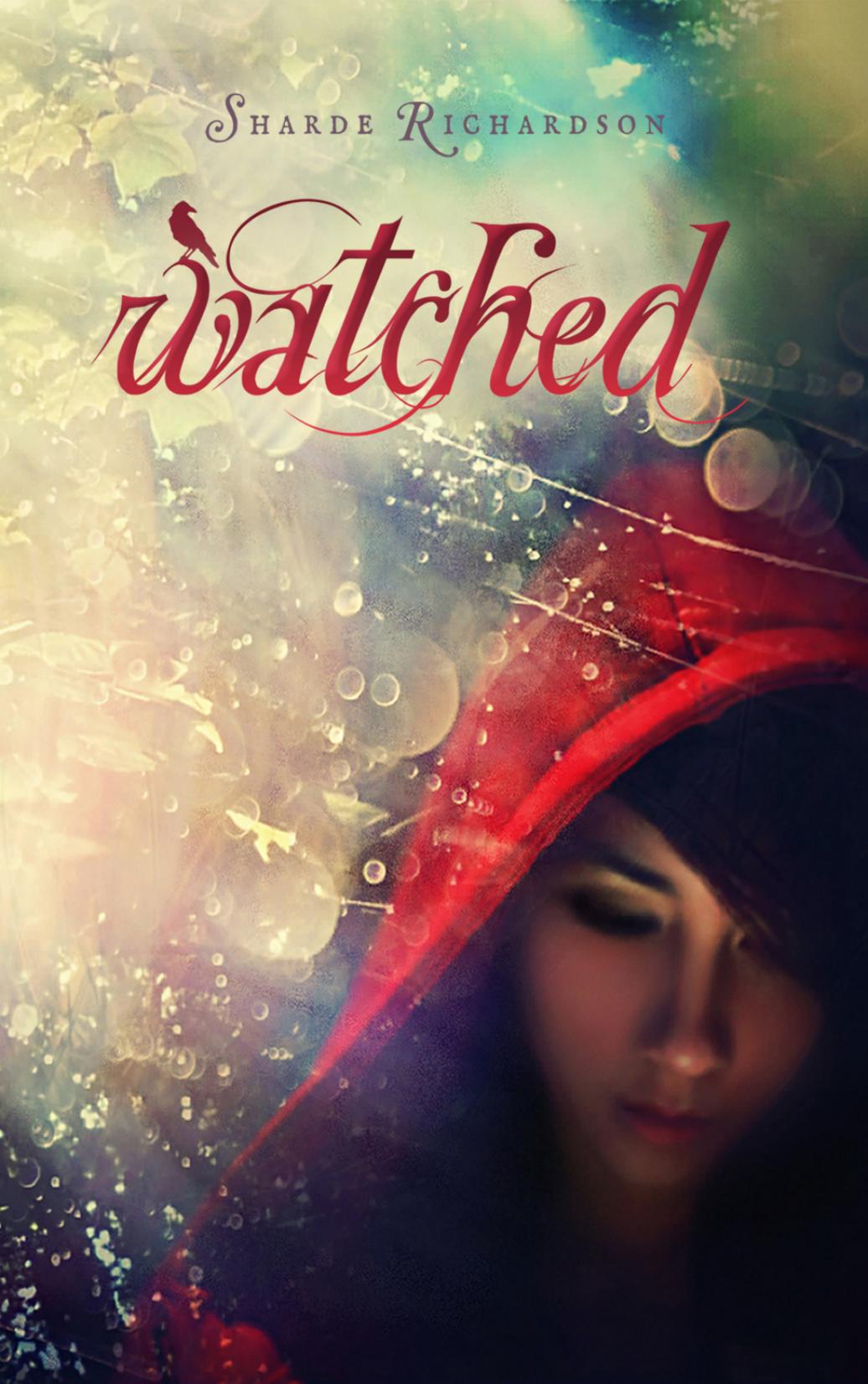
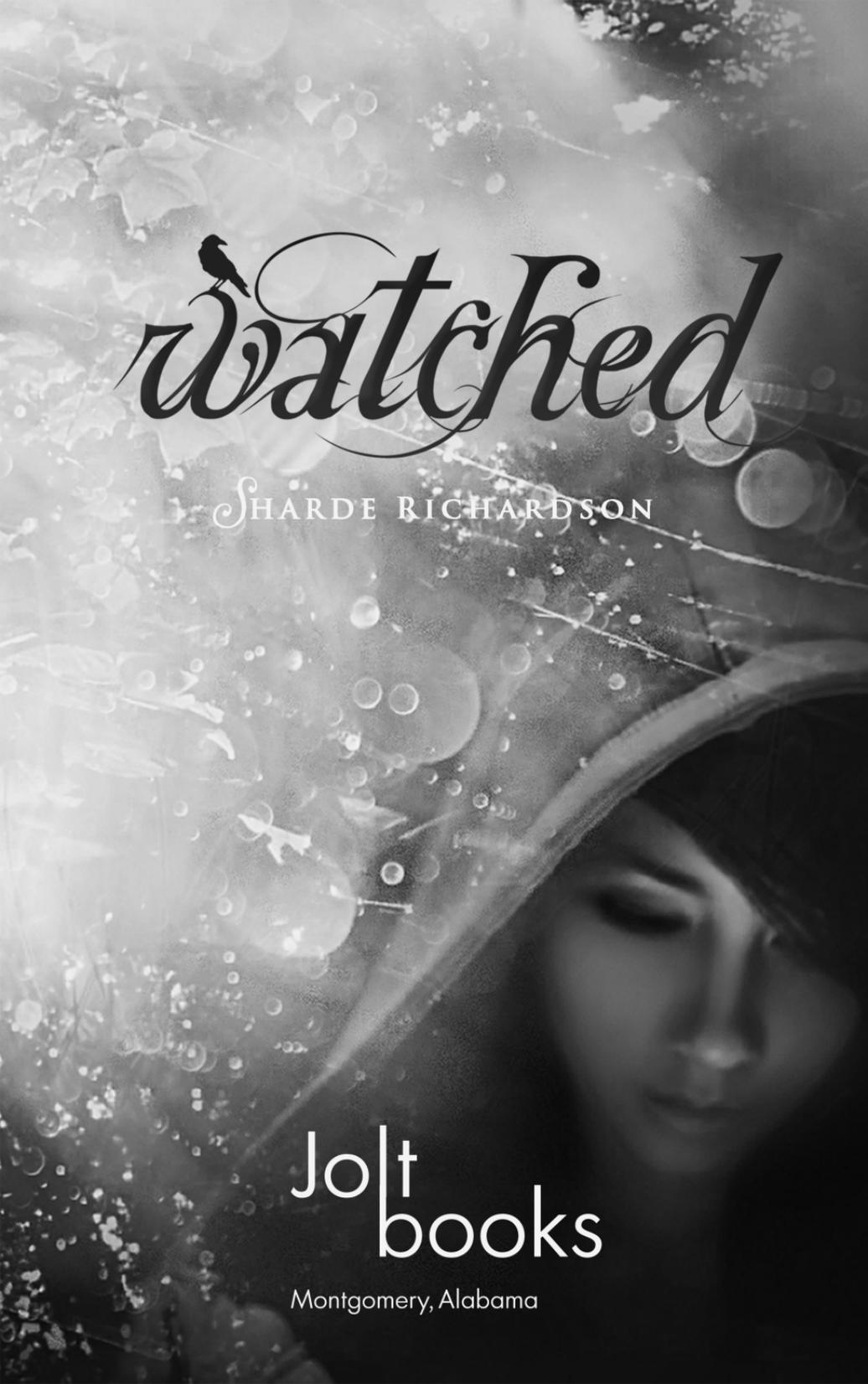


SHARDE RICHARDSON

watched





watched

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Jolt
books

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For Georgia Hall.

Thank you for encouraging me to take the red pill instead of the blue one.

I'll be seeing you.

Your first grand,
Sharde

Acknowledgments

Please don't expect these acknowledgments to be great. They won't. In fact, they will probably suck on a level akin to realizing you're the overweight kid in gym class on Presidential Fitness Day. For everyone that I fail to mention, I hope you can forgive me. These are being written in a very cheese deprived state. For those who don't know me, the state in which I'm referring to is pure hysterics. My acknowledgments are as follows:

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And last, but not least of all, my husband Dean. Thank you for the love, support, and promise of a unicorn.

This world is full of coincidence...

I said it was full of perv's with a boner for pubescent kids and murderers lurking in the shadows, and God awful things I didn't care to think about.

God. I didn't know if I qualified to say that anymore. How did things get so out of control, so messy? I was normal, once. Put on my bra one arms strap at a time, laced my Converse's from bottom to top just like everyone else. Granted it was a slightly different version of normal. A little too far left of kosher, maybe. But before all this twistedness happened, I was me. I was a little ignorant, a little naïve. I was whatever my social network profile said. But I hadn't updated in, like, three months, so...

Three months ago, I was the girl who wore her hair in a saggy ponytail, the girl with the stutter. I despised my mom's cooking, gamed too much, and laughed at all my dad's jokes even when they were corny as hell. I'd never been kissed, or gotten into trouble. I was Mikayla Blake, human, prone to fuckups and mishaps. No more, no less.

Three months ago, my new life started. And nothing's been coincidence since.

one

THE SHITTIEST DAY EVER BEGAN WITHOUT A hitch. It was December 2nd, my birthday. I just made seventeen and instead of planning to attend my kickass, nonexistent birthday bash, I drove on the only highway in Sulphur Springs to Lake Rose wondering what the hell was wrong with me.

Wait. I should tell you a smidgen about Sulphur Springs. It wasn't the type of place you'd find on a 100 Best Getaways site, or Wikipedia. A rustic sign hung just outside of town:

Welcome to Sulphur Springs.

Come on in.

Pop. 8,471

But Wade always spray painted over the “COME” and “In” and put “BLOW” and “Me” instead. We had a Super Wal-Mart, Piggly Wiggly, and every fast food franchise imaginable. Dumb, I know. Our four-way stop light in the middle of town blinked after 9 o'clock because no one drove after 7. We were home of the famous 1970s weekends.

The VFW Arena ended up being the ‘adult hot spot’ for those needing to pour old memories into a shot glass. We were also home to Ted the Wino, the town drunk who slept in front of the gas station/ABC/convenience Store. Which had the best freaggin’ corn pups this side of Bumfuck-Egypt, hands down. But now that I think about it, stocking the Gummi Bears next to vodka and Melon Ball flavored Boone’s Farm had to violate some kind of health code.

Anyway, Sulphur Springs was the kind of place that grew on you, and then you got over it.

Now on to that shitty birthday of mine.

It was colder than polar bear snotcicles out. The type of day you’d wrap in a Snuggie and watch reruns of Degrassi. Mom and Dad drove to Beaufort to see Uncle Joe. I stayed behind to finish some homework, although Uncle Joe was funny as hell and I missed him. Besides my parents, he was the only person that didn’t make me feel self-conscious about my stutter. Plus, today was primed for ice skating, less the irreversible frostbite. But Fancy Porsche Driver wasn’t getting

me any closer to the lake.

Ten bucks said it was a gray-head behind the wheel. It had to be. Old people were notorious for buying oversized or fast cars in which they never drove over thirty or could see past the steering wheel. I waited a few minutes, thinking the driver would speed up before I made my move. Didn't happen, and when I passed him, I spied a dude behind the wheel. Through the misty fog, he looked at me and spread a wicked grin. I turned back to the road, startled because (a) that was one freaky grin, and (b) Wade, who probably just came back from painting the welcome sign, sped toward me in his truck, whooping with one arm out the window. He wouldn't slow down. He liked crazy, dare devil, chicken shit games like this. Wade laid on his horn and I panicked. When I swerved back into my lane, I cut Fancy Porsche Driver off.

It was an accident, and I scrambled to roll my window down and stick my arm out to wave. "S-s-sorry." I expected him to blow his horn or flip me off, I got neither. Just his car disappearing in my rearview from all the fog.

Hell's Curve was up ahead. Probably should've thought about that before I overcorrected and ran off the low shoulder. Hell's Curve wasn't life or drunken-Saturday-night friendly. You couldn't survive shit like that. If tumbling down the seventy-foot slide full of rocks and tree stumps didn't kill you, the lake at the bottom would. Since Rose was frozen, well, you'd

be royally assed-out.

I turned down into Devil's Mouth right at the bottom of Hell's Curve. Sounds wicked, trust me, but the steep path led straight down to the lake. Gnarly branches reached out like claws, and large roots did a number on the undercarriage. Summer nights, all you'd see were the flames of bonfires at the bottom, butts of cigarettes that looked like lightning bugs, and bra's adorning branches like ornaments, with sprinkles of condom wrappers for an added teenage, hormonal touch. But now it was winter, and it looked, I don't know, barren, sort of grungy? The half-buried beer cans and Red Bulls sprawled everywhere made me feel like I was late for a party.

I blocked the path with my Gremlin, got out and laced my skates on the bumper. The head rush started and when the stinging felt like fifty fists coming down on me en masse, I pressed the heels of my hands against my temples. It was like the first time I tried pot and my brain cells were pop locking and river dancing to funky techno music. Only this was amplified and hurt like shit, and definitely didn't get me high.

Images pressed behind my eyes: me skating, the car, something bro—Stop. Stop. “Sssstop.”

“Caw!”

I snapped out of it and rubbed my forehead. In the beginning, I didn't mind having the occasional images pop up in my head. Sort of like Déjà vu and Vision bumped uglies in the

back of Premonition's van, and what I saw every now and then was their estranged love child. Sometimes it came in handy. But lately my lazy ass synapses/neurons playing catch up with the rest of my brain was like someone taking a sharp fountain pen and etching the images into my eyeballs. Not cool.

I looked over my shoulder for the screeching bird. A ginormous freaggin' black bird flapped on the ground near a tree. I sucked air through my nose like I couldn't get it in fast enough, hopped down and walked over. "Jeez, aaaren't you s-s-supposed t-ttooo fly t-to Florida or sssomething like that during wa-wa-winter?"

It croaked again, spreading its wing revealing a white feather and flew away. What lay frozen on the ground behind it didn't croak, didn't move. This bird was smaller and...frozen. I bent down and thumped it. Nothing.

Uncle Joe told me once he thawed a frozen fish back to life. And this one time in Biology, Mr. Reamer showed us a video of these frogs that freeze when a single snowflake lands on their skin. In spring they come back alive, toad slime and all. Then again, Uncle Joe could've been full of it, and Mr. Reamer thought a photoshopped picture of Principal Cooley kissing Sean Connery was genuine, so who knows if that video was real.

Couldn't hurt to see. I didn't know how long this little thing had been lying here, but I picked it up anyway, put it

inside the breast pocket of my red parka, and flat-footed it over to the edge of the lake. There was something about seeing all that water, frozen as it was, that made my bladder do the hokey-pokey.

“T-t-to pa-pa-pee, or not t-too pa-pee?” I thought about it, and the fact that I had zero tissue. I mean, I could’ve squatted behind a tree and jiggled dry, but that would leave my undies all moist, so...

I hit the ice.

And I was kind of the shit when it came to ice skating. Didn’t know where all the talent came from. It wasn’t like I was formerly trained, well, not that I could remember. I didn’t have much of a memory anyways. Someone took one gigantic piss on it and wasn’t courteous enough to wipe up after. So as you would imagine, I’ve had a craptastic time getting over it. Long story short, I was damaged goods. And not in a dented-can-of-soup kind of way.

At the half-mile point, I turned and skated back toward the Gremlin. The sunset changed the sky to a red-burnt orange-ish swirl. I had to whiz something awful and I saw a spruce that had my name on it. I stabbed my skates between the roots to make it up the path.

A gleam of light caught my eye. It reflected off a shiny, black as pitch car parked bumper to bumper with mine. What the hell?

Before I could reach for my keys, a slender man stepped out from the trees. Snow white hair, dark veins spread like roots beneath an onion skin, pruned face and sunken eyes. A cigarette was stuck to his lips by the crusty looking spit around his mouth. When he bared his teeth into that freaky smile, that cigarette fell, and breath steamed from his nose like some demented, raging bull.

It was Fancy Porsche Driver.

“Whhaaat the f-f-flip dude, g-g-get back.” I looked to the Gremlin. Guess I thought it would crank itself up, I’d hop on the hood, and we’d ride on the frozen lake into the sunset.

I was a fool.

“Too late,” he said, as if he knew I wanted to get the hell out of there. His grungy voice chimed like two others were fused with it. He stepped closer. Pale hands. Nosferatu fingers. Oh snap. A gun.

I couldn’t move at first. Damn. All I did was pass him.

“St’—wait, wa-w-wait.” It was like pleading with a dumbass at a party not to push you into the pool with all your clothes on. Pointless. The more you begged the more the idiot wanted to do it. And I could see he wanted to do... something. My skin prickled like thousands of safety pins were stabbing my body and I just had to wait for the pain to fade before I could do anything. When my legs finally got the message to book it, my skates caught in a root and I fell nose down near a can

of Red Bull.

Classic.

This was supposed to be my fight or flight response and I was sucking major assage at both. I just lay there, sort of numb for a minute. Strange, to be so scared you think you can transport yourself out of it, beam-me-up-Scottie style. I couldn't do any of that. Just didn't want to face what was behind me, what was about to happen. I tried to focus. But the words and the two bulls colliding against the sunset on the can in front of me took hold like a bad habit.

Glucuronolactone.

He cocked the hammer.

Caffeine.

He laughed.

B Vitamins and glucose.

The ground crunched under his boots.

Red Bull gives you wings.

He kicked me in the gut and I rolled over, coughing. My hands were on fire, growing hotter with blue, darting sparks disappearing between my fingers.

I wanted wings.

Was this real? You'd ask that a lot when a gun was pointed at you, like a part of you wanted to believe he won't shoot, even while he fired three rounds to your legs and chest and you smelled your flesh burning. You'd ask that same dumbass

question when you felt pee running down your crotch, when he looped his hands in the top of your jeans and dragged you between his legs. Or when he ditched the gun, pulled out a knife, straddled you and said, “Let me in.”

Of all the things I should’ve done, I only did one. And he allowed me...watched me do it. What told me to reach for my pocket? I couldn’t say. Maybe I felt it move. I couldn’t be sure now that my body was one big heartbeat. Or maybe I believed it was alive again, thawed, and I didn’t want the little bird to die with me like this. I set it free.

“P-P-Pleeze,” I begged.

He leaned forward and his jaw unhinged like a boa constrictor taking down a rabbit, bones popping, teeth dripping with black glop.

“Oh Ga-Ga-God.”

He drew back the knife and shimmering lights covered him, growing darker around the edges until it was pitch black. Until he was gone.

Loud growls. Screams. No pain.

I hallucinated being saved, though I knew I was dead when I saw him.

two

THERE WAS SO MUCH ICE, AN OCEAN FULL. THE skates were already on my feet. Someone stood in the middle of the ocean. Two someone's.

Mom? Dad?

The sky looked like a sloppy tie-dye of purple, red and indigo. The moon was hella bright and burned my eyes. I cruised toward Mom and Dad, but they kept moving.

Hey. Wait for me.

Behind me the Gremlin, parked on top of an iceberg, flashed its headlights as if to say hello. I waved back. *Helloo, Gremlinnn.*

Wade and Ted the wino appeared out of nowhere. Ted held a bottle covered in a brown paper bag and Wade had a spray

can in his hand. They clinked the two together in a toast, then turned to each other and sucked major face. Wade stopped to look at me.

Whoa, bro, whatever tingles your testes...

He cocked his head to the side, his mouth moving in hyper speed. "She's lost too much. We're gonna need more blood." Only it wasn't his voice.

Weird ass. I'm not bleeding.

I kept going toward Mom and Dad. And they kept moving. *Seriously. Slow down people. Daughter coming your way.*

Hadn't I yelled?

Buttons on the tongue of my skates read Turbo. I pressed them and zoomed toward my parents. It was all good out here. No wind cutting my eyes. No one crowding the ice.

Something zinged in my chest.

What is that?

Mom and Dad stopped. I was closer. Could see them clearer than before.

Oh hell. These weren't my parents.

I tried to stop. *Turbo off.* I pressed the buttons. *Abort mission. Turbo off.*

"One, two, three." The voice came from the sky, all thunderous and condemning.

God, is that you? I could use some help down here, Big Guy. Freaky looking parent imposters at 12 o'clock.

“Charge! Clear!”

Ah, my chest. Fuckey owey, I'm being electrocuted.

The Imposters were in my face. No noses, no eyes, only a slit for a mouth. They looked like an Ernie Barnes painting: elongated and distorted. But not nearly as beautiful.

“Again,” the Imposters said.

Shit. Fell backward. Grabbed chest. *Hello? God?* Imposters in my face.

“Clear.”

Cracks spread beneath me. Ice fractured. Hundreds of hands break through the ice. Frozen water. They grab me. Take me under. Couldn't breathe. Cold water. No air. More Imposters. Ugly bastards. Swimming. Leeches.

The one in front of me—

“Put it in, dammit...”

—its fingers. Turned into snakes. Slithered. Down. My nose. My throat. Shitty. Situation. Too much.

“Oxygen at 100 percent... Plug that hole.”

Choking. Squeezing.

“...cut them away... wait, we're flat-lining... paddles again.”

Hands. Everywhere. One. Holding. A bird.

Bird?

“Ventilate.”

Bird shoved. In my mouth.

“...Clear.”

Exploding chest. Scared shitless. Feathers. Stay strong.

“Again.”

Focus. On. The light. Moon.

“Anything?”

Moon fading. *Dammit.*

No light. Clawing hands.

Big Guy upstairs. Is. One cruel *mutha*—

Darkness.

three

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, BRIGHT SEAR-WORTHY light stung my retinas, and it felt like a midget was tap-dancing on my skull. I could deal. Or at least that was what I told myself. I didn't have an inkling why I was alive—I remembered the gun, the smell, remembered being shot and discarded like a colander leaking blood. I died and faded to black. Hands came after me, clawed me and took me into the darkness.

But something ignited in my memory—a feeling of rising, the torrent of warm rain beating against me and a velvety voice that demanded one thing: “Live.”

Now I wasn't a religious freak, but I was under the impres-

sion that when I *did* assume room temperature things would be different. But it wasn't the type of death I expected. No light at the end of the tunnel, no feeling of total peace, no pearly gates, etcetera, etcetera...ad blahseam.

Nothing but the suffocating mass around me and claws and muffled screams in the darkness.

Dying sucked. Like that one time I ate Mom's chimichangas after midnight and dreamed of being chased by giant, butcher-knife-wielding cockroaches. It was painful. It was dark. It was the shit of nightmares. I should know since I was there, being dragged deeper and deeper into whatever dark recess *they* were taking me to, every part of me limp and lifeless.

I lifted my head, a tube sprouted from my nose.

Crap. The midget just went Bojangles on my ass and was sliding into an encore. I plopped back down. My entire body was beef, freshly ground into hamburger meat. My head, chest and legs wanted to explode. Really wasn't in the mood for this type of crap today.

Today? What day was it? And where was I now? I blinked, trying to focus.

Two braces went from my thighs to my ankles.

Blink.

A bandage wound around the middle of my chest to my shoulder.

Hard blink.

I couldn't move my right arm. Couldn't move my legs.

Eyes got watery.

A myriad of fish, mermaids, and a poorly painted Triton looked down on me from the ceiling. To my left, an annoying, beeping monitor. To my right, a bag hanging on a pole. *A hospital. Hospitals were good. Not dangerous.* And square in front of me stood a woman with way too short knee-high stockings, a no nonsense white dress, and a clipboard in hand. My eyes must've been totally off because I swore there was a weird blur around her. Almost as if she vibrated or something. Her linebacker frame filled up the doorway and the hard look on her face said she didn't take shit from anyone. I wasn't about to give her any.

"How you feelin', shug?" Her voice weighed a ton.

I tried to tell her a little screw-faced but I gagged on the tube that had my uvula in a headlock.

"Wait now. Just wait. Let me fix that." She charged somewhere and came back. "Inhale and exhale."

The tube from my nose slithered along my insides as she pulled it out. I coughed again, this time the equivalent of someone scraping down my esophagus with a fork.

"Breathe. Now inhale and exhale again. Let's use this oxygen instead." She reached behind her, came back with a tissue, wiped my eyes. "Better? Oh no. Don't reach up like that, you'll pull out your IV. I caught sin getting into that little vein."

Her freakishly large hands forced my arm down. I wanted to see if those vibes around her were real or if I was tripping out. “Wha—” *Flippin’ A*. It hurt to speak.

“Say somethin’, shug?”

I shook my head.

Every inch of me was under attack by the Kraken of Pain. I couldn’t find a spot that didn’t throb, pulsate or twitch like a bad muscle spasm. Shit. I shut my eyes.

“You hurtin’, huh?”

No. I looked to her name badge. *Hattie of the Children’s Ward, I like to act like acid’s been poured over me for fun*. It was the kind of pain that made you irrational. Pain that possibly would drive you to the brink of saying something outlandish to the gargantuan nurse next to you.

But since said nurse’s body had a license to whip your ass, you just nodded.

“I’ll get you somethin’ for it.” She came back with a syringe filled with Pain Monster numbing goodness. “That’ll help. Works pretty fast now.”

My lips started tingling and my eyes fell half-mast.

“It’s a shame because you just had a visitor.”

My mom and dad. It took a moment for me to remember that I wasn’t alone, that there were at least two people that cared about me—who *I* cared about.

“The gentleman that came by yesterday left not too long

ago. Guessin' he wanted to catch you awake."

Gentleman? Hold the Kraken of Pain numbing goodness.

What gentleman?

Her bear paws tucked the covers around me, locking me in place. Invisible ants scurried around my mouth and behind my eyelids, making them too heavy to keep open.

"Said he knew you from..."

Whatever she'd given me was Grade-A, because I was out before she finished.



Mom's hair was the first thing I saw when I came to. She lay next to me, her hand covering mine. Dad sat in a chair by the door with a baseball cap covering his face, and Nurse Hattie was an ominous mass standing vampirically over me.

"Morning, shug."

Morning?

Mom raised her head. She looked spent, puffy-eyed and red-faced, a cardboard cutout of my mom, and yet—*glowy?*—like light bulbs had been turned on under her skin. So did Dad.

"Mikayla?" She ran a hand over my face.

"Mom." My voice was sandpaper against concrete.

"*Thank-you-thank-you-thank-you,*" she whispered, hugging my neck in a full nelson. She smelled like hairspray, pepper-

mint breath, and lilacs. “Barry, she’s awake.”

“Ow,” I croaked.

“Careful, Mama Bear,” Hattie said. She never looked up from pressing buttons on the monitor beside me. And I wasn’t tripping. Those vibration thingies from earlier were still around her, lashing out and coiling back to her body.

I tried to blink them away.

“Baby.” Dad eased next to Mom. “How are you feeling?”

Stretched and old and....“How long”—*cough*—“have I been here?”

They looked at each other, silent for a moment.

“Three days,” Hattie said, as she walked toward the door. She looked at my parents, made a chubby V with her fingers and pointed at them. “Give you all some time before I let him come in, okay?”

The mystery visitor.

Hattie wasn’t much for subtleness or bedside manner. She didn’t wait for an answer and closed the door behind her. What reflected in the mirror attached to it was more than enough to distract me.

Green and yellow colored eyes stared back at me beyond the mirror. Sunflower eyes Mom called them. I’d always liked that they were different. But the blackened eye, bruised nose, and scraped cheeks? Not so much. My skin was pasty, with splats of purple against the pale like that weird, Goth chick’s

I took Chem class with. Bed head was a mild descriptor for my hair. More like after sex hair, minus the sex. And it looked like I'd been fist pumping all night at the Cowbell when I got caught in a bar fight.

In short, I looked like shit.

Dad took my hand. "Your Uncle Joe came with us...and he wanted to stay but..."

I nodded. And it hurt.

Uncle Joe lost his wife two years ago. Aunt Stella was one Ford-tough chick. She liked to hunt and one day went out alone. They found her the next day with her face peeled half off. They told Uncle Joe there was a dead snake next to her body, and that they believed she'd killed it with the butt of her shot gun when a round accidentally fired in her face. She didn't die right away, and spent a few hours in the hospital. Uncle Joe hadn't been the same since.

Mom brushed a stray hair from my face. "Can we get you anything, baby?"

A new body and some Q-tips. Gah, what wouldn't I do for one right now. I pointed to the door. "*He* who?"

"The detective," Dad said. "He wants to talk to you about...this."

"But Sulphur Springs doesn't have detectives, Dad." We had Staties and a sheriff. But they didn't give us mouth unless they caught us speeding or something.

Mom clutched my elbow. “Say that again.”

“Sulphur Springs doesn’t have detectives.” She had that quizzical-mom-look on her face. “What?”

“Your stutter,” Dad said.

“I...” Sweet Jesus juice, they were right. I’d said a slew of words and none of them tripped or ran over each other. Weird. “...don’t know what happened.”

What *had* happened? *My visitor*. Didn’t know much about the interworking of your average psycho’s brain, but the sicko that did this to me ranked somewhere up there with the worst of them. What if he stood over me while I slept, watched me, breathe...? What if he...

No, no, no.

I throbbed everywhere, which made distinguishing a throb in the nether region of my body a little hard. I grabbed Mom. Dad shot me a worried look, and against the pain kicking my nerve-ending’s ass, I pulled her ear to my mouth. “He came,” I whispered, willing myself to finish. “He was here—”

Someone knocked and opened the door with a blurred hand wrapped in stringy vibrations. *What the hell?* The threads branched out, forming translucent, skeletal hands that clawed the air, then snapped back.

I’m losing it. I’m losing my freaggin’ mind.

A man stepped in, short and stocky. He had the most as-ertive nose I’d seen on a person, and emotionless eyes. Like

maybe he'd seen some heavy shit in his day and couldn't get over it. I could tell the suitcases underneath those eyes hadn't been unpacked in a while.

Mom's voice came out in a whisper. "Who came, Mikayla—"

"Morning, I'm detective Ward." His voice was just as dead as his eyes. He consulted his tablet to remember my name. "My-kayla." Still got it wrong. "I'm here to talk to you about your accident."

He meandered to the foot of the bed. Mom still wanted her answer.

Dad stood and offered his hand.

The detective's vibes coiled around and upward, until they grasped his neck and choked him. "Mom," I whispered. "Do you see that...those things around him. Do you see them?"

She gave me a sideways glance. "No honey. What things—are you okay? Are you up for this right now, because..." Her voice trailed off. Or maybe I trailed off. I didn't know what I was up for anymore, didn't know if the meds Hattie injected made my eyes play tricks on me, or if I was going crazy.

Detective Ward grabbed my dad's hand and at the touch, the detective's vibes broke off into a hundred tiny spines. They latched onto my dad's wrist, but retracted from his glow as if they'd been burned.

Neither of them noticed.

I am going crazy.

“My-kayla, could you tell me anything that happened that day?”

“No-way-no-way-no-way.” *Focus. Get your shit together, Mikayla. It’s not real.*

“You don’t want to tell me, or you don’t remember?”

“No. I—” I didn’t remember a lot of things, years worth of things. But this would forever be tattooed in my memory. “I think he was here.”

He squinted and the skeletal hands snapped at me.

Not-real-not-real-not-real.

“Who was here?”

Mom’s thumb ground a hole into the back of my hand. She chanted, “It’ll be okay,” with each rub.

Clearly, things weren’t going to be okay. Thumping at the back of my brain paradiddled at high tempo to the front. I knew what was about to happen. “The man that shot me. He was here.”

“Here? Are you sure?” The hands wrapped around his throat and he looked at me like I was dandruff on his shoulder. “Are you sure you weren’t dreaming. Sometimes...”

What if it wasn’t him? No, it had to be. Who else? Not Dad, not Uncle Joe. Had to be him. All eyes were on me. Mom’s thumb stopped moving. This guy had no mercy. His voice was so beyond post mortem, I couldn’t take it.

“No...” My head started to sting. “Hattie said.” *Shit.* “A man...that he came...”

Maybe he moved closer because he didn't hear me. The wicked vibration tentacles crawled onto the bed and toward me. His pen tapped, tapped, tapped against his tablet.

I closed my eyes and a starburst erupted behind my lids.

“Can you describe him? Did he have any identifying marks? Was he...”

Dammit. My eyes. My head. “I—”

Tap-tap-tap.

“or white...eye color?”

Stop. Now.

“...brown, maybe?” he said.

The fists came down hard, a legion pulverizing my skull. I buckled and with my good hand, held the side of my head to keep my brain from oozing out.

“...fat, short...” His voice strummed like a morbid guitar. Pain zigzagged behind my eyes, an image pyroed into them.

“Tall and thin...”

Something big, brown. Something over me, huffing.

“Mikayla?” It was Dad. His voice mixed with Mom's and the detective's. Their words stabbed my ears, and fell to the floor in loud pings. I wanted them to shut up. I wanted them to—

Heat wrapped around my arms, and my hands felt full of

tingling electricity. I felt this before.

“My-kayla, I can’t help you.”

I opened my eyes, sucked down air.

“If you don’t let me in.”

And I screamed. I screamed like a banshee. It was all I could do because what hovered over me was the mother of twisted shit.

Over the detective’s head, the vibes stretched to the ceiling in a giant, black face that had hollow eyes and fangs and a hel-la large gaping mouth frozen in a soundless scream. The tentacles were on the bed and around my neck as the giant face swooped down, ready to swallow me into the black, oblivion.

I covered my face with my arm. “Stop.”

For a moment, I heard my breathing and everything was quiet. I peeped over my arm Dracula style. Saw my reflection in the mirror. I hadn’t been swallowed. The mouth had vanished.

Mom stood a few feet away, hand covering her mouth. I caught a glimpse of Dad’s back as he walked out the door, wiping his cheek. The detective’s pen still tapped, tapped, tapped against his pad.

