and sharp. I barely noticed, I was too busy just trying to make it through the next minute. "She's in a lot of pain. You can wait until she sees a doctor," Miles snapped coldly. More sirens arrived.

"Lexie!" Rory's voice broke something inside me. I crumbled against Miles.

"She's conscious," Miles said. "She's in a lot of pain, though." Hands touched bruises. I whimpered and buried myself against Miles, the hands went away. "It's just Rory, Angel," Miles told me in his soothing voice. I took a deep breath and nodded that I heard him.

"Hurts," I explained in a raspy voice.

"The ambulance is here," Rory announced. "Kid, come here, let me see." I pulled back to look up at Rory. His amber eyes ran over me, his

expression murderous. Another wave of pain tore through me as I moved on the trunk.

"Hospital, now," I whispered in a scratchy voice. Rory nodded then lifted me into his arms.

"You got it, kid," He said as he moved toward the ambulance. He ignored the other cops who were saying that they needed my statement. He climbed up and laid me down on something too hard to be called soft. He pulled back until I looked up at him, his face was strained, his eyes red. "We're going to the hospital now," Rory told me gently. I nodded, still crying too much to try to speak. He looked at someone out of my sight. "Give me that blanket," He bit out, he covered me in warm fabric. He left me long enough to go to the back of the ambulance.

"Miles get Isaac and call the others. Don't tell them what happened. Just say that she'll be okay," Rory ordered. "Have Asher pick her up some comfortable clothes. Don't tell Zeke any details. I'll tell him when he gets to the hospital."

"I'll take care of it," Miles agreed.

"Thank you, Miles," Rory said, his voice thick.

"Don't leave her alone," Miles replied. Rory came back and sat beside me, his face was drawn and pale. Doors closed somewhere as he took my hand, I clutched his hand in a death grip. Tears fell down his face as the ambulance took off. I couldn't stop crying, I kept feeling his hands on me.

"I'm going to be sick," I muttered. Rory helped me lean over the side of the gurney. I dry heaved and sobbed at the same time.

"It's going to be okay, kid," He said his voice confident as he helped me lay back down. His forehead met mine as I kept crying. "It's going to be okay." I didn't believe him.

The ride to the hospital was a haze of pain. I don't remember how long it took, but I was in a curtained off section of the ER soon. A woman in scrubs was next to me, she had Rory leave. I didn't understand. My head was killing me, the world tilting here and there. The nurse was back with some cloth in her hand.

"My name is Lilly, and I'm a nurse here. I'm going to help you change," She said in a soothing voice. I didn't understand until she tried to unbutton my shirt. I knocked her hands away and tried to move away from her, but I only ended up groaning in pain. She pulled her hands back and ran her gaze over me again. Then she gave me a strained smile. "Lexie, is there something the doctor should know?" She asked quietly. I blinked up at her, my head was killing me. Huh?" I asked, confused. She sighed sadly and left the curtained off section. There was whispering on the other side of the curtain. Rory came back in and sat down in the chair next to the bed, his face was pale. After a little while, a woman wearing scrubs and a white coat came in. The doctor examined me without making me change. She was mostly concerned with my eyes, throat, and head pain. The nurse gave me an IV and some pain killers. The pain finally receded enough that I could think again. When the nurse noticed that I was more coherent, she went and brought in the doctor again and a female police officer. The doctor asked me several questions which I answered. Then the doctor looked at the police officer, she stepped forward and asked me what happened. I told her everything that I remembered. What happened when I woke up, what happened when I ran, and what happened when he got me back to the cabin. I told her everything. My voice sounded like a frog as I spoke.

When I was done, the officer took a deep breath and asked, "Lexie, when you woke up, were you dressed?" My stomach rolled as I thought about those buttons.

"Yeah, but..." I took a deep breath and told them. "My shirt was untucked, and a few buttons were messed with." I looked at her shoulder in that dark blue uniform. "He had my phone. When he knocked me out, it was in my bra, and I'm missing a tracker that was in the same place," I croaked. The officer and the doctor shared a look, the doctor knelt down and met my eyes.

"Lexie, I'm going to have you get an MRI and x-ray of your skull. I think you have a concussion, and even possibly a skull fracture," She said gently. "Then I'm going to suggest that you get a S.A.R.T kit done."

I blinked at her. "A what?"

"It's a rape kit," She explained. My heart dropped. "From what you've told us, I think you should have one, just to be sure. And you'll be needing a

pelvic exam for your groin injury anyway, we can do it at the same time." The world spun, and tears fell. I nodded. What else could I do? I needed to know.

Chapter 21

The Hospital

What they never tell you about a rape kit is that it can take hours. I'd already been sped through the MRI and the X-ray department for my other injuries. Then we started the rape kit. I had been examined, hair plucked, my injuries photographed, my nails had been scraped for DNA, and I gave my statement again, in more detail. I broke down crying three times. I thought that wasn't so bad for how I felt. I was laying on the exam table, my feet in those fucking stirrups and trying not to cry again. My groin hurt, a lot, and I couldn't remember if it hurt before the knee to the groin or not. I'd still be crying just from that if wasn't for the IV of pain killers the doctor given me. The doc was about to lift the paper sheet when there was a knock on the door. Dr. Melville frowned as her assistant answered the door. There was whispering then the assistant closed the door and came back to my side.

"Lexie, there is a woman named Maria here for you," She said. "She wanted to know if you'd like company." I started crying immediately and nodded. The assistant went back to the door and let the twins' Mom in. Maria strode through the room straight to my side as I started sobbing uncontrollably. She took my hand and gave me a small understanding smile.

"Rory called and told me what was happening, honey," She said softly. "No matter what this test says, you're going to be okay," She promised. She hugged me tight until I could stop crying. She wiped my face and gave me a smile.

"Do the guys know?" I croaked.

"Miles does, he met me at the ER entrance and brought me here. That's all I know," Maria said. "Are you ready?" I nodded. Maria looked down at the doctor who waited patiently. "Let's find out," She said. The doctor nodded then lifted the sheet, I closed my eyes tight as I tried not to be sick.

It was a few minutes of hell, then the doctor was putting the sheet down again and standing up.