“I guess that’ll be all for today. I’ll, um, leave my card.” For the first time I heard an inflection in his voice.

Mom’s tears spilled over her knuckles. She moved to the door and before she left, held a finger up to me. “I need—I

need to find your dad.”

But I knew that wasn't why she left. Her daughter just turned into a scream queen and there wasn't a slasher in the room. Not one that she could see.

The detective followed after, but paused in the doorway and turned to me. “If you don't mind, there is one more thing. Lake Rose is over ten miles from here.”

I just stared at him, him and those damn vibes, grateful that the bastards were somewhat in check.

“Staff found you in front of the emergency room. How did you get here?”

Nothing tingled on the rim of my memory when he asked that. Just felt empty, like I'd drawn a blank or suffered from the worst case of brain flatulence ever. My eyes fell to the floor, like somehow the answers were written in the cracked linoleum. At a loss for words, I shrugged and said the only thing I was absolutely sure about.

“I don't know.”

four

12/8

DAD SHOWED UP WITH CORN PUPS AND A sandwich bag full of Q-tips. Bless him.

“Figured the food’s worse than your Mom’s. Don’t tell her I said that.”

I nodded, eyeballing the Q-tips.

“Save these for when I leave, got it? I don’t want to see... *that*.” He moved to hand them over, then pulled back. “Christ, Mikayla, promise this isn’t some new drug type thing you saw on the FaceTube.”

“Dad, it’s YouTube, and this is totally hypoallergenic and legit in all fifty states.” At his skeptical expression, I added, “Promise.”

“This too.” The mp3 player he held wasn’t like my old one. No tape held the batteries in place and no buttons were worn out. “Your mom got Uncle Joe to transfer some songs. So I guess you know what’s on it.”

I had a good idea. Enter the realm of bluegrass: an old-timey assortment of banjos, bagpipes, and hillbilly yodeling. Blah.

I took the player, stuffed it under my pillow, and wondered how Uncle Joe was doing.

Dad sat in the chair beside me. “How was your day?”

“Uneventful. Oh, wait. I found a suspicious looking hair in my tapioca. And by suspicious, I mean p—”

He waved away my next word like it was bubonic. “Got it. Did you tell anyone?”

“Nah, figured it’s a secret ingredient they use to ensure its inedibleness.”

“Someone probably forgot to use a hairnet, is all. I doubt it was *that* type of hair.”

“I remain unconvinced.”

Dad chuckled and it was kind of foreign to me. No one laughed much since the shooting. But after a while, a symphony of silence fell between us, and I caught Dad looking at

my legs. He didn't say anything, but his lip twitched like he wanted to. And before I could ask him about it, he grabbed the remote and flipped to Sports Hub. There was nothing on so he turned to the news.

A woman in Missouri put her baby in the oven, said the voices made her do it. Gangs in Britain used Molotov Cocktails to turn homeless people into human torches. Sprees of church fires plagued the west coast. The poised reporter told us what we were about to view may be graphic and unsuitable for children. I glanced at dad rubbing the 5 o'clock shadow under his chin. They cut to an obliterated school in a small village. A literal pile of small hands, gaunt bodies, tennis shoes, and blurred out faces.

A sad strum of music played, but not for the kiddies. Another school came into frame. My high school. Candles flickered by the statue of our mascot, a giant armadillo with a top hat. A vigil of students and teachers crowded around a poster sized picture. I knew the girl's face. Owl-like eyes behind black-rimmed glasses, and stringy hair. Sidney. Sidney Smaw. We took Trig together.

Dad turned to me. "You know her?"

"A little."

Dad served the grim straight up and on the rocks. I usually liked that about him. "Her mom found her hanging from the pipes in their basement."

But grim served cold wasn't always easy to swallow.

The anchor's voice rose over the soft wailing of the piano in the background. She didn't leave a note. She didn't say good-bye. She died on my birthday. I didn't know why yet, but I was pissed. The camera man panned over the faces again—some crying, others sniffing, most blank. Sidney Smaw, for whatever reason, killed herself. I wanted to scream at the TV. Wanted to toss F-bombs all over the place.

But not for her.

I wasn't the type of person who gave two flips about rules, but she broke the big one, you know. Sidney Smaw copped out. And they mourned her. All I could think about was my birthday, my skin burning instead of seventeen candles, the smell, the shooter—*my shooter*. How nothing mattered except to stop the world from turning, to stop time long enough to escape the bullets, to escape him. To forget. On that day—the day I begged to live—Sidney freaggin' Smaw handed her life over like lunch money.

So why the hell were they crying for her?

Dad flipped the TV up a channel to the Holy In the Afternoon station, and handed over the Q-tips.

12/10

My palms were in constant-tingle mode tonight, and I couldn't go five minutes without my brain jack hammering

against my skull. I'd been having visions of a brown, fuzzy blob, the impostures, and lip gloss. *Freaggin' lip gloss.*

The night shift workers holed up in the hall closet across the hall from my room. At least five janitors in unisex yellow uniforms piled in after each other every night. They didn't come out for hours.

12/13

Light crept in from the window and burgled my sleep. Morning. Time for the daily yuck. My regular tech, Lauretta, backed into my room, placed the tray on my table, then opened it. Her vibe was subtle and hovered over her skin—annoyance?

“What is that?” I asked.

The rings on her fingers clinked together as she patted her head repeatedly in one spot in a nervous tick or a possible new form of scratching I wasn't hipped to. “Beef hash, tatters, and oatmeal.”

“Looks like death,” I mumbled.

Hand on her hip, she raised a thinly drawn eyebrow. Her gold tooth flashed when she said, “We don't serve death here, child.”

“You sure?”

She held up a condemning finger. “Look, I don't play with churren. I got four of my own and they'll tell you the same.

Now you're welcome, ya hear." She spun, a twirl of eight too many earrings in one ear flashing under the fluorescents, and walked out the door.



My feet itched something awful. The cast went mid-foot on each leg, and a sling kept my right arm in horizontal traction. So I was stuck looking rather Frankenstein-ish trying to reach them. The nurses didn't come fast enough and my regular tech stayed in a pissy mood.

Count on three things from hospitals: uncomfortable beds, awful food, and subpar service.



Scratch that. Count on *four* things from hospitals: uncomfortable beds, awful food, subpar service, and defective compartmentalized devices. The volume for my TV went out on my 3-in-1 remote/help-light/telephone. By that night, mind-numbing boredom set in.

I plugged in my ear buds. Bluegrass. It was so OD, but all I had. I flipped through the songs: sad, sad, and vomit-inducing sad. I wanted to chuck the thing across the room but I had little else to do. The Devil in Georgia challenged a boy to a fiddling duel for his soul. At the mention of a golden prize, the dude accepted the Devil's bet like an idiot. What followed

was the Devil's succession of high pitch squeals, long drags, and fast strokes on the fiddle. The bow was made of fire, the notes flaming in a sinister inferno of chaos and confusion. The poor kid had no chance by the time he started plucking. But he turned out to be cool beans.

He started slow, then unleashed an arsenal of ear piercing strums that mimicked women screaming for their children's lives. Sickening. Brutal. Honest. He took the crescendo up, up, up until his bowstrings might pop under the pressure. Until the world might implode from the awesomeness that was this dude's fiddling, because he just owned the Devil and made him assume the position. And then...

From the corners of my eyes, I saw it for the first time. Black and shimmering and distinctly as I remembered with the one white feather. It flapped outside the window, hitting its beak against the glass. Staring at me.

The bird from the lake.

12/19

In the dark I thrashed as the old geezer who shot me appeared. His chin hung super low, making his mouth a long oval hole. Black eyes, black spider web veins. Those mile long ,fingers reaching for me, and I yelled.

Something shook me. Hard. The dream sequence pixilated out of focus and Hattie stood over me. Her vibes danced

around her, a tamed version. I licked my lips, and they tasted salty. Sweat rolled into my eyes.

“Having night terrors, shug?”

I didn't know when Mom made it here, but she stood off to the side while Hattie worked. Her face was colorless, and her eyes fixed on me in a hopeless gaze.

She wasn't glowing as much.

12/21

Across the hall, the janitors plotted to overthrow the hospital in a bid for Janitorial World Domination. Or something like that. Light seeped beneath the door. Shadows of feet moved across the light. Conspiracy was afoot. The nurses should be warned. The end was near...

Shit, I need a hobby.

12/22

“No-o-o.” I didn't like looking at Hattie, or anyone else with vibes.

“There ain't any other way, shug.”

I hadn't peed in like a day, and right now she was a Brahma bull in my face. Apparently, my beloved pain meds caused my bladder to spasm and hold my urine hostage. I needed to whiz bad, man.

Hattie stood at my bedside with a peculiar looking tube

connected to a bag in her manly hands.

She had plans.

“If I don’t get this catheter in you, you’re gonna wish I had.”

I shook my head. “No go, Hattie. That’s an exit not an entrance.”

“Um-hm, and there ain’t nothing exiting so far. Now we can do this the hard way. Call your parents up, explain things to them and have them decide for you.” She stood sumo-esque with her hands at her waist. “But in the meantime,” one mammoth hand came down hard on the lower part of my stomach, pee knocked at the front door but nothing came out, “you’re just gonna keep filling up.”

Later that day

Man alive, I wanted to set my legs ablaze. The invisible ants were back, crawling in between my cast, gorging on ‘flesh de Mikayla’. My call light wasn’t working. Again. But since Laretta was here today, and probably was in her usual irritated mood, I came out better reaching in my funky robotic pose than call her. Epic failure.

“What’s your name?” She spoke with a musical lisp. As far as speech impediments went, her lisp was nothing compared to the mid-speech seizure I had endured with every stutter.

The little girl stood in my doorway. No vibes, but she

looked extraterrestrial: baldhead, eyes too big for her face, a toothless smile, and frail. The force of a butterfly flap would topple her over. She barefooted it toward me wearing a hospital gown that swallowed her.

I felt crappy and achy all over. The alien didn't budge, though. "Mikayla. What's yours?"

"Emma. You look funny."

She caught me mid-reach to my toes. "I itch."

She wiped the back of her hand across her nose, then held up a finger. "Want help?"

I eased back, let her little finger wedge inside my cast and scratch that maniacal itch. Better. "Thanks."

The awkward limbo of silence left me not knowing what to say and her eyeing my cake-in-cup.

"Want it." I grabbed it off the tray, peeled the plastic film back, and gave it to her.

She used the same finger she'd scratched my foot with to scoop the cake in her mouth. Kids stuff. I tried to drift back to sleep when I heard her lispy voice again.

"No she's not."

"Who are you talking to?"

"My friend." That all purpose finger of hers circled around the rim of the cup. She licked the chocolate residue off it in two clean swipes. "He says you're different. You don't look different."

“Who?” Then I figured, she’s like seven-years-old. “Your imaginary friend?”

“No, silly.” It came out as “thilly”. She rubbed her eyes, sniffled, and stumbled backward as she let out a tornado of a sneeze that outweighed her body. It was a good sneeze. Her gown drooped a little to one side when she held up her hand to point across the room. “He’s right there.”

Whatever meds they were giving this kid must’ve been too strong, because when I looked across the room, no one was there.

Later 2.0

Hattie was back with that flexi-plastic tube and an impressive syringe. My parents totally caved.

Christmas

Lauretta came in wearing a Santa hat and red scrubs with an arm full of envelopes. She dropped one in my lap, said, “Merry Christmas,” and left with some intent.

I opened it to a hospital printed gift certificate redeemable for one free dessert: tapioca.

1/3

Mom smelled floral. Must’ve meant she’d gone back to work.

She sat down beside me, and it was a little weird having my Bag-O-Urine dangle between us. Her bag came with her, which meant an overnight stay. We talked school and possible physical therapy. She swerved out of bounds to ice skating.

“Remember Canada? How everyone wanted to know who trained you to skate?” When she brought it up, her hand always reached for mine. Like she could smother the fire igniting over my skin. “We could go back next year. You’ll be ready.”

Fractured legs. Broken collarbone. Shattered ego. *Sure, Mom, I’ll be skating real soon.*

She rambled around in her bag, placing a picture of her, Dad and me on my table. Afterward we stared at the TV. The volume worked today. There was a woman on channel forty-two, the Holy After Dark Station. At the bottom of the screen scrolled the words: PLEASE SEND YOUR \$100 SEED NOW! THE LORD COMMANDS YOU. The gritty voice came from the lady center stage. She wore a wig piled like pink cotton candy on top of her head. Directly in front of the camera, she sat with her arms folded. The camera cut close. Too close. I could see her falsies, her two pack a day teeth stains, and crow’s feet. She looked like the morning after without having been anywhere.

“Children of God, because we’re all children of God,” she reassured us people outside of TVland, placing one hand over her heart and raising the other in a sanctified oath. She closed

her eyes and shook her head, as if someone objected, but the audience was corpse quiet. I moved to adjust and woke the Kraken of Pain. *Where's Hattie?* "May He keep you and bless you. And know that your trials and tribulations are His love." She looked me square in the face. "It is only a test."

My body ached a little more. A test.

Yeah, lady, it is only bullshit.



I kept dreaming of losing all of my teeth, of not being able to make it to the imaginary toilet in my dream fast enough and wetting the bed. I kept waking, blinking between streams of indecipherable thoughts.

Mystery visitor.

Who was here with me that day? Hattie said she couldn't find where he signed in. Young man? Gentleman? Couldn't remember which. Probably didn't matter. Emma was there, too. In my dozes, I mean.

Need to sleep.

What had her friend said? No, what had *she* said. That I was different? Because it was only her, no one else. I was up in the middle of the night thinking of the answer, due in part to the bird at my window. Same white feather. Same beady eyes. It stared at me. For hours. Pecking. Like it wanted to get in. I slung a pillow at the glass with my good arm. The

bird wouldn't fly away and it wasn't afraid of me. Maybe I was paranoid.

My head throbbed. The imposters were there each time I closed my eyes. I couldn't shake them or everyone's vibes and glows and the complete randomness that was my life right now. Mom was fast asleep in the recliner by the door. I could wake her to turn on the light. Could ask her to talk to me for a while. I needed to talk. To someone.

Bird.

Closed my eyes.

Imposters.

Damn.

I rubbed my temple. *What's wrong with me?* Peck. *I want to be me.* Peck. *Want to be Mikayla again.* Peck-peck-peck.

Mystery visitor.

All my frustration seeped into my hands. Tingling turned to burning. Burning turned to sparks. Blue, stringy currents wrapped around my fingers then disappeared.

Mom was in my face, and I wondered how she made it there so fast. *Why is she telling me to calm down?* She turned on the lights and called for Hattie. My hands were flushed and smarting. I had a hard time breathing. Air felt stuffy and recycled.

Mom: "Sweetie?"

Hattie: "Child's having a panic attack."

Me: “*Woo-shnib.*” Translation: “Oh shit.”

Blood betrayed my brain. Everything in my sight zeroed into a fine point surrounded by black. Tunnel vision. Mom’s glow faded, Hattie’s vibes spread. Something shoved my head back to the pillow, covered my mouth. Air. Gobs of it. Too much.

At the end of the tunnel, the bird was still there—still watching.

1/5

Zombie. The only word that came to me as I looked in the mirror. Still jumpy about my electric hands, my lack of sleep for the last two nights gave me an undead makeover. When Emma walked in, I thought maybe she’d been a little zombified, too. Looked more ET than usual. I’d taken to saving my cake-in-cups for her in exchange for foot scratches. From the way she demolished them, I didn’t think they gave her chocolate in her room.

“You’re supposed to breathe in between bites,” I said. “You’re totally going to choke out.”

“So good.” She smiled and chocolate mortared between her teeth. “Who are they?”

I followed her gaze to my nightstand and the picture of Mom and Dad. “My parental units.”

Usually Emma and I watched reruns of manga and an-

ime. We never could follow the story lines, but it had some badass Japanese intro music and graphics we found amusing. But now that she'd finished her cake-n-cup I notice she looked a bit off. "Sup' Emma? This is the episode when Urahara uses the Bakudo against Aizen."

"Uh-huh," she mumbled, staring at my parents' picture. "You don't look like them, Mikayla."

I never will. "Yeah, I know." I pointed to the screen, trying to deflect the inevitable. "He just launched number forty-two and seventy-nine. You're missing it."

"Why?"

"Because Aizen fused with the Hōgyōku and..."

She shook her head, pointed to the picture. "Why don't you look like them? My brother looks like Daddy. I look like Momma."

No way a seven-year-old knew how to dodge like this. "How old are you again?"

She waited for the answer to the same question everyone seemed to hit me with. Yes, my parents looked ancient. Yes, the possibility of them having a seventeen-year-old was slim to none and some. And, no, it wasn't really anyone's business.

But Emma wasn't budging.

"All right." I totally got handled by a toddler. I tried to think of a way to make her understand. Because this wasn't something I talked about all the time. But how could I do

that when I hardly understood myself. “Sometimes when kids don’t have parents, they get new ones. And—”

“You’re adopted?”

That was my first WTF moment of the day.

“Yeah,” I managed. “That.”

Her legs dangled off my bed, and she used the length of her arm to wipe her nose. “Did they die?”

A prickly feeling spread over my body, hairs stood like foot soldiers. My parents sent me to a shrink to talk about stuff like this. An hour in an office decorated by pre-schoolers, guarded by oversized stuffed animals, twice a week was supposed to help me cope, help me feel less guilty. Like, for serious? A giant purple panda wasn’t making me feel any less adopted. Or less awful that I couldn’t remember my bio’s faces, or why they didn’t want me—why they’d left me to wake up alone in that hospital. Patient 331506, the wristband read. Girl Doe. My freaggin’ name was Girl Doe.

Birthdays would forever suck.

But here I was, F.U.B.A.R, talking to a snotty-nosed less-than-ten-something kid, with a bad chocolate addiction—about my b-parents. And finding it easier to put the words together. “I hope so,” I said.

Emma hiked a brow and stared at me like I just gave the word to set fire to a litter of puppies.

Silence.

Her gaze shifted to an empty corner and she nodded. “He says to ask if you believe in guardian angels.”

“You’re friend. Oh, *riiight*. So...your friend’s an angel?” And that would be me hitting the snooze button on this conversation.

“Do you?”

I believed in sleep. Which was exactly what I needed right now, not this. But I turned to the vacant corner anyway and shook my head. When I faced Emma again, she wrapped me in her stare.

“He says you should.”

“Why?”

“Because everybody has one.”

I knew it was all a lie, but I didn’t say it to her. It wasn’t for me to tell her that her imaginary friend didn’t exist and, not to mention, was a lying McAsshat. Or if there was a God or angels, they wouldn’t allow people to become human torches, children to pile up like discarded mannequin parts, or people to wake up not knowing who they are. *Girl Doe*. I didn’t say anything because I was too caught up in looking at her, and jealous that I couldn’t remember being her age, being that young.

I wished for her memories.

Her face was pale and sunken and haunted, but at the same time it soaked up a thousand sun beams—a thousand I

love you's and happy days and trapped them inside her eyes. They were big as seas with endless tides slamming toward me. How could I ever go against that?

I said, "Yeah, well, my guardian angel is a serious slacker."

She gave a toothy smile and hugged me. Under my hand, her spine was a string of pearls.

"Bye, Mikayla." She tiptoed out the door without another word.

"Bye."

1/20

Emma died.

2/15

Discharge day. They rolled in my new whip for the next couple of weeks: a black on black wheelchair that said, That's Right, You're Lame Now.

My casts came off days ago, but my legs still looked like hairy spaghetti noodles. Something about having Hattie shave them for me just didn't feel...heterosexual.

Mom brought in the only salvageable thing from my shooting, my red parka. Everything else was ruined.

"Blood is one tough stain to get out," she said. "And I even pre-soaked with color safe bleach."

Yeah, a formidable foe, indeed. There wasn't a spot on the

parka, though, only a hole Mom patched with...

“Felt?”

“It’s the only red fabric I had that matched the darn thing, Mikayla.” She patted her pocket. “I took it from the Baby Jesus,” she explained.

“The manger display in the living room?”

The car keys were at the foot of my bed. She picked them up and toyed with them. “The one and the same.”

“Wow, Mom. Isn’t it, like, sacrilegious to have a nude Baby Jesus lying around?”

“The Baby Jesus is our lord and savior. So, no. It’s called being resourceful. Now put on the jacket, Mikayla.”

It was after five when Mom actually signed me out. In the hallway, I recognized one of the janitors from the nightshift sweeping near the nurses’ station. Only he wasn’t sweeping much at all. More like stalling in front of a room.

There was something going on in there. I strained to listen over Mom asking the tech if they used detergent booster to get their white bed linens so white.

Lots of talking—no, lots of yelling from that room. Nurses spilled out into the hallway, pulling off gloves and wiping their foreheads. Exhaustion colored their quiet faces. Another nurse rolled out a machine with metal paddles. It didn’t take long to realized what happened.

The janitor went in after with his broom. Clean up duty.

And as I pushed passed the door on our way to the exit, I peeked inside. He stood over the bed with the still body, one hand lowered onto the lifeless chest. It was weird he put his hand there and left his broom discarded on the floor. I got nervous that I shouldn't be spying and that he probably was one of those chester's that had a thing for dead people. Ick.

I was about to look away when he turned to me, eyes black as a shark's—no white anywhere. And I swear...I swear I saw him mouth one word to me before my chair rolled me past the doorway.

Later.



My heart beat to a techno rhythm, *thoompthoompthoomp*. I *couldn't have seen that*. But I had. Every cell in my body confirmed it. Paranoid now, I couldn't stop glancing back to that room. Three nurses walked by, looked in, and kept moving. Two kids played super soaker in the hallway with water-filled syringes. Hattie tied her hair away from her face. Maybe no one noticed because I'd been sold the only ticket to the freak show. Man...*what's the deal with me?*

It got better once outside, though. The sky calmed me. I hadn't seen it in almost a *year* of Sundays. The sun struggled through the gray, swollen clouds for position in the sky. A ray escaped in one last, not-going-down-without-a-fight, effort.

But like bullies, the clouds strangled it on the horizon—a well kept secret that was bound to change by morning. Drops of rain fell into my lap.

After Mom and Dad folded me like a lawn chair into the backseat, they talked dinner. I reached for a Q-tip that wasn't there. I needed one. Two maybe. The rain made music against the roof. I decided to ask for a detour.

five

WANNA KNOW WHAT SUCKS? VISIT THE SUPER Wal-mart. on a Sunday.

Post churchgoers pawed rotisserie chickens, mascara wearing emo dudes paraded in girly jeans, and old biddies protested to the pharmacist about over-priced meds. Amidst this chaos, detailed in a radioactive yellow, giant smiley faces rendered you blind as they directed you to low prices. Geez, they should build a roller coaster in this place and call it Wally World.

I peered through the sea of humanity. Maneuvering my

wheelchair around the morbidly obese and any cryptically old persons suspected of weak sphincter muscles could prove vital. Trust me; there was nothing worse than being behind someone with loose gas seepage.

Dad hated this place too, and stood near the As Seen On TV lane, right next to a wall of missing persons posters while I ventured into the vibes. I needed my Q-tip fix, and I needed it bad. Like a druggie jonesing for a hit, I rolled down the aisle on my way to my white tipped savior. This being my third box in almost two months, Mom was a little p.o.'ed at first when I asked her to make the detour, but she needed a few to wipe/dust/swoon over her The Best of Kenny Roger vinyl. I grabbed a 150 pack on sale with plans to half it with her, and rolled back through the marine of asses mindful of weak sphincters.

Remember, loose gas seepage. No good.

Two boots blocked my path. They were like size twenties and dingy as hell. You know the kind. I tilted my head to scroll up the body. Dude was the biggest and filthiest guy I'd ever seen. Soap and water had to be a foreign concept to him, along with what not to wear. The two sizes too small plaid button down was in direct conflict with his ankle beater sweat pants. The whole get up looked pieced together from a truck stop dumpster.

“Mikayla.”

Whoa. Did he...? My heart beat a little faster. He sounded

like maybe he'd been saying my name long before today. Like maybe he knew me from somewhere and my bastard memory betrayed me. Or, *maybe* my bastard memory, for the first time in its twelve year amnesiac stint, had nothing to do with it. Thoroughly confused and a little iffy, I kept one hand down by the wheel, ready to haul. As only persons in wheelchairs can do.

“Yeah...do I know you?” I knew I didn't.

“We need to talk.” He came nearer, and I caught a whiff of wet dirt. “But not here.”

I clutched my Q-tips to my chest, and wheeled backward. You see, I suffered from a condition in which bitchiness was a side effect at the mere mention of bullshit. “Sure. Just excuse me while I think of a polite way to say hell no.”

He grinned, stepped forward with some intent, leaving mud footprints on the tile. “Relax.” I'd already bypassed the fem hygiene products when he added, “I'm not going to hurt you.”

Sure. Complete stranger plus questionable hygiene raised to the tenth power by questionable attire equaled tacky hobo serial killer. Maybe I could torpedo tampons at him. Massive hands. Massive feet. Massive body. This guy was the spokesperson for anabolic steroids and a high protein diet. Yeah, didn't have to think twice about keeping the wheels moving on this one. Or that I didn't have time to deal with random bullshiz in

my Q-tip deprived state, especially from Man-child over here.

“You should know that stalking is frowned upon,” I said.

I wedged through the center aisle full of people, jabbed my thumb through the perforated outline of the box, and dug out a Q-tip. I gave another push to coast so I wouldn't have to roll the wheels. Usually I saved my nasal fixation for the confines of my bedroom, but I so needed to sneeze away the back-asswardness of that strange encounter. I twirled the cotton tip through my nostril, tickling the fine hairs as I headed back to meet Dad by the register. The whole act of sneezing only lasted a few seconds. But in those seconds, my mind went blank. No thoughts of my b-parents or lost memories or vibes—nothing. Just cruise control to nowhere, man. Just *normal*.

“I know what you see, Mikayla.”

Man-child's voice crawled over me, warm, creepy, and prickly across my skin. The Q-tip hung from my nostril like a chandelier prism as I turned to look. “Wh—”

The rest of the word caught somewhere in my throat. Because already crouched eye level with me, he made it here at some impossible speed. So close I could see the smudges of dirt on his high cheekbones. Beads of water dripped from his hair and streaked his russet skin. Large, gray eyes looked at me beyond a facial expression of permanent impatience. There was nothing good about this dude that I could see, except he didn't vibe.

I stared at him, not sure what to do with my hands. Which had the strangest urge to reach out to his face.

“They’re all around us, Mikayla.” His breath carried the scent of pine. Chill bumps sprang up like mountains on my neck and a small tornado stirred in my gut. He reached for the precariously dangling Q-tip and removed it and my sluggish flinch came off as a poor afterthought.

“They’re around all of these people, feeding.” He glanced left, smoothing his wet mop away from his face. *His face.* Something unknown registered deep in my core. “Herders and Sombers. They’ve got powerful sway, Mikayla. And only you can see them.”

Dry mouthed, I asked, “They?” Crap. I couldn’t stop my hands. I wanted to grab an elderly passerby’s cane and bludgeon them into submission somehow.

He tilted his head and searched my eyes for something I knew wouldn’t be there. In his, a storm stirred. I was vaguely aware that I couldn’t stop looking into them. “I know you’ve changed,” he said. “I know you don’t remember.”

I couldn’t gulp down the fear and skepticism building in my throat, and my heart felt like it would crab out of my chest onto this dude’s face. Shit. Who was this guy again? What the hell was he talking about? And why was I entertaining this? I blinked long and hard, but the answers weren’t behind my lids. When I refocused, he was still there, all grimy and wet

and incredibly, the only glowing thing against the backdrop of people and their clawing, kaleidoscoping vibes.

I wanted to cover my eyes. Could count the seconds till the vibes started snapping at each other.

He rubbed over his left arm. An impressive ink job—no, puffed scars intertwined down its length. “We need to talk now,” he pushed in that warm voice.

I nodded. He knew about them, too. The vibes. Right? But then my brain reminded me *I* didn’t know *him*, and that this whole situation had freaky written all over it. “I mean no. Who are—back off, okay.”

His grin didn’t falter in the cocky department. “Soon,” was all he said.

“Mikayla.” Dad spoke behind me. I glanced over my shoulder, caught the fluorescents reflecting off his forehead. “Everything all right?” His hand came down on my shoulder.

No. “Yeah.”

There was no way to explain Man-child. Or what he said to me. But I needed to tell him to keep his mouth shut about the vibes. Because it would be all anti-freak meds and Tell-Me-About-Your-Feelings therapy pow wow’s from then on. The second I turned to face the stranger, though, he’d gone. My used Q-tip lay neatly in my lap.

WTF?

“Better get going, you know how your mom is about din-

ner.”

I scanned the crowd. Left. Right. Nothing. Dude totally disappeared into the forest of neon smiley faces, squeaky tennis shoes, and bargain shopping velociraptors.

six

THE BULK OF MY CONCERNTRATION CENTERED on not wiggling out when, in fact, I definitely wiggled out as we rounded the mountain. The distance we put between The Super Center of Ridonkulous and ourselves helped a bit. Man-child's words were inked in my thoughts and my mind insta-replayed them in a constant loop—herders-somers-herders-somers. No amount of head shaking would Etch-a-Sketch erase them away. My sanity was so dying a slow and painful death. Like watching a slug crawl through a maze of iodine. Salt plus slug equaled slushy mushy me.

Dad looked over his shoulder. I could tell by the way his

brows furrowed my expression must have been one of sheer confusion or possible constipation. “Look alive, Mikayla.”

The lone comment sparked a chain reaction. Behind the wheel, Mom, whose driving was über reckless, swerved and brutally overcorrected in an attempt to ask, “What’s wrong?”

Once I recovered from the g-forces that plastered my face to the window, I assured them both everything was copacetic.

Our house was nothing short of the Taj Mahal when we pulled into the driveway—wonderful, welcoming, truly missed. They had parked my Gremlin near the wood block Dad and I used to make fires. I took it in like I’d never been here before: the yard, the night sky, the woods behind our house, the hidden paths leading to my secret cliff.

I kept cool as they rolled me in, ready to unhinge my bedroom door just to get to my computer. The air smelled forgotten. How insane that everything was just the way I’d left it. Except my bed was made and Mom lined up my Converse according to color across my trunk. The band posters wallpapering my room—The Drunken Ballerinas, I Am Angst, and Hormonal Overlords—glossy, where-the-hell-have-you-been stares were enough to give me paper cuts. I tossed my parka on the beanie bag and wheeled over the shag carpet to my desk.

I really didn’t know what to expect when I typed the words into the search box. A new Mexican restaurant, maybe? A breed of genetically mutated, nomadic penguins? The words

Somers and Herders waited in the search box. The cursor blinked impatiently. All I had to do was press enter. Press enter and be through with it. A nice list of All That Is Weird In The World would appear with my answer tucked neatly between Why Does Potted Meat Smell Like Dog Food? and 25 Ways To De-wing A Fly. The Internet gods were righteous dudes that would never fail me. I mean, we'd been bff's since I downloaded my first set of Jane Eyre cliff notes, which had nothing to do with Jane Eyre, but everything to do with an Elizabethan porn script. Or that time I accidentally uploaded a virus to my hard drive because my 'bff' sent a phony error message in the middle of me schooling some Internet noobs in WoW. I'm sure it was all some big misunderstanding, you know. Like, mistyping a text message because of auto correct, or getting pregnant from unprotected sex, or offensive BO, or being shot by a total stranger while ice skating on your birthday. Pow pow. Game over. The end.

I palmed my face and abandoned the search when I determined it probably wouldn't turn up anything. Besides, if I didn't press enter, I'd never have to know.



The next morning, Mom came and pried me from bed. At the table she served a pile of brown stuff I think was supposed to be eggs. Either that or Cajun styled cream of wheat. It was

debatable.

Dad laid his newspaper on the table.

LOCAL ELDERLY MAN OVERDOSED ON
PAINKILLERS. FAREWELL NOTE CONFISCAT-
ED BY OFFICIALS.

Things in Britain weren't getting better on the human
torch front.

WEEKLY FORECAST: EIGHTY PERCENT
CHANCE OF SHOWERS TODAY AND FRIDAY
NIGHT, PARTLY CLOUDY ON SUNDAY.

GIRL MISPLACED: TEEN MISSING EN
ROUTE FROM FLORIDA. INFORMATION
AND PHOTOS AVAILABLE AT:
WWW.THEMISSING.ORG

What did that mean, anyway? Misplaced. Like a wallet?
A puppy? *Oooh, sale on Converse All-Stars at Nygeun's Save-N-
Grab. Score.*

As she poured the OJ, Mom reminded me about coming
to her shop after school and about my new schedule.

"I talked to Principal Cooley last week. He said they'll give

you a head start to classes. Just go by the office and pick up your slip.”

“Awwww. So they do care.” Without tasting, I downed a spoonful of eggs or cream of wheat.

“Yes, they do.” She scraped a little more of the brown stuff from the skillet onto my plate. “Now hurry and eat those hash browns before you’re late.”

Outside Dad and I went through another round of lawn chair folding to get me into the car. He wasn’t a morning person. Didn’t talk much. He was the undertaker escorting a prisoner to the guillotine. Prisoner being me, guillotine being secondary education.

He parked at the curb near the front office. “You ready?”

I looked to the entrance, a set of opened jaws that led to my seven-hour shift in Hell. “As I’ll ever be.”

Dad tooted the horn as I wheeled up the sidewalk. The building was a study in mediocrity and a total life-force drain. Behind these walls, fast food clerks were made, lords of the Kwiki Stop were born. High school. It was so unholy.

Inside, two protestors stood near the double doors wearing red S.A.C.F (Students Against Cafeteria Food) t-shirts. The protestors carried unusually large ears of corn.