"Lexie, I don't see any sign of sexual activity, consensual or otherwise," She announced. I went limp with relief, Maria wasn't so convinced.

"How can you tell?" Maria asked.

The doctor answered matter-of-factly. "There would be tears, irritation, even bleeding. The only damage is around your clitoral area, which is extremely bruised. That, I believe, came from your attacker's knee?" I nodded, still too relieved to speak. "I can continue the exam if you like, but from my experience, I'm confident that you were not raped tonight." I took a few deep breaths as that news set in. I hadn't been raped. I thought about finishing the exam, I looked at Dr. Melville.

"Let's do the whole exam," I said in my frog voice. "I'd hate to be wrong because he had a tiny dick." Maria gave a small sigh. Dr. Melville gave me a small sympathetic smile. Well, I thought it was funny. The doctor went back to her stool.

"Deep breath, Lexie," She told me. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply forcing myself to relax as she used the speculum. A few minutes later and it was over. I was able to put my legs down from the stirrups and sit up. Though my body still wanted me to die, I knew the truth. I hadn't been raped. I still felt disgusting where he touched me, but he didn't rape me.

"I'm sure these tests are going to come back negative," The doctor assured me. "You're going to be in the staying in the hospital overnight for observation and pain management," Dr. Melville told me gently. I nodded, too emotional to say anything. Maria hugged me as I held on tight to her as I cried in relief. I got a whiff of his musky cologne and I felt his hands on me again.

"God. I can still smell his cologne," I bit out.

"Can we get her a shower?" Maria asked. Dr.Melville seemed to think about it.

"I'm worried about her skull fracture. So, we could have you use a seated shower with a nurse," Dr. Melville explained. I crossed my arms over my chest at the idea. Maria's arm gave me a squeeze. Dr. Melville added. "Or we can set you up with a sponge bath."

"Then let's get her a sponge bath," Maria demanded for me.

"Of course," The doctor and her assistant left the room as I cried on Maria's shoulder. She sang to me in Spanish. I don't know what song it was, but it helped me calm down. The nurse came back with warm water, soap, and towels. Maria steadied me and held up the sheet, so I was covered as I washed until I felt clean again, until I couldn't smell that cologne on my skin. Then she helped me into the clothes the guys brought from home for me. Asher's Sylvester the cat bottoms, Zeke's giant blue thermal that reached my knees, and Miles' hoodie. Maria wet my hair, brushed it out, then braided it for me. When I was ready, she covered me back up with a blanket and sat with me.

"Thanks for coming," I said. Maria gave my hand a squeeze.

"Of course, honey," She said softly. "The doctor suggested a sedative, I'm going to suggest it for tonight."

"Really?" I asked, my voice small.

"Yes, you've taken a beating and need to rest," She said. "You won't tonight, not without help." I thought about it and nodded. She kissed my forehead and went to get the nurse. The nurse came in with an ice pack and a syringe then explained what she was giving me and what the side effects were. I didn't care, I was too busy putting the ice pack between my legs. It was cold at first, but it helped with the pain. The world became fuzzy and less sharp as I relaxed into the bed. Maria stayed with me until the nurse came to take me to my room for the night.

"Do you want me to stay, honey?" She asked. I shook my head.

"You've got to work tomorrow," I told her. "I'll take your advice and stayed sedated tonight." Maria gave me a small smile.

"If you need to talk, or anything, you call," She ordered me. I nodded. I felt horrible for not telling her that Sophie was in her house, but I managed to keep my mouth shut until she walked out the door. A couple of people came in with the nurse. They unlocked the wheels and moved the bed through the hallways until we reached the third floor. They set me up again,

gave me the buzzer, and left the room. It started to snow outside. I watched the snow fall through the window. Soon, voices came down the hall.

"She took a beating," Rory's voice announced. "She has a skull fracture, one eye completely black. She had some testing done and ... well... She took a beating. So, don't be surprised when she looks like shit."

"Thanks, Rory," I called in a scratchy, hoarse voice. Rory cursed, then came in and looked around the curtain.

"Sorry, kid," He said gently before stepping further into the room. The others came in behind him, but I couldn't focus enough to see them.
"What'd did the doc say?" Rory's voice was hard and shaky.

"Negative," I said. "I did the rest of the test to be sure. But... she said she's sure it's negative." Tension melted out of Rory as he took a deep breath in relief. His eyes shimmered.

"Good," He managed, his voice thick. "Is... is there anything you need?" He was struggling, even sedated I could see that.

"Ice cream," I said, mostly to give him something to do. "I want ice cream, chocolate, and strawberry or cherry if you can find it." He snorted, it pushed the tears back for him.

"I'm on it, kid." He ran his hand through his hair. "I'll... I'll hit the store." Rory headed out of the room and down the hall. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before I looked at the guys. Miles was leaning against the wall next to the curtain near the bed, Zeke was standing just inside the curtain, and the twins were at the end of the bed. Isaac's knuckles were bruised, and he had a black eye, but that seemed to be it. Asher was leaning against the cabinets in front of the windows. Every one of them had dark faces and shadowed filled eyes.

I didn't know how to fix it. "I'm okay, guys."

"What test?" Zeke asked carefully. I looked up. He was watching me, his hands clenching and unclenching. I opened my mouth and closed it. Zeke's eyes narrowed on me, demanding an answer. Apparently, Miles had kept it a secret. Crap.

"I was dressed when I blacked out, and when I woke up... a few... a few buttons were...." I stopped, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath then

looked at him. "I just needed to be sure." I didn't have it in me to say it, but I didn't have to. Zeke's eyes went wide, his body rigid.

"Did you just have a fucking rape kit done?" Zeke growled. Everyone but Miles went still. I fought off tears and took deep breaths.

"Zeke," Miles began patiently. Zeke shot him a look that silenced Miles then looked back at me, his eyes were tortured.

"Someone should have been with you," He breathed. Tears started to fall as reality hit me hard, I'd just had a rape kit done.

"I.." I took a deep breath.

"One of us should have been with you," Zeke said again, sounding lost. I started crying.

"It was hard enough to have the test," I told him, my voice small and shaking like the rest of me.

"I didn't want to even think..." Ethan came around the bed and sat on the side facing me.

"Lexie, you don't have to explain anything," Ethan told me, his voice gentle but firm, his hands going to my arms. "Not to us, not to Zeke. As long as you got the support you needed."

"Rory called Maria, Zeke," Miles said calmly as he walked over to Zeke. "Maria told me she got here in time for the worst part. She wasn't alone in there."

I sat up and hugged Ethan, my face buried in his shirt. He wrapped his arms around me gently; I took a deep breath of spice as I tried to calm down. Limes reached me as a hand went to my back.

"You're okay, Lexie," Isaac said softly. The bed dipped, vanilla reached me as a hand went to my shoulder.

"You're safe now, Ally," Asher whispered. That just made me cry harder, because he was right, I was safe now, I could cry all I needed to. Another hand went to my other shoulder.

"We're here for you," Miles said in that soothing voice of his. I shook under their hands as I kept sobbing. A large hand ran over my hair.

"I... I'm... I'm going to get Hades," Zeke muttered. Lips touched my hair then the hand was gone. He left? Zeke just left?

"He's just getting your puppy," Miles reassured me.

"Zeke loves you, honey," Ethan whispered in my ear. "He just can't take seeing you cry like this, I'm tempted to join him myself." I nodded that I heard him. They held me as long as I needed them to. Eventually, I pulled back from Ethan and wiped my face.

"Can someone get the nurse? I don't think the sedative is working," I asked. Miles hurried out into the hallway immediately. The guys convinced me to lay back down, and with the pain coming back, I didn't care. The nurse came back in, she explained it was time for my pain meds again and that she was adding another dose of the sedative. After a while, I relaxed in the bed. Ethan covered me with the blankets and took the chair on the left side of the bed, Isaac sat on the ground while Miles and Asher went looking for chairs to bring in.

The world was fuzzy again, and my body didn't want me to die so much when they brought back chairs for everyone. The guys were chatting when Rory came back in, empty handed.

"No ice cream?" I croaked. He gave me a small apologetic smile.

"Sorry, I had a talk with Zeke, and now the stores are closed," Rory apologized as he sat down on the side of the bed and looked at me.

"You know what this means," I said.

"What?" Rory asked.

"Milkshake for breakfast," I grinned as much as I could without hurting my face. His eyes ran over me as his face grew concerned.

"Lexie, are you okay?" Rory asked.

"She had a small breakdown," Miles answered for me. "She's sedated now." Rory looked at me.

"A drugged Lexie is a good Lexie right now," I said in a silly all-knowing voice.

"You sure about that, kid?" Rory asked.

"It's just for tonight," I told him. "I'll have another breakdown tomorrow, and you can deal with that one." The guys chuckled as Rory sighed.

"Okay."

"They arrested him, right?" I asked. Rory nodded.

"Yeah, Isaac did a pretty decent job of beating the shit out of him. He's in the hospital, handcuffed to a bed," Rory explained. "But as soon as he's released, he's going to jail." My stomach dropped. He was in the building?

"Rory, can you..." I began, then swallowed hard. "Can you watch him?" Rory blinked.

"He has a guard stationed outside his room-"

"I know that, I don't know him, but I know you," I said quickly as if it made sense. "Please, watch the fucker?"

Rory took a deep breath before looking to the guys. "Are all of you staying?" He asked. They all said yes, Rory nodded then met my eyes. "I'll go camp out in his room," He promised.

"Thank you." My voice shook with relief, Rory got up and headed out. The guys turned the TV on.

I simply floated there, half-awake and half asleep, when a dog whined. I opened my eyes and listened. The animal was crying, whining, and whimpering as if he was being tortured. It made my heart ache.

"No animals allowed!" Someone shouted.

"Service animal," Zeke's growl came from the hallway. When he turned into the room, Hades was pulling on his leash like he never had before. When Zeke walked in, he just dropped the lead. Hades ran and jumped up onto my bed and immediately started sniffing me.

"Hades, baby, I'm okay," I told him in my soothing voice. Hades stopped whining as the puppy examined my face, neck, and body. I looked up at Zeke. "How long was he crying like that?" He ran his hand through his hair.

"Since I picked him up," Zeke said. "He saw you get grabbed. I think he's been like that since." I hugged my dog to me, he rested his head in the crook of my arm and passed out. I shifted to get comfortable and winced. I wanted another ice bag but... I looked around the room at the guys and said fuck it.

"Could someone get me a bag of ice from the nurse, please?" I asked the room in my rough voice.

"No problem, Red." Isaac got up from his chair next to my bed on my right and headed out. Zeke walked over and sat down. His face was hard, his eyes haunted as he looked at me. He didn't say anything, he just examined my face and my neck. He opened his mouth when Isaac walked back in and handed me the ice.

"Thanks," I said as I put in under my blanket and between my legs. The whole room went still.

"Lexie," Zeke said in his 'I'm trying not to kill someone' voice. "You said the test was negative."

"It was," I groaned, as I shifted until I was comfortable. "He kneed me in the groin," I muttered, everyone relaxed. The guys started talking again, they made jokes and tried to keep me smiling. Eventually, the meds really kicked in, and I fell asleep.

A hard, shaky breath woke me up. I opened my eyes, my hospital room was dark and the guys were gone but someone was taking deep, ragged breaths. I looked to my right, Zeke was still in the chair next to me. His elbows were braced on his knees, his forehead resting in his palms. His shoulders shook as he took deep, shaking breaths. My heart broke. Zeke... Zeke was crying, I couldn't take it. I pulled my blankets off and moved to get up. He quickly wiped his face and lifted his head. His bloodshot eyes narrowed on me.

"Baby, what are you doing?" His voice was thick as he reached out and stopped me from putting my feet on the floor.

"Hugging you." Wasn't it obvious? I went to stand up. He stopped me again.

"No, you're staying in bed. You've got a fucking crack in your skull, and you're bruised to hell and back," He snapped.

"Zeke, I'm hugging you. Either let me up or get your ass over here," I told him matter-of-factly. His ice blue eyes were tortured as he met my gaze, he knew I wasn't joking.