They were Orchid ‘SugRfreepunisher’ Hemrick and Chevy ‘Junkfoodtyr_nt’ Allen: the school’s student advocates for all things nutritious and the only gamers to defeat my Zom-

bie Apocalypse score at the Kwiki Stop. We weren't exactly friends, more like associates. We spoke the same language. Also, it didn't hurt that they weren't vibing.

"Boycott high fructose corn syrup," Orchid yelled. Blue streaks colored the front of her dirty blond hair. She wore psychedelic colored slap bracelets from Hot Topic and waved an ear of corn. People rushed by her. "Side effects include weight gain, diabetes, and extreme bitch fits."

Chevy stopped me before I could roll past. "What's up, Mikayla? Have a button." He tossed one in my lap. To someone who didn't know him, Chevy could be five-foot-ten inches of contradiction. His mom was Asian and his dad African-American. So he had that whole Blasian thing about him. That and the fact that he rocked the only part curly, part bone straight mohawk in school solidified his distinctiveness.

"Sup Chevy." The button was a familiar radioactive yellow with the words EAT RIGHT OR DIE in bold gothic font. "Subtle message."

"Orchid decided truth without additives or fillers would be best." He tossed another button over my head to someone else. "We heard about the shooting. Kinda sucks, huh?"

"Yeah. The big one." I toyed with the button. So yellow. "I'll see ya around, all right?"

"We'll holla."

I pushed over the threshold, Orchid still hollering in the

background. “Diabetes, people. It’s makes your pancreas sad.”

I took in the aftershave/varnish/freshly printed paper/nasty-stuff-in-a-locker-close-by smell of the lobby. Inside the front office, I rang the silver service bell on the counter. Ms. Golson, the secretary, stood up.

“Good morning.” She looked over her horn-rimmed glasses at my chair, then back at me. It was plausible that Ms. Golson was hot once. Back when hooker helmet and mall bangs were okay to wear in public, and upper lip moles were coined beauty marks. But now, she sagged in all the wrong places, and I’d give my last quarter to have a rat chew that thing off her face. Also, she had Doritos breath.

“Morning Ms. Golson. I’m here to pick up my early dismissal pass.”

It wasn’t even 8 o’clock yet, but she took a deep swig from a Coke. From the smell of the 5-star worthy belch that followed, she’d laced it with a little liquid courage. She reached under the counter, and came up with a slip of paper. “There you go. Schedule and pass,” she said in a no frills kind of way. I was halfway out the office when she added, “And sorry about those legs.”



“Readymades. Can anyone tell me one readymade by Marcel Duchamp?”

Mr. Huffstetler posed that question to his third period class. What energy anyone might have to answer it, died doing the Macarena in second period P.E.

“Shouldn’t be that hard. We just went over this material last week.” Mr. Huffstetler side-stepped through a row of desks. His paunchiness didn’t warrant any other way. He scratched his chin through a beard as seen on Greek deities or unshaven hobos, and scanned the room. He glossed over me, but I knew the answer. Duchamp was my homeboy.

“Mr. Collins,” he said. “Name one for me, please.”

Wade Collins preferred to play grabby ass with our town’s beloved Tara Dandaeu, who, coincidentally, hated me to the extreme. She was one of those freaky/my dad was a preacher/ I let guys motorboat/ have secret F-150 sex kind of girls. See, Wade and just about every other jock in school secretly wanted uncharted territory—me. I still possessed my V-card unlike Tara who didn’t bother renewing hers after bumping fuzzies freshman year. This made me, even wheelchair bound, an untainted hot commodity. Something all the Tara’s of Sulphur Springs High couldn’t compete with.

“Have no idea, Mr. Huffstetler.” Wade held a wad of Tara’s hair to his nose, looked at me, and smiled.

Mom’s breakfast suddenly made an appearance in my mouth and I swallowed. When I looked at him, I only saw his whooping arm on the day I was shot.

“Anyone?” Mr. Huffstetler asked. No one raised a hand so he flipped on the projector. “What about now?”

It was a picture of Duchamp’s *Fountain*.

“But that’s a urinal, Mr. Huffstetler,” Tara said. Laughter surged from the class.

Mr. Huffstetler waved us down, causing his front-butt to peek from under his shirt. “Is that all you see? Look beyond the obvious ladies and gentleman. Duchamp shares worlds with his installations. Invisible worlds that play on your senses.”

His speech was lost under the laughs rolling out like waves. I swear their vibes high-fived each other in the process. I took that as my cue to leave, even though it was five minutes earlier than my dismissal pass.

“See the invisible, class,” Mr. Huffstetler said in a last ditch effort.

In the hallway, I got some relief from the vibes. But I didn’t bring a Q-Tip and needed to chill for a second. I made it to the 420 alcove near the science hall. From there I could see Orchid and Chevy hanging an EAT RIGHT OR DIE banner between two light posts. The lunch bell would ring any minute now.

A girl with sunglasses walked to the entrance like the air was getting in her way. She didn’t vibrate and moved with purpose through the front doors. I knew I’d never seen her before, but Principal Cooley appeared in the lobby and extended his

hand to her.

“Testing. Testing.” Chevy distracted me by checking to make sure his bullhorn worked properly. They celebrated with fist bumps, both exploding their hands like bombs afterward. Those two were made for each other.

I turned back to the new girl, but by that time, Principal Cooley escorted her up the hall.



The sound in the lunchroom was hella loud and salty like heavy metal blaring from cheap sub woofers. I'd almost forgotten how crowded this lunch wave was.

Almost.

I scanned across the table cliques. The new girl hadn't been here an hour before the jocks pounced on her like a pack of juiced up hyenas. She ate that shit up, too. Reaching over to spike up Patrick Creel's well shaped 'fro, then stopping to trace her finger inside his palm. Patrick's vibe wound up her arm slowly, as if it were caressing her.

I bit my apple.

“She's fast.”

Orchid took a seat next to me, picking at a callus on her thumb. She'd been gaming too much.

“No. She's new. And all shiny,” I said. Patrick reached for New Girl's sunglasses, but she intercepted his hand and inter-

twined her fingers between his.

“True. When she walked into my class, sperm counts dropped.” Orchid unwrapped an organic fruit cup. “How are you holding up?”

The question left me gob smacked for a second. No one had asked me that today. “I’m straight. Just feels like the first day all over again.” I looked for her sidekick. “Where’s Chevy?”

“He’s taking down the banner. Hey, you should come with us to the Cowbell tonight.” She paused, probably realizing what she had asked. “I’m sure they’re wheelchair accessible and everything. Anyways, you’ll get caught up on the latest humps and dumps quicker that way.”

The Cowbell was Sulphur Springs version of a nightclub: A local bar that served only soda’s to minors and offered a subpar live music selection from local bands. Which wasn’t the truth at all. The Cowbell was a two level shack full of man stank and skank every Monday, Wednesday and Friday faithfully. If someone cool at the front door gave you a 21-and-over wristband, you could get shwasted. And the bands? Suckish. Luckily the power usually died when the amps went live. I’d been there a couple of times. The Cowbell was definitely something I didn’t need more of right now. “I’m at loss for awesome these days. And I’ve got an ungodly turd of homework due, so...” I looked back to new girl’s table. She was really working Patrick over.

“Her name’s Bianca Proch. Transferred from somewhere in Florida.” Orchid took a second to slurp the remaining juice from her organic fruit cup. “A Tara Dandean in training.”

“Looks that way.” The new girl adjusted her sunglasses, caught me staring. I turned to Orchid. “Just another mattress.”



I finished Hell with a sweaty round of fourth block physical therapy and jeans that clung in all the wrong places. Outside I waited for Dad. They’d wrapped Sydney Smaw’s posterized picture in clear cellophane near our mascot. Old candles surrounded the base, little bows littered the ground. I couldn’t really look at her face the same. I saw her dangling legs; her grabbing for whatever she’d wrapped her neck with in my thoughts. When I looked at her, I didn’t see my classmate in Trig—the quiet girl. She was just a yearbook picture now, a paper ghost.

Dad ushered me into the car and drove to Mom’s shop for my first day back at work. “You okay to help your mom out?”

He was all shirt and suave tie, which meant a solo mission with Mom while he did his sport commenting thing. “Her cooking’s always ten times worse when she comes home tired.”

“You’re right. Let’s get you in there.”

The unmistakable scent of the flower shop hit me when I wheeled in. The front of the store was thick with the smell of

tea lilies, azaleas, and lilacs. Further back and the roses, sweet peas, and freesias took over. The bouquet was soothing, one you'd want to bottle up and spray on like perfume.

"Hello?" I wheeled past the counter where I saw a help wanted sign near the register. I grabbed it, wondering what it was about. "Where are you?"

Mom's voice floated from the back. "I'm in here."

She hunched over, fighting dirt and grime like no one's business in the cooler.

"Um, sorry I'm late. Physical therapy went over a little bit," I said.

She stood and faced me, her cheeks reddened from bending over so long. "That's fine. It's not very busy today. I just thought to clean the coolers out before I have to stock them again."

"Right." I held up the help wanted sign. "What's this about? Are you getting rid of me?"

Which would totally not be a problem. A flower shop didn't top my list of extracurricular activities. I could be gaming right now. Still, it would have been nice to know if I was being canned, say, at breakfast over a piping hot plate of brown stuff.

"Oh, that. I just put that out a few days ago." She placed a rack back in the cooler, leaving my question half answered.

"And."

“And somebody is coming by today. An older man. I think.”

“It’s a guy?”

“Yes. A guy. And what’s wrong with that?”

I fought against the mental picture of a pink shirt, tight khaki pants, penny loafer wearing, middle-aged balding guy. “Nothing. I guess I didn’t know you needed the extra help. So he’s a guy?”

“Again, he’s a guy. And I just figured since you’re not one-hundred percent yet, someone could help out with what you can’t around here.” The cooler door closed with a loud thwack behind her. “I’m not firing you, sweetie. Just making some adjustments until you’re back to yourself.”

“Well, when is he supposed to show up?”

The front door opened with the jingle of bells.

Mom peeked at her watch. “Right now, actually. Come out and meet him. You can help with the interview.” She gave my shoulder two quick mom-knows-best pats as she walked past me.

Folding the help wanted sign in half, I waited a few minutes, not sure how I would handle the ‘flamboyancy’ of it all. But when I finally wheeled out, stopping shy of passing the counter and hiding my face behind a bouquet of carnations and baby’s breath, the mental pictures I’d developed of the new guy disappeared.

I need a Q-tip.

seven

“THAT’S MY DAUGHTER,” MOM SAID, WAVING me over. “Mikayla, what are you—come around and introduce yourself.”

Before I could flee, the stranger sauntered to me. My gaze drifted to boots that thudded against the floor, up to legs slightly bowed at the knees. Worn jeans were ripped in all the wrong and right places and russet skin peeked through. He wore a form-fitting V-neck, and held out a massive, calloused hand.

“I’m Lucas Long. You must be Mikayla.”

It was everything I could do to keep my hands at my sides. A hint of ruthlessness, an epic character flaw, seemed to have escaped Mom who Kool-aid smiled in the background and adjusted her glasses.

I was stuck in a full on panic apocalypse, and dropped the help wanted sign behind my wheel.

He bent to pick it up, and before he cleared my ear to stand, he whispered, “I told you soon.”

My willpower folded against the sensation of his breath traveling over my skin. Mom’s gaze was that of a head mistress, my reaction totally school girl naughty. I shook myself and scowled at him.

Mom’s voice sliced the awkwardness. “Are you new to town, Lucas?”

He placed the sign in my lap, stepped backward to face her. “Yes, ma’am. I’ve only been here a few months, but decided to stay a while.” He glanced over his shoulder at me. “I’ve got some loose ends to tie up.”

The interview went on without me. They talked about schedules, W-4’s, wages, yadda, yadda, yadda. All the while I kept remembering his mouth close to my ear. What the hell was wrong with me?

The way I figured, I had two options at this point. Option (a) tell Mom about this guy, which by default would mean telling her everything, which by double default would mean

explaining why I hadn't said anything sooner. So I supposed option (b) was best: run.



There must be something about a person moving at full tempo that set off a-deer-caught-in-headlights effect. I mean, really, if someone careening toward you at max wheelchair speed didn't say get the hell out of the way, what did? Because of this, I'd taken down, an old lady with a shih tzu, two trash cans to avoid a UPS guy, and a kid enjoying his purple passion flavored Deep Throat slushy, which, incidentally, was not purple, contained no passion, and dripped from my shirt.

I popped a wheelie across the walkway leading to Towne Park, as if it were the Bridge of Khazad-Dum and the Balrog would smote me down into the fiery abyss if I didn't. I passed a row of benches, a fountain, and a slew of birds thoroughly pissed I disturbed their feeding time.

It was hard wheeling over the grass, but I made it behind a bulbous ash tree at the bottom of an empty knoll. I hid there. My arms ached and my lungs screamed for air. Soft rain sifted through the leaves and branches, landing on my face. I tilted my head back and let the drops fill the wells of my eyes.

Mom, I thought, is gonna hand my ass to me florist style when I get back.

For no apparent reason other than to annoy me, thunder cracked through the sky in loud earsplitting fractures like The

Big Guy was a little p.o.'ed with Earth. From the way the rain picked up, I thought maybe He might be.

In the distance, the downpour pummeled a piece of paper into ruins. Long streams of water dripped from the bird fountain like jellyfish tentacles stinging into the ground. Cool air wrapped my bare arms and I shivered. The hands that grabbed them from behind not only warmed them but freaked me out on a genome level.

I rolled forward, and knew—just knew in my gut—who would be there when I spun around.

“You ran.” His voice carried over the downpour.

“What the hell—dude—you just...can't.” I sounded premenstrual. “You just can't keep doing this.”

“We can talk now or later. But later may be too late.”

“God, you're like a bad spammer.”

He stepped forward, his body wide and unavoidable. His unmistakable scent rose like steam from his skin, curling into my throat and pressing against that tingly spot behind my naval. I couldn't see around him, but I knew we were alone. And my hands—*gab*—even now were drawn to him like a fat kid to cake. My heart did that techno thing again. I balled my fist at my sides. “Please....please don't do anything strange or unusual to me. Dude, I've had a rough couple of months. And I just can't handle it.”

“I'm not here to hurt you. Why—” He looked confused

and stepped forward.

I shielded my head for some reason. “Stop.”

He huffed. “Take down your hands.”

I peeked through my dripping fingers.

His eyes rolled in impatience. “We aren’t going to get very far this way.”

“I agree, so you should just—”

He pulled his t-shirt over his head, and then stuffed the wet thing into his pocket. Long scars. Body. Lots of it.

“Go...shoo?” I squeaked.

“You’ll forgive me for this one day.”

I didn’t have time to ask what for. The wheels of my chair dug into the wet ground as he dragged me toward him. His eyes turned coal black. Another crackle of thunder boomed overhead, jagged light tattooed the sky, rain drops shattered against my skin. His face was inches from mine. His nose and mouth jutted forward, fangs grew and extended past his lips. He growled. Brown hairs sprouted through his skin, filling every possible space until his torso was covered.

Fangs. *Chrissakes, he’s got fangs!*

I let out a sound that resembled sea lions being strangled by orcas. Twice he shook the chair, huffed in my face—this animal...*thing*. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t move. My body seized, thirsty to taste, to feel, to have him taste and feel me, yet my mind had a totally different reaction.

So scared.

Suddenly I felt thin, spreading into something far and wide and endless. Lucas was a brown blob over me that I couldn't fight against. Everything shimmered into blackness. My hands burned. He held me hard against his chest and I melted into him, disintegrating into pixels of myself. I thought of Mom and Dad as we disappeared like secrets on the wind.



Images, faces, and feelings all swirled in some sadistic tornado in my mind. I pieced together in a puzzle of human matter. Everything connected, everything just as it should be.

I was still pressed to his chest, his hand smoldering against the small of my back. My legs buckled and I slid in a heap to the ground. No, I slid onto shag carpet. No more rain. I blinked hard. Hormonal Overlords. Converses. Jalapenos boxer shorts.

I'm in my room.

“*Woo-shmib,*” I slurred.

Lucas lowered himself in front of me. “Relax.”

He wasn't furry anymore. No fangs, no beastly nose, just a sun-baked shade of red. His brows drew together and he didn't blink, as if afraid he would miss something.

My mouth formed words, but they cannoned at him, impossible to catch. “How...park...my room—my room.”

He pressed his wrist against my temple, his mouth close to my ear. “You have to breathe. Take in some air, Mikayla. Can you feel my pulse against you? Make yours match mine.”

I shouldn’t be near this guy. I shouldn’t let him touch me. Mostly because I was almost desperate for him to touch me. My desire terrified me almost as much as he did.

“Make it match, Mikayla,” he said again.

Lucas was *so* here and *so* right now in my face. I couldn’t ignore the beat of his pulse against my temple. Loud. Commanding. Real. It drummed inside my head, an almost impossible rhythm to follow. But I listened. No, I felt—felt it throb over me in small bearable quakes. After a while, it was all I could feel till he pulled away.

“Are you better now?”

I did a quick mental check and nodded. My heartbeat wasn’t filling my throat. My hands weren’t shaking or burning. There was a situation going on with my breast thanks to Mom leaving on the AC. The urge to touch his face remained. And his scent—God, that scent. It was like pure pheromones. Awkward much? “Who—no, *what* the hell are you and what did you do to me?”

“I’m your Sentry.” The way he said it came off as a burden. “And I calmed you.”

“Sentry?” I shook my head. “No. How are we in my room right now? What did you do at the park?”

He stood, reaching for the shirt in his pocket. “I’ve done nothing to you. You did this. It was the only way you would believe me.”

“That’s bullshit.” The fact that I’d just swore at him didn’t help unglue my eyes away from the real estate that was his bare chest.

“No. The situation is very real. And you better get used to it.” He pulled the shirt over his head, rubbed his hand down the length of his scarred arm.

Hot or not, this guy just kidnapped me and he didn’t look like he was about to dip any time soon. I slid backward to my bed, grabbed the clear phone I got from the thrift store retro sale last year. I fumbled with it, tangling the cord around my arm. I dialed the numbers, but had to smack the receiver against the heel of my hand to get the operator’s soporific voice to come through.

“Nine-one-one what’s your emergency?”

“Yes, there’s...”

Lucas moved in a blur to squat in front of me. “Tell her there’s a guy in your room that *you* transported here. Tell her about the demons you see around people. You should mention you see other things, too. Things before they happen.”

Demons. “I—”

Holy piss, *demons?*

“Hello Miss. What’s your emergency?”

“Tell her,” he prompted.

“I—I’m sorry. I meant to dial four-one-one.”

He took the phone, placed it on the hook, and then picked it back up. “Call your mother. Tell her you needed some fresh air. And that I offered to take you home because you weren’t feeling well.”

I did everything he said. Not like I had much choice. This close, the smell of him was a carpet bomb to my brain. Mom freaked, of course, but overall on the Parental-Manometer-Of-Screwed, I was safely somewhere at the bottom in the ‘grounds for dismal of punishment’ region.

“Uh-huh. Yeah. I know, Mom. Should’ve called sooner...What?” Mom repeated her question phonetically, even though I heard her the first time. “I don’t need aspirin.” I turned slightly away from Lucas and spoke quietly. “I’m not on the rag, Mom. I have to go, okay? Yeah, I’ll tell him. Same here. Bye.”

I hung up. “She says to tell you thanks. And that you can start tomorrow.” I looked down at my hands, the cord snaking around me, not certain where to pick up the conversation. “You were there at Wal-Mart waiting for me. You said something...about the Herders and Sombers. Now you’re telling me about demons? Okay, I get it. That’s your OCD. But you keep following me. Why? What does any of this have to do with me?”

“Everything.” He rubbed his hair. It was short and uneven now, almost like it’d been cut by a steak knife instead of scissors. “Herders and Sombers are personal demons to humans. You’re a demon hunter. You have the abilities to send them back to the Nether Legion, to stop the feedings. I’m your Sentry and you’re in my charge.”

I held my hands out to ward off his next words. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Dude—”

“Lucas,” he corrected. While my hands were up, he slid the curly cord off my fingers and placed the phone off to the side. Something about his touch didn’t make sense to me. His fingers hurried, as if he feared touching me too long. His jaw tightened every time he did, I noticed.

I faked clearing my throat. “Excuse me, *Lu-cas*. But you have the wrong girl. You see, I’m in high school. They don’t offer Demon 101 classes there. And I’m pretty sure I’d know if was meant to send demons to this ‘Nether Legion’, anyway.”

“When is your birthday?” he asked.

“Decem—”

“Wrong. Where did you grow up? What were your parent’s names, your real parents?”

“I don’t—wait.” He was close to me, every word he spoke smelled piney. His eyes were impossibly gray and deep.

“What was your favorite thing to do when you were little? What toys did you play with? Did you have a best friend?”

Were you lonely all the time?”

He spat question after question and I couldn't answer any of them. “I get it, okay.”

He stared. “Everything from ages one through thirteen is gone. You don't remember any of that, so why is it impossible for you to believe you don't remember this—who you really are?”

“No. It stops at twelve. My parents adopted me when I was twelve.” I knew that for a fact. He couldn't take that away from me. *Boo-yeah, bitch.*

“Wrong again. You came here when you were thirteen. We're the same age, Mikayla, born on the same day to each other. I'm eighteen and so are you. I know almost everything about you. You're in my charge, I was born and trained to protect you when you came into your ability. And now you have. You should make this easier for me.”

I tried to digest what he was saying, which was some kind of impossible and almost as hard as eating Mom's food. Trapped in a downward daze, the carpet became a maze of shaggy strains all pressed in different directions, away and into each other. None of which made sense.

This is crazy. This is crazy. “This is crazy.”

I rolled onto my stomach and army crawled to my nightstand's bottom draw. “Dammit.” I dug through more junk. “Where the shit are my Q-tips?”

Lucas grabbed the baggie off my computer desk and held them in front of me. “This isn’t crazy. We’ve lost time since the Call and I need you to trust me right now.”

I snatched the bag, shoved one in my nose and sneezed so hard my ears popped. But he was still here. One, two, three times later I didn’t feel different. I couldn’t sneeze him or this away.

He looked at me with those gray eyes and I felt he knew my dirty little secret. He took the next Q-tip from my hand and tossed it into the pile next to me. “This won’t stop them from coming. They can feel you. Some have gotten through because of the Sombers already. And you’re not set for them.”

The way he said *them* sent a prickly feeling over my skin. My voice came out raspy. “Trust you? You’re not even human. At the park...”

“I shifted. You’re easily frightened of me for some reason.” He paused, as if he contemplated that, looking at my hands. Not at all innocently, his gaze traveled upward, over my chest, and settled on my mouth. The muscle in his jaw jumped again. “But I knew that would make you fade, make you see. It’s the same thing you did the day you called me.” He lowered his voice. “Can you remember how you felt when *it* was standing over you with the knife? You felt loose, coming undone. And then you woke up someplace else.” He grabbed my hands and turned them palm up, pressed his thumbs in their centers. He

fingers trembled. My hands were as small as car keys inside of his. His skin was rough from use, but his touch tender. I mistakenly closed my fists around his thumbs to keep them from spazzing out. It was obvious he had no concept of personal space and it felt *different* having his skin close to mine. “Your hands felt full, probably stung a little.”

I nodded, even though it wasn't a question.

“You want to touch me right now, don't you? And don't lie, I'll know.”

A Hattie-Bear-paw of a knot swelled in my throat. “You can read my mind?”

“No.”

“Because that would be freaky and a total invasion of privacy.”

“But I can hear your heart. It's beating softer, not too fast. I think you know I won't harm you.” He searched for confirmation in my eyes with a predator-like awareness.

Sandwiched between everything said about the visions, the demons, and my hands was a little thought that said if he wanted to hurt me, he would have by now. “Yeah. Why is that—I mean, why do I want to touch you?”

“It's your Speak. That's how it works between Sentry and Hunter. We're born and paired at birth. But the Bond can't be made between the two until the Hunter ascends after eighteen and calls for her Sentry. It's natural for you to want to touch

me right now until we complete the bond. You'd touch me here." He brought my hand to his temple, the place my teeth ached for. A tremble passed over his skin. "And I'd touch you in the same place, only your Speak would flow through us and create the bond of Sentry and Hunter."

I tried to follow, but either I wasn't awesome or delusional enough to understand. At this point, I was befuddled by bullshit. I pulled my hands away. "But I never called you—"

He shook his head. "You did when you fought your first demon, the straggler, at that lake."

Outside, the wind picked up, tearing a lone leaf from a branch. It stuck to my window, sliding down until it fell away. Lucas was there at the lake with me.

Loud growls and screams.

He'd stopped the shooter from killing me. Or, I'd stopped him from killing me by...*fading*? He wasn't human—I mean, my shooter. No, the demon.

I chewed at the inside of my cheek. Black glop dripped from my shooter's mouth. Something wasn't right about him. The way he went all Rambo on me said as much. But his fingers...the way his voice sounded, all distorted and auto-tuned and more than one. The look in his eyes...Shit.

"You said some get in because of Sombers, is that how the one at the lake was able to attack me?"

He nodded.

“So they have a free for all pass to the human buffet. Great.”

“Doesn’t work like that. There’s a certain way they escape to the surface. It starts with a suicide.”

My heart thumped against my rib cage. For the life of me, I didn’t know why I had this strange urge to pee.

“That’s one gateway for demons to leave the Under Legion. Suicide is a Somber demon’s specialty.”

I convinced my sore legs to cross. A part of me punked out because I believed what he said was true. She came into my mind and I couldn’t shake her—the quiet girl. My feelings from that day in the hospital all came back. Sucked that they were there, gnawing at me. I shouldn’t care. *Be cool, she gave it all away.* She was dead now. Except before I could do anything about it, I blamed her for what happened to me. If she weren’t so weak... Her copout let *them* in—the demons.

As if he could read my thoughts, he said, “Everyone battles personal demons, Mikayla.”

“No. People battle heartburn or a bad breakup or the sixth level of Zombie Apocalypse with rabid dogs. Normal people don’t battle demons.”

“A Hunter will and that’s you.”

This isn’t me. “What if I don’t want any of this? Could I just say no and, like, forfeit the whole demon hunter destiny gig?”

“Your choice. In a few days, if we don’t Bond, the temporary connection I have with you will end. Or you can refuse

me, but you'll be on your own. It won't change who you are, Mikayla. They'll still want you because a dead hunter is a good hunter to them. And with no memory, you need someone to help you." He leaned on my computer desk. "Your answer shouldn't be hard."

No, my friend, *life* shouldn't be hard.

I didn't look at him for a while, because I really couldn't handle the demon/hunter/life-changing shit he'd dropped on me. He successfully reset my life in one afternoon without even pressing Control/Alt/Delete. Congratulations to me. Clap clap. *Bravo. You're no longer seventeen. Your memory is still fucked, but who cares? You're a Demon Hunter. Oooooooh, doesn't that just rock! Don't worry about being normal, normal's over-rated. Oh, and by the way, the demons are coming after you. So suit up and boot up and get geared to kick some demon ass with powers you never knew you had. Hoo-rah, soldier!*

I should unzip my skin and let him wear it.

His stare lasered into me, waiting for an answer to the only question he hadn't asked yet.

"I need a minute to think, okay. And not a minute in the literal sense." I squeezed the baggie of Q-tips "You need to leave now."

He gave me a look that penetrated my skin. When he walked to the door, he hesitated, came back to my computer desk and tossed the koosh ball from a souvenir cup.

“When you’re done with that minute, drink this if you want to walk again.” He took his index finger to his palm. His nail grew pointed and sharp. In one clean line, he ripped the skin open, blood poured into the cup. Repulsed and fascinated at the same time, I wanted him gone. I couldn’t think clearly when my body reacted like that. “You used your Speak to fade us from the park. They can feel that. At least you’ll be able to run when they come after you.”

eight

“WHAT WAS THIS DOING ON THE FRONT PORCH?”
Mom wanted to know.

I woke from something like a bad dream, in which I was a demon hunter on some tripped ass mission to lay the smack down on the uglies of this world. Only it wasn't a dream and Mom was, in fact, calling my name from my door. It was dark outside, which meant I hadn't slept till the next day like I thought. I lay on the floor in damp clothes looking a hot mess. She would notice. There would be mom questions.

She rolled in my wheelchair. “And why are you on the

floor?”

Because I faded myself here and was too tired to do anything else. When did he bring back my chair? The cup was still on the desk. “I must’ve fallen out of bed.”

She rubbed the vinyl backing of my chair. “And this was outside. Did you crawl in?”

“Right, that.” I raced to come up with an answer. “The new guy helped me in.” She pursed her lips and I went for the win. “It was wet from the rain and...I rolled across the lawn. So I didn’t want to track mud on the carpet and left it out... side?”

I waited for her to see through that one. Instead she rolled the chair bedside. “Smart girl,” she said. “Hop in. Your dad and Uncle Joe will be here in a minute.”

Mom went all out and bought dinner from the Chinese Peking Palace, the spot owned by Mexicans. She spread tortilla crisps and the Kung Pao chicken on a platter.

“You haven’t seen Uncle Joe since before the hospital, right?” She speared the chicken cubes with toothpicks.

“The night he slept over from the VFW weekend.”

“Oh, right, right, right.” She sopped a spot of sauce with her finger and tasted it. “This stuff is hot.”

I threw a couple of bottled waters in the refrigerator and heard a two pack a day raspy laugh from the front. Uncle Joe.

I was out of the kitchen before Mom could register any-

thing, but stopped. When I saw him, I had to admit he wasn't exactly what I expected.



“Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes,” Uncle Joe said.

He wore his signature Bass Pro Shop cap. A cut off flannel button down, with a white wife beater underneath. His boots were a dusted shade of bland, and one was wrapped in duct tape. This was normal. Normal I could handle.

But he was swarming with *them*. The kind that clung to him like a jacket. They snapped. They reached. With black cryptic fingers they wrapped around his neck, and I couldn't help but reach for mine. I'd seen this kind before.

Not Uncle Joe.

“Where's the love, kid?” He was all thirty-two's with his arms held out wide. I waved. “Like hell you wave.”

He rushed me. His stubble scratched my cheeks inside the bear hug he held me in. “Uncle Joe.” The vibes stretched for me, but snapped back like they touched a hot skillet. “Can't breathe, man.”

He let go, took off his hat. “Hot damn.” He looked around. “Did y'all know this girl doesn't sound much like a lawnmower now?”

“We noticed,” Dad said, rubbing his bare chin—the complete opposite of Uncle Joe's. Everything about Dad was the

complete opposite of Uncle Joe. Dad was quiet, Uncle Joe would tell you where to get off. Dad wore ties and Uncle Joe wore overalls. When it got hot, Dad cranked up the AC. Uncle Joe sat bare-chested on the front porch and tossed back a cold one.

“Well, say somethin’ else.” He thought of something. “Did you like those songs I sent you?”

It came out before I could edit it. “Death to Blue Grass. May it rest in peace.”

To Dad, he said, “Barry, I think we oughta take this one back to the hospital. Sounds like she may need more medical attention.”



We sat at the table, mouths agape because the stupid-hot Kung Pao chicken burned our souls. Uncle Joe told one of his stories that was impossible to believe, but left you thinking it might’ve happened. He swore a lot, which annoyed Mom and Dad to no end. They never told him to stop because (a) it was a known fact that he couldn’t, and (b) no one gave shit to a widower.

“...so the fella walked in—and he’s a green sombitch, too. Had way too much to gargle. Anyhow, he walked in and sees this lady choking...” He nudged me, making the universal sign for choking with his hands.

Uncle Joe told most stories this way, with his hands. I laughed as he went on, demonstrating the size of a cashew with a piece of chicken.

He stood up, pointed to his butt. "...he licked her right there. Lady was so startled she blew that cashew across the room. And you know what that fella said he was doing? The hind lick maneuver. The *hind* lick maneuver!" He popped another piece of chicken in his mouth. He moaned and pointed to his plate with his fork. "This here's hotter than a kitchen in the summer with the oven on."

"And that didn't happen," Dad said, wiping a laugh tear from his eye.

Uncle Joe nodded. "Sure it did."

"It didn't," Mom explained. She was flushed in the face, and I couldn't tell if it was from the story or the pao in the chicken. "Remember—what was it, six years ago? At the County Fair. The stand-up comedian...what's his name?" She snapped her fingers.

"Jethro." Dad dumped more tortilla crisps onto his plate. "That's right. You and Stella convinced us to see him."

Uncle Joe looked down at his plate, scratched over his brow with his thumb. "Sure did," he said low like he was recalling it for the first time from some forgotten place. "Stel had been wanting to see him for a long time." He looked at Dad long and thoughtful. "Good times, Bear. Good times."



I followed Uncle Joe to the front porch while Mom and Dad washed dishes. The earlier rain left the evening cool and damp. Stars lit the sky, bright enough to connect the dots and create a new constellation. It reminded me of those nights Dad would build a fire and we'd find Boötes, Ursa Minor, and Libra. A bird flew over the Gremlin by the old chopping stump. Everything was falling asleep around us.

Uncle Joe sat on the banister, one leg cocked, the other dangling. The darkness hid most of his vibes and made looking at him a lot easier.

"Stutter Butter stutters no more, huh?" he asked.

I applied the brakes and rested my elbows on the railing. "That's what I hear."

"Well, to hell and back. Guess something good had to come out of it."

"I guess." *Along with a ton of other weird things.*

"That's a shame, though. I kinda miss being Uncle J-J-Jo-Jo-Joe." He laughed and mussed my hair. "No harm, kid. Those city boys still don't know who did it?"

I shook my head.

He settled back on the banister, pulled out a pack of Big Sir chewing tobacco and pinched off a piece. There should be laws against looking so lonely. I wanted to reach out and soak

some of that lonely up, share the load. I tried, but I couldn't see my Uncle Joe. Where was the guy who built a swimming pool for me by lining the bed of his pick-up with a tarp and filling it with water, the man who packed a spare fishing pole wherever he went. Or the person who made the best squid hot dogs and called them seafood?