"Get back in bed," He told me gently. I carefully brought my legs back into the bed then scooted over slowly. Zeke waited until I stopped moving then he sat down carefully next to me. I leaned forward so he could put his shoulder behind me. When he settled with one leg on the bed, I curled up against his side. My head rested on his shoulder while his arm wrapped around me and held me to him, he treated me like glass. His other hand pulled my blanket up to cover me again. I rested my hand on his chest as he took a deep shaking breaths. I listened to him breathe and felt safe, I really needed it.

"Are you okay?" I asked quietly. His lips went to my hair.

"You were beaten and had a rape kit done today," He whispered against my skin. "No, I'm not okay." I hugged him tighter, well, as tight as my beaten body would allow me. I remembered the feel of Clay's hand on me. I buried my face into his shirt then breathed in leather and engine grease.

"I'm here, he's handcuffed to a bed, Rory is watching him. You're safe." Clay would never touch me again, Zeke would kill him before he even got close. He scared me, even handcuffed to a bed somewhere, he scared me. I started talking, Zeke had to know so he could understand how scared I really was.

"He yelled at me a lot, mostly a lot of psychobabble and he kept hitting me." I whispered. "And..." My voice choked off.

"You don't have to tell me if you're not ready," He whispered into my hair. I wanted him to know, someone needed to understand.

"He grabbed me," My voice was barely a whisper. "Second and third over my clothes." I summed up the worst as vaguely as possible using a baseball metaphor. Zeke took a deep breath and let it out slowly as it ran through my hair like a warm breeze.

"I'm okay though," I whispered. "I'm here-"

"You're not okay," He said. "I know you're not okay. Not after that fucker put his hands on you." I never could really lie to him.

"Touché."

"We'll get you some help, Baby," He promised his voice thick. I nodded, the silence stretched in the dark room.

"We still need to talk," I reminded him in my hoarse voice. His hand ran down my hair as he gently kissed my forehead.

"Not until you're better," Zeke whispered. "Not until you're healed and ready. It can wait until then."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," he whispered. "I want you okay again more than I want to figure it out." I stopped fighting it, I relaxed in his arms and fell asleep.

The Boys: Zeke

I watched as Lexie shifted her legs under the blanket. She did that whenever the icepack she was using stopped working, and I wasn't the only one to notice. Asher got to his feet.

"I'll get her another icepack," Asher murmured.

"Ask about her meds, she should be due soon," I told him. He nodded that he heard before heading out the door. I looked at her again. Her face was mostly black and purple, her left eye was completely black and bruises in the shape of hands covered her throat. Fury burned in my stomach as I looked at what that fucker had done to her. I checked the clock on the wall, three hours. It had been three hours since I walked into this room and opened my big mouth.

After making her cry, I had to fix it, and I didn't know how. The others were holding her and I didn't know what to do except get Hades, she'd worry about him otherwise. But first, I walked through the hospital looking for Ordin's room. It wasn't hard to find, it was the only one with a cop guarding it. Rory was there talking to the guard. He spotted me coming down the hall, he broke off to meet me before I reached the door.

"What are you thinking, Zeke?" Rory asked casually. I looked over Rory's head to the door.

"I want to see him," I said calmly. Rory frowned at me.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" He asked.

"I need to see the fucker who hurt her," My voice grew deeper. Rory sighed.

"Okay," Rory agreed. He shot the other cop a look then walked into the room ahead of me. The fucker was huge compared to her. My height, and half my size. He still outweighed her by at least eighty pounds. His face was beaten to hell, completely black and blue. He had scratches down one side of his face. One of his eyes were swollen shut, the other went to me

and grew wide. He had one arm in a cast. He was shirtless so I could see his ribs were wrapped, bruising was everywhere. His left leg was in a brace where Isaac broke the fucker's knee. That was it. And she looked... It still wasn't enough. I went after him, Rory shouted and pushed me back. I don't remember what I was yelling at that piece of shit but his face turned white under the bruises as Rory, and the other cop, pulled me from the room. Rory grabbed my jacket and made me walk away with him. He kept saying that Lexie needed me here and not in jail, that Clay was going to jail on several charges. That it was a slam dunk case, but it didn't matter to me. I just kept seeing my Lexie's face beaten to hell, I kept seeing her crying and I kept thinking about the fact she had to have... I pushed it away. I couldn't think about it and stay sane. Rory kept walking with me around the building for I don't know how long. Long enough for me to cool down and finally hear what he was saying. She needed me here. Not in jail, that would only upset her more. He was right. I couldn't let her down, not again.

She whimpered in her sleep bringing my attention back to the present. I reached out and carefully held her hand. She relaxed again, a small smile on her lips. My heart skipped a beat like it had every time I saw that smile. Every time I saw those sparkling eyes. Ever since that first corny ass joke, I never stood a chance.

Riley even knew it, she said so. I had tried with Riley. Hell, I even held her fucking hand in front of other people. I never tried for someone before, but it didn't matter in the end. When she asked me if I loved her, I knew it was over. I wouldn't lie to her and Riley knew it.

"You're in love with Lexie," Riley had said, her voice pained. She stated it as a fact, and it was over.

Her hand squeezed mine, letting me know she was awake. She was trying to sleep, but it wasn't happening. My mind went back to today in the weight room. The way her lips tasted, that little noise she made. Everything had disappeared but her for those few seconds. She took the torn places inside me and eased them. And I let her drive home alone. What the fuck had I been thinking? I needed to do better than this. Especially, since he touched her. I fought down the urge to tear the room apart, that wouldn't help her. I already texted Miles about getting her to a shrink. Miles didn't

ask why, he probably already knew or had at least guessed. He just said he'd find the best.

Hades' head lifted off Lexie's leg. He gave a soft bark before he jumped to the floor and went to the door where he took up the guard position that I had taught him. Hades might still be a puppy, but he had good instincts when it came to Lexie. I walked over to stand in the doorway, then cursed. Dylan was coming down the hall. When he saw me, he didn't even miss a step. This fucker was beyond my last nerve, he figured Lexie would protect him from me. I wanted nothing more than to pound his face into the floor. I reminded myself that she needs me here and out of jail while the others searched in town for her ice cream. It barely helped. Dylan stopped across from the doorway just out of my reach. I refused to move from the door.

"I heard about it at the police station when I was being released. Is she okay?" Dylan asked. I debated whether to answer or not. But it was a neutral question.

"She's alive," I said.

"The cops only said assault... What did he do to her?" He asked. My temper boiled over. I debated the best way to get him out of here without bloodshed. I was about to say fuck the no bloodshed when Asher came around the corner carrying an ice pack. He frowned when he saw Dylan.

"What are you doing here?" Asher demanded. So, I wasn't the only one wanting to beat the shit out Dylan. It was good to know I wasn't over reacting.

"He heard about Lexie at the police station," I said through clenched teeth.

"Did he hurt her?" Dylan asked, his voice growing hard. A little late to start caring now, gutless.

"He beat the shit of out of her," Asher told him, his voice calm. "He also gave her a skull fracture along with a few other injuries." Dylan cursed then clenched his jaw. I waited for him to leave.

"I want to see her," Dylan announced. I was amazed by the balls this guy had.

"No," I stated. Dylan's eyes flashed at me.

"Why don't you ask her? Instead of making all of her decisions for her," Dylan snapped. Was this fucker for real? When did Lexie let anyone, *ever*, make a decision for her? Judging from the look on Asher's face, I wasn't the only one confused.

"Fine. I'll ask her," I said calmly. I knew what she was going to say, but Lexie was the final word when it came to Dylan. Asher handed me the ice pack before I walked back into the room. I moved around the bed and knelt to her level. "Baby," I said in my softest voice. She opened her eyes. Yeah, she hadn't been sleeping. I handed her the icepack, she gave me a small smile as she took it. I waited while she put it where it needed to be. When she stopped shifting, I told her. "Dylan's here."

"I know." Her voice was small and not like her, I missed her normal voice.

"He wants to see that you're okay." I kept my voice as soft as I could. She didn't need my opinion of the prick to deal with right now. Tears filled her eyes, making my chest burn.

"You were right," She muttered in her scratchy, hoarse voice. "I'm not okay, Zeke. I'm so not okay." Heart aching, I reached out carefully and brushed the hair from her face.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked carefully. She looked so small in that bed, she looked... broken. I couldn't stand this.

"I don't care what he wants," She whispered through her damaged throat. "Get rid of him. Threaten him, hit him, I don't care." Tears ran down her face and my knotted stomach filled with anger at the sight. "Just get rid of him. I've tried, he's not listening and I can't...." Her voice choked off. She closed her eyes trying to find control again, it felt like a kick to the gut. I pulled my handkerchief out of my back pocket and slipped it into her hand. She opened her eyes again.

"I'll take care of it," I promised. She gave me a small, grateful smile. I straightened to my full height and went back to the door. "Hades, to Lexie," I ordered. Hades gave me a look as if he wanted to argue, before turning and going back into the room. He jumped onto the bed and Lexie started talking to him. I turned to Dylan. "She said no. She doesn't want to see you, not now and not ever again," I growled as I stepped out into the hall. "She

was kidnapped and almost beaten to death. She doesn't give a fuck about what you want."

Dylan's face turned red. "You can't stop me from seeing her, Zeke," Dylan shot back. I took another step towards him.

"If you ever come near her again, I'm going to beat you until you're the one in the hospital," I warned him, my voice hard and sharp.

"It's not your decision," Dylan reminded me.

"No shit, it's hers. She said to get rid of you, and she doesn't care how," I growled, stepping closer. "What do you think will happen if you're not gone in the next couple minutes?" I asked. Come on fucker, swing at me. You hurt my Lexie... our Lexie, and I hurt you. Dylan clenched his fists.

"Lexie!" Dylan shouted. Asher jerked him back away from me before I could reach him. He immediately stepped between us.

"She said no, and that's that," Asher declared. He grabbed Dylan by the shoulder and started him moving him away. "I'll walk you out," Asher said, his voice stiff as they walked down the corridor. I waited until the elevator doors closed before I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I walked back into her hospital room and sat in my chair next to her bed, I held her small hand in mine. She gave my hand a squeeze before closing her eyes. She really needed to rest. Where the hell were the twins with that lullaby when we needed them?

The Boys: Asher

I kept my grip light until the door to the elevators closed then I let go of Dylan. If I didn't, there was going to be trouble. I couldn't believe Dylan. An old friend or not, he was beyond crossing the line now. I just needed to get him outside before I said anything to him. Dylan, however, didn't seem to understand the situation he was in.

"That fucker is pushing her around," Dylan bit out. I took a deep breath, just wait until we're outside. "He's jealous of how Lexie feels about me," Dylan groused. I watched to floor numbers change while bouncing on the balls of my feet. Come on, it's a three-story building! How could it take this long? Dylan continued to bitch about Zeke and how he'll talk to Lexie and work everything out when she's feeling up to dealing with Zeke. I almost lost it right there, he still wasn't listening. I debated texting Zeke to have him meet us in the parking lot just to make it clear to Dylan. But that would leave Ally alone, and that was never going to happen again. The doors opened, and we walked out into the foyer. The outside air was crisp and welcoming right now. "Zeke's been trying to get into her pants since day one," Dylan announced as we reached his Dad's car. That's it, I was done.

"Shut the fuck up, Dylan!" I shouted. Anger burned through me like I'd never felt before, not at a friend. Dylan turned to me, his face stunned. "What the hell is wrong with you? Ally's been through hell tonight, and you show up and demand to see her? Then she says no, and you yell for her?"

"I was worried about-"

"No!" I snapped "This wasn't about her. This was about you. You wanted to see her, and you don't give a damn about what she wants or needs right now!" Dylan shook his head.

"I'm in love with her." Dylan admitted quietly. I was stunned, for five seconds.

"Bullshit," I growled. "You made her feel like a burden. You knew exactly what that would do to her, and you did it anyway. You don't do that

to someone you love." I shook my head, I still couldn't believe this was the same guy I'd played football with all my life. "I just did you the last favor I'll *ever* do for you." Dylan eyed me as I explained. "I just saved your ass from Zeke, next time I won't," I warned him. A car pulled into the almost empty parking lot.

Dylan shook his head. "Lexie wouldn't let him-"

"You don't seem to get it," I stated clearly so he couldn't misunderstand. "Lexie has taken the chains off. He now has permission to beat the shit out of you on sight."