"Barry," Mom shrieked. Through the window, Dad held the empty platter and wore his signature 'my bad' look. Sauce was painted on Mom's shirt. She studied him for a moment, then pressed herself against his button down, smearing sauce on him. Dad held his arms heavenward like Mom was walking Ebola. After a second he laid the platter on the counter and hugged her. He kissed her on the forehead and mouthed sorry.

Uncle Joe turned away and spit a line of brown juice over the rail. "They said you died and came back, kid."

The question caught me off guard. "Hm-mm."

"You scared any? Of course you must've been," he answered, adjusting his cap. "People should be scared to die," he murmured.

Shitless, I wanted to say. It was something to be kept and never shared. A dark nightmare of the kind you never thought you could produce without the help of acid. And you hurt. The imposters go in, out, and through you. You'd scream, they'd grab, you'd wonder why The Big Guy up stairs went

on break to check his emails and minimized your window on his computer screen. The only good thing about dying was waking up.

A cool breeze blew a strand of hair in the seam of my lips. I pulled my arms inside my short sleeves and wrapped them across my stomach to squeeze this feeling away. I wanted to tell him, tell him everything—that I knew what happened to me at the lake, that I'd seen a real demon, that I wasn't the same Mikayla anymore—because if anyone could understand, Uncle Joe could. But I didn't. The words backed away from my tongue like a scared swimmer to the edge of a pool. The look on his face said, *That Was More Than A Question*.

"I should've come to see you." He avoided my eyes for the first time tonight and ran his fingers over his stubble. Moonlight streamed through the clouds, shining on the side of his face. His eyes glistened and I thought of morning dew on soft grass. "Wasn't an excuse for that. None at all." Another line into the yard. "You should've known that I cared and wanted to be there. For you. All the way, kid."

Silence. I stared ahead and could've cried. I'd never seen him like this and what had happened to me only added to his problems. Hurt shouldn't pile up like this inside of someone. No one should suffocate beneath pain on top of pain. You should have time to breathe, time to scream it out until it doesn't exist anymore.

No one screamed out loud today. I wanted him to know I heard him. “It was quiet, lots of light, you know. Kinda beautiful.”

Uncle Joe took another pinch of tobacco and stuffed it inside his cheeks, staring out across the lawn like the trees, dirt and grass hid an ocean full of answers, ones he could pluck out like fish. I looked out to that ocean with him and felt bad about the grub-muncher of a lie I told him. When I saw the corner of his mouth pulled into a smile, I knew I wouldn’t change that lie for the world.

“She’d like that,” he said under his breath.

“Yeah.”



Everyone slept while I paced my room wheelchair style. The pile of Q-tips on the floor near my bed made me think of Lucas, about the park, about fading, about this other person I was. Everything that happened today was real and an unholy load of depressing. I could deal.

Tonight, with Uncle Joe...something wiggled me out about it. What had Lucas said? *Everyone battles personal demons?*

Yeah. Maybe that was true. Maybe it wasn’t. Maybe I just needed to feel numb to forget about the whole thing.

But what about in the morning and all the mornings after that? What about the people who didn’t have a clue they were

swarming with demons? What would happen to them?

Sidney.

Maybe she wasn't such a copout after all. Maybe she had a little nudge in the wrong direction from a Somber.

Something like that could happen to anyone, a complete stranger or someone close—an uncle.

My hands stung at the thought. Personal demons were starting to irk me the same way celebrities claiming to be environmentalist and adopting kids from foreign countries did.

The cup on my computer desk drew my attention like one those smiley faces at Wally World. I went over and held it.

I let the words leave my lips. "I'm a Hunter."

It sounded strange, like I didn't own it and never would.

Could I take down the uglies? Could I help people?

Something burned under my skin and flowed into my hands. When I closed my eyes, I saw Uncle Joe.

Hell yeah. I could try—trying had to count for something. But not alone. I needed him, wherever he was.

I weighed the cup in my hand, then lifted it to my lips.

nine

I WASN'T SURE HOW I FELL ASLEEP. MY BODY FELT sour and twisted. Chewed, spat out, and chewed again. My head throbbed and a laser show played behind my lids. An auroras borealis of light spread out into the darkness, morphing into an image. I closed in on something fast, my sight clear as HD.

Things wouldn't be so complicated if she knew. Maybe she'll refuse me and I can move on. It's risky to stay, the scarring has started. The deep voice rumbled in my throat. *Why have they called me when they know the rules?*

Low to the ground, trees towered over me like Earth giants

in the darkness. My ears breathed in every sound. Everything. Warm bodies splashed in water nearby. A girl giggled and said, “Use your tongue, Jim.”

An owl hooted, shadows disappeared in the brush, blood gurgled in their hearts. Fear. I surged with warmth, power, muscles tight but springy. Grass and fallen branches were soundless under my feet—my paws. I had paws? The underbrush turned to concrete. Life was happening: lights, sounds, cars, tall buildings, the hum of electricity.

A city.

I crept forward—fur covered shoulders sawing up and down, ready for whatever. I inventoried the dark alley: one homeless guy, one dumpster, and one distinct smell of urine. It burned my nose.

Of all the places to hold council, they chose this one.

That voice again, in my head and throat, deep and a little angry.

I passed the sleeping guy wrapped in a dingy blanket, clutching a bottle of Boones, and a cardboard sign that read:

**Been probed by aliens
Need money for stitches.**

Tobias, I'm here. I need clothes.

Behind the dumpster, a tall metal door opened. The light above flickered in a buzz of mosquitoes. I stretched skyward, arms in front of me, fingers flexed, bones snapped and popped

until they aligned. Reddish-brown skin. Ripped stomach. An insane V-cut... Whoa, and I was pretty sure the equipment I cupped in my hands wasn't supposed to be between my muscled legs. Dang, I hoped this wasn't one of those lesbo/tranny dreams.

"You made it." A wiry guy stepped in the doorway holding a pair of jeans. He flung them at me and I pulled them on. He cleared six-feet, but somehow I managed to see over his head.

"Did I have a choice?" My arm was scarred and mammoth. Looked a lot like... Lucas's.

"No," he said. I could see my reflection in the muddy brown puddles of his eyes. Serious face. Serious attitude. Serious gray eyes stared back at me. Crud. This *was* Lucas—and his body. What kind of freaky, psychedelic blood had he given me? Dammit.

"My charge is unattended."

"She'll be fine. Use your bond and leave if she's in danger. Cyric has called us."

A chill passed over me, weird for a night without a breeze.

Easy for him to say this. His charge was willing and trained. Our connection is weak and I failed her one time already. Slack-ing. It might not be a good idea, but I do need to be closer to her. She's unprotected. One of them could be gaining strength to come after her now.

I stepped inside and down a long, dank hallway filled with

testosterone and shirtless guys glittering with sweat. They nodded. Their stare-worthy bodies came straight out of a gym. They fell in line behind me, walking into a room dimly lit with bulbs dropping from the ceiling, scattered tables and chairs, a dusty bar beneath a picture of anthropomorphized dogs playing cards, and forgotten poker chips littering the floor. It smelled of old tobacco and lost rent money. I branched off to the side.

Fingers stroked my scalp and down my neck, my gut turned. *"You cut your hair."*

His voice boomed inside my head. *I would have kept it long if I knew it wouldn't have gotten your attention.*

I turned around. An olive skinned girl stood in front of me with enormous eyes. Sort of beautiful, she came to my chest in height, long flowing dark hair. *"Hello Sable."*

"Lucas." She pressed against me, pinning me in a dark part of the room. This chick was unusually strong and warm. Her curvy body felt soft against my skin. Man, this was so a lesbo dream. Her fingers flowed down my chest and I caught her wrist before she went further. For all her cock strong attributes, she seemed small and breakable in my grasp.

"Still shy." Her voiced dripped with the cheap seduction only found at the Cowbell.

"I see you still aren't."

"Our turn is coming, Lucas. When will you stop fighting this?"

She throws herself at me. So easy. I could take her in the back room now. She'd like that, want that, my hands all over her. I let her hand fall by her side, looked into her blue eyes. *Nothing there, nothing worth scarring for.*

I grabbed her closer to me, spun around and pressed her back against the wall. Her skin rubbed against the trail of hair on my stomach leading into my jeans as I lowered my mouth to her ear. She quivered under my hand as I murmured, *"There is a room full of men in front of you. Go climb one of them."*

Whoa, burn! Plus one, Team Lucas.

Three men stepped forward from the back wall. I stepped aside to let her pass. *"They're starting."*

Her cold, relentless stare held me. She smiled, her cheeks colored with an orgasmic blush, and walked away.

"Thank all of you for coming on such short notice." The voice was unreal, like music that made you want to skydive, streak a soccer field, and marry a stranger. It belonged to the man at the head of the room. He appeared to be the oldest person here. The lines around his eyes said, *Been There, Done That.* I guessed he was supposed to be Cyric. *"I know you have been commanded here but what we seek are willing volunteers."*

His fierce gaze appeared ready to serve up some grim.

Always voluntary he says. Lucas's voice vibrated right through me. *When he knows we can't refuse him. And where is Tyus?*

“As some of you may have noticed, we are missing a member of our Council. Tyus has accepted mode-lock after not claiming a prime.”

Worry moved over the crowd. Gazes wandered the room, low whispers sounded off like soft guitar riffs at an acoustic set. A woman stormed out, the door slamming behind her.

“Let her leave.” But someone went after her anyway.

Tyus would never do this. He trained me, knew about the scars, knew the consequences of not claiming a prime. He favored Lewyn but the rules are clear: no relationships with humans, mixed bloods, and charges. He must believe they couldn't be matched. She's part Panthera. The Council doesn't allow this. But he wouldn't have accepted mode-lock either.

“This brings us to the reason for this meeting. Like Tyus, so many Sentry have accepted mode-lock, over fifty-seven this year. This means over half of those fifty-seven are no longer connected to what human part they once shared. They have turned full lycan, no longer Sentry, and seek only blood. The humans are in danger. It is declared as of today that any lycan Sentry who has accepted his or her mode-lock will be hunted and executed before such time he or she makes prey of innocent humans.”

This makes no sense. My brother is in mode-lock because of his charge. Would they have him killed too? Everything went red. Anger pumped through my veins, exploding in my heart. I locked eyes with the wiry guy from earlier. He shook his head.

I backed deeper in the dark corner, bending forward to stop my bones from popping and dislocating. They didn't fit inside of this skin, like those jeggings I made in Home Ec. Ready to burst out Kool-Aide man style through a brick wall. Tight like a cheerleader's ponytail.

Control yourself. Even in my head, Lucas's voice sounded choked. Thick, dark hair erupted through my forearms. *I can't let them see me like this, they'll think I can't hold my own. But my brother, they'll hunt him. Maybe I could volunteer and find him before they do.*

The enormous eyed girl, Sable, looked at me. She slid her tongue between her lips, rubbed over them. What a slut puppy. This did nothing to help the situation.

"Council will need fifteen volunteers. This will mean leaving behind your primes and forfeiting your duties to your charges until time permits you to return. Your charges will fall in the care of another upon your departure. With lycan Sentries accepting mode-lock at a much greater rate than anticipated, it is possible you will not see your homes for a long time. The Council asks no one under the age of twenty step forward."

I remained buried in the corner, fighting back whatever wanted to rip through me. Men and women stepped forward, some tearing themselves from the grip of others.

"For those of you who remain, if you have charges we suggest you inform them. Since a Sentry in mode-lock is considered dan-

gerous, your charge has full permission to treat them hostilely, as they would any demon. Some complaints have arisen. Please remember certain warlocks and witches will remain our allies and should be regarded as such. This means respecting their places of business—nightclubs and the like. Keep transactions with the Fae and the Demoted regarding mortal glamour to a minimum. You should remain noncommittal in regards to the dispute as it does not concern us or cause harm to the humans. The werewolves will need to be avoided. Take great caution in distinguishing them from our kind on nights of the full moon.”

I stumbled down the long empty hallway. Outside, I convulsed to the ground as fur covered my body and claws replaced my fingers and toes. My shredded jeans lay piled behind me. Racing through the woods, low branches whipped across my face, tearing skin and fur away. It didn't hurt, only amped me up to go farther. I wondered when this dream would end when a familiar voice echoed in my head.

“Where will you go?”

“To my brother. I can't be here, Tobias. My brother served and his charge turned on him. He never asked for this. And now they want volunteers to hunt him and the others down?”

“But this is the Council. What they say goes, you know this. And what about your charge?”

“They're dated and need to be put down like dogs. And my charge is preoccupied. I want to protect her, but she believes that

one Q-tip a day will keep the demons away. I doubt she'll miss me."

My arm stung where his scars should be.

"And Sable? Going against her father like this...leaving a meeting when he declared you and her months earlier. Tonight you should have—"

"—lied?"

"You should have claimed her."

"Tobias you know me better, Sable isn't the one. And what part didn't you hear? He didn't want any volunteers under twenty. I'm eighteen; he knew what he was doing." I splashed through a stream. "It doesn't matter, Cyric's mind is already made up. I'm pure blood, so is she. He's only concerned with keeping the blood-line strong, doesn't matter if we matched. If I had volunteered after he'd declared us, no one would be here for Sable. Look at what he did to Tyus."

"So you know what will happen."

"Full well."

I'd been running for a while, but I wasn't tired. The air was warmer, my breaths came steady and slow. I needed this type of stamina for P.E. I broke through the woods onto cool asphalt. To my left was the Sulphur Springs welcome sign painted by yours truly, to my right a long stretch of highway. I headed to the right, Lucas's voice came low and intense.

Where would he be? When was the last time I saw him, a year

ago before his shift? I think that's right. Near Louisiana. But he wouldn't have stayed there, too many Herders. He could be anywhere now, far west near home. It's unpopulated and he'd be able to feed. But he likes the cold, Canada would be the place to start.

I dropped off the low shoulder and raced along the highway. The road stud reflectors melted into one luminous line in my peripheral. Then I stopped cold, like I'd been roundhouse kicked, my chest knotted like a wrung towel. I thrashed in my sleep, but Lucas's body didn't veer off course and I couldn't wake. This dream went past the point of personal space and into the realm of freaky.

Ever.

The name echoed of something once lost now found.

I should go to her first, explain things. Everything.

I stood there, letting the *badoom* of Lucas's heart beat in my ears. It was just as real and commanding as his wrist against my temple. The bluish glow of dawn inched forward on the highway, driving away the night. I didn't know who this Ever chick was, but the sooner he made up his mind about her the better.

I was losing sight of everything, through his eyes the world grew smaller and smaller, disappearing into blackness. His voice faded in and out, broken sentences and words: "...of her parents", "...matched", "...wouldn't feel the same...risk?". His heartbeat became mine and I felt his pulse on the soles of

my feet, throbbing between my legs, in my throat, pounding in my lips. Warmth spread over my face, there was brightness behind my lids. When I opened them, the sunlight made shadowy tree branches against my wall. My room was coming alive with morning. I heard Lucas again, close by and secretive before I attempted to move.

...be a mistake.

ten

A SUGARY COPPER TASTE COATED MY MOUTH, like I'd been sucking on honey covered pennies. I swung my legs around and dangled them on the side of my bed. A deep burn wrapped me in a hug of sundried clothes. My legs looked the same; I rubbed my thighs, behind my knees, and around my calves. No more soreness, just intense warmth. Slowly I stood up and, for the first time in months, didn't fall back down.

"This isn't real," I mumbled, taking baby steps across the room.

In the mirror in front of my closet, a girl with a severe

case of bed head and a semi-flat chest stared back. Her brows pulled together in a suspicious line.

“Yeah it is.” I squatted, stood back up, held each leg out in front to make sure they belonged to me. The whole act resembled some robotic dance routine from a throwback musical.

I went to my computer desk and grabbed the empty cup. How could Lucas’s blood do this? Images of last night—his scarred arm, Sable, the people from the meeting all came back. I rubbed my skin and it was so warm, just like his. The taste of him lingered in my mouth—sweet. The stuff of addictions.

Outside my window, Dad picked wet leaves from his windshield. I wondered where Mom would be until the smell of burning butter came from the kitchen. I reached for the doorknob, but I couldn’t go out.

I wasn’t supposed to be walking. It definitely wasn’t the type of conversation I wanted to have with my parents this morning. *Mom and Dad, I gurgled blood last night and now I’m totally mobile. Isn’t that the darndest thing?*

Yeah, maybe some other time.



As Mom drove me to school, she talked, unbidden, about anything. It wouldn’t have been bad if I had some rest. But last night left me exhausted and confused and looking out of my window repeating whatever Mom said.

“The display closet at the shop is atrocious. Needs to be cleaned out.”

“The display closet at work needs to be cleaned out?”

She nodded. “I need to buy more shears, too. My favorites are so dull.”

“You need more shears because your favorites are dull?”

“Yes. Sometimes I wonder if you should use those Q-tips in your ears instead of your nose, pumpkin.” She tucked my hair behind my ear. A total mom move. “Speaking of shears, you could use a cut. Did you even comb your hair this morning?”

I had not.

“You look a little Joan Jett-ish before she went blonde and cut her hair like a boy,” she said

“Joan Jett is girl-rock gold.” I smoothed my hair down to tame it. “But duly noted.”

“Well, sweetie, she *was* popular in the ‘80s.” She lowered her voice, though we were the only ones in the car. “More so for being responsible for many boys’ nocturnal emissions—”

—“Whoa, Mom, TMI. I haven’t even digested all my breakfast yet.”

“What, don’t they teach sex education anymore?” Red and blue lights flashed up ahead. “What’s going on here?”

There was a throng of Statie and deputy cars in Towne Park. Mom craned her neck to my window, simultaneously

slowing down what little traffic Sulphur Springs had. Generally this wouldn't be a problem, except the VW behind us honked an impressive Morse code that spelled out: Move-Your-Ass. Someone was off their coffee today.

Mom waved a sorry out the window. "I'm going, I'm going."

I took in the rest of the scene in Towne Park from my side view mirror, mindful objects were closer than they appeared. The Staties and deputies crowded around something: fingers pointed down, hats came off, wedgies dug out. A deputy moved, and I almost lost my shit when I saw a white sheet on the ground. A body.



The hallway was full of vibes, people texting, and whispers. I knew it had something to do with Towne Park. Nothing exciting ever happened here. The highlights of our social lives were Devil's Mouth on VFW nights and two for one sales at Nygeun's Save-N-Grab.

I opened my locker and grabbed my first period Advanced Bio book. We were supposed to dissect fetal pigs today. Something totally unnecessary. I mean, not saying that I wanted to be pork stupid, but at what juncture in my life would the anatomy of a pig be important? At a PETA rally? A barbeque? And they wondered why people grew up to be bathroom stall

creepers and mentally scarred.

“What up, Mikayla?”

I grabbed my player and closed my locker door. Chevy and Orchid were on the other side. “Life in general.” Both wore hoodies with NO MSG FOR ME on the front. “What’s up with you guys?”

Orchid’s hair was pulled into two ponytails. She gnawed at her thumb. “Hear about what they found in Towne Park?”

I closed my backpack with a loud zip. “A body?”

Chevy had a moment of Tourette’s, save for the swear words. “A *dead* body!”

“Loud enough?” Orchid elbowed him in the side. “They say that it’s Ted the Wino. But he doesn’t hang out at the park. Usually stalks the parking lot at the Kwiki Stop for old cigarette butts.”

Chevy pulled at his hoodie drawstrings. “Saw ‘em there this morning. He’s not dead, just boozed up and sleeping near the garbage can. Oh, but get this.”

“Preach,” I said.

“On the drive over, my dad stopped and asked his old army buddy, a deputy, what happened. The guy said the body is missing a heart! A freakin’ heart! Can you believe it?”

I slung my backpack on my wheelchair handles. “What? Stop lying.”

“No lie.” Chevy held up a hand. “On my life. No, no. On

my *momma* and her asthmatic sister.”

“So who is it?”

“Don’t know,” they both said in unison.

Chevy propped his arm against the locker. “The deputy said he couldn’t release the identity yet—not even to my dad.”

The first bell rang, but hallway etiquette clearly stated in order to maintain your coolness you shouldn’t move until the second warning bell.

Orchid splayed her fingers out in a fan across her chest. “You think this could be the start of some psycho serial cannibal killer’s wet dream? You know, like the little Irish man in that movie *Back Two Tha Hood*.”

I shrugged.

Chevy tugged at his ear. “I hope not, because I need my heart. And my penis. Probably my penis a little more than my heart.” Tara Dandean walked by, brushing Chevy’s backpack, which threw him off balance.

“My bad, Chingy.” She glanced over her shoulder, then gave me an all-encompassing bitch glare.

Chevy’s eyes were trained on her ass like smart missiles to a terrorist’s fallout shelter. “She’s unfairly hot.”

The tardy bell rang.

“She said your name wrong,” Orchid pointed out. “Which means you’re socially irrelevant to her.”

“It was close enough.”



The piggies were all in zip lock bags.

“Mr. Reamer, this is gross and inhumane.” The class vegan, Thai Chie, didn’t hesitate. “All hearts should be allowed to beat.”

“Thai Chie, please. Not today.” Mr. Reamer rubbed his comb over: three strands of hair at best. He was a slight, bespectacled man allergic to everything. “Take one and pass it.”

The dissection kit handouts chain-lettered to each group of two and my group of three, me and two other girls. I was the odd man out, caught between their morning volley.

Girl One: Hey Danita.

Girl Two: I’m not talking to you, Candace.

Girl One: Why?

Girl Two: Oh, you know why. And I broke up with Robert.

Girl One: But...he’s like your soulmate. He has your Facebook password and everything.

Girl Two: Not after that text message you sent me: *Just got through screwing Robert.*

Girl One: What? No. *Tutoring.* I texted ‘*I just got through tutoring Robert.*’

Girl Two: Whatever.

Girl One: I got auto-corrected. I swear.

There we were. And so it went.

A haze of gray flitted past the row of windows in my peripheral. Then another.

I thought bird.

I thought stray trash bags blowing in the wind.

I thought it was too early in the morning for my brain to process the random.

Mr. Reamer was about to explain the handout when the door opened. It was that girl, Bianca Proch. Mr. Reamer directed me to move to the empty table and I guessed me and newbie were going to be lab partners. Odd man out no more. I wondered if she remembered me staring at her in the cafeteria? And what was the deal with the sunglasses? She still wore them.

He handed her a pig and she dropped it on our table and sat next to me. No books, no paper, nothing except her wrinkled schedule.

Thai Chie stood up. “Mr. Reamer, I refuse to do this dissection on the grounds that it’s animal cruelty.”

Mr. Reamer lips pursed in a fury of irritation. The fact the animal was never born was lost on her activism. “Thai Chie... go to the principal’s office and plead your case. I’m here to educate.”

I saw a special on the History channel once, said ‘educate’ stemmed from the root word ‘punish’ in ancient Egyptian. I

didn't know why no one else here knew this.

"Now, if there are no more objections," Mr. Reamer said. "We can begin."

The pig slid out of the bag with a vinegary smell. I reached for my goggles and gloves and Bianca picked up the fetus and placed it on the dissection pad barehanded.

"Um, we have gloves for that," I told her. She turned and looked me up and down. I couldn't see her eyes, but they might as well have been skewers kabobing my soul. She definitely remembered. "Never mind."

"You'll need to place the specimen supine, that's on its back for those of you who didn't study your terminology last week. Using the string and pins, secure the specimen to the dissecting tray," Mr. Reamer said.

She drew the pig's tail between her fingers. It snapped back. Pull-snap, pull-snap.

This chick was a little off, probably hid bloodshot eyes behind those sunglasses. And she could use a mani. Real bad. Her nails were broken off and jagged. The beds were filled with dirt and the unknown.

I grabbed the scapula when Principal Cooley's voice came over the intercom. "Faculty and students." He paused and exhaled. "Today I have some terrible news. One of our own, Patrick Creel..."

The scapula fell out of my hands onto the floor in a loud

ping. Shit. My head.

“...was found this morning—”

Popping sounded off like live electricity, turning into a forceful beat. *Not now, not now, not now*, I begged myself.

“—dead.”

And just like that, everything exploded. Someone screamed and no one told them to stop. One big gasp sounded off around me followed by frantic voices. I couldn't make them out with the blood gushing behind my ears. This was bad. The room swirled in a meaningless blob of chalkboard green, arms, jeans, and pig fetuses. I squeezed my eyes closed, an image formed like it'd been burned there.

I drove the heels of hands into my sockets to dull the pain. “*No-no-no.*” Didn't help and from out of nowhere Lucas's voice rushed me. *Ever.* My stomach knotted just as it had last night and my left arm burned.

Then I saw it: puckered lips sloppy with red gloss, constantly repeating itself. Again. Again. Pain. Pain.

Ever.

“No, bro. Not Patrick,” someone said.

A high-pitched, “Omigod,” wailed out.

“Class I need you to remain seated...”

I folded over in my wheelchair, clutching my arm and willed the vision/voice to end.

Stop, stop, “Ahh—dammit. *Stop!*”

Hands weighed on my shoulders. “Take it easy, Miss. Blake.” It was Mr. Reamer’s nasally voice.

I tried—tried thinking of cute puppies, of the talks me and Emma had, those plastic thingies on the ends of shoe strings—*What are they called?* Anything to distract me from the pounding in my head and inferno in my arm. When I opened my eyes, the feelings were still there. Bianca Proch stared at me and smirked.

Mr. Reamer turned to the class, his hand patted my shoulder. “It’s okay. Let the hurt out. Let it *alllll* out.”

eleven

THE SILENCE IN THE CAFETERIA WAS EARSPLITTING. Everyone walked around on mute, like someone ripped a giant scab off and they were scared to move too fast or speak because it might cause pain.

Weird ass Bianca hadn't stopped staring at me. Across the uniformed tables, sobbing eyes, and huddled bodies she sat by herself, arms folded and that smirk still crooked on her face. I didn't know what it meant, but it was intimidating and hinted of something too far lessie. Suddenly the need to send her the message I wasn't into carpet munching seemed of great

importance.



The pain eased up in second period, Lucas's voice disappearing with it. After school, I rolled out front. Chevy and Orchid spotted me from the alcove and walked over.

Orchid's eyes were red rimmed and I tried to remember if she and Patrick had ever been close. She asked, "It's sad isn't it?"

"Yeah, on so many levels," I said.

Chevy carried his backpack by the strap. "They ripped his heart out." He illustrated. "What the hell were they going to do with it?"

"Don't know," I offered, even though something inside me tugged in a certain direction. I'd been thinking of Lucas since my 'schizo' incident in Bio. Patrick's murder was just so random, like my shooting. Part of me thought Lucas would know the answer. I didn't know if this was because of his blood or just the way I felt. He was starting to make me feel all kinds of ways. Didn't matter though, because I wouldn't be able to ask him. He'd be gone in search of his brother. The way I figured, if this did involve demons, it wouldn't qualify with present company.

Orchid used her sleeve to rub her nose. She sniffled. "Are you coming back for the vigil tonight? Me and Chevy are."

“You should. Sidney Smaw’s was tight,” he said. But I had seen Sidney’s already. “Some of us plan on going to Devil’s Mouth afterward. Strength in numbers, you know.”

Devil’s Mouth. Lake Rose. “I-I don’t know. I’m not exactly driving—”

“Don’t worry about it.” Orchid looked over her shoulder and waved me forward.

I followed. Chevy was close by. “Her uncle makes the tapioca over at the hospital and is really cool about her getting his van. Only he just got out of prison a few months ago for misuse of regulated chemicals and still doesn’t trust anyone. So he’ll have to meet you first to make sure you aren’t going to peel his muffin top back.”

I had no idea what that meant. “Right, okay.”

“Oh, and don’t stare,” he added.

A Chewbacc-esque person leaned on the hood of the van. He was one hairy mho-fho and took a drag on the longest cigarette known to man. He was covered in black fur, had pork chops for side burns, and a plethora of taco meat peeked over his collar.

“Unc, this is Mikayla. Mikayla this is Unc,” Orchid said.

He extended his hand to me, only there wasn’t a hand attached. I wiggled out because I didn’t know how to shake a nub. And why the hell would he lead with his nub anyway? I shot an urgent glance at Chevy who discreetly waved his hand

across his neck in a don't-go-there gesture.

"I'm Harry."

I almost pissed my pants. *Why, yes you are.*

I grabbed high on his forearm and shook it. "Hi."

As Orchid explained her plans to him, he sized me up with a look reminiscent of harder times. Times when the terms 'lockdown' and 'shank' or 'don't drop the soap' might suffice. I couldn't stop staring, although I knew it was rude. I'd just never seen someone so hairy...or handleless.

"Don't forget to put gas in it," he told her, then looked at me. I diverted my eyes to the pavement, hoping I hadn't disrespected his gangster. "I just got her detailed. Make sure your wheelchair doesn't get the carpets dirty."

I nodded.

"Pick you up at seven?" She slid inside the windowless van not unlike those frequented by Chesters. All it needed to lure children in and be classified as a grade-A perv-mobile was 'Free Candy' spray painted on the side.

"See ya."



I followed Mom to the walk-in display closet: a wreckage of discarded things she'd forgotten about. She grabbed the pull cord and turned on the light. She pointed to the shelves, explained where the green floral foams, fake mistletoes, ribbons,

flowerpots, and everything else should go. I saw a box labeled **THROWAWAYS**. One more glance around at the mess, I wished that box was twenty-times bigger. When the door closed behind her, I plugged my ears with Joplin, stood up from my chair, and got to work.

Five minutes into the whole ordeal, a slow ach grew in the lower part of my stomach, morphing into flutters. A sting attacked my arm and I put another box on the shelf, trying to ignore it. When I turned around, Lucas leaned against the door with folded arms. My hands got the rogue memo to tantrum. I shoved them to my sides like misbehaved kids. *What was he doing here?*

Lucas's lips moved and I pulled out my ear buds. "What'd you say?"

He crossed in two steps, grabbed my wheelchair, and placed it behind me. "When did you get this?"

"I was about to thank you for leaving it on my porch last night."

"Sit," he said

Everything he wore was wrinkled, except the black shirt that looked good against the color of his skin. A definite improvement from the truck stop dumpster attire. The fabric clung to him in a way that showed the contours underneath, but something was off. Something about the way he looked, the way his brows drew together made me want to take my

finger and smooth them straight...

Whoa. Where did that come from? *Focus.* I should not be looking at him this way. I needed his help. Nothing else. But I still couldn't understand the look on his face or why he was here. "What's your deal?"

"I didn't bring this chair to you. I would have, but when I went back to the park it was gone."

"Um, all right. Weird. Who else put it there?"

He wet his full lips. "I'm not sure. But whoever it is knows where you live."

Then a thought occurred. "My mom labels everything." I displayed the shelf behind me game show girl style with the varied boxers inked by Mom. "It's a ridiculously small town and someone saw my name on the back and did me a favor and brought it to my house. Everybody knows everybody here."

Lucas's brows drew together again, and I wished he wouldn't do that. It was so very tempting.... "Wouldn't they have found that unusual since you weren't in it?"

He had me there. Someone definitely would have found it strange. And if nothing else, would have left a note or something on our porch. I pushed the good Samaritan to the back of my mind and concentrated on the bigger problem in front of me, every russet inch of it. "I thought when I call you come?"

Lucas nudged the chair forward, his size choking the space out of the closet. “That would work if you knew how to call properly. But you don’t. Now sit.”

God he was piney. The smell filled my nose and I was reminded of running through the woods with him...or inside of him. Some bastardization of the two. “Any reason why I should be taking orders?”

“If I had been your mother that walked in, what would you have said to her?”

Point taken. I stuffed my player into my pocket and sat. “You still haven’t told me why you’re here.” He couldn’t be taking my mom up on her offer to work here. I just didn’t see it panning out.

Lucas’s eyes searched mine and I looked around the closet to ease my awkwardness.

Polka dot ribbons.

Glue guns.

Cardettes like pitchforks in a field of pea green floral foams.

“Any reason why I wouldn’t be?” he asked.

Ever.

I pressed my fingers to my temple. Not again. “Do you mind? Really tired of hearing that name. All night. All day. Ever.”

His right brow arched while the other lowered.

“Yeah. I’m all in your head space right now. And can you

do me a solid and keep your intense thoughts to a minimum? It's manifesting in certain parts of my body in the form of pain."

I grabbed my aching arm. For a nanosecond, I thought I crossed a line that would result in him going beast-mode ballistic and laying waste to my body in Mom's storage closet.

He put the brakes on that thought as he crouched in front of me. The combination of fear and attraction I felt amplified with the unusual look in his eyes. So gray. "When you drank my blood, you drank me. You saw what I saw and felt as I felt." He reached for my hands, but pulled back before contact. He pointed to them, and said, "Have they done anything you didn't want them to do today?"

Why yes. They have this reckless urge to stroke your face.

"Nothing they don't usually do when you're around."

His eyes roamed up my legs and rested on my neck. "A little of me is still left in you. Your muscles have gotten stronger, so have your senses."

I thought back to my nasal assault at school. "Yeah."

"It's not supposed to be this way." He rested his forearm on his knee. His shirt stretched over his bicep. The scars on his left arm branched out more. "I apologize if my thoughts were inappropriate last night. And if you saw a side of me you were ready to see." He turned his head slightly as if listening. "Are you frightened? Your heartbeat has sped up since I walked in."

Ugh. The ultra sensitive hearing. Forgot about that. I needed to get a grip on these emotions taking my body hostage.

I did a nervous fidget in my seat. “Nah. Not at all. It’s just...a manual or side effects warning would have been nice.”