"That's just until she feels better and can stand up to him again," Dylan stated as if it were obvious. I couldn't believe him. Ethan and Isaac walked up to us.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Isaac snapped.

"Tell me he wasn't stupid enough to go upstairs?" Ethan asked me.

"I can't," I said.

"What the fuck is the matter with you?" Ethan snapped. "Was there some miscommunication when she looked at you and said, 'fuck off?""

Dylan went to get in to his Dad's car but I slammed his door shut and took the keys from his hand. We were getting this dealt with now. We had already come too close to losing Ally tonight, I wasn't going to risk her getting hurt anymore.

"Give me my keys back, Asher," Dylan snapped. I shook my head.

"Not until you understand what will happen if you come near her again," I said calmly. Dylan rolled his eyes.

"I'm not worried about it," Dylan reminded me.

"Well, you better get worried about it." I countered.

"Wait, what did we miss?" Isaac asked.

"Ally said she didn't want to see him, then she asked Zeke to intervene with Dylan," I announced. The twins' faces were shocked. Yeah, Ally asking for help told us exactly how much she was hurting right now. And if Dylan really knew her, he'd understand that too.

"Did the labs come back positive while we were gone?" Ethan asked, his voice boiling.

"No. They came back negative," I told him instantly. Ethan and Isaac let out relieved breaths.

"What labs?" Dylan asked.

"From her rape kit," I told him bluntly. His face grew pale. "That's right, Dylan. On top of getting the shit kicked out of her, and a skull fracture, she was also scared she might have been raped while she was unconscious. Then you show up and again, don't listen to her." Another car pulled into the parking lot.

"Stay the hell away from her," Isaac spoke up. "If you came near her again, I'll come after you."

"Same here," Ethan added, his storming eyes on Dylan. Dylan rolled his eyes, my old friend still didn't seem to understand that we weren't messing around. A car door closed, Miles was walking towards us with a few plastic bags in his hands. Then he spotted Dylan. Miles' face turned cold as he joined us.

"I managed to get Lexie's ice cream," Miles announced before looking at Dylan. "Why are you here?"

"He wanted to see Lexie," Isaac supplied.

"She said no," Ethan joined in.

"Lexie asked Zeke to intervene," I told him. Miles' icy gaze snapped to me. "We're trying to explain what that means to him, but he's not getting it," I added. Miles' gaze went to Dylan. His face was empty as he handed Isaac the grocery bags, then Miles grabbed Dylan by the arm. In an instant, Miles had Dylan face down on the hood of the car with his arm in a lock behind his back. The echo of Dylan's head bouncing off the hood filled the parking lot. Dylan grunted as he tried to move, Miles waited until Dylan realized he couldn't move an inch. Then Miles leaned over him, his forearm pressing against his neck, and spoke into his ear.

"Lexie has gone through enough. With you and with her stalker." Miles said each word very deliberately. "Now she's asked for help, and we're not going to let her down."

"That's right," Isaac added.

"She has asked you nicely, she has told you bluntly, and now we are telling you," Miles' voice was colder than I'd ever heard it before. "Stay away from her, no contact. That means no calls, no emails, no texts. And no showing up at her house. Do you understand me?"

"What are you going to do? Hire someone to kill me?" Dylan scoffed. I shook my head to myself.

"I don't need to hire anyone. Just an ironclad alibi," Miles whispered to him. Dylan went still, he finally seemed to understand the situation he was in.

"Do you get it now, Dylan?" I asked.

"Yeah," Dylan said clearly. Miles let go of him and stepped back. Dylan got off the car and turned to us. I tossed him his keys. We all stepped back and watched Dylan drive out of the parking lot as Isaac handed Miles back the bags.

"So, how did you find a store open this late?" Isaac asked cheerfully. Miles pushed his glasses up his nose.

"I called the owner and bribed him to open the store," Miles admitted. All of us started laughing. We were still laughing when Ethan pulled out his phone.

"Zeke says Lexie can't sleep. He's telling us to get back and sing Sophie's lullaby for her," Ethan announced.

"Let's go take care of our girl," Isaac suggested. We all agreed and headed back into the hospital.

The Boys: Ethan

Lexie was finally asleep. I took a deep breath and let it out. There was no way in hell I was moving, she'd probably wake up, and no one wanted that. After coming inside, we tried to get her to sleep. After an hour, I ended up climbing into bed with her for a cuddle. She was out cold, curled up against my side, her head on my shoulder, and her hand on my chest. I kept my arms lightly around her, the last thing I wanted was to hit a bruise and hurt her. I watched her sleep in my arms, committing the moment to memory. The red crescents of her lashes on her battered cheeks, the curve of her split lip. My poor Beautiful. What the hell were we going to do to make it better? My phone vibrated in my pocket. Careful of Lexie, I pulled it out. It was a group message with the others. I looked up and saw they were all on their phones. I opened the message.

Miles: Meeting.

Isaac: Without Red? I don't like it.

Miles: It's about her.

Zeke: If this wakes her up, I will kill all of you.

I had the urge to grin, I had no doubt Zeke would chase us all down if we woke her up. Kill? Nah, we might have a few bruises, a black eye but that would be it.

Ethan: She's exhausted, I think she'll sleep unless I move.

I looked up at the guys. Zeke's haunted eyes ran over her then he went back to his phone.

Zeke: Fine.

Miles: Lexie asked for intervention with Dylan tonight and we all know how much she hates to ask for help.

Asher: Yeah, we know.

Miles: I propose we stop waiting for her to ask.

I looked up from my phone to Miles. I met his eyes, he was struggling with this situation just as much as I was. Hell, he threatened to kill Dylan. I wish I had that on video just so I could remind myself it actually happened. My phone vibrated.

Zeke: She's down, but she's not out. Though I do like this idea.

Isaac: She'll get back to her old-self eventually, right?

Zeke: It's going to take therapy.

I went still. What did Zeke know that we didn't?

Miles: Zeke, I was going to ask later but now is as good of time as any. What did she tell you?

Zeke: Get her a shrink.

Zeke wasn't going to talk. Miles sighed.

Miles: I need to know what kind.

Zeke: Just get one who specializes in a range of trauma. If they can't help, they'll recommend another one that can.

I looked up from my phone to him. His face was hard. I looked at Isaac and met his eyes. We both were thinking the same thing. We weren't here when the test results came back. Isaac's eyes darkened before he began texting.

Isaac: The kit came back clean. Right?

Asher: Yes, I swear it came back clean.

Miles: We need to be aware of potential triggers.

And the fact that not knowing might slowly kill each of us. Zeke was silent as he stared at his phone. Then he began typing.

Zeke: You want to know? Ask her. It happened to her, it's her decision who she tells.

That was enough to give all of us an idea. The bastard must have done something. I ran my eyes over her sleeping face. We needed to make damn sure nothing like this ever happened again, not to our Lexie.

Isaac: So, no longer waiting for Lexie to ask for help? I second it.

Zeke: Third.

Miles: Motion carries.

Asher: Only until she's on her feet again. When she's okay, we back off.

Agreed?

Miles: Agreed.

Isaac: Duh.

Ethan: Yeah.

Zeke: Fine.

Miles: In the interest of disclosure, I should let you know that I had my lawyer draw up papers for a restraining order against Dylan. He'll be here in the morning for Rory to sign.

Asher: Rory know about this?

Miles: Yes, I texted him after Dylan left. He agreed immediately.

Ethan: What about Lexie?

Miles: She's a minor, she doesn't have to sign.

Zeke: Should have just let me hit him.

I smirked at that. Lexie made a small noise. Her face was wincing, but she wasn't shifting around in pain. A bad dream? Her fingers dug into my shirt. I put my phone down and held her hand to my chest, letting her know that I was still there. I quietly sang Sophie's lullaby to her in Spanish until her face relaxed and she fell deeper into sleep. When I was sure she was okay, I looked up. Everyone's gaze was on her, everyone's face drawn, their eyes worried. It was clear we were all thinking the same thing, the next few months are going to be hell.

Epilogue

I came home from the hospital the next day. The guys kept me company for the rest of the week. They made ice packs, kept me on schedule for my pain meds, and made sure I ate. Rory even took the rest of the week off. It made me feel a lot better with them around. Safer.

Riley came over after school the day I got home, the guys backed off a bit to give us girl time. She has called or visited every day since. We talked about almost everything. Riley made a point to let me know that just because she wasn't dating Zeke, that didn't mean she'd disappear on me.

Dr. Melville said my skull fracture was a simple linear one, which meant it would heal in time. But my throat was another story. The MRI showed damage to my vocal cords and the surrounding tissue. To sum up, Ethan's band needs to find a new guest singer. Dr. Melville said I should get my singing voice back, but it'll take time and therapy. I didn't even know there was such a thing as voice therapy.

Clay is in jail, the judge refused to allow him bail after a search of his house was done. Two tickets to Morocco were found along with his passport and mine. I still have no idea how he even got a passport for me.

My nightmares started three days after I stopped taking pain medication, I'd wake up screaming and lose my voice for the day. After two days of this, Rory let one of the guys crash on my floor at night with a strict rule that the boys stayed on the floor and the door remained open, it helped. Even Riley filled in when one of the guys couldn't.

Miles found me a therapist to talk to a week after the cabin, and I'm going. I've been talking to her, and it helps. She says it's going to take time and that I should tell the other guys what Clay did. When I was ready, of course. I almost did a month later. We were sitting in Miles' family room, Isaac had walked into the room and was standing behind the couch. Then he touched my shoulder to get my attention. I remember panic, throwing a

punch, and Isaac holding a bloody nose. I instantly started crying. Isaac reassured me that he had worse from Ethan, but it didn't help. I explained that they couldn't come up behind me and touch me, not if I didn't know who they were. The room was silent as everyone struggled with it. They all said they understood and that it wouldn't happen again, and since that night, it hasn't.

Even the dead were understanding about me not helping them cross for a couple weeks. In fact, several ghosts stood guard outside the house to stop any other soul from bothering me. It had surprised the hell out of me.

Zeke hasn't mentioned the kiss or talked about it. I brought it up once, but he only shook his head and said, "It can wait." I don't know if that is good or bad, but right now, he's right. It can wait until I can walk to my front door and not remember getting grabbed. It can wait until I don't freak out when someone touches my shoulder from behind me. It can wait until I don't break down crying after a nightmare and need to take a shower because I could still feel Clay's hands on me. It can wait. He wasn't going anywhere, and neither was I.

For the latest on the Veil Diaries

Visit

Blbrunnemer.com

Or

My Facebook Author Page:

https://www.facebook.com/BLBrunnemer-1575614369409677/

Or

Our Veil Diaries Fan Group

https://www.facebook.com/groups/1428115267201786//

Turn the page

for a

sneak peek

at

Book Four

April

"Lexie."

"Hmm."

"Can you stop looking out the window and focus for me?" Dr. Smith asked. I let the sheer curtain drop and turned around on the plush couch in her office. Dr. Smith was a nice woman with kind gray eyes and endless amounts of patience. At least it seemed that way to me. She'd been my shrink since January. After the abduction and assault, everyone thought I should have someone who could help me through it. Miles found Dr. Smith, an expert in dealing with the aftereffects of trauma. Trauma, I had suffered trauma. I snorted to myself and focused as she spoke.

"How are the nightmares?" She asked. I sighed.

"They are happening less, three times this week," My voice was raspy. I took a sip out of my now, ever present, water bottle so it would go away.

"And did you shower after them?" She asked gently, I sighed. My nightmare was always the same, Clay was forcing me to walk through the snow back to the cabin. Then he'd call me 'his' and grope my chest then between my legs. It wasn't as bad as it could have been, but that didn't stop me from feeling like I needed a shower after every dream.

"I showered after only one of them." The raspy note from my voice was gone.

Dr. Smith's eyes ran over my face.

"How did you stop yourself from showering after the other time?" She asked. I reached down and ran my fingers through Hades' fur. The dog had a big growth spurt and was now at my mid-thigh. I took him everywhere with me now.

"I reminded myself that it happened in January, this is April. I petted Hades and did those counting exercises," I said. Dr. Smith smiled gently.

"That's good, Lexie." Her voice was encouraging. I gave her a small smile. "Any panic attacks?"