He laughed. And although it was without humor, I stared at him. I liked the way his mouth pulled higher on one side, the way his eyes glanced sideways then back. There was something wickedly perfect about it. He didn’t come off so uptight for once. He seemed...human.

“There are no manuals.” He wet his lips. “You shouldn’t be connected with my thoughts in this way, especially since we haven’t bonded. Because we don’t share ourselves often, and only then if we have to. I don’t know of any Sentry who has had this problem with his charge. I’ve never shared myself with anyone and I can’t tell you how long it will last. I promise to make it easier for you since you are my first.”

No one admitted something like this to me before. There were no more ‘firsts’ in Sulphur Springs. No first boozers, stoners, or sexer’s. I didn’t know how I felt now someone’s first was spent on me. “Oh. Well...thanks.”

He stood up. “Anytime.”

The closet couldn’t hold the heavy silence between us. I was acutely aware of him. How his wide shoulders tapered to a thin waist—the way his jeans hung low around it. He wasn’t wearing a belt...or socks.

His voice snapped me from my reverie. “Can I ask how much did you see?”

“Of last night? Um. Everything I think.”

He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. Only to open it again. “I know you have questions.”

“A few act—”

He held up a protesting hand. “But it’s a complicated situation. One that doesn’t concern you.”

I hiked a brow. “That’s not the way I heard it.”

He shifted his weight and glared at me like I was a blemish on his Dry Erase Board of Conformity that he needed to wipe away. The phrase, *If Looks Could Cut* seemed appropriate.

I couldn’t let that look faze me and cranked my attitude dial to hardass. “Who is she, the girl whose name you’ve been calling?”

It was hard to tell what the expression on his face meant, but I narrowed it down to either of two things: hurt or extreme disappointment.

“We’re not having this conversation.”

“We kinda are.” I pointed to my head. “Sort of...In a telepathically-metaphysical way.”

Lucas squared all six-foot odd inches of himself in front of me. “Why does it matter to you?”

I couldn’t call it. Only that a part of me wanted and didn’t want to know the answer in the most equal, yet insanely jeal-

ous way. Maybe she was an ex-girlfriend. That was logical. Or a current girlfriend he loved and had to leave because of his duty to me, which was even more logical. What if he resented me for that?

“It just does. I’d like to know what type of person I’m dealing with...and the people he deals with too.”

“It probably would be easier for you to ask if she’s my girlfriend.”

His stare shot anti-hardass bullets to penetrate my defenses.

“Well, is she?”

Lucas rubbed down his arm. “No. She’s not.”

His cryptic answers were irritating as hell. “So what exactly is Sable to you then?”

“A mistake.” He folded his arms across his chest and made a groan of annoyance. “But I’m sure you already heard that last night. Is there anything else?”

“Yeah there is. Why aren’t you looking for your brother? I remember you telling Tobias you were going after him, to keep him from being hunted.”

His eyes darted to the side and then looked at me. “Because I’m here with you. And if we’re done with your questions, there are other things we need to discuss like training you tonight. There’s an area I found hidden...”

“Tonight?”

“Yes. Tonight.”

I sucked air in through clamped teeth. “Ooh. Tonight’s not a good night for me. There’s this vigil at my school, the thing they have when someone dies. My nerd herd is coming around seven to pick me up. Rain check?”

He rubbed his face. “This is not debatable.” The wicked gleam in his eyes said so. “One of your classmates has just been murdered. His heart ripped from his chest. I need to help you control your Speak so the same doesn’t happen to you.”

“You know what happened?”

“*Oculi*, second tier Nether Legion demon. They feed on flesh, taking the heart is not uncommon for them if they plan to gain strength faster. It’s probably here because of you. You used your power the other day and it’s drawn to it.”

I thought back to his hindsight at Towne Park and felt all weird inside. Like I’d been diagnosed with some life threatening disease that, no matter how hard I tried, I would never be rid of. “How will you stop it?”

He stepped closer as if to make the point with his body: *I am man. Listen and obey.* “We will stop it together. But you’re not ready, which is why we need to train. *Oculi* take on different forms, birds, humans, they can even possess. In all forms they are cloaked, dangerous, and never alone.”

I sandwiched my hands between my thighs. There had to be something morbidly wrong for me to want to stroke him

while he chatted up demons. “What do you mean...they’re invisible and travel in packs?”

He leaned against the shelving and it creaked. “No. But they have wraiths. *Oculi* eyes are sensitive to light and they are weakest right after a feeding, it exhausts them. The wraiths serve as guards during this time. It’s only with rest afterward that *Oculi* gathers strength. And they are far from invisible, Mikayla, but not even your sight could see them. Like some higher ranked demons, they can stop their auras or emit false halos to seem more human.”

“Halos? Right, those glows I see around some people.”

He nodded.

“Well what’s the point of ‘seeing’ demons if I can’t ‘really’ see all of them? Sounds like a pretty useless trait to have.”

“Would you rather be without it?”

Hell yeahs, I thought. Then Uncle Joe made a surprise visit in my mind. I saw him in a full body tattoo of personal demons. “Would be nice to turn off sometimes.”

“You can. But it requires practice. Something you’d have to learn from your own kind, other Hunters that have mastered it.”

My own kind. Just like I knew who my own kind were.

“Okay. So while this O-demon is in a food coma we should, you know, strike or something.”

He shook his head like I’d missed the point. “Its wraiths are

not to be played with..." He paused and stepped as if he were about to leave when the door opened.

"Oh, sorry, Lucas. I was just coming to see how you two were doing. Been in here an awful long time together."

Mom looked around Lucas and I gave her a thumbs up signal. "We're good," I said, if by good she meant plotting to kill a demon, possibly saving someone else's heart, and training to use power beyond the realm of all human explanation and capability. Then yeah, we were rainbow golden.

"Lucas, would you mind if I borrowed your height out back? The gutters are spilling over with leaves."

"No ma'am." He gave me a sidelong glance before following her out. "I'm here to help you."



The perv-mobile pulled up at exactly 7 o'clock. Orchid blew the horn taking Mom away from counting down the register.

"Who's that?"

"Classmates. There's a vigil tonight for Patrick Creel."

She took down her reading glasses. Popped her jaw. "Poor boy."

"I told them I'd go." She gave me a worried look and I thought about what Lucas said, about it being dangerous for me. But what about Orchid and Chevy? I couldn't protect them, but maybe I could convince them not to go to Devil's

Mouth after. “There’ll be other people, Principal Cooley and everyone else. Only a couple of hours.”

She tapped a finger on the counter, as if to prompt it for an answer. “I want you home by nine. And take this.” She went to her purse and grabbed her pepper spray.

I didn’t know what type of defense it would prove against a demon, but I took it hoping never to find out. “Thanks.”

Chevy helped load my chair, careful of Harry’s carpet. The front seat smelled of Drano and vanilla—a combination I didn’t want to know where it came from. We pulled off. Mom waved. In the alley between her shop and the used bookstore beside it, Lucas stood on a ladder and his eyes locked with mine. My left arm stung in reaction to his pissed expression. He dropped the wet leaves from his hand and rubbed his scarred arm, shaking his head slowly as we sped off in the distance.

twelve

“TONIGHT WE COME TOGETHER FOR PATRICK Creel.”

The vigil was the epitome of sad. The orange, swollen sun fell on the horizon. Everyone stood in statue-like silence around our mascot, the little paper cup candles glowed low in our grasps. A concession line of people took turns in front of us to say polite things about Patrick. Even though I distinctly remembered him being a supremo jackass. I guessed death kinda trumped all past offenses.

“He will truly be missed.” Principal Cooley continued, staring down at his hands. “We’ll take this time to dedicate a moment of silence.”

Orchid and Chevy flanked me in a crouch wheelchair lev-

el. Both interlocked their arms in mine, as everyone else did the same and bowed their heads. Orchid had a death grip, and I didn't have it in me to tell her to ease up.

Someone mumbled behind me and when I heard Chevy join in, the words became clear. The Lord's Prayer.

Hard flight sounded overhead. A bird—*the* bird from the hospital with the white feather perched atop the armadillo's hat. Ruffling its wings, it sidestepped, and moved its head in a curious twitch as if it knew me. I wasn't surprised by this, which meant I'd been living under the dominion of weird shit way too long.

As Orchid and Chevy's arms loosened around mine, the bird bolted into the woods next to us. Everyone's head rose. My eyes fixed on the woods as streaks of gray whizzed through the trees. Long, irregular shapes I couldn't make out.

I rubbed my sweaty palms across my jeans. "Is it time to go?"

Chevy blew out his candle. "Yeah."

"Good." The gray whizzes had vanished. "Because I have to be home by nine."

"It's only, like, eight." Orchid rummaged around in her jean satchel and came back up with keys. "Devil's Mouth, remember?"

I did. I also remembered there was a demon on the loose who popped hearts out like Skittles. I didn't want to go out

like that. Taste the rainbow my ass. “E3 Con comes on live tonight. I don’t wanna miss the new system releases and games.”

“E3 Con isn’t for another two months. Tonight’s a re-run of last year’s,” Orchid said.

“She’s right,” Chevy co-signed.

I knew this, but the fleeting look they threw my way made me think I’d insulted their gamer-hood. “Right,” I said. “My bad.”

They started to walk to the perv-mobile and I tried again. “But wait. Isn’t that the convention where that Chinese dude streaks the stage wearing nothing but kal’dorei ears? How could we *not* re-watch that?”

Chevy laugh-sighed as if remembering, and I thought he wouldn’t mind seeing it again. But Orchid wasn’t having any of my save-them-from-possible-dismemberment shit and kept going to the van. “We can YouTube it. Let’s go.”



“Tonight, we come together for P.C.”

Devil’s mouth was the epitome of sad. The fat, yellow moon hung suspended in the sky. Everyone stood around the bonfire, white drinking cups like extensions of our hands.

“He’ll truly be missed,” Wade stood on the hood of his truck holding a bottle of Hawaiian-flavored Boones. “Let’s pour one out for our fallen bro.”

He tipped a stream of Boones onto the ground. Orchid, Chevy, and me grouped off to the side, poured the watered down SoBe from our melted ice in remembrance, and then refilled. A trail of cars blocked the path out, the few at the bottom made a half circle, headlights and music blaring. Styrofoam coolers headed each car like hood ornaments.

It was so much louder here than I remembered on my birthday. Grass had grown over the spot I fell. My Gremlin would've been parked just shy of Wade's truck, where Thai Chie and her boo-thang, Zak, stood. I wondered if they knew a girl almost died there.

Chevy walked off to join two guys near the fire. After seeing him with Orchid all the time, it was weird that he socialized with members of the same sex.

The 420's hung near a Saturn, hollowed out a cigar and rolled a blunt on the hood of the car. Two jocks played touchy-feely with a freshman girl. I didn't know her name. They felt-up her bare legs while she fake-complained. They knew she liked it, I guessed. Wade and Tara stood near the edge of the lake. She laughed hysterically at something, her mouth stretched Cheshire cat-like across her face. So big her hand couldn't keep it covered. The Cooler-Than-Thou Cliques hipster head-bobbed in sync with the music because it would've cramped their style to actually dance. The 420's couldn't get their blunt lit against the breeze. The cigarette lighter flick,

flick, flickered, but never caught fire. They retreated inside the Saturn and soon smoke seeped through the cracked windows in drifts of fluffy white as they sought oblivion. Lake Rose was placid, a sheet of glass reflecting the stars. They were beautiful—the stars I mean. Seemed a shame they wasted their shine on us tonight.

Orchid bumped my chair as she sat down beside me. “You think people can be forgiven from beyond the grave?”

The question didn’t seem meant for me because of how low it came out. When I looked at her, I knew it was. “Are you talking about the dead person? Because they probably wouldn’t care.”

“I’m talking about someone who wronged another person before that person died. Do you think the wrong doer could be forgiven?”

The jocks managed to get the freshman girl in the water. They bobbed and splashed. I heard her giggle. I also heard a snuffle. The kind followed by crying, which made me uncomfortable. “I don’t know.” *Bob and splash, bob and splash.*

She grabbed my hand, the fabric of her Hot Topic slap bracelets fuzzy against my skin. The tears in her eyes waited for permission to fall. “Remember Sidney Smaw?”

“Yeah.”

She wrapped her arms around her knees. She stared ahead. One of the jocks emerged from the water, a shirt and bra

dripping wet from his hands. “We use to be best friends way back when. Kindergarten love, you know?” She slung the ice from her cup onto the ground. “But something happened. She stopped talking to me. And I never asked why. It just happened. I guess it just goes that way. Then a couple of days before she died...she...she said she had something to tell me. But I was busy...on my way to print off some flyers in the computer lab for a campaign me and Chevy were having.” She didn’t say anything for a while. When she did it came low and unexpected, as if it were a rogue thought she let escape her mind. “I can’t even remember what that campaign was for.”

I caught a glimpse of Chevy with his cup down by his side. He talked to Jason and Sam by the fire. I could tell it was video game related from the way Sam’s hands molded over an imaginary controller. I wondered where Orchid was taking our conversation.

“I told her I would be right back—right back. I wish I would’ve stayed and listened to her. Especially since I knew what it might’ve been about.”

“What was it about?”

“Her and Patrick.” Orchid stared at me. “I don’t know why I’m telling you any of this. I guess I need to say it. And since Chevy can be transparent sometimes...”

“It’s cool. Vent.” The freshman girl and the other jock disappeared from view.

“They hooked up over Thanksgiving break. Remember hearing a rumor that the manager of the Cowbell caught two people in the storage shed?”

“That was them?”

She nodded, wiped her cheek. “Nobody knew because the manager didn’t get their names. I only knew because a week before she died I heard Patrick telling it to Wade and the rest of the ‘roid heads in my locker well. He had pictures on his phone. When he was alone, I told him if those pictures got around school that Cooley would hear about it too. But I think the damage was done. Wade and everyone in the locker well that day would say stuff whenever Sidney passed by.”

I thought back to Sidney again. So real she might’ve walked in front of the bonfire, hiding behind her hair as she did. “That’s messed up. So...you want Sidney to forgive you?”

I heard her fingernail click against the rim of the foam cup.

“And Patrick too.”

“Why Patrick?”

“Because I kind of wanted him to die.”

“Oh, well...” *Harsh*. I sat in silence and hoped for some piece of wisdom to come to me. When it never arrived, I said, “Everybody thinks about stuff like that. Take Mr. LeHane for instance; who hasn’t wanted him to croak in the middle of his neutron star collision and gamma ray burst spiels. It’s kinda normal.”

Orchid shook her head. “Not like that. I actually told him to roll over and die. Those words. To his face.” She tore off a piece of Styrofoam and made rib marks with it between her teeth. “Something like this happened to my older sister and she had to transfer to Bullock County Preparatory School in the boon docks because of all the crap she caught behind it. People don’t know that kind of hurt. They say they do, but they don’t. She graduated last year, but she still won’t hang out in Sulphur Springs. She didn’t even come home for her Christmas break. Just hit a nerve with me. I’m not crazy, I know I wasn’t the reason he died. But there’s this voice inside that says I threw some bad karma Patricks way. I try to push it back, try to bury it....Sometimes I can’t help but think that way. If I could’ve apologized before they died, you know? Taken some of it back...” Orchid stared at me. “What would you do, Mikayla?”

It was a question of biblical proportions. One that I wasn’t ready to answer. “That’s a tough one, Orch—”

“Yeah, I know.” She sucked her lips inward, and threw the remains of the cup in the bush. “I just wish I’d never said it. My paw-paw says, sometimes when you say things, you speak them into existence. Like the universe answers you back.”

“I don’t know, Orchid. I’ve asked the Universe plenty of times to never pair me with a noob in Call of Duty. But, I always am. And the bastards leaves me with no ammo while

Nazi zombies bite my head off.”

She let out a wet, cloggy laugh through tears, sniffles, and snot. “I hate noobs.”

“They’re like Internet fungus,” I said, hoping to keep her laughing.

She elbowed my wheel, gesturing that she had a comeback. “They’re worse than fungus, they’re like those STD commercials that never stop coming on after music videos.”

“And what’s the deal with your sister going to Bullock Prep? Aren’t the guys, like, testosterone deprived and the girls have to wear those long skirts that make them look like...”

—“Scottish transvestites?” we said in unison.

Orchid propped back on her hands. “She hated those skirts.”

In the distance, I heard smatters of Chevy, Justin, and Sam’s conversation. It seemed Tara Dandean had “motorboat worthy tits” and a “nice ass”. Over my shoulder, the chanting idiots trying to get fifth year Tim to do eyeball shooters grabbed my attention. His left eye was already on perma-weep because of it, but he held it open anyway and took the bottle of Everclear to it. The 420’s lay in pot comas in the Saturn. The air around us smelled half-baked. Someone yelled, “Get green!” and launched a beer Hail Mary-style across the fire to awaiting hands. Thai Chie and Zak cuddled on his parents’ fuel efficient Prius.

My cup fell to the ground in a *thunk*-ing sound as I stood. She fell over herself, the freshman, her hands covering where a bra should be. I couldn't make out anything she said. I was too busy watching the enormous black bird zip over her head and through the flames of the bonfire. It disappeared up the path where my eyes couldn't follow. The gray shapes slunk through the trees to our far left like shaven sloths on fast forward. One paused, its head cocked to one side. No nose. No eyes. A wicked slit for a mouth. *Imposters*.

When I wasn't ready for it, her scream washed over me in a tide of knives.

"He's dead!"

thirteen

“OH MAN, OH MAN, OH MAN.” ORCHID BACKED away, bracketing her face with her hands. “What’d she sa— how are you standing?”

I looked down at my more than capable legs. Shit. “Involuntary reaction, you know. Nerves.” I pointed back to the naked freshman to take the attention away from myself. “We should see what’s up.”

I let Orchid lead, sneaking one more glance over at the trees. The imposters were gone. The music was killed and you could hear a squirrel piss in the quiet. No one moved. Three

voices floated on the silence.

Random Severely Altered Guy: She naked?

Justin: Sam, is this CGI?

Sam: No, man. It's all real. Those. Are. Boobs.

Justin: I've never seen real boobs.

Random Severely Altered Guy: She naked?

Her next wail woke everyone from their stupors. Thai Chie offered up Zak's polo shirt to cover her.

"The hell you mean 'he's dead?'" Wade asked.

The naked freshman hiccupped. "He-he-he-he's back... back there." She pointed to the woods.

Wade held out his hand. "Tara. Phone." He shook his head, screwed his cap on backward, and headed in the direction Freshman Girl pointed.

"What the hell are you doing, Wade? Don't go back there," Tara pled.

"Relax babe, Chase was probably shittin' around." He held his phone and Tara's screen out to illuminate his walk. When he stepped into the woods, the darkness folded over him like water swallowing a sinking ship.

"We should get out of here," Chevy said under his breath. "My mom's hardcore Asian. If I'm not home by curfew, she'll freak and take away my system. And I just got over the red ring of death two weeks ago." Through tight lips he said, "I can't have that, man. I need my system. Orchid, tell her I need

my system.”

“He needs his system,” Orchid said.

“Told you.”

I agreed with him totally. I did not aspire to be a virgin corpse or freak out and involuntarily fade in front of everyone. Ironically, I couldn't decide which of the two would be worse. “Okay Chev. Chillax. We'll leave once we've found out what's wrong.”

A few minutes later, Wade stumbled back through the trees. He looked haunted and kept patting himself, leaving bloodied handprints on his jeans. He mumbled under his breath, “My keys, my keys.”

Tara touched him on his shoulder and he flinched. He stared at her in an unseeing way. “Get in the truck, Tara. We hafta go.”

“Wh-what happened, Wade? Stop screwing around.” Tara held her bony elbows and rubbed the back of her leg with her foot. “You're scaring me. Is he—Chase isn't... Wade?”

“Car. Now!”

The command sent everyone fleeing to their hoopties.

“Holy shit skits, man.” Chevy pulled out a stalk of celery from somewhere other than a refrigerator and shoved it in his mouth like it was the antidote for the situation.

I stared at him. “Really, guy. Celery?”

“What? It was left over from lunch today.”

“And you have it in your pocket...why?”

He ignored me and took another crunch before assessing the situation further. “Say it’s not so.”

Orchid chewed her nails. “It’s so, Chev.”

Chevy’s arm shook as he rubbed down his mohawk, the expression on his face was that of a drug dealer whose car was about to be searched by a cop. I thought he might drop a deuce of spades in his underwear any minute now. “*Gõu pi!*”

“Man up, Chevy,” I insisted. “You’re acting so tweetable right now. Hashtag: growapair.”

“I am manned up. I’m all man.” He shivered and palmed the vital part of his body. His crotch. “It’s just chilly. Very very chilly out.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose to quell the headache. “We’ll call the Staties inside the van then go.”

“Yeah,” Chev said. “Call the po-po’s and then go. Good plan. Orch, where are the keys?”

“In my pocket.” She hugged herself. “What if he isn’t dead?”

I stared at her. “Did you see all that blood on Wade. Chase is dead.”

“But what if he isn’t? What if he’s just lying there—like wishing someone would help him?”

“And who’s gonna find that out, Orchid?” I asked. “Wade’s already been in there and came out the whitest shade of pale.”

“Wade’s a dick,” she countered.

I air-stabbed her with my finger. “That may be true. But he’s an extremely wise dick for getting the hell out of here. We should do the same—live to tell the story.”

She dug the keys from her pocket. “Go crank the van, Chev.” He ran up the path and what few people left, followed. Only Orchid, the crackling fire, and me remained.

“You’re so not going in there,” I told her.

She looked into the dark woods and held her phone out.

“Orch, I know you’re probably still tweaked about that Patrick thing. But this isn’t Patrick...or Sidney. You can’t bring them back or make them forgive you by doing this. We should call the Staties, they, like, get our tax money to handle shit like this.”

She walked forward, turning back once to look at me before the woods gulped her whole. “I have to do this.”

A shadow circled above me. I gawked at the black bird suspended in the air in an unnatural way. It turned to the woods where Orchid disappeared. In one lilted move, it swooped in after her.



I’d like to kick Orchid’s ass right now for being so stupid. But then I’d have to find a way to kick my own ass for following her. I should be hightailing it back to the van. Every cell in my

body told me so, but for whatever reason I couldn't see myself leaving her.

I abandoned my wheelchair and crept inside the woods. Through the darkness, I could only see by the moonlight and my makeshift stick-torch. This whole rescue mission was the set-up for some horror movie waiting to happen:

Fade in to Devil's Mouth, notorious watering hole for the teens of Sulphur Springs.

Wide shot of girl walking through the quiet woods surrounding the lake. She steps on broken branches as she maneuvers through the trees on her destination to doom. Squirrels aren't even stupid enough to come out tonight.

Me: This is pork stupid crazy.

Close up of her face, determined yet scared shitless. The flames of her makeshift torch cast eerie shadows against her skin. She's terrified.

Me: *(voice over)* If Orchid's still alive, I'm gonna slap the taste out of her mouth for being so ignorant.

A sound permeates the silence. She looks around for the source. It's the hoot of an owl.

Me: *(voice over)* Dumb owl.

She presses forward, flashes her light over an empty space.

Me: Orchid? Orchid? Get you blue-haired ass out here.

Another sound startles her. She whips the torch around. Extreme close-up of her eyes. They dart left, right. A gray limb

disappears behind the mask of trees.

Medium shot as the girl looks back toward her wheelchair, and then again to the black woods, deciding.

Me: *(voice over)* *I'm starting to believe I'm the masochistic type.*

A disembodied scream emerges from the forest. The girl clutches her torch, realizing that it may be her friend Orchid. She starts to run toward the scream, amazed at the strength in her legs. Something is running parallel to her, though, weaving through the trees with precision. She knows this may be an imposter.

Me: *(screams)* *Orchiiiiid!*

The girl trips over a rock in classic horror movie style. She curses herself for being so cliché.

Me: Dang Mikayla. Fall? Really?

Her torch lands dangerously close to her head. She pushes the torch away before it singes all of her hair off. Because even in these godless times, her dark hair is essential to her appearance. As she comes to her feet, she sees a bird alight on a branch. The bird spreads its wings revealing the signature white feather the girl has come to know and loathe.

Wide shot of girl and her surroundings. Gray, spindly arms and legs emerge from the darkness. She turns around and is confronted by a monstrous figure. There are no eyes or ears. It's bald with thin translucent gray skin covering its bony body. It

stands spider-like, the ragged skin around its orifice pulls back brandishing four impressive teeth. Shit. They remind the girl of an extra sharp stapler remover. Its tongue slithers between the viper-like fangs almost like it's tasting the air.

Me: (shocked) What the—No way.

The imposter charges at her and she lunges backward, scrambling for a weapon. She reaches in her pocket for the pepper spray her mom gave her, but realizes the imposter has no eyes.

Me: *(voice over)* *Shit just got real.*

She resorts to throwing her shoe. In mid-pitch of her orange Converse, she notices bluish sparks passing over her hand. She's momentarily mesmerized. The creature amazingly dodges the shoe without the aid of sight and tosses the girl against a tree with supernatural strength. Her head knocks against the trunk and ringing fills her ears.

The imposter doesn't waste time and propels toward her again, springing into the air with arms spread. In her peripheral, the glow of her torch catches her eye. She grabs it just as the imposter descends on her with gaping jaws. With her hands white knuckled around the torch, she goes for the win and stakes the imposter in its mouth with the fiery end. She feels the torch go through the back of its skull. It gurgles and reaches for the lodged torch to no avail.

The imposter falls to the ground, instantly exploding into

a motor oil like bubbling substance—demon goo.

Me: (exhausted and breathless) I just pnwed your spider-monkey ass.

She reaches for the throbbing part of her head. Blood stains her fingers. Her eyes feel extremely heavy. She wants to nap right now. Yadda, yadda, snore.

Something big flaps overhead. An oversized blackbird lands across the distance in front of her.

She blinks and a dark humanly figure replaces the bird, but remains out of focus. She blinks again and this time she can only see large shoes. She feels herself lifted from the ground, cradled in hard arms. She believes for a moment she has died.

Me: God?

Velvety voice: (brittle laugh) God is not here, *cher*.

I was too fatigued to fight against the voice. My eyes drew close like Venetian blinds as the world faded to black.

fourteen

“*CHER.*”

I batted my eyes at the sound. The familiar green tweed welcome mat on our front porch came into focus. My head throbbed in tune with my heart and it had nothing to do with a vision or fear. Just raw, merciless pain. On top of that, I sat positioned in my wheelchair. An impossible feat for an unconscious girl to accomplish. Something told me, as I cradled my aching head, the black bird on the banister had a lot to do with that.

It cawed and flew away. I righted myself in the wheelchair

and readied my fist to knock. Before my hand came down, the door opened. Mom stood a red-faced mess on the other side.

“Hi Mom.”

“Where have you been?” she asked. I didn’t have a clue what time it was, but I was pretty sure I’d broken my curfew into something unsalvageable. “It’s almost eleven o’clock, Mikayla, you were supposed to be here hours ago.” She turned and yelled inside. “Barry, she’s out here...and intact. God you gave us a scare.”

I rolled past her, angling my head in a way to shield the bloody spot in my hair. “Mom, I’m so sorry. I can ex—”

“Please tell me you weren’t there.” Her finger pointed to our left at the TV in the living room. The news anchor’s voice blared through the speakers.

“Another disturbing discovery uncovered by local officials in Sulphur Springs after an anonymous call tonight. Near Lake Rose, the body of a teenage boy was found mutilated. Officials have not released the identity yet, but confirm the style of the killing resembled that of another victim, Patrick Creel: senior star baseball player, seventeen, who is survived by his mother Laretta Harris and his three siblings. More information about these vicious killing are to come. In other news, the family of missing teenager—”

Dad clicked off the TV and took position next to Mom.

Together they made up the two parental columns blocking the way to my room. The gatekeepers wanted an answer and wanted it like yesterday.

I contemplated the truth. *Mom. Dad. I know this is gonna sound really messed up, just hear me out though. Tonight, another one of my classmates possibly got his heart ripped-out. Wait, wait, wait—now I know what you’re thinking, ‘Holy Father in Heaven, there’s a serial killer on the loose.’ But you’re wrong. It’s not a serial killer. Technically, it’s a demon. One who has these kickass, spider-monkey wraith bodyguard thingies, and I think I killed one tonight. Plus, this demon seems only interested in male organs. So I’m totally safe, but not really. See, much better, right?*

However, the lie slipped out easy. “No. I wasn’t there.”

“Then where were you?” Mom asked.

It crossed my mind to say with Orchid. But truthfully, I wasn’t even sure if Orchid was alive. And that would put a major dent in the lie and not to mention would suck if she was dead. So I said the only place I was almost certain they wouldn’t have been. “At the Kwiki Stop. After the vigil, a couple of us hung out there and played video games.”

“And your shoe?” Dad asked.

Back in the goddamned woods. “Orchid spilled her slush over it. And I left it in a plastic bag inside her Unc’s van.” I adjusted in my chair. “Didn’t want to soak my socks or get

his carpet dirty.”

They took in the lie like food for thought and after they digested it, I was allowed to go to my room. They didn't question my answer, just accepted it. And even though my head nagged the hell out of me, lying to my units nagged at me just a little more.



I let the crap of tonight and the blood from my hair flow down the drain in the shower. After I sought comfort via Q-tips, I laced my pillow with a towel and tried to crash. I knew there would be no sleep for me tonight, not with this headache. I spooned my pillow, hoping for relief when something tapped at my window.

I eased out of bed, grabbed my game controller for a weapon, and examined the dark shadow through my curtains.

May I come in, Mikayla?

The voice ricocheted through my mind. Lucas? I drew the curtains. He stood shirtless with jeans on, eclipsing all background light. I lifted the glass away and wondered if he knew how close he came to being battered with a joystick.

“Could you not do that? You scared the crap out of me.” More importantly, “What are you doing here?” I tossed the joystick to the side. There would be no bludgeoning tonight.

“I told you tonight we train.”

I let out a deep breath and rubbed my eye with the heel of my hand. “But I’m exhausted...and kinda bummed that another classmate died tonight.”

He placed his hands on the windowpane on either side and leaned in to me. “I’m sorry about your classmate, the *Oculi* don’t care where their next feed comes from. But I’m not taking no for an answer.”

I yawn-talked. “I don’t see how not. What’re you gonna do, kidnap me?”

“Such a thing can be arranged,” he said, then came through my window in a blur.

Crap. “Hey—”

The rest of my sentence was muffled against his warm palm. “Not so loudly,” he said over my ear. “Your parents shouldn’t know that I’m here, right?”

I nodded, allowing my body to wake up to the vise-like arm around my midsection. His stomach was hot against my back and at the thought of him being so close, my hands decided to join the party in all their glorious need to touch him. The treacherous bastards.

“So we have an understanding?”

I nodded again.

He released me and I massaged my cheeks. “Are you always this subtle?”

“So says the girl wearing men’s Jalapeno boxers.” He paused, tilted his chin, and inhaled deeply as if gathering data. “You’re bleeding.” It wasn’t a question. He moved closer to the spot aching on my head and inhaled. “What happened to you?”

“I was attacked.” Then the reality of what really happened tonight hit me and I palmed my forehead. “I don’t know if Orchid’s okay. I-I should see, I should call her.”

I reached for my clear phone when Lucas placed his hand on my shoulder, moved me away from the window, and closed the curtains. His voice came hushed and urgent. “It’s late. And I’m sure your friend is fine.”

“How can you be sure? She was in the same woods with me.”

“*Oculi* don’t usually feed more than once a day. Now tell me what happened to you.”

I told him about the vigil, about the bird, the gathering at Devil’s Mouth and how everything was fine until Chase died and I went into the woods after Orchid on my Crusade of Masochism. I explained how I killed the imposter and mentioned the bird again and being carried away from the woods by someone or something.

“...And the next thing I knew I was on my front porch.”

Lucas’s eyes were an unholy shade of intense. “What you killed tonight was a wraith.”

“Figured that.”

His face screwed into confusion. “You ‘figured that?’” he repeated and I didn’t appreciate the tone. “I’ve yet to understand you.”

“What’s to understand?”

“How it seems, between you and I, I’m the only one interested in your safety.”

I picked up a hint of disappointed and for some reason this bothered me. “Look, I had a somewhat decent social existence before all these life changing events happened to me. I did normal things, like game and drink too many caffeinated drinks or, oh, I don’t know, go to the lake to hang out with my peers. Excuse me if I’m not all that enthused about the prospect of killing demons, but you can’t expect me to just stop being me. And for the record, I’m very interested in my safety and the safety of the people I hang with.”

“I can tell. Running through the forest at night when there are demons present confirms that.”

I threw my hands up in frustration. “You are something else.”

“And you are afraid.” He moved closer and gave me an inexplicable look. I’d give anything to hear his thoughts, but he made good on his promise to stay out of my head. “And I don’t think it’s because of me, but what I represent.”

“What’s that, annoyance?”

“No. The part of your life you don’t want to deal with right now. I told you some things about your past the other day you probably weren’t ready to hear, and for that I am sorry. But it needed to be said. You probably feel like you’re losing control of yourself—”

I held up a hand. “Spare me the psychological analysis. I’ve had about six of those in the past four years. I’m in complete control and unnaturally adjusted, all right?”

“I know. Which is why you ignored my advice and went to the lake when I told you it would be dangerous. It’s the same reason why you haven’t bonded with me, even after I explained it would mean protection, that I would be able to locate you faster. We could have done things differently tonight. We could have done it together, safer. I’m ready to lay my loyalty and protection down for you and yet you run from it. Why are you holding out from me?”

“I’m not running and I’m not holding out.”

“Are you sure, Mikayla?”

“I am. It’s just the whole bonding thing sounds too permanent and I’m having serious commitment issues, okay?” I pressed my fingers to my cut. It bled again. Shit. “I just need more time to think about it.”

“You may not have more time.”

The conversation stalled as the impasse we reached settled in. He was right, though. I *was* running, I *was* losing control,

I *was* holding out. Even thinking about bonding with him sent me into Fear-of-the-Unknown mode. What if bonding meant reaching a point of no return? What if it turned me into a Mikayla I wouldn't recognize, a Mikayla my parents wouldn't recognize? If not bonding with him meant keeping a little more of me, a little more of pre-Hunter Mikayla, than I wanted to save that.

A part of me didn't want to commit fully to this new world which oddly enough, when weighed against the years I couldn't remember, those years with my bio's, resembled the exact situation I found myself in before Lucas came and delivered my destiny—*lost*. I wanted to help, especially those close to me like Uncle Joe, but what if things changed and I wanted to leave my new lifestyle someday, retire? Bonding just didn't sound like something that would make leaving possible.

Lucas stared at me. I started to feel self-conscious about my sleepwear and all the skin it exposed. "They're comfortable," I said.

He looked confused. "I'm sorry, but you've lost me."

"The boxer shorts. I wear them because they're comfortable...and I like the Jalapenos."

His mouth pulled into a slight smile. The second one I'd caught. "You wear them well. But I'm more concerned with your head. If you like, I can help you." He reached for me

and I moved backward.

“What would your type of ‘help’ involve?” I didn’t know if I could handle anything blood related. I suffered from the type of hemoglobin hangover people associated with the misuse of street pharmaceuticals; the envy of stoners and dysfunctional celebrities worldwide.

“The type you would say thank you for afterward.” He stepped back to my nightstand and snatched my emergency baggie of Q-tips. I needed to re-up soon. “You have to remember I’m for you, Mikayla. Turn around.”

I nervously faced the mirror in front of my closet. His size dwarfed me and I looked ridiculous standing next to him. “How did the wraith do this to you?”

“I was going for valiant when it backfired...resulting in my skull having a surprise engagement with a tree.”

“You realized you could have been killed.”

“I said it backfired.”

He put a Q-tip in his mouth and parted my hair over the gash. His hands seemed even more massive when next to me and they trembled with his quick, fleeting touches. “How many wraiths were there again?”

“I only saw the one.”

He took the Q-tip out and rubbed it down the cut. It was a total *ew* moment, but the cotton tip glided warm and wet over the pain. I wondered if he would have come out better

using his tongue. Wait, why wasn't he using his tongue? Not that I wanted to be his lollipop, but this was the same guy who touched my hands and face right here in this very room before I knew anything about him, before I gave him permission. The same guy who offered up his blood to me, the one I shared thoughts with. Procuring a Q-tip seemed one too many steps for his 'just get it done' attitude. When did he become so conscious of personal space?

"Did anyone see you?" he asked.

"I don't know. I wasn't exactly checking for an audience while running for my life."

He looked over his shoulder, as if someone yelled from another room. He shook his head, annoyed, then brought his attention back to my cut. He moved hurriedly, being careful not to touch my skin and placed the used end of the Q-tip in his mouth. As he pulled it out, he hesitated and looked at it in a thoughtful gaze. His tongue swirled inside his mouth and his face changed. I couldn't pin it down to any one expression, more like a grocery list of them.

I turned and craned my neck to look up to him. "How do I taste?"

He lowered his head and bore down on me with his eyes, manipulative and mean. His voice came out throaty and deeper than usual. "Like trouble," he said, searching my eyes.

He stared at me a moment longer, and I side-glanced at

his hand cupping my hair. I chewed the inside of my cheek. There was something cruel and hateful in his eyes. It curled around my neck, strangling me until I couldn't bring myself to ask what his problem was. Yet... it would be so easy to trail the length of his arm up to his temple. In spite of my fear of him and losing myself, it was what my body wanted. He wanted the same. I could tell because I felt him inside me, rushing to my heart in a frenzy of beats. His warmth wrapped me in a hug closer to his body. His scent made my mouth water and throb....My body was so laying down an edict I couldn't ignore: *touch him*. Before my hand made contact, right there, along with the rest of his scars, another one veined out and added to the number. A new feeling, pain, pierced my left arm. I remembered today at the flower shop and my eyes shot back up to his, full of questions. He looked away and, as if out of instinct, I turned my head slightly to face the mirror.

Maybe I was wrong about him feeling the same way and should've been grateful for this interruption. I decided to let it drop when he didn't offer an explanation for his instascarring. Though it seemed I wasn't the only one holding out on something.

He stepped away, letting my hair fall back to my shoulders. While I got my reaction under control, he rubbed down his arm in the background and kept looking over his

shoulder. "How does it feel?" he asked.

"Bitter."

As if understanding, he said, "I meant your wound."

I waited for the sting. "I can't feel anything." I touched the spot. It was completely numb. Not only was his blood made of win, his saliva apparently dripped with awesome. "Thank you."

"With my blood still in you, the rest should heal by morning." He tossed the baggie on my bed and folded his arms. Back to business. "You said the last thing you saw before you woke up was a person."

"I think so. It looked and sounded human. There was a bird at first, then him."

"Did the bird seem unusual?"

"Yeah. It's not average size. Black all over with one white feather." I flashed back over the last few months. "It was the same bird I've been seeing for a while. It was there at the lake when the straggler attacked me."

Lucas shook his head and grimaced. "Are you positive of this?"

"Like two blue lines on a pregnancy test positive."

He shook his head and scratched at his chin. "I don't know what or who this is, but I'll find out. In the meantime, I don't plan on being far from you."

He went to my closet and grabbed gym shorts, a black

tee, and snow boots. “Put these on.”

“Why? Where are we going?”

“They’ve been calling me all night. Since it takes priority over your call until we bond, I have to answer. But I’m not comfortable with leaving you alone again. Are you okay with this?”

I nodded and Lucas faced away from me as I pulled the clothes over my sleepwear. In my haste, I wondered what the hell I was doing. “You still haven’t said where we’re going.”

“A place I’m hoping you can take us.”

fifteen

“A CHURCH.” WE STOOD ON THE GROUNDS OF Pentecostal Baptist Church after walking down the mountain from my house. “This is the place?”

“This is the place I want you to fade us from. Demons avoid holy grounds, usually. If you fade us from here, they shouldn’t notice.”

“Great plan. Only one tiny problem—nothing major really. It’s just, I don’t actually know how to fade at will.”

“This should make for good training then,” he said.

As we walked around to the side of the church hidden

from highway view, Lucas explained. “Hunters work from sights, memories, thoughts, and sometimes impressions when they fade. The hardest part should be getting yourself involved in the environment you want to fade to before you’re actually there. It will be more difficult for you this time because you haven’t been to where we’ll fade.”

“So...how is this going to work again?”

He faced me. “I’ll push you the image through my thoughts and you’ll take us there. Since this will be an exercise in sights and impressions, I don’t have a crutch to offer you this time. I can’t scare you to make you do it. You’d probably end up fading us somewhere you thought was safe instead. Remember the lake? You faded to the hospital. A safe place.”

I nodded, remembering.

“You can’t rely on fear to animate you. You need to build this up as a skill instead. Understand?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’ll give you what you need, just try to pick somewhere discrete from it and take us there. Grab hold of me and concentrate.”

I gulped. Grab hold? “Okay.” I just tamed my hands and he wanted me to grab hold. “This work?” I hooked my index fingers between his belt loops. No skin involved.

His expression turned curious. “That works.”

He closed his eyes, as if deep in thought. I did the same,

concentrating on whatever he threw my way. Which seemed to be nothing. I peeked at him through one eye. Behind his lids, his eyes moved like pencils drawing in something. This was stilted, I thought. I almost told him this wasn't working when...

He was in.

City lights.

Music. Coffee.

A girl with her back turned. Almost...can...see...her...

Chinese restaurants. Sampler! Sampler!

Cars. Screech. Stop. Honk.

*Brick buildings. Tall buildings. Irregular shaped concrete g-
ants.*

People with lowered eyes. Avoidance. Crammed sidewalks.

Jewelry. Pizza.

Music, music, music.

Coffee, coffee, coffee.

Roof.

I pulled his loops and drew him closer when I felt myself loosening, spreading over an expanse I couldn't cover. Like something elastic, something thin, something fading away.

Gone.



We reshaped together and my first thought was, moon. Giant

and pockmarked and without rival of another in the starless sky. My second thought:

“*Ahhhh! P-please, please,*” I sputtered, as I dangled from the side of a building. Lucas grabbed my slipping hands from his jeans and I took one look at the mass of traffic beneath me and nearly lost it. Again. “Please. I don’t wanna be street pizza.”

“I’ve got you.” With one tug, Lucas planted me firmly at his side. “Are you all right?”

I felt myself and made sure everything transferred from Sulphur Springs. “I’m okay.”

He gave a slight head nod and looked around. “I don’t think anyone saw us,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting to be this close. Nice work.”

I crouched a moment to gather my bearings, which was long enough for Lucas to walk to a fire escape ladder. “We’ll go down this way,” he said.

Getting as far away from the edge as possible, I stepped down the ladder to reach ground level. Dark dangerous alley never looked so good. We edged out into street view.

“Where are we?” I asked in a breath one wheeze shy of asthmatic.

“Seattle.”

I took in the scene around me. Steam rose from manhole covers, drifting over litter-lined street gutters. Traffic roared past us as people spilled out of city buses and taxis onto the

overcrowded sidewalks lined with vendors, street musicians, freaks, and the hungry homeless. Their vibes were something to be feared. They were wild and in full effect, doing whatever it was people did at this time of night. Lucas scanned the crowd, watched everyone around me. If someone got too close, he tugged my wrist or shirt to bring me back to his proximity.

These people looked busy on their way to nowhere; taking breaks from cell phone conversations to size Lucas and me up. Their eyes widen and immediately we were given “more room” to walk, and by “more room”, I mean a ten-foot radius on all sides. A distance I felt wasn’t created solely for me.

“People always react to you that way?”

“What way is *that*?”

“Scared.”

He smirked a little and continued to walk. I struggled to keep up with his stride as we closed in on what looked like a warehouse painted in light. A soup line of people dressed in slinky, flashy, or barely there clothing wrapped around the block, roped off from the entrance doors by a Sumo-sized man with two eyes tattooed on the back of his baldhead. My ears breathed in the funk of House Music that poured onto the pavement. The lights near the top of the building cut out into one word.

Lisztomania.

“Is this what I think it is?” I asked.

“Depends on what you’re thinking.”

It was. “I don’t have ID. I can’t get in.”

“They won’t be carding you tonight,” he said with a pause. “But there is the lady of the house. She’s older and...different. She agrees to let Sentries meet here under her protection charm. It’s about as safe from demons as holy grounds. But meeting or not, no one gets in this place unless she says so. Do you understand?”

“Got it. Old chick of the house gets cranky about guests.”

He started to walk, then stopped. I nearly crashed into him. “You should also know she’s a witch. In fact, there will be a lot of witches and other things here tonight.”

I pointed both my index fingers at him. “And that’s my cue....” I started to walk the other way, immediately drawing a mental picture of Sulphur Springs. If I could just fade back to....

He grabbed my shoulders and spun me around. “You’re with me. You’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. So lemme get this straight. There’s this old lady inside that’s picky about house guests. Turns out said lady is a witch that could possibly throw some bad mojo my way. On top of that, there are other things—I don’t even want to know what ‘things’ means, by the way—but on a scale of ‘angles’ to ‘zombies’ where do the particulars in that joint fall?”

He smirked again, more marked this time. I wondered what was so damned amusing about my reaction. “It varies.” He sidled next to me so there was no distance between us, effectively becoming my shield against the wash of humanity around me. His eyes roamed, investigating the crowd. “But I trust what’s inside of there more than I do anything out here.”

“That’s very comforting, Lucas. Very, very, freaggin’ comforting.” It cramped my neck to look up and scowl at him. “I’ll remember to keep that in mind when someone zaps me with a killing curse...or gets hungry and goes for one of my toes.”

“You said you would be okay with this.”

“I remember.”

“Start acting like it.”

He cut his eyes left and right through the swarm of people, then settled them back on me. Waiting. For all I knew, I could’ve been fading all night until I ended up where I wanted to be. Which, given the fact that it drew demons out of the woodwork, was not something I wanted to do.

“Fine...I’m ready,” I said.

We straight-lined it to the front of the club. Next to the main entrance was a single door with a camera planted high off center. Lucas looked into the camera; I could hear the mechanics of it zoom in. I could also hear someone yelling at the bouncer to my right.

“You gotta be shittin’ me, boy.”

Sumo dude just stared at the angry little guy like ‘shittin’ him would be above his job description.

“I ain’t signing no waiver to git in this place.”

“No waiver. No admittance,” Sumo dude said with *no* frills.

Angry Guy held up the paper. “What’s this ‘bout ‘not responsible for possible e’fects of fatigue’? I came all the way here from Tennessee to git tore up from the flo’ up, boy. Not fatigued. Only fatigue I want at the end of the night is from my heat seeker”—*crotch grab*—“being inside one of these here fine honey dips. Git my meaning?”

“No waiver.” Sumo Dude stepped closer and unfolded his arms. His wide stance said: I. Will. Destroy. You. “No admittance.”

I started to look away when I glanced up at Sumo guy’s head. I blinked when I caught it. One of those tattooed eyes just winked at me.

Lucas tugged my tee. “This way, Mikayla.”

The door opened and we stepped inside a parlor-like room painted red. Ceiling red. Dust boards red. Walls red. The floor, however, the color of pitch at its hottest. I could see my reflection in its slick surface. The only piece of furniture was an antique of a man standing by the archway in front of us. He hobbled over, favoring his right leg. Wisdom lines, laugh

lines, and crow's feet etched into his face like a worn out chopping block. Although his hair was the color of dirty snow and his body had long since seen the age of fifty, I got the distinct impression this man could whip the shit out of someone.

Lucas nodded at him. "Gimley."

He held out his hand. "*Zam, tanpri,*" he said in an accent with way too many ingredients.

Before Lucas could respond, a voice floated from behind the man. "This one here does not need weapons, Gimley. He has his own devices."

Cue '70s psychedelic music. A whole lot of woman strode around the corner of the archway. Big hips. Big bust. Big 'fro. Big lips. All neatly packaged in black leather pants stretched to max capacity and a midriff bare leather top. Her skin was flawless, the color of an old photo in deep sepia tone. Her S&M worthy stiletto boots clicked against the floor as she approached.

"Hello, My. You look lovely this evening," Lucas said.

"I look lovely every evening. I have not seen you for many months, Lucas Long." Her accent mirrored the old man's: French, twangy, soulful—a gumbo of languages that made one.

She turned and said something quickly to Gimley. "*Chache yon chemiz pou zanmi nou an.*"

He gimped off, disappearing beyond the archway.

She raised her hand to Lucas's face. He took it and kissed the backside. "My apologies, My, but I've been engaged."

She looked at Lucas thoughtfully. Her hand slipped from his grasp and down his scarred arm. "So you have." Another long silence fell between them. She then smiled and glided to me. I stepped back. She matched. We tangoed like that until her hand reached out and cradled mine, soft and silky. Without looking away from me, "Who is your friend?" she asked.

I looked to Lucas who nodded the okay. "Mikayla," I answered.

"Mikayla," she said in a way that was broken. *Mick-ah-la*. She glanced over at Lucas. "*Vrèman? Mwen pa ka ansent nan sa.*"

"Yes, My."

"Busy, busy boy." She issued him a verbal challenge. "*Kote nan fen laverite ak kouche a kòmanse?*"

Lucas didn't answer and the full weight of her stare turned back to me, along with a smile revealing ultra white teeth against her dark skin. "Mmm, such stunning eyes, Mikayla." Her thumb traced circles around the rims. There was something creepily erotic in her touch. Her gaze was calm and hypnotizing, though. So hypnotizing that I didn't mind her fingers. "They remind me of long days and short nights. Of tyranny and screaming children. Have you noticed her eyes, Lucas Long?"

Gimley returned with a white long sleeved shirt. Lucas pulled it on. As he buttoned it down, he said, "I have."

She didn't take her gaze away from mine. Her mouth drew dangerously close to my lips. "Have you told her how striking they are?"

"No, My. I have not."

Her hand left my face and rested on my left shoulder. She inclined her 'fro ever so slightly in Lucas's direction. "Does not a lovely woman deserve such praise?"

Lucas shifted his weight and rolled up his sleeves. "She is deserving."

"Well?"

He looked at me. "Your eyes are nice, Mikayla."

My's lips pulled high on each side of her mouth into another smile. They were two orange slices adorned in a shade of lipstick as red as the walls. She turned around and flanked me. "Oh, but you can do better than that." She wisped her hand through the air as would a chief conductor with his orchestra. "Think Lorca. You enjoyed Lorca on my visits."

The muscles flexed in Lucas's jaw. He looked deep in thought. Uncomfortable. Willing to please. Through tight lips, "She won't understand—" he tried.

"Ta-ta-ta. Indulge me. Come closer. To her face, tell her."

Why was this so important to her? They were my eyes. No compliment necessary. I wanted to find my voice to say this

but I didn't want to piss this lady off. I had about ninety-nine problems already and I did not aspire to make this witch one.

She stepped away and Lucas replaced her. "Et—"

"Ta!"

He parted his lips as if to say something to her but decided better of it. Amen.

As My watched closely, Lucas lowered his head somewhat eye level to me. I could feel him, like squiggles of heat rising from hot pavement, reaching out to my body. So warm, this boy. Without even meaning to, I looked over his face—his brows, his lip outline, and eyes were not spared. His expression was hard around the edges, forced. *I'm going to touch you*, he thought. And his voice jolted me. So did his hand as it cupped my cheek. At his touch, I balled my hands and stared at him doe-like. He moved my hair away from my face and anchored it behind my ear with his finger that swept down my neck afterward, coming to a stop in the hollow of my collarbone. The whole act seemed so natural to him, like he'd done that to me a million times before. His eyes soften on me, measuring—apologizing? His face changed before the words came out. "*Ete yo ap pou tout tan jalouzi je ou.*"

The floor felt like it dissolved beneath me. I steadied myself and glanced off to the side, not really sure what just happened.

My clapped maniacally and Lucas let go of my face. "I always thought poets to be a little word whipped." She let out

a throaty laugh. “Do you know why the eyes are so special, Mikayla?”

The fact that they allowed you to see didn’t seem like an adequate response. “No. No, I don’t.”

“They are special because you can forget every detail of a person—hair, clothes, possessions...but the eyes never leave. They never lie and tell of all your secrets.” She cut her eyes to Lucas. “Even secrets you don’t know you have. They imprint upon you, upon every soul they meet. Am I right, Lucas Long?”

“I think Mikayla would like to go inside,” he said without looking away from me.

My smiled. “Mikayla,” she repeated, while stroking my arm. She was one touchy-feely lady. “That means, who is like God. Or so I have heard over time.”

“Oh. I don’t know. I never asked,” I said.

She gave one dramatic head nod. “All the same, it is not befitting to you. Perhaps...”

Lucas’s warm hand wrapped high on my arm. “Perhaps we should be moving along, My. The meeting will be starting without me.”

His eyes bored into hers and I felt odd man out in the middle of their silent conversation.

She removed her hand from me and stepped back. “Very well.” She gestured to the archway. “You may.”

“Thank you, My,” Lucas said.

We walked through the archway and into another room with shelving racing around the walls. On each were miniature crystal balls in different hues encased in protective glass boxes.

“What are these?” I asked, picking one up from its case. The insides swirled, like some universe trapped by glass.

Lucas took it from me and placed it gently back inside its clear shell that seemed anchored to the shelf. “Trash,” he said.

I looked at him wanting more of an answer than that, but his hand started to search the shelving, finding a trigger. After he tripped it, the shelving popped out in a hiss, and then slid aside, exposing an elevator.

We stepped inside, and as the mirror doors met, My appeared between the seam, and said, “Do send your parents my love.”

She waved.

Lucas nodded.

The doors closed.

The elevator was made of glass and exposed cables ran the length. Lucas pressed the B-2 button and we descended. I tried to calm my hands down, but the elevator motion, My, and his touch left me with bad vibrations.

“What’s her deal?” I asked.

“She’s a witch. She always has a deal.”

“More specifically.”

He let out a heavy sigh. “She’s outlived her late husband by more than one-hundred years. She misses him. I believe she’s lonely and has nothing better to do with her time.”

“That why she made you say that to me?”

“I don’t pretend to know how My thinks.”

We came down an open floor that peered out into a doom-core club scene. Lots of spiked hair, lots of leather, lots of skin glistening with sweat—bars in every corner of its football field expanse. People writhed on the black/strobe lit dance floor to a beat so heavy it vibrated into the elevator. I imagined yelling over the music to be heard.

I thought body jungle.

I thought glow stick overload.

I thought the Cowbell at home would have total club envy.

The D.J. behind a turn-deck and laptop pointed to the far corner of the room where two guys dressed in black stood with hoses in their hands. On his mark, they flooded the floor with white smoke.

“I didn’t know you spoke a foreign language,” I said.

“It’s not so foreign to me. She taught it to us when we were younger.”

Us? Him and his brother? “What did you say back there?”

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. Before he walked out, he said, “What she wanted to hear.”

sixteen

THE ELEVATOR LED TO A BALCONY PEPPERED with waiters serving cocktails, and people grazing from little plates like cattle. “I’ll be down there.” Lucas pointed to the two black swing doors at the bottom of the staircase. “Sit anywhere up here...and don’t eat anything. I shouldn’t be long.”

I gave him two thumbs up, and as he left, I walked to the edge. The lips of the balcony wrapped in a perfect circle around the mouth of the room below. It was a swank setup: long, flowing curtains over the doorways, dim lighting,

deep recessed alcoves keeping the darkness prisoner, gargoyle statues uniformly spaced every three feet on the walls. The slick floors and earth-toned paint reminded me of the parlor up stairs. The music played softer, smoother, seemed to be something more for an older crowd. No vibes. No halos. No problems.

Something nudged my elbow for attention. “You must be Lucas’s.”

Green. The first thing I thought when I saw her eyes. Lambent green stared back at me beyond an almond shaped face. She was about my height, five-foot-eight, and a curly redhead. I felt all types of awkward from my lack of color while standing next to her.

“Mikayla,” I corrected. “And I don’t belong to Lucas.”

She sucked in her lips then popped them in an epiphany. “Oh, right. You’re still just starting out.” She stood next to me and held out her hand. “Name’s Bea. I’m with Tobias, i.e., I’m Tobias’s. You don’t have to front, I’m a Hunter too. You’re the one he’s been talking about. Q-tip girl.”

Is that what Lucas thought of me? “Yeah...Q-tip girl.” I shook her hand. “How do you know who I am?”

“I’m pretty decent with spotting paranormals. Since they don’t usually dress in Led Zeppelin tees or snow boots, I thought, ‘Hey, she must be one of us’. Plus you lost as hell.”

She grabbed a glass from a waiter walking nearby and

took a long swig. “Ah. Have you tried that? Get’s me every time.” She offered her cup. I respectfully declined and she propped her elbows against the balcony. “First time here?”

“Yeah.”

She tipped her head over the railing. “They look normal don’t they? You wouldn’t believe the youngest here’s like two-hundred-years old.”

I could feel her looking at me while I stared below. “Look, see that one?” Skinny, alabaster skinned, facial features cut in stone. “He’s a Demoted—bad demon gone good. So is that whole group surrounding him. We still keep a good watch out on those kind, though. They could turn.” Bea began a series of finger points and head nods around the room. “Warlock, witch, witch, Demoted, werebear, leprechauns—ugh, never get in a relationship with a leprechaun, can we say ‘possessive’. Oh, and never party with the Fae either, man. They go rock star hard and by the end of the night, you’ll be licking the nipples of a unicorn. Mind blowers,” she continued. “Witch, shifter, Dud—”

“Dud?”

“Regular people without powers—*humans*.”

“Should one be down here?”

“Probably with a Fae. They get off on humans; their essence drives them all shades of crazy. It’s all good as long as it’s consensual.”

Of all the paranormals, she didn't say one. "What, no vamps?"

"Shoot yeah. There are fangers all over the place."

"Really?"

She nodded.

"Do...they...sparkle?"

"Hell no. They rip out your jugular and chew it like Bubble Yum."

The beat picked up and the geriatric paranormals below began to sway with each other.

"Witches know how to party, huh? I'm surprised they haven't tried to scoop you up. You know, with that milk still fresh on your breath. Guess Lucas has some pull around here."

"I guess. I think his family knows My."

She took another swig. "Figures. His family is like Sentry royalty. They know everybody and their momma's."

Then I thought, "What would they want with me?"

She just smiled and looked over the balcony.

Everyone gathered near the center of the dance floor, waiting. I glanced around and the balcony was now empty save for us. Then from the elevator she stepped out in a pair of jean shorts, white tank top, sunglasses, and a heap of bad girl attitude that shielded us pisants from her sight.

Her named slipped from me. "*Sable.*"

Bea looked over her shoulder. “You’ve met?”

“Yes—I mean, no.” She disappeared down the stairs and through the black double doors. “Sorta yes and no.”

“*O-kaaay*. I guess you two will ‘sorta’ meet at Lucas’s ceremony. Girl’s a trip.”

“What ceremony?”

“His prime ceremony.”

Vaguely, the memory of his meeting the other night rose to the surface. Sable’s voice along with it. *Our turn is coming*. “When’s that?”

Bea cocked her head and her red hair flamed over to the side. “He hasn’t told you anything?”

I shook my head.

“Boy’s slacking. It’s whenever he claims her. And her daddy says that needs to be sometime soon. That’s why your boy’s all scarred up. Failure to claim brings the pain.”

I looked away confused.

Bea nudged me with her elbow. “Heavy, right? Same thing I thought when I first started. Can you imagine hooking up with same person for the rest of your life? Bum-mer.”

“I actually thought he didn’t like her.”

“What? Like or no like, you don’t get scars like his unless it’s a strong match. And he’s been scarred for as long as they’ve been matched, so really makes no sense for him to prolong the suffering.”

I waded through the info-barf she just covered me in.
“They suffer?”

She gave me an ‘are you kidding me?’ kind of look. “Tobias got a scar once—just one about two inches long above his collar bone, right before he had the chance to claim his prime Gayle. When it came, we were in Alabama at Mardi Gras, trying to stop this Jumper demon with a nasty habit of possessing strippers. And let me tell you.” She pointed at me for emphasis. “Strippers, thongs, MoonPie’s, and demons don’t mix. Anyway, he doubled over on the sidewalk when it happened. It was the first time I ever heard him scream and we’ve been together since before I ascended. Think of someone cutting your skin off with a dull knife.”

I grabbed my arm. “Damn.”

“Now pour rubbing alcohol over it.”

Lucas scarred tonight and didn’t so much as flinch. “You sure it’s like that for everyone?”

“Sure as shit. It’s meant to be excruciating to make them claim faster.”

Here I was thinking *I* was the masochistic type.

“You should come to Tobias and Gayle’s ceremony. It’s kind of a tradition to show support since we’re the ones they spend most of their time with.”

“I’ll see what the boss says.”

She pointed to the ceiling. “Check it out. They’re about

to make it rain.”

I looked up, didn't notice the soles of feet that moved across the ceiling. It was a one-way mirror type of thing, viewing straight up to the first floor. The floor with all the humans.

A red light whirled around the room signaling something great or terrible to come. The beat accelerated to an unrecognizable, somewhat otherworldly tune. The paranormals' heads lifted up to the ceiling like wilted flowers succumbing to sunshine.

Squares opened and silver vents eased out. The mouths of the gargoyle statues across the walls dropped and long concrete tongues inched to the crowd. From the dark recesses, men in black stepped out with hoses ready to unload.

The white smoke seeped from the ceiling vents first. It started with a long hiss, the sound a tanker-truck made after a screeching stop. Then it rushed out, erupting from every corner, vent, and hose. From the tongue tips of those gargoyles, the paranormals wrapped their mouths and sucked the smoke like they were hookah pipes. They danced with gaped jaws, arms eagled spread, breathing every puff of it they could stand. The whole scene was out of control like a mismanaged nose bleed. I finally looked away when a leprechaun passed out.

“What hell is this? Some kind of acid trip?”

Bea laughed. “Acid is for pussies. This is the narcotic of the paranormals courtesy of the Duds upstairs.”

“The white smoke?”

“Euphoria excess. They call it Rapture.” She explained from the top. “The Duds upstairs supply the euphoria, the witches trap it inside this smoke stuff—which Duds think is there to physically cool them off from all their bumping and grinding on the dance floor—witches do whatever it is that witches do to it, and voila! The paranormal’s version of crack.”

I pointed below. “That’s lame, right? They have powers, why do they need this to get altered?”

“They’ve been around since, like, Jesus, seen everything there is to see and probably tried everything there is to try. They’re not humans and aren’t affected by the drugs humans do. To them, humans *are* drugs.”

What the heck is this girl sipping on? I thought. But somewhere in the grimy scheme of it, what Bea said made sense. Manipulative and opportunistic, maybe. Still, it made sense. “Do they know what’s happening?”

“The Duds? Nope. Makes them tired, but nothing a little Gatorade won’t cure.” She turned up her cup and crunched on the ice. “They never know what’s happening. They’re all part of this unseen machine...” She snapped her fingers, and then circled her hands like they were covering a ball. “What’s

the word I'm looking for?"

"Invisible world?"

"Yeah. Just like that. And the sad part is, they can see it if they want. They just chose to be happy inside of their little 'eco-friendly cars', sipping on their little 'mocha latta whatever's', while talking techno-geek on their 'smart little phones'."

All those air quotes and hand gestures she flashed threw some serious hate undertones my way. "You sound Dud-ophobic."

Bea snorted. "Hardly. I'm Dud born. To hate them is to hate me. And I'm infatuated with my sexy self. Besides..." She trailed off, rubbing her temple. "Coming, coming, coming," she said to herself. "Tobias is calling. They're done." She stepped back and began to fade. "Hey, we should definitely link up some time. Kill a few demons, swap fight stories, play a little Rock Band. I'm the shit on bass. Prepare to be schooled, home slice."

I'd so kick her ass on bass. But she was funny and I laughed on the inside while giving her a nod. She responded by holding up two fingers and saying, "Deuces," before disappearing.

In my haze, I thought I should've asked her how to turn off my sight.



I paced by the elevator and waited for Lucas. When he

showed, there was a shade of pissed on his face. Great.

“How’s your head?” he asked.

I hadn’t thought about it since my room. Poking around my scalp the pain and cut were gone. “Fine. How was the meeting?”

“Bearable.”

We boarded the elevator, a sleek silence stood between us. I decided now was a good time to ask why he hadn’t told me about his scars.

“Bea told me about—”

“Excuse me.” A voice and hand slid between the closing seams. The doors rebounded off of it and opened up to Sable’s body. “Mind if I ride up with you all?”

She stepped in. We adjusted to accommodate. Lucas glared.

“I’m not interrupting anything am I?” she asked with a teasing smile.

I shook my head. What was it about this girl that reminded me so much of home?

As she turned to face the doors, I reached to press the L button. Before I could depress the button, her arm jerked out and blocked my way. “Allow me,” she said. She turned around and peered at me over her sunglasses. I didn’t like the look. “You must be, um...um...”

“Mikayla,” Lucas said. “But you already knew that.”

Sable smiled his way. "Right. Mikayla. The girl who plays with Q-tips. Your Hunter."

God, not another one of these type of chicks. Seriously, what about me said 'snark target'? Why couldn't we just get along, listen to some sweet alternative tunes, and play a little X-box? Chill.

Her hand edged out for mine and, at the tight grip, I immediately wanted to let go. "I'm Sable. Lucas's prime."

Lucas cut a dark glance over to her. "You're a bit premature aren't you, Sable?"

She fluffed her long hair and countered. "We both know I am not." Back to me. "Tell me, Mikayla." She stood next to me, looked me up and down. "Did you work all night to put that outfit together?"

Boom! Snark target obliterated.

"Sable," Lucas growled. "Play nice."

"Actually," I said, stepping to the side to create some space between us. Because if this chick exploded, I didn't want to catch the shrapnel. "Your prime picked it out from my closet last night."

She pouted her lips in the slightest but most condescending way. A smirk spread across her face as she inclined her head and slowly pushed back her sunglasses, examining. No explosion, but my reflection remained in the black lenses as she trained her eyes on me.

Silence—thick and awkward.

The elevator stopped and Sable dismissed me with little more than a flick of her wrist. “We need a minute.”

I wanted to say something, but I didn’t. What could I say? I righteously had no place there between them. Lucas wasn’t mine. He was hers. Besides, I got the feeling going against Sable would be like following-up Jimi Hendrix in a concert after he made love to his guitar then burned it. Futile and utterly embarrassing.

In a total bitch move, I exited from behind the shelf door and stood outside near the parlor. But not too quick to run into My again, I gestured at Gimley to let me out.

Life outside calmed down. So did I. To my left, people staggered out of *Lisztomania*. They looked exhausted and, with limp arms, hailed down taxis. I continued down the sidewalk assaulted by the foreignness of it all. A homeless guy leaned against a newspaper machine and sold jokes for fifty-cents. But the opposition in front of him was a one-armed man, playing the xylophone while sitting Indian style on a bucket. Now who the hell could compete with that?

He attracted a fistful of people. His skinny arm played *O Christmas Tree*, though it was the middle of February. People gawked, they pointed, some college noobs stopped with camera phones and snapped pictures. He just played, fast and furious and one-armed, determined to make breakfast

out of their pocket change.

Traffic lights blinked their coordinated commands: *You may go. Please slow down. Halt!* Silhouettes pranced, danced, or stood motionless by the shade drawn windows of the concrete giants towering over me, all in some race to the sky they'd never win. The long trench coat of a little person lashed against my legs. The owner turned around, tipped his green fedora in apology, and kept it moving. There was something familiar about him. The merchant across the street struggled with a chain rope till the garage looking door over her storefront came down with nice and easy *chlunk* sounds. She wiped her hands down her pants, satisfied.

I meandered near a pedestrian crosswalk. No one knew me. I didn't know them. We roamed together in quiet anonymity.

"Are you ready?"

I didn't hear him come up and his voice spooked me. "God, I told you not to do that."

"Sorry," he said. "You seemed deep in thought and I didn't want to interrupt."

I rubbed my arm. It ached upon his arrival and I wondered if he'd gotten another one. "Well, feel free next time."

We headed back in the direction of the alley from earlier. The sidewalks were nearly empty and traffic slowed to in-existent. The high of *Lisztomania* started to fade and replaced

itself with sleepiness.

“So, she’s like your fiancé?” I asked, still rubbing my arm.

His stride was shorter. I could tell he slowed down for me.

“From your perspective, yes.”

“What other perspective is there?”

“The one in which I’m bound.”

“Which is...?” I asked. But he didn’t bite. “Whatever perspective, I think she hates me.”

He sighed. “She doesn’t hate you, she hates your presence. Every day that I’m with you is a day I’m not with her.”

Lucas stopped mid-stride to let a passerby decide which direction she wanted to go around us. She started left. She started right. She finally decided to cross the street.

He shook his head and half-smiled. “Can I ask you something, Mikayla?”

I looked at him. He rarely asked me anything out of context so his question made me anxious. “Yeah. Sure.”

He stopped walking and stared at me. His voice was warm and inviting. Not at all the tone I expected. “Are you still afraid of me?”

I was brutally honest. “Yes. All the time. But...” How could I communicate it wasn’t *him* I was afraid of? Instead, my thoughts of him, the constant ache to touch him, or the way my body reacted when around him that I feared most. I feared myself. “I think it’ll get better, though.”

He stared into my eyes. “What can I do to take away your fears of me?”

“I don’t know”—*Step back ten feet?*—“I think I just have to get used to you...being here...all of the time.”

“Get used to me?” he repeated, and something flashed in his eyes, something ancient come undone. His voice came out above a whisper. “I’ll try and be more accommodating to you.”

Why so serious all of the time? “Okay, I guess.” I started to walk, eyes stinging with sleep. Today seemed elastic, stretching on forever and my body started to feel it. “But can I ask you something?”

He hesitated as if thinking about it, but finally conceded. “Yes.”

“Do you feel like I’m a burden to you, on your Sentry life, I mean? I know there are other things you could be doing, like, concentrating on claiming Sable, or finding—”

“You’re not a burden,” he cut me off quickly, as if offended by my question. “I’m where I ne—” He paused and corrected himself. “I’m where I *want* to be as long as you’ll have me.”

“I’d like that,” I said. But immediately I wanted to take the words back. I didn’t want him to know that I’d like for him to stay with me. That I needed him. It felt selfish and wrong. Yet so right. So familiar.

Then he said something that caught me so off guard, that seemed so out of character for him to confess, I was stuck staring at the pavement trying to process it.

“I’d like that too,” he said.

I didn’t say anything, and for however long it took us to cross over to the next block I stared ahead.

“And don’t worry about Sable,” Lucas said.

I thought back to where the conversation started and nodded. “You could have told me that’s what they meant.” I pointed to his scars. He gave me a look “Bea explained it. Said they were from not claiming your prime. How can you stand it...the pain, I mean?”

“I just do.”

I didn’t understand him. Or was it the fact that I was trying to understand him that confused me? Why did I start caring?

Then it occurred to me that Lucas had a reason for not claiming Sable; he resisted for a purpose. And not because Sable was a tool of the female kind. The thought of it made me sad for him. “You said Sable was a mistake when I asked about her. Is she a mistake because you were matched with her but you don’t love her?”

“Who says I don’t love her?”

“I was in your head the other night when you basically told her to jump someone else’s bones. Call it a wild guess.”

“Love is not always necessary,” he said with a particular dryness. “Sometimes we make decisions based on need not want.”

“But is it necessary for you? Shouldn’t it be?” I asked, musing what I would do if in the same situation. “You’re going to be with this one person for the rest of your life. Shouldn’t you at least *want* to be there, enjoy them?”

He looked pained. “It only needs to be tolerable.”

“Tolerable?” I smoothed the hair away from my face and sighed. I thought back to all the things in my life that were tolerable. Being adopted, not knowing the first people to ever lay eyes on me, not remembering who I was. Feeling unwanted like those two end-pieces on a loaf of bread. All these things were tolerable, but still raw and sore and painful sometimes. If only all things healed as fast as gunshots wounds. “How can you live like that?”

“You’re quick to judge.”

“Wha—Lucas, I’m totally not judging.” I waved off the accusation. But was I? Because I would be in no place. I started to realize we shared a lot in common. “Total judgment free zone. I was just making an observation.”

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, stared quietly ahead of us. “You talk like you’ve been in love before.”

I’d been a few things: a gamer, the adopted girl with the weird eyes, and even a jock’s wet dream about a potential

handicapped lay, but never had I been in love.

“Have you?” he asked.

“Well, you’ve been around me for the past three months. You tell me? Anyone sneaking in my room at night other than you?”

“I can’t imagine why not,” he said, and at first, the words dripped with sarcasm. But he turned to me and buffered them smooth. “They would be lucky to have you.”

I forced a swallow down my dry throat. Why would he say that? Just seemed so odd coming from him. We stood under a streetlight in front of the alley, the sidewalks barren of people, while I sought the answer. I twirled my hands together, begging them to behave. It was weird wanting to touch him so badly, when I hardly even knew him. Just didn’t seem right or fair. Neither was the way he stared at me, his gaze resting on my mouth then searching my eyes. It was the same look he gave me in My’s parlor. Apologizing. But for what? I opened my mouth to ask him why, when he eyes drifted behind me. Something held his gaze and his lips mashed into a thin line. With one hand, he grabbed both my wrists and pulled me closer to him.

“Mikayla,” he said with restrained anger.

I made fists. “Yes?”

“Fade. Now.”

seventeen

“WHY?” I FOLLOWED HIS GAZE. TWO LITTLE BOYS stood in the middle of the alley. They stared at us and waved hello. “From them?” I asked. “They’re kids.” I freed a wrist to wave back, then stopped. “Wait. Why are kids standing in an alley...at night?”

Their eyes started to glow red. They stopped waving, lowered on their haunches, but kept their hands up. Every finger curled down except their middle one as they shot me a bird.

“Is that answer enough?” Lucas moved in front of me. “They’re demons, Mikayla. And you’re not ready. Fade,” he

demanded, then looked over his shoulder at me. "Please," he added with a sort of pain in his voice.

"Okay. Got it. Going." Shit. I stepped back and closed my eyes. The decision to fade to Sulphur Springs was a no brainer. But could I get there?

"Fellas." I heard Lucas say. "Isn't it past your bed times?"

My heart raved in my chest. I could feel Lucas's blood pulsating through me, exciting, terrifying...hot. He was primed and ready to go. Me, on the hand other, not so much. I tried to sank deeper within myself, tried to visualize my destination because thinking about it just wasn't enough. I needed to see it.

"Her," a guttural voice said. My eyes shot open. "We want the Hunter."

Me?

"I'm afraid she's taken." Lucas stepped forward, his white button down fell to the ground as he bared his chest. "Perhaps you'll have me instead."

The demon boys looked at each other as if considering it, then faced Lucas with demonic grins. From their haunches, arms and legs elongated into spindly things; clothes were left in shreds around them. Razor like claws whipped out. With teeth bared, they snapped at Lucas and circled him. The creatures lunged into action at the same time, going for Lucas when in mid-soar they were caught in the tight grasp of Lu-

cas's hands, writhing and squirming for freedom until their heads came smashing together in a crunch of bones.

Lucas dropped them like hot garbage.

He turned and faced me. He hadn't broken a sweat. "You're still here?"

I fidgeted with the rim of my shirt. "Mind drew a blank."

He shook his head and placed his full attention back to the demons. Mortified, I walked over as he picked one up like a ragdoll by the neck. While gripping its shoulder, in a wet tearing sound, Lucas ripped it in two like a piece of paper. Black liquid spewed across Lucas's face. Unfazed, he moved to repeat the action to the other one.

My back hugged the wall as I steered clear of the demon carcass. There was nothing child-like about the ridges around those close set eyes. Or its mottled, green tinted skin.

Lucas tore through the other one and tossed its parts in a pile.

"God, that's nasty," I said.

Lucas looked up from his work. I could hardly recognize him with that disgusted look on his face. Demon goo dripped from the tip of his nose. "It ensures they're dead."

"Right," I said, because he obviously was the expert on such matters.

Lucas stood and went for his shirt. "We should go," he said, staining the white shirt black with his hands.

We headed to the far end of the alley toward the fire escape ladder we pulled earlier. “You first,” he said.

I went on the other side of the ladder and placed one foot inside the metal rung. Before I pulled up, I took a hard look down the alley. “Lucas, what kind of demons were those?”

“The dead kind. Now move.”

I pointed through the bars to the view in front of me. “Clarify dead.”

His brows crashed together as his head turned down the alley. The demons blood bubbled on the pavement and one by one, four duplicate creatures stepped out. With choreographed intent, they jumped on the alley walls, claws digging, chunks of brick falling as they advanced crab-like.

Their red eyes only had one target.

Us.



I fell backward as one tackled me off the ladder. I rolled out, desperate to create some distance. Regardless of all that Hunter/secret powers bullshiz, I needed to get away from this thing. Gasping for air and nursing my pavement slammed back, I definitely wasn't feeling the whole destiny gig right now.

The hell spawn lunged at me again and I dove out of the way, effectively allowing its head to connect with the brick

wall behind me. This did nothing to slow it down.

I searched the ground, stealing a glance at Lucas tackling three demons of his own. He ripped one in half, while the other two clawed at his back.

My own demon was more polite; gave me time to stand before he rushed me again, knocking the air out of me in a grunt. Its legs wrapped around my torso and we tumbled against a dumpster, before bouncing off the hard bricks, and splashing into a puddle of water that was so filthy it could only be summed up as pond scum or bubonic.

I got leverage somehow and rolled on top of it, pinning it on the ground. Damn thing reeked. The smell burned my eyes, like vomit set ablaze. “You stank like gouda!” I slapped its claws away from me with icky taps, not wanting to touch its lycra skin, but needing to keep it and the smell at bay. “Wash. Your. Ass!”

A loud, wet snap sounded just before the thud that followed. Lucas had two more down, but from the bubbling demons shells, four more rose.

Shit.

“Stop killing them,” I yelled.

Rip.

“What!”

“Sto—”

The rest caught in my throat. The demon’s hand weaseled

around my neck and squeezed so tightly I felt my eyes bulging out and face filling with blood.

“Lu-Luc—” I tried.

It stood and forced me to stand with it, lifting me from the ground. I was smashed into the wall, bricks fell to my feet, and a sharp pain pierced my lower back. “I will have you first, Hunter,” it said in a rasp. But for a split second, its grasp loosened and it stared into my eyes like we reached some common ground, like we were old pals.

Epic failure on his part.

Disgusted, I sent a command to my leg, and at the demon’s hesitation, I nailed him in the groin with a front kick so lethal I had to congratulate myself on the inside. It went down, howling in pain. Guess demons had balls, too. Good to know. I stored this piece of info away for future references, as I launched a brick at its head. Surprisingly, it nailed him and left me wondering where the accuracy came from, and what was with this strength?

I straddle the demon and it felt good to have it beneath me, squirming. A vicious grin spread across my face and I heard myself giggle. The demon yowled and it sounded foreign, yet so...satisfying. Something addictive—adrenaline—surged through my body, and as if instincts took hold, I grabbed another jagged brick and raised it, ready to bring down a world of hurt on this demonic Assholier-than-thou asshole.

But before I could impale the thing, its face morphed.

“Don’t hurt me, Mikayla. Please,” she said in a toothless plea.

“Emma?” I blinked hard, as though coming back from a daze.

“Please,” Emma begged.

Demon begged?

What the shit was this?

Emma died. She was gone. Yet here she was staring back at me with tear filled eyes, begging that her life be spared. I lowered the brick taking in her extraterrestrial face when her hand connected with my nose and top lip with a force that knocked me off center. Blood poured from my nostrils. “Dammit!”

I wiped the crimson away, my thoughts sobering up as I realized what happened. My hands were white knuckled around the brick. “I won’t”—*wham!*—“hurt you.” The brick jutted from its eye socket as it convulsed and jerked, its face no longer Emma’s. I wiped the black goo away that squirted on my brow. “Now stay the hell out of my head.”

After a good farmer’s blow, I stumbled away from the corpse and whirled around. The pain in my lower back punished me for the sudden movement. I reached under my shirt to the spot and fingered blood. Awesome. How in the hell would I explain this to my parents?

I glanced at Lucas, who was in the middle of dismembering one, when two wrapped around his neck and another bit at his ankles. Lucas groaned as their teeth and claws sank deeper. The demons were like spiders on steroids and an unholy load of spry.

Lucas threw them to the alley walls in a burst of strength while lowering to the ground. His arms, legs, and back doubled in size. Fur replaced his skin, teeth were swapped for fangs, bones elongated and popped while his jeans shredded away from him.

On hind legs, Lucas stretched to his full height, straightening his long fur covered arms and flexing his claws. He rolled his neck as if adjusting to the new feel, his mannerisms more beastly than human. My eyes flickered between the demons and Lucas and for a nanosecond, I didn't know who to run from.

I caught his wolf-like profile as he turned to me. *Behind you, Mikayla*, he pushed and the thought dripped with rage.

“Wuh?” Ouch. The tears my busted nose brought burned my split lip as I turned around.

In the gooey remains of my dead demon, two more stood with hungry expressions. I heard a deep growl as Lucas split another in half, its body dropped to the pavement like trash as two rose from the heap.

We can't win, I thought.

I ran like hell toward Lucas because these dudes were too much for me. I tried to think, search my brain for something, someplace. I needed to fade...

“Ow!” My stomach kissed pavement as the two-o-duo behind me dragged me backward. I grabbed at the pavement, cutting my hands on broken glass, drifting farther away from Lucas. Finally, I got off a kick to one of their faces but they were still there, like feral things scratching and clawing at my legs. Shit. Needed to fade. *Think, think, think.*

As I turned over, the starless sky weighed down on me and the mental picture I needed came through crystal clear.

I slipped out of my snow boots, the only things left of me in their grasp as I sprinted toward Lucas. He was kicking major demon ass but they kept multiplying, kept coming back for more—determined.

My right hand dissolved before my eyes. I was fading away and that was so not going to happen unless Lucas was with me. I wasn't going to leave him.

I closed in on Lucas and stretched out my left arm to his furred leg.

If I could just...touch....



I woke with a deep inhale. Smelled like Mother Nature just popped the freshness seal on the air. So good. I adjusted my

eyes and noticed three things. (1) There was town directly below me, a small cluster of lights with roads snaking between them. Darkened forest bordered the town where its streetlights couldn't reach. (2) This town was Sulphur Springs from the vantage point of my secret cliff. And (3) Something licked me.

I lay horizontally, my arm raised over my head as wet warmth surrounded my thumb. Snatching my hand down, I pressed against the stone slab under me to sit up when hard arms forced me still.

“You may not want to move.”

“Wha—why? Lucas?”

“You have quite a few cuts on your body. I've numbed most of them, but there's a deep one on your back that could be painful if you sit up,” he said. Then added, “And I'm not wearing clothes.”

I started to turn around, then caught myself. “You're naked?”

“Yes,” he said. “But if it offends you I can shift into my lycan form.”

It took a pause to get my thoughts in order. “No, you're okay.” I stared below to the town. “It's just...you've been licking my body?”

“Yes,” he said.

I searched my mind and drew a blank. “How long have

I been out?”

“Ten minutes or so.”

“Have...you...been licki—”

“I haven’t stopped until now,” he said. “How’s your nose?”

I raised my right hand to it, my palm still raw and skinned. “It’s fine, numb. You licked my nose, too?”

“You were asleep,” he said with an edge to his voice. “I started with you face, then moved to the cuts along your legs. I was working on your right hand when you woke.” He grabbed that hand. “May I finish?”

My face? I tongued my busted lip. Only it didn’t feel busted at all. “My mouth?”

“I didn’t linger,” he said matter-of-factly. And I believed him. “Your hand.”

I held it up. “Y-yeah. Go ahead.”

He opened my hand and rubbed over the tender parts of my palm with his thumb, before isolating my pinky finger and bringing it to his warm mouth. His lips closed over it, as his rough tongue and teeth trailed its length.

“Why did you bring us here?” he asked.

He moved on to my ring finger and I drew in a much needed breath. This. Was. Bizarre. “The stars,” I said. “Those things in the alley—”

“Stragglers.”

“They flipped me over and I couldn’t see the stars in Se-

attle. This place popped into mind.”

Middle finger.

“You use to come here a lot.”

It wasn't a question. A sound fact. Almost like he knew this already.

“Um...” It became increasingly difficult to respond with my fingers going in and out of his mouth like that. “With my dad. He showed me this place when I first moved here.”

“Right,” he whispered, then swirled his tongue over the raw skin of my palm. “I can see the appeal.”

He gave my hand back and I curled my fingers in a fist at my chest. I thought about the feel of his skin beneath them. His hand moved down to the tail of my shirt. “Lie on your stomach,” he said. I hesitated and he noticed. “It will be easier to access the spot on your back.”

I turned over, the slab cool against the side of my face. I couldn't see Lucas, but I could feel him like electricity raising the hairs all over my body. Those prickly currents traveling down my stomach and into my shorts. His burning fingers touched down and dragged along my skin, freeing my shirt up to expose my back. I hurled questions at myself: Why was I letting him to do this? What's wrong with me that his touch felt so good? Why didn't I want him to stop?

“It's a bad cut, Mikayla,” he murmured. “Try not to move.”

His lips touched down and I could feel the heat of his mouth as they parted. I couldn't help it. I tensed as his tongue licked over the cut in slow, short strokes. His touch teased my skin. I closed my eyes, thankful he couldn't see my face, knowing the heat rising to my cheeks wouldn't go unnoticed. Though the same couldn't be said for my traitor heart.

Over one-hundred beats a minute later, he stopped. "Are you okay?" he asked.

His tongue licked my body in places no tongue had ever been before. I'd been tattooed in his saliva. To say that I was far from okay would've been the understatement of my life. So I lied.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

He didn't answer and finished with one long stroke of his tongue before pulling my shirt down.

I sat up, careful to keep my head forward and focused on the town that was not bare of clothing. "Will it be like this between us all the time? Me getting banged around and you coming to numb me up."

"Hopefully not," he said. "You'll get better at this, and come out of fights with fewer battle scars."

I laughed to myself because what he said was so not me. I never so much as busted a grape before tonight, let alone fought someone—or thing.

"Here," Lucas said. His arm hooked around to my face.

Blood dripped from a line in wrist. “Take it.”

“No-o-o. I’ll pass.” I patted my belly. “Still a little full from the last time. Gotta count those calories, you know?”

“You may be numb, but you’re far from healed. Everything on you is still bruised and cut. There isn’t enough of my blood inside of you to heal them by morning. Don’t be stubborn. Think of what your parents will say.”

It took a second to answer again. “No. I’m not in the mood for another out-of-body experience. Sorry.”

“Let’s not argue, shall we?”

Lucas’s hand gripped the back of my neck and forced my mouth to his wrist. I pushed back, but that was the equivalent of shoving a brick wall. The blood gushed onto my lips. I blew it away and grabbed his wrist to yank it down. Lucas groaned impatiently, his fingers tangling in my hair as he pushed his wrist firmly against my mouth.

My shoulders sagged. “You’re such an assh—”

Somewhere between ‘such’ and ‘asshole’ came the first taste, a tease on my tongue like a secret half told. Addictive, sweet, never to be shared. I chewed at my lip, contemplating, remembering—warring with myself about the side effects. But in answer to the dilemma, my tongue flicked against the cut for another taste, then another, until my lips created a suction on his wrist. It was total déjà vu of the mouth and my resistant pulls turned into hungry grabs for more. I came

to my knees, and when Lucas knew I wouldn't let go, he released my neck. I felt his hand trail down my back as all of his body heat hovered over me. My nails buried into his arm as I drew on his wrist, the blood bursting into my mouth.

I drank.

Lucas was no longer Lucas to me. He became a throb my heart synchronized with—a pulse with white blood cells, red blood cells, platelets, and plasma coursing down my throat and hammering through my veins, finding those places that needed him most. So insanely sweet. So bitter with consequence. So addictive.

“Mikayla,” he whispered over my ear.

“Mmm?”

“That's enough.”

He pulled his wrist away and my lips came together in a wet smack. I braced my hand against the cold slab, drunk with his taste. With the back of my hand, I wiped the blood from my mouth.

“Thank you,” I said more breathy than I would've liked.

“I should see you home. You have school in the morning.”

God, school seemed so stupid given my current career path. With wobbly legs, I stood up, not really sure how he would see me home considering he was naked. Should I walk along side of him, in front of him...?

With my back still turned, I heard the familiar popping

and stretching sounds followed by an animal-like huff.

You lead, he pushed.

I reached behind and grabbed a hand full of fur. *He shifted*. I turned around and he stood on all fours. Even then his muzzle was eye level with me. He didn't exactly look like a wolf, but he didn't exactly look like anything else either. His dark fur was straight/curly. Reminded me of the Blasian type of hair Chevy had, with the thickest part being around his neck. His paws were large with coal-black claws curving over them. But for everything that changed on him, one constant remained. Those eyes were the same shade of intense gray, only the moon gave them a kind of mirror shine that made me think of the stars on Lake Rose at night. Funny, I wasn't that afraid of him being this close.

He was sort of majestic.

I reached over to touch his muzzle and he backed away. "Really? You just got through licking my body. You picked a bad time to be stingy with personal space."

I reached again and he backed away near the path. "Fine then. Be that way."

Half way down the path carved out through the warren of trees, I saw the Gremlin. Lucas stayed near the edge of the yard, just shy of where the woods intruded on the grass, while I climbed through my window.

Good night, he pushed.

“You mean ‘good morning,’” I said to myself, knowing he wouldn’t be able to hear.

I faced the window and gave him the go ahead to leave, but he didn’t. Those eyes just glowed as he shrank back into the woods—waiting.

eighteen

BY WEDNESDAY WE HAD THREE DEAD CLASSMATES, TWO scheduled funerals, and one seriously dysfunctional town. The headline of Dad's newspaper read: STOP SENSELESS MURDERS. Reporters from two states over came with media hard-on's to interview us. Apparently, being home to the "Heartless Killer" made us big shit. We made t-shirts with dead boys' faces on them. We prayed to Jesus about it. Over analytical shoppers gave opinions in the grocery checkout lines as to the gender of the killer. *Because the killer had to be a man, men are stronger and domineering and*

tend to be loners. And only a loner could do something awful like this, which is why it can't be a woman. Women aren't loners because of their inherit nature to be nurturers. In addition: Don't you believe anything men can do women can do better? Is that a four for two sale on pomegranates? I hear they're a super food. Blah, blah, blah.

In the end, we were all just freaks.

We went through the motions at school, attending classes on subjects that would never be applied in real world applications, eating processed cafeteria food, and staring at each other wondering if it was okay to smile. Could we smile? Should we smile? We waited for the puppet master to pull the strings, but what would be the point when someone always burst into tears. It was all some sinister test in will power. Of which most of us failed.

I rolled through the hallways filled with depressed people. If happiness was gauged in hues, they'd lie somewhere in the 'bleh' region of the color gamut scale. They huddled in groups, sobbing, talking, remembering. Rumors of a vigil spread, and I knew this was pretty messed up of me, but if I saw another candle, I might've gone ape shit mental.

Folded papers and cards filled the slats of Chase's locker. Sticky notes of the rainbow assortment clung to the outside: "R.I.P C-Man" "Gone but never forgotten" "Toss me one from heaven, bro". One more note read, "Sorry I couldn't

find you” with a smudged O signed near the bottom. I ripped it off and took it with me.

I hadn’t seen Orchid or Chevy all day, which was extremely unusual given their clingy natures and the multitude of things we needed to discuss. Like if Orchid made it home safe. And if Chevy’s mom repossessed his system. I checked in the 420 alcove, in the library, and even the wastelands of our school’s media room. Nothing. When from behind me came a mocked cough.

I turned around and there she was, blue-haired wearing a polka dot shirt. “Orchid, you’re okay—I wanted to call last night, but it was so late—”

“Here,” she said simply, handing me a grocery bag. The red finger nail polish on her hands was chipped. Like drops of blood blooming on a white surface that hadn’t quite made it to the edges.

I took the bag, examining the orange Converse inside, dirty from the woods last night. “Oh. Thanks. Hey, you didn’t have to bring it back.”

“The sole is muddy,” she said, staring at my hands and legs. “I have to go.”

“But...”

“Bye.”

Orchid practically ran away from me, accidentally bumping into an über emo dude dressed in heavy Goth. He perched

a fake raven on his shoulder, and wept, “Nevermore,” as Orchid flew by.

Ochid looked shaken up—and not because of the emodude. I opened my hand to her note with the smudged O. *Sorry I couldn't find you.* What made her think she was Miss Captain Save-a-Bro? She probably cried while writing it. Probably couldn't get over what happened to Chase. Maybe that was her deal. Or maybe that wasn't it at all.



I slumped it through P.T., pretending that every bone in my body suffered irreparable damage with each step. It was all a ruse. I felt fine, probably stronger than I had in a long time. My legs could drop kick open a metal door ninja style, easy. But in good showmanship, I kept up the act. And fortunately for me, my therapist, Dana, an Amazon of the comic book heroine kind, wasn't putting up with any of my shenanigans and let me go early.

Principal Cooley's voice was devoid of life and a study in ear torture as he came over the intercom.

“All students please report to the courtyard for a special announcement. All students please report to the courtyard for a special announcement.”

The message ended with a crack and switch of the intercom. I wasn't in the mood for anymore grim and made the

conscious choice to take the long way round. I hoped that Principal Cooley would be done with that ‘special announcement’ by the time I made it back.

About halfway down the science hall, I dipped into an empty classroom full of beakers, pentagon shaped lab tables, sinks opened to faucets with drill formed heads, periodic tables, and graphs. I needed to chill. I’d had the mho-fho of past twenty-four hours and if there ever was a time to illicit the help of illegal substances to go null/void it would be now. Until then, there were Q-tips, of which I was down to all but one.

On the pristine white, dry-erase board was a sentence, ‘Are Fossil Fuels to Blame?’. Between sneezes, I read the scribbled text underneath: coal percentages, gas and petroleum percentages, renewable and non-renewable resources. After that were more percentages and percentages of those percentages. And I thought—(*sneeze*)—weren’t we all just percents of something; walking fossil fuels waiting to be pumped into gas guzzlers of the future and spewed out in a plume of smoke throughout the atmosphere?

Humans plus world preservation equaled fail.

A loud *thwrap*, like a book that had just fallen, echoed down the hallway. It didn’t take me long to register that I might be caught skipping if I didn’t move my ass. I eased behind a white partition that hid a disfigured skeleton manne-

quin. Dude had a rough year. He missed about four toes and a knee cap. Someone glued fangs to his lateral incisors and covered him in glitter. His arm was bullied from its socket. High school had not been kind to my friend.

I waited for the footsteps that never came, then eased and peered into the hallway. Empty. Cutting my chill break in half, I headed back to the front of the school, when I heard that weird sound again. Only this time it mixed with slurps and smacks. What the hell was that?

It grew louder as I neared the end of the hallway, and right away, I noticed Mr. Reamer's opened class door. It wasn't just opened, it was off the hinges. The square viewing window embedded inside the wood made the pile of glass on the floor. The light blared from the adjacent double doors onto the shards in a hundred different directions.

I looked inside and there was Bianca Proch, bent head first into a plastic container labeled: SPECIMENS. It was the first time I saw her today and she wore the same clothes from Monday. The greasy ropes of her hair whipped against her dirt stained cheeks as she faced me.

She looked at me beyond her sunglasses.

I looked at her in total disbelief of her lack of personal hygiene.

And oh my God, the cork screw tail of a pig fetus peeked beyond the seam of her lips.

My gaze drifted to her hands that held three piggies upside down. Juices dripped from their pink, hairless bodies. Her tongue pushed the rest of the tail inside her mouth and she swallowed in a loud gulp. I cupped my mouth and my stomach as the large bulge traveled down her neck. I felt the disgusted look form on my face. She smirked at it. The piggies slipped to the floor in a *thwrap* as she approached.

I eased backward. “Hungry much? What’re you, on some type of Yeti diet?”

She cocked her head in a curious way that I didn’t like. For starters, I didn’t like *her*. I didn’t know why, but it was there in the pit of my stomach, gnawing. It rustled like a burning breeze over my hands that stayed past its welcome. My dislike for her was further confirmed with her next words.

“Why aren’t you running, Hunter?”

Hunter? The word came down like acid rain searing the flesh from my bones. *She knows who I am?* At first, I tried to figure out if that was what she meant to say, and stupidly replied, “Wuh?”

She stood in front of me in a busted pose: left foot turned inward, while the right pointed straight, shoulders skewed like a crooked picture frame, and her hand twitched at her side. Old blood was the new color of the previously beige shirt. Dried mud crusted her shoes and up to her ankles, like she’d been wading in it. She looked like a broken Barbie doll

left in the sandbox after a long recess with eager toddlers.

Mud. Not many places around here were muddy, but I could think of one off the jump. And that thought had me reeling. What had Lucas said in Mom's closet? I ran his descriptions in my head and everything checked out.

She must've seen dawn break across my face, because she said, "I'm surprised you didn't realize sooner, Hunter."

Flesh eater.

"My bad," I said. "Guess my classmates turning into human pot pies must've distracted me."

Vibeless.

"They died in high spirits. Very tasty."

Haloles.

"You're a she-bitch of another kind, know that?"

Sensitive to light.

"I *am* the other kind," she said, and lowered to my face. My hands tingled with power that was useless to me. Her breath was a metallic scented huff over my skin. "And know this." She rolled her neck, adjusting. "I will have your soul, Hunter."

Sunglasses.

She looked like she was about to do something strange and I held up my hands. "Wait. Before you go all Death Reaper on me, I just have one question." I snatched the glasses off and tossed them down the hall. "Were those Ray-

bans?”

Light flooded her face and she screamed a piercing, banshee call. And in the moment it took for me to leave and for her to cover her eyes, I looked into them.

Her eyes were like the birth of stars, explosive, new, but long dead by the time they reached me. The pupils were big as black olives, pulsating open and close, open and close, like strobes lights rigged to rapid fire and seizure induce mode.

I didn't turn my back to her, and with one shove of my legs, coasted over her glasses, through the double doors, and into the safe light of the courtyard. The freight train formerly known as my heart bore a tunnel through my chest. I stared at the doors, waiting for them to burst open and her to come out with demon guns a'blazing. Yet they stayed closed, and I strained to hear her tortured scream over the noise around me.

I rolled back without looking.

“Whoa! Watch the J's, Mikayla.” Over my shoulder, Chevy was in my view pointing down to his shoes. Orchid was by his side. “Where've you been?”

I glanced back to the double doors. “Around.” When I returned to Chevy, the only thing I saw of Orchid was her back shrinking in the distance.

Chevy watched her and waved it off. “She's been tripping all day.”

Steadying my voice took effort. “Yeah, I know. I thought it was just me.”

“Naw. I think she’s still upset about last night.”

I nodded and looked to the doors again.

“And you might’ve mentioned you were riding with someone else,” he said.

My brows crashed into each other and my lips pressed into a line. I couldn’t help it, that was my fall back expression.

Chevy gave me a look. “Orchid said she saw you take off with someone.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I lied, and gnawed my bottom lip. What else did Orchid see? Where was Bianca? “My fault.”

Chevy pointed ahead. Through the masses, Principal Cooley stood accompanied by two Staties. “Can you believe that?” he asked. “It’s bullshit.”

“What?”

“For one, they’re setting a curfew. Seven o’clock. Two, we’re on the buddy system. And three...” He handed me the piece of paper that had been balled inside his fist. I flipped it to the backside and smoothed it free of wrinkles. “She’s been M.I.A from the MIA since Monday. But no one can figure out why she didn’t say anything. It was all over the news last night, dude. They thought she’d been murdered or kidnapped or something until Principal Cooley called the

Staties. But now they can't find her again."

The final bell cried out and people started to move. I flipped the paper over and stared at the black and white face. The only things different were her eyes.



Lucas tracked back and forth between Mom's work van and the cooler carrying flowers. Mom had been busy lately with all the condolences orders to fill. And when she drove down the street and out of sight, I sprang my news on Lucas.

"I think my lab partner's a demon," I said. "In fact, I'm ninety-nine point nine percent sure she's the O-demon."

Lucas made a face. It was a cross between pissed, and not so pissed, with a dab wary disbelief and a sprinkle of "Ah..." I think the expression he was going for was confusion. "What makes you say that?"

"One, she kind of told me. And two, she kind of threatened to kill me after."

He rubbed down his face and looked around, like he'd missed an important part of a puzzle and needed to find it. "This was day time, today?"

I nodded.

Oculi shouldn't be able to come out during the day, he pushed.

"She's been wearing sunglasses. But I broke them and I

think she's totally p.o.'ed about it," I said. Lucas just stared at me and the point came through clear. "I wasn't trying to listen. You kind of threw it out there."

"Sorry."

"You're good, but there's something else about my lab partner."

"She knew who you were," he stated.

"Yeah, that too. But that's not what I was going to say."

"Go on." I slid him the crumpled piece of paper with the picture on it. "Who is this?"

"*That's* the demon. Only it's not the demon. The eyes are different. See?" I pointed to the hazel irises and explained that the demon's were white and pulsating. "And this girl actually has parents that reported her missing since Monday."

Lucas brought the picture down to his side and slumped against the counter. "Possession," he muttered.

"Right." I remembered him saying something about that now. "That makes sense. So should we hire a priest, an exorcist or something?"

He avoided my question. "And you say that her parents are looking for her?"

"Since Monday." Something in his voice wasn't right. "What are you getting at, Lucas?"

"Priest and exorcist don't really help, they actually make things worse. Makes the demon angry. We can kill this demon

alone,” he said, and I caught the tail end of his thought:... *she'd never understand*. “But I don't...” He paused and the expression on his face made me anxious.

“Finish ‘We can kill this demon, but I don't’ what? What won't I understand?”

Lucas turned to me and issued a look that sent warning signals down to my hands. “I don't think we can kill the demon without killing her.”

“Say what?”

“They're called casualties,” Lucas said, stepping closer.

“They're called murder victims. As in, if we try to kill this demon, we'd be murdering her.”

“You can't think of it that way.”

“Lucas, are you kidding me right now? She's a person.”

“One that's been dealt a bad hand.”

“No. A bad hand is being down to your undies in strip poker when one flop of the river card can be your doom. This, Lucas, is not a bad hand. It's a sack of shit that's been set on fire and placed on her doorsteps. Excuse me while I take a moment to let the smell of burning fecal matter waft over me.”

I leaned back in my chair and palmed my face. Every day since Lucas showed up, I felt I took one-step toward claiming this new life, only to take two steps back when he laid the heavy on me like this.

“I’m not a killer, Lucas,” I said through my hands. “At least not of humans. Cockroaches, maybe. Spiders, maybe. People, never. And that’s what Bianca Proch is, a person. Well, part of her.”

“And that part will suffer. The longer the demon stays inside the less human she’ll become. The demon will starve her out, and she’ll die.”

“Tell me why you think she’ll die if we do this. I have to know?”

“Because you have to convince the demon inside that it no longer wants its host. You have to persuade it to leave by pure will of your powers. And you’re just—”

“—not ready,” I finished. “Yeah, tell me something I don’t know.” I smoothed my hair back. “How can you be so okay with this?”

He stuffed his hands inside of his pockets, like what I just asked him would fit there. “What you want to know is how I can think so little of a human?”

“Well, yeah. I’m starting to get that vibe.”

His eyes shifted to the right. “It’s not that I think less of them. How can I when I’m fighting to protect them? I know what demons are capable of, Mikayla. And to kill them makes me content. If that make me a monster in your eyes, so be it. But soon you’ll have to choose if you want to be that monster too.”

nineteen

THE WATER WAS BITTER COLD AGAINST MY SKIN by the time I stepped from the shower. I dried off, stealing a glance at my marshmallow pale body in the mirror.

“Damn you’re pasty,” I mumbled.

I turned around and awkwardly looked at my lower back. The place a nice scar should be was clear. I rubbed over the spot and caught a flexed muscle in my arm.

“Hel-lo.”

I struck a muscle pose and flexed my biceps and did the same with my legs. There was some pretty softball worthy

muscle definition going on here. And since I hadn't been hitting weights, I kind of figured Lucas's blood was to thank.

After I dressed, I tiptoed across the hall. Mom and Dad were in the living room, debating whether or not they should go to 1970s weekend Friday. I couldn't believe they were still having it in spite of all the killings. In retrospect, having a town nurse themselves on alcoholic downers just didn't seem like it would help much.

I closed my bedroom door behind me, when I turned around Lucas stood next to my window.

"Crap!" I whisper-yelled. "I told you I didn't like when you did that."

He crossed his arms. "Better me than someone else. You really should start locking this window."

I glared at him. "You really shouldn't climb through it unannounced."

"You're upset with me," he said, spreading a familiar grin. It took all my resolve to keep from staring at him. There was something transformative in the way his lips curled over his teeth like that. Something rare that shouldn't be forgotten. "I'll wait for you outside," he said.

I went to my closet and grabbed a pair of shoes. "Yeah, yeah. Let's just do this."



There were a few things I could admit to sucking at. (1) Kill-

ing two pigs with one bird, (2) Styling my hair, (3) Dancing, and more recently, (4) Roundhouse kicks.

“I fail at this,” I said to Lucas, after picking myself up from the slab. For the last two hours, he put me through the roughest crash course in hand-to-hand combat second only to torture. Training with him was beyond tough, couple that with the fact he didn’t get tired, and I was in for a long night.

I wiped my brow of sweat and looked over to Sulphur Springs. Where would the she-bitch be now? I wondered if she was feeding.

“Don’t whine,” Lucas said. “Stop pointing your toes and land the kick with your heel.”

“That *was* me trying to land the kick with my heel,” I explained.

He offered no sympathy. “You’re holding back. Don’t,” he said, while raising his left hand out in front as my target. “Again.”

It was the pain in my joints that made me think twice about it. I still felt Lucas flowing through me, but maybe it wasn’t enough. My body twitched and throbbed like some machine warming up to come alive—rebooting. I reared back, planted my back leg firmly, and thrust forward with the other.

Lucas’s hand didn’t move, as though my kick failed to connect, when I knew it had.

“Again,” he said.

I repeated the move, using every accessory muscle I had to get the job done. Nothing.

“Ugh.” I balled my fist at my sides.

Lucas circled my left. “Again.”

I bit my lip and glared at him, repeating the same kick with piss poor results.

“You’re not trying hard enough.”

“Dude, I’m so trying right now.”

He snorted, still circling me. “If that’s what you call trying, I hate to see you against the *Oculi*. She won’t be as kind as your straggler from the lake or those in the alley last night.”

Ouch. Low blow.

I picked my jaw up from the stone slab and responded, “I handled myself all right in the alley last night.”

“Pure luck. Lower tier stragglers like those are not competition. And I hardly call that handling yourself. I patched you up, remember?” He licked his lips and laughed condescendingly. “How’s that healing working out for you?”

I whipped my head around to look at him. Something changed in his face that wasn’t there a second ago. “What’s you deal?”

“You,” he said. “You think because you can’t remember anything makes you exempt from this life.”

I shook my head, confused at the accusation. “I never

said that.”

“This sorry excuse for a training session speaks loud enough.”

Every part of me ached. My body felt as if it came off an assembly line of angry Swedish masseurs. And tonight, I moved my arms and legs in ways they’d never been moved before, trying to prepare myself, trying to please him. Why did I even care to please him? “Come off yourself,” I said, walking toward the path. “Blow this cheese. I’m outtie.”

I was a foot shy of entering the woods when I heard him yell. His voice was just as dark as the dense trees in front of me.

“Go ahead and leave. That’s what your real parents did to you so I guess you inherited that trait.”

My head twitched to the side before I could stop it. Maybe I didn’t hear him right. “What’d you say?”

He stepped closer, no longer having to yell the words. “It takes a cold-hearted person to abandon their child, even colder when they don’t try to find her.” He threw his voice at me and it was a hard jab against my back. “What that must feel like.”

My body started to tingle, the sensations traveling down my arms. “I think you need to quit.”

“Forgetful,” he taunted.

Heat rose in my legs, my back, and face. Everywhere until

I reached a boiling point. “Stop.”

“Orphan.”

I turned and faced him, the moon glowing off his eyes. “Asshole!”

“Stray. I think I like that word better. *Stray*. Like a runt whose been cast out of the litter.”

My hands felt full and I spread my fingers for relief. “Why don’t you just shut that slit in your face!”

“You’ve got me scared now, Mikayla. Come on,” he challenged. “What do you want to do?”

Something pulsed through me, something I couldn’t grasp filled me up, pooled deep in my muscles, and clenched my stomach. It was Lucas’s blood. It was my pain, loss, and fear all roiled together igniting my senses rapid fire. I fought with it before finally letting it take over. It was enough to make me cry. But crying would mean shedding tears of helplessness. And I wasn’t helpless, but in complete control and ready to kick some ass.

The consequences didn’t weigh on me until I lunged for Lucas with some type of preternatural speed and strength to lay down the hammer that was my fist onto his face.

The punch landed across his mouth awkwardly, but landed nonetheless, and his face jerked sideways in response. It was such a release. He turned around and there was a little trickle of blood in the corner of his lips that he lapped up

with his tongue. His cocky smile set me on edge, and I was about ready to give him another when his hands grabbed my wrist mid-jab and he stared at the blue sparks circling over my knuckles. I countered with my left and he grabbed that one too.

“Mm. That’s what I’m talking about,” he said huskily. He pulled me forward and brought my hands to his face just enough for the sparks to jump over his skin. He closed his eyes while he made my fingertips touch his temples. “Never forget how this feels. I can feel it in you,” he said, then inhaled and swallowed. “I can smell it. Be mad; be angry enough to kill, Mikayla.” He wiped a flyaway hair from my face and stared into my eyes. His fingers burned my skin, and I hated myself for wanting more. “It suits you.”

twenty

I DIDN'T FEEL THE SAME AFTER LAST NIGHT. Not about myself or the killings or Lucas. But especially not about Lucas. What he said about my bio's was cruel. Total as-shattery at best. But it was this cruelty that awakened powers inside me that probably wouldn't have joined the party otherwise. What did it say about me that everything he did and said last night made me buzz?

I caught myself replaying every conversation we had just to think about his movements, his stare, what he did with his hands. I searched his concerned face in my thoughts, the

way his eyes scanned the crowd around us in Seattle. Protective. The way he stared at me in My's parlor. I thought of how he looked at Sable, frustrated and annoyed. So helpless to his future with her. I tried to understand how a complete stranger could ever care so much about me. And then I realized it probably wasn't care at all. It was duty.

Duty. A word synonymous with Lucas and everything he did. *You have to remember I'm for you,* he'd said right before he healed my head. Duty. Yeah, I'd have to remember that, have to keep that in mind when I refused to bond with him or fantasize about the feel of his skin against my fingertips.

Welcome to reality, Mikayla, get your shit together.



Restless, I sat on the porch looking out into the woods and sky. The clouds swirled in drunken brush strokes, their underbellies burnt orange with the setting sun. I ditched work to come home. Mainly because I was burned out on people. I needed a break or the company of a like minded person. Which was exactly what I got when Uncle Joe pulled up.

“Hey kid,” he shouted from his window.

I waved, taking in his vibes. “Who died?”

He stepped out of his truck—a busted '69 Ford pick-up overdue for retirement in a junkyard—and grabbed his cooler from the bed. “What? I can't come by and see my favorite

niece?"

"I'm your only niece, Uncle Joe."

"Is that right?" he asked with a smile. He sat next to me and grabbed a beer from the cooler. "Have one?"

I rolled my eyes. "You know I don't drink."

"Um-hm, just checking."

His vibes coiled around his arms, legs and chest. They snapped out, but, like last time, shrank back. "You staying over for '70s weekend?"

"Thought about it. But this place stinks from chewer to cooter in death."

"Tell me about it."

"Yep," he said, and pulled the tab back on his beer. It opened in an aroma of hops. "Tires run on air, but even they go flat. I s'pose these killings won't go on forever either." He looked over to me. "You holding up okay? Those kids were your classmates."

"Yeah, I'm fine. Never better," I added, though I was slowly unraveling on the inside.

He wagged his finger at me. "I know that face."

"You off your meds, Unc?"

He smiled. "Haven't been on medications since the '70s and they weren't the prescribed kind. But I know that face like the back of my hand. Just thought I'd never see it on you."

“Do I even wanna know what you’re talking about, old man?”

He stroked his chin, then scratch at the stubble. “Stella used to have that same look when I forgot to let the seat down in the bathroom, or when I lost track of our anniversary. Like I worked her nerves over somethin’ awful ‘til she couldn’t figure out what to do with me.” He took a long swig of his beer and pursed his lips after. “What’s his name?”

“Who?”

“Or...her name. You know I’ll love you either way.”

“Uncle Joe, as much as I appreciate your openness about my sexual orientation. I don’t bat for the home team.”

“All right, all right.” He propped his feet on the banister and grinned. This was how Uncle Joe worked on people; with a beer and a grin.

“So what’s been ailing you, kid?”

I thought about that for a long moment. How nice it would be to actually tell him what was going on with me. So I did. “I have this friend...”

“A friend?” he said, like he wasn’t buying it.

“Yeah. A friend.”

“Um-hm. And what’s this friend’s name?”

“The name’s not relevant, Uncle Joe. She’s a friend.”

“Got it. Friend.”

“Okay. So I have this friend and she’s dealing with some

things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Just...things.”

“Nine month things?”

“No. Never. She would never be so irresponsible. Plus, she’s not seeing anyone at the moment.”

“Smart girl.”

“Brilliant,” I said. “But stuff keeps popping up at her. And she doesn’t know what to do about it. She doesn’t want to let anyone down—you know, because that’s not her style. But she doesn’t want to lose herself either. And there’s all this pressure...so much pressure weighing down on her that no one knows about.” *Killing a human to kill a demon*. “She just wishes she didn’t have to choose between everything she’s ever known and her dest”—*fake cough*—“I mean, this new thing. She just wants someone to understand.”

“Sounds like your friend’s in a world of hurt right now,” Uncle Joe said.

“She is. Nothing makes sense anymore.”

“Girl’s lost.”

“Can’t find her way back with a GPS.”

“Well, that dog sure is hell ain’t gon’ hunt.” He sighed, then raised his beer to his lips, then stopped midway like he was struck with a thought. “Tell your friend it gets better. Some days seemed to drag on forever, but all the good days

after that are tenfold. Tell her to rough it out and go with her gut. She sounds like a pretty smart, mature girl that'll make the right choice." He paused, then clapped my back. "Better let her know she's got an uncle that doesn't mind listening to her, too."

I smiled. "I'll be sure to tell her that, Uncle Joe."



Lucas called for me in his thoughts and I ignored him.

Not out of spite, but because tonight, I belonged to my family. Uncle Joe and I played spades against Mom and Dad and we owned the night. Our trumps made their hearts bleed on the table. They didn't stand a chance.

We laughed.

We joked.

We blotted out the twistedness outside.

It was the first time, in a long time, that I felt whole. No thoughts of the O-demon. No uncontrollable powers. No inhibitions. I was just human. And that was more than enough.

twenty one

MOTHER NATURE SUFFERED FROM SOME PMS issues. She seemed confused about whether to scorch us with heat or cool us with rain. Her indecisive moodiness tonight left us in a cranky state of drizzle.

“No deaths today or yesterday,” I said between deep breaths. “What do you think that means?”

Lucas stared off into the distance. We’d been training since my parents left a few hours ago for the VFW and Lucas didn’t seem into it.

“Hey,” I said, trying for his attention.

He shook his head, as if erasing a thought. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

I wiped rainy mist from my cheeks. "What do you think it means that no one has died in the past two days?"

He stroked his chin. "Could mean anything. Could mean it has returned to the Nether Legion. Or doesn't have to feed as often because it is stronger."

"We should be so lucky," I said.

Lucas stared at me in a funny way. Actually, he'd been giving me that stare since work this afternoon. Like he was trying to communicate something to me with his eyes. The look didn't go over well with Mom who caught him, and no less than three times that shift, asked if I was comfortable working with him.

"You okay, Lucas?"

He rubbed down his arm, standing directly in front of me but seeming so many miles away. And I tried to think just how far that was.

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Your brother. What's his name?"

I hoped I wasn't crossing a line and making a total ass out of myself for assuming. But I wanted to know what was bothering him and what else could it be other than his missing brother.

“Eli.”

I nodded slowly. “Oh,” I said, not knowing how to transition to my next question. “What happened to him?”

“His charged turned.” He looked at me knowing that I didn’t understand. “She traded teams so to speak.”

Traded teams? “She doesn’t fight against the demons?”

“For them. It happens sometimes, but it’s very rare.” He continued. “When you kill enough demons their essence takes a toll on you. You have to be sure of yourself not to accept it.”

“Is that what his charge did?”

He nodded.

“How did that affect your brother, though?”

“They were bonded. And when she slipped into darkness so did he. He’s in mode-lock now, unable to change back because there’s no human left to change back to.”

That was heavy. “I’m sorry, Lucas.”

“Don’t be,” he said, and suddenly we were back to business. “You’re getting better with hand-to-hand. I don’t know if it’s enough to save you in a fight, so let’s concentrate on your Speak now.”

I shook my head, amazed at how quickly he buried his feelings and went over to him. I envied that about him, knowing I wouldn’t have the ability to separate myself in that way.

“Remember that demons can feel your power. Use only enough to go undetected. When the time is right, you’ll know when to use more.” He stood near the rim of the woods and pointed. “Try to project against this tree.”

I shrugged. “You lost me. Sooo...what is there, like, a magic word or something? An Avrah KaDabra type deal?”

“Just feel yourself out. Think of something that moves you.”

“Emo?” I asked. “I can do emo.” I threw my hands out in front, then let them fall. “I can’t do emo.”

“You have to summon your Speak from within. Think of how light edges away darkness,” he said. “That’s how your Speak works against demons. Only it doesn’t just drive them away, it turns them to cinder.”

I held up my hands. “These things burn?”

“You just have to get it to that point. Remember the feeling you had the other night?”

“Yes.”

“When you’re upset your power seems to work for you. I think they’re connected with your anger.”

“That a bad thing?”

He arched a brow. “Yes. But a good thing too. Means there will be passion behind your kills.”

I held my hands out in front again, trying to summon some anger, which was considerably insane given I wasn’t

upset.

“But not like that,” he said and came over to take position behind me. Heat spilled from him and drenched my body in warmth. He was too close. The hard contours of his chest and stomach pressed against my backside, as the feel of him slid down the length of my arms to my hands. His fingers weeded between mine and turned them palm up. They ached and I fought the urge to curl my fingers around his. Against my legs, the stiffness of his jeans scratched my calves. I stilled from his touch, terrified of the way my body reacted to him. He lowered to my ear and spoke cotton soft. “Relax Mikayla.”

The hushed sound of my name ignited my senses into a frenzy. Pure sound-sex to my ears. It made me uncomfortable. I tried to relax, which was just enough for him to wedge his leg deeper between mine and spread them apart. My stomach clenched when his hands pressed into my waist, his fingers gentle but warm through the fabric of my tee. He manipulated my body closer to his and controlled the way I should pose. The intimate touch went against all the carefully designated contact I remembered.

“Wide stance gives you more balance, Mikayla. It’s your first time and it should throw you if you do it right,” he explained. His large fingers pressed firmly into my sides. I felt small and pliable. “Find your center and try to hold your

ground.”

“Right,” I answered, which came out a breathy mess.

The moonlight casted our shadows onto the slab. He towered over me, a threatening silhouette made softer around the edges in the pale glow. His body was against my body. His skin was against my skin. My hands told me this was trouble waiting for permission.

I concentrated on the tree I was supposed to hit, when a funny thing happened.

Lucas didn't move.

The tie was pulled from my ponytail and my hair fell around my face. In my peripheral, his shadowy hand slid through my hair, his nails dragging against my scalp.

I stepped away from him. His stare drifted over me eager, hungry. “What was that!” I hissed.

He didn't speak, just continued to look at me as if he had new eyes.

I shook my head, at the same time wanting to grab between my thighs to stop the throbbing. “I can't do this. With you, I mean.”

He lessened the space between us. My body thrummed like deep chords struck on a piano. *Why this, why now?*

His voice was low. “What is it that we're doing?”

“I don't know,” I rushed out. My hands were sick for his touch. And the way his eyes drank me in started a riot low in

my belly. Shit. “I don’t know. You just—you know?—with my hair. I’m pretty sure we’re doing something...right?”

His arm reached out too fast for me to consider moving. His tongue passed over his lips and he moved my hair from my face. I couldn’t concentrate when his fingers grazed my cheek like that. “Refuse me and I’ll go.”

Something knotted in my chest at the suggestion. “You *want* me to refuse you?” Is that why he did this, to push me away?

“In some ways I think it would be better if you did,” he said, with a strain in his voice. “You really don’t remember anything from your past?”

My eyes widen. I didn’t think I could take being upset as I was the other night. “Don’t do this, okay? Don’t try to push me this way. Leave my memory and parents out of it.”

He grabbed my hands against my resistant pull backward and placed them on his face. “Can you honestly not feel this between us? It doesn’t remind you of something?”

Only the scary attraction I felt for him. “The bond I’m supposed to create with you. Nothing else.”

I couldn’t decipher the look in his eyes. His body drowned out the background till there was nothing left but him as landscape. My hands jerked and sparked against his face, sending rogue impulses through my body that I couldn’t ignore. Lucas didn’t move and stared at me as if I’d violated

him, or in the way a thirsty person desired water.

Every part of me told me to stop. This wasn't okay. To be this close to Lucas, to feel so terrified yet immensely content had to be wrong. Very, very wrong. God, he was practically engaged!

But the feel of him was so...*right*. His heat, the pulse in his temples bounding against my fingers, and the way his body quaked and stiffened set me on edge. To touch him syndicated ecstasy all over my body.

"I don't feel anything. And I'm not keeping you here, Lucas." I swallowed hard against the thrill filling my throat. *Don't leave*, I thought. "You can leave whenever you like. To do whatever and whomever it is you want to do." My traitor hand sent a contradictory jolt through me.

Lucas stared dead into my eyes. The sensitive look was sexy. "You're a terrible liar."

"I'm not lying," I lied.

"Then why are you still touching me. Tell me the truth. Do you want me to leave?" His breath blew over my face, while his head rubbed against my palm as if enjoying the feel. "Is that what you want?" he asked softly, his earthy scent washing over me.

I strained my neck to look into his gray eyes. My hands got all types of messages then: explore, touch, feel. My mouth wanted to taste his mouth. I started to feel that my urge to

touch him went beyond creating our bond. It felt ancient. “It would suck. But I think that’s what you need.”

He dipped his head closer to mine. His eyes had changed, and flickered a weird combination of silvery-blue like an animal caught in the moonlight. He seemed bigger—wider. Almost swelling with something ready to burst out. “How could you possibly know what I need?”

“I-I don’t.” The distance between us hurt. “So why don’t you tell me. Save me some time thinking about it.”

I stilled. Butterflies didn’t have anything on the action going on in my stomach right now, as his cheeks rubbed against the side of my face when he lowered to my ear. “I want all of you,” he whispered, his teeth grazing my lobe.

He fingers gripped the small of my back and he mashed me, roughly, against his front. He was hard, and I became aware of my softness. His body trembled against mine, causing vibrations to seep behind my naval and descend into my shorts. Lucas had me riled up and ready to make some bad decisions.

His face loomed over mine and I sucked in air, not realizing I’d been holding my breath. *Closer*, I thought. “Move back,” I said.

He shook his head softly and the inches disappeared, until there was nothing but air and opportunity between us.

You want this, my body said. *You want this desperately*. My

eyelids fell half mast and my lips pulsed with anticipation. I could feel the heat of his mouth over mine. So insanely near. So close the swirl of his breath on my tongue was thick and sweet.

“Mikayla,” he murmured, his finger knotting into the back of my hair, forcing my chin upward to his face. “Won’t you kiss me?”

“No.”

His fingers dragged lightly down the back of my neck, then curled around in a firm hold. “Say yes.”

Yes, yes, yes! “No,” I said, almost drunk with the scent of him. “I won’t.”

He groaned at my answer, then pressed his mouth to mine. I froze and his grip around my neck tightened, as if urging the response I wanted to give him so badly. *Open your mouth*, he pushed, his voice a soft command in my head.

I pressed my lips into a hard line and moved, opposing his mouth against mine. When every cell in my body screamed to let him in—screamed to swap heat with him.

Don’t fight against me, Mikayla. You won’t win. His thought penetrated me, creating questions that seemed secondary to everything else: Was this another attempt to ignite my Speak? Could he feel what this was doing to me? Is this really what I wanted? His woody scent settled in my throat. I looked into his eyes, almost hit with the feeling of surrender.

Yes. I want this.

I stopped protesting his lips and opened wider, welcoming his tongue, inhaling his frenzied huffs and tasting all of him. Every inch of my body tingled from his wildness, his scent, his warm mouth and soft lips.

Heat rolled over my skin, drifting between my throbbing thighs, as I swapped reluctance with eagerness. My fingers anchored into his hair, pulling him closer, although he felt immovable in my small grasp. His hands found my waist and I arched my back against the rough insistence of his fingers.

Lucas moved hungrily.

His mouth swirled against mine, sucking, drawing, devouring my breaths, leaving me gasping for air. We rocked and swayed, finding our rhythm, moving our bodies in a song against each others. I moaned and took his bottom lip between my teeth and bit.

Lucas growled.

His body shuttered against me and he took one last hard kiss from my lips before he planted a soft peck. As his mouth pulled away from mine, he looked at me from under his lashes, those eyes still moonlit and trained on me in the sexiest of ways.

Ever, he pushed.

Her name was a bucket of ice down my back. I peeled away from him when every part of me wanted to sink back

into his gravity. My body shook in a spooked-out, deprived way. “Wh-what? Did you just...”

I couldn’t get my sentence out. His eyes went wide. He made a mistake that I wasn’t supposed to hear.

“Mikay—”

“No. How could you think...least of all right now.”

He stepped toward me. “It’s not what you think.”

“What do you mean! You planted the thought in my head.” I shook my head, so confused my right eye started to twitch. My mind fired off like an algorithm scrambling all my thoughts and spewed them out randomly. “She’s the real reason you haven’t claimed Sable. Your scars...because you’re waiting for her?”

“Yes,” he said, finally. “In more ways than one, I wait for her every day.”

“Good for you, man. Great. I hope you have the patience of a monk for this girl, because I don’t think she gives a flip about you if she hasn’t come back by now. Just...don’t involve me in the cesspool that is your love life to hold you over until then. Try Sable next time. She’ll be more than happy to oblige.” I walked passed him, grabbed my left arm against the sting wrapping around it. “And will you please get out of my body!”

“I don’t have to wait anymore,” he said. “I don’t have to wait because she’s already here,” he shouted to my back.

I flipped him the bird and tried to blot out his voice, tried to bury myself so deep into the woods that the blackness would close over me and suffocate all sound.

“Mikayla,” he yelled, a sound not far from agony. “You’re Ever.”



I turned to him, still clutching my arm.

“You’re kidding, right? That’s your excuse?”

Lucas shook his head. “It’s no excuse. All truth,” he said. “I don’t expect you to believe me right away. But I need to tell you—”

I gave him the hand. “Tell me what? That you’ve completely lost it. Are you on something? Have you been doing Rapture?”

He rocked on his heels. “Listen,” he said. “Just listen. I know this sounds impossible.” He stepped slowly toward me, holding out his hands as if I would disappear. “But it isn’t. I’ve wanted to tell you this since you called me—since the night you first heard my thoughts. It would have been so easy to say all the impossible things to you that way.” His voice shook. “I thought if I could get you to bond with me, you’d see everything and know that I wasn’t lying. But I think now it would be a mistake.”

I created the distance I needed not to be within his reach.

I didn't know how he thought I would react, but there was a stunned look on his face. "Your instincts were right," I said.

He sighed loudly and the words streamed from his mouth, wanting to convince me that they were true. "Your real name is Ever Sophia Harper. We grew up in Canada together before you disappeared. Your parents names were Iain and Lilith. Our parents grew closer after you and I were born to each other. They raised us together—a mistake—but we became friends..."

I stepped back even farther, as if dodging the words. How could he lie like this, tell me names of people I didn't remember? "Lucas, stop—"

"I have to say it. I won't have the nerve otherwise—the strength to tell you about the nights we'd sneak out and stare at the stars together. How I taught you to ice skate. You fell in love with it and thought you'd be the next Jacinthe Larivière." He spread a tormented smile and shook his head softly. "You don't realize how hard it is to look and not see that girl I used to know, yet someone so much more amazing than I ever thought she could be. The sight of you unravels me and I wait for the moment your eyes will remember my face."

I balled my hand, digging my nails into my palm. I needed to feel something, needed to make sure this was real. "But I don't," I said. "I don't remember."

My chest felt pressured in, and I grabbed at my shirt loosening it around me. I started to sweat. Lucas was spinning his version of my past. How could I believe any of it? What did I have to reference? Nothing. Nothing but the hard fact that everything from my past to me was blackness. No images, feeling, or faces.

But...but there was ice skating. And that wasn't shocking at all. That was something I could grapple with. It just wasn't enough, though.

"I know you don't," Lucas said. "Which makes being around you so difficult. I often wished that you would refuse me so I could go. But I'm in so deep with you, deeper than you are with me, that I don't think I could bring myself to stay away."

Too much, too much, too much.

As Lucas went on, it was harder to listen. My pulse thumped in my throat like hard rain. I felt woozy from the information overload.

"You think I scar because I haven't claimed Sable and you're wrong. I'm scarring because three months ago I found my prime dying near a lake. Ever," he said, and I couldn't find the breath to respond to the name. "You're the one I haven't been able to claim."

His admission was too much—this whole thing was too much. The knot in my chest gripped tighter, and I panicked

because I couldn't get enough air. I couldn't breathe and the air turned thick with the coming rain.

Lucas continued talking but the words weren't clear. He came for me, yelling something, "Don't," I think it was. I reached for my chest, and my hand passed right through. I knew what was coming.

Just before Lucas could reach me, I tilted my head to the sky. A thick drop of rain splashed against my forehead.

God those stars looked lonely tonight.

twenty two

IT WAS DARK.

I rolled over onto my side, pushing against the leaves beneath me. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust, and when they did, I braced against the tree in front of me. Salty tears slid down my cheeks, mixing with the rainwater sifting through the trees. I wiped them away not knowing when they got there.

Ahead was Lake Rose. The stars reflected against the surface, lonesome and distorted as the rain prickled down. I let go of the tree, sturdy and breathing well enough to not need

the assistance. Behind me, tires treaded the highway, heading in the direction of the VFW. The place my parents and Uncle Joe were. The place I needed to avoid at all cost right now.

On the way up the path, I tried to think of how I could get home. I could bum a ride beyond Hell's Curve, from there I could pretty much walk the rest of the way. But did I *really* want to go home though? Lucas would be there, or close by, no doubt. I couldn't handle seeing him. His words colored my thoughts. How did he ever expect me to believe that? It was just so wrong and...selfish. Never once did I mention to him about my parents, or the need to know about my past. My past was just that to me—something to remain forgotten. At least until *I* decided different. But for his own reasons, Lucas peeled off the scab.

Lightning flashed.

I sucked in a breath, feeling shitty all of a sudden. Which, I guessed, was what I should've felt like. Although Lucas told me all those things—things I wasn't sure I could believe yet—he did so in the most sincere way. Everything in his eyes told me it came from his heart. The scars, the bonding, his confession of not be able claim left me feeling some type of way.

A way that morphed into fear when she stepped from the woods and blocked the path.

I froze.

She pressed a squirrel to her mouth like it was a piece barbecue. When she pulled it away her lips were sloppy red with blood. I stood perfectly still, unnoticed by her until I reacted to the flash of gray next to me.

Her eyes connected with mine, white and pulsating. She spread a wicked grin. "I have been looking for you," she said calmly.

She tossed the squirrel aside, looking like she died and no one told her yet.

"I just had a really bad night," I said. "Can we do this some other time?"

She smiled then lunged for me. I ran like hell.



She was fast.

I couldn't get through the trees quick enough and one of her wraiths ran alongside me. For it to have no eyes, it was incredibly keen. The underbrush whipped against my legs and it stung. This pain was, of course, secondary to the fact demons were nipping at my Converse.

Straight ahead was a clearing. I remembered it being there from an old cabin that burned down. If I could just make it into the opening, I would have a chance.

Or so was my thought process before the wraith swept my legs from under me.

It dug into my calves with its nails, pulling me like a rope closer to it. I turned over, and threw a wild punch to its mouth. It connected, but my knuckles nicked on its teeth and burst with blood. It yowled in pain. I reared back to kick it when her strong hand caught me by the ankle.

“My turn, Hunter,” she said, and gripped my leg firmly with both of her hands, swinging me around hammer throw style into a neighboring Maple. Something cracked in my side and I exhausted my lungs, hoping the pain would go away with my scream.

She was hulk strong. And the inevitableness of just how screwed I was settled in.

She and the wraith closed in on me. In the sheet of rain, I saw two more wraiths lurking near the clearing I tried to reach. Something caught my attention, coming hard from my left side, swooping over and clawing the wraith’s face in front of me. *The bird with the feather.* It distracted the O-demon long enough for me to stand and shrink backward.

“Mikayla!” Lucas’s voice floated somewhere in the dark. How did he find me? *Where are you?* he pushed.

“Here! I’m—”

She stuffed her hand in my mouth, dragging my opened jaw to the ground. My body followed. I couldn’t hear the bird anymore, or Lucas. My hands started to swell, whatever strength in me pooled into my fingers.

Use your Speak. Use it now! His voice was frantic in my head.

The O-demon clawed at my chest, digging, my skin leaving with each swipe of her fingernails. She was going for my heart.

“I will have your soul,” she said.

I slapped her hands away. “Get—off—me!”

Something wet snapped, followed by an inhumanly agonizing scream.

Kill her, Mikayla, Lucas thought.

I don't know how, I wanted to scream. She was too strong, every bit of her weighed down on my like lead. She stopped clawing at me and stared into my eyes, her pupils opening and closing rapid fire. Her gaze held me like a conversation. Her mouth began to open an inhuman degree, exposing crammed, razor-sharp teeth. It was wide enough to take down a cow and dripped with caustic looking slime.

I struggled to own the power inside of me and bring it to the surface. It swelled in my arms and fingers, pulsed. But never broke through. There was a way, though. What had Lucas said, *Never forget how this feels.* I didn't want to go back to that dark place, void of memories. Yet I had too. Had to think about what Lucas said about my parents, about the days as Girl Doe, of all the inconsistencies that unraveled