I shook my head. "Not since that last one at Vegabond." The bar had been packed, everyone kept bumping me. Not on purpose, the place had just been that crowded. I didn't like it, the next thing I knew I was having trouble breathing. Miles had realized what was happening, the boys worked together to get me out the side door and out into the fresh air. I made a point not to go into too crowded places now.

"Have you had any flashbacks?" Dr. Smith asked.

"Nope, not since I told the guys not to touch me from behind," I replied. "But I still have flashes occasionally." Dr. Smith's eyes narrowed at me.

"Are they still walking you to class?"

"Every one," I admitted.

She smiled and shook her head at the same time. "Have you gone anywhere alone this week?"

I chuckled. "Miles is in the waiting room." Dr. Smith sighed deeply and shook her head. She'd met the guys at our first appointment. Zeke had insisted that one of them be here, they just forgot to choose who and all showed up.

"Lexie, you need to learn you can be without them. That you're safe even if they aren't there," She said gently. I nodded.

"I know, and I think I'm ready to," I told her. "With Hades, though and no big crowds."

Dr. Smith smiled. "That's a good start."

"I'm also thinking about going to see about a job at the tattoo shop in town. See if I can learn anything," I offered. Dr. Smith smiled encouragingly.

"That is a significant step, Lexie," She said. Then her smile faded. "How are things with the boys?" I looked over the book cases behind her.

"They're supportive, loving, you know, the usual," I hedged.

"Lexie," She said in her 'come clean' voice. I sighed and met her eyes.

"Zeke and I are still having problems. I still haven't been able to hug him since the hospital," I admitted. She wrote that down. "I tried and..." "A flashback, his physical build reminded you of your attacker." Dr. Smith finished for me. I nodded. "Is this affecting your relationship?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. He's distant but he's always around."

"He's also struggling, Lexie," Dr. Smith explained. "From what you've told me, he's a protective person, and you were attacked. That's going to take some time to deal with."

"I know." I checked the clock on the wall. "Times up."

Dr. Smith chuckled. "That's my line," She chided. I snorted. "Your homework this week is to go out without the boys, go to the tattoo shop and try to hug Zeke again. Remember your exercises." I nodded and got up off the couch with Hades' leash in hand. "Thanks, Doc," I called over my shoulder as I opened the door. Miles looked up from the magazine in his hands. His high cheek bones and angled jaw made him cute, but it was his smile that showed you how handsome he was. That and his intelligence in his emerald eyes whenever he got excited about something. His brown wavy hair was back to curling a little again, he needed a trim. He pushed the bridge of his black-rimmed glasses back up his nose before getting to his feet. His eyes ran over me, his mouth a tight line.

"Is everything alright?" He asked in his quiet timber. I nodded.

"I just have some homework," I explained as we headed for the door. Miles opened the door for me and followed me out into the hallway.

"What kind?"

"The kind none of you are going to like," I admitted. Miles hit the button for the elevator then gave me a gentle smile.

"If it's what's best for you, we'll do it," He reassured me. I raised an eyebrow as the elevator doors opened, we walked inside.

I waited for them to close before I told him. "She wants me to go out without you guys."

Miles' silence was enough to make my shoulders tense.

"If it's what the Doctor suggested and what you want, we'll step back," Miles said in a calm reasonable voice. He was right, I just didn't want to be the one to tell Zeke. It felt like I've done nothing but hurt Zeke since I came

back from the hospital. Since my last try to hug him, he's walked on egg shells around me, and that conversation about our kiss? Forget about it. He just kept saying 'when I was ready.' I hated this. We reached the ground floor.

"I know, it's Zeke I'm worried about," I muttered as we walked out into the lobby. Several people spotted Hades and backed away quickly. I had gotten used to that reaction lately, and I honestly didn't mind. "Our communication hasn't exactly been the best lately."

Miles walked me to his car in silence. I opened the back door so Hades could jump in. When I turned around Miles' eyes were full of understanding.

"He'll listen to you, Lexie," He reminded me. I sighed, he was right. I was the only one who could get Zeke to listen. I got into Miles' car and closed the door behind me. When Miles climbed in on the driver's side, he had a small smile on his face. "But right now, the guys are surrounded by the twins' cousins. They've been sending me an S.O.S every five minutes for the last hour."

I chuckled. "Let's get over there and watch the chaos."

Turn the page

for a

sneak peek

at the

first book

in a

new series

December

Trinity

I made sure to blend in with the crowd of gawkers watching the police work in the alley. It was late, and with winter in Chicago, not much could get me outside at night. But news of this latest crime scene had sent me running out of my loft. Something about it didn't sit right with me. The paramedics started bringing the gurney out, it had a black body bag. I cursed under my breath. I knew there was no point to hope, if they had someone injured they would have moved faster. I waited as they made their way over the snow. Thankfully, I had managed to slide close enough to the yellow caution tape to be near the ambulance as they walked by. I took a deep breath. Sulfur. I cursed under my breath again. It was a demon kill. I couldn't ignore this, I had to get to work. I started moving back through the crowd when the skin on the back of my neck grew goosebumps. Someone was watching me. I kept walking away from the crowd and down the street. Footsteps crunched in the stone behind me. Probably a mugger. Deciding to have a little fun, I crossed the street and took the long way back to my bike. If someone was following, then they'd have plenty of time to act. The footsteps followed. I kept my pace even, going so far as to pull my leather riding jacket closed. The footsteps still followed. I smirked as I walked into a dark alley and slowed my pace. My pulse picked up as the footsteps came into the alley. When we were far enough in to be hidden from view I turned around and went still. It wasn't a mugger. His dark gray suit and white dress shirt showed off his broad shoulders, and chest. His white blonde straight hair was shoulder length with the front held back off his face. His piercing gold eyes contrasted with slightly tanned skin. Something about him sent my heart pounding, my skin tingling. I'd never had a reaction like this to a man in my entire life. It put me on edge. I didn't know who he was, but even from almost ten feet away I could tell that he wasn't human.

"What are you?" I asked. His lips moved into a polite smile.

"I'm the same as you." He said, his voice an odd mix of authority and polite I'd never heard before.

"Annoyed? PMS-ing?" I asked dryly. His eyebrow twitched.

"Gargoyle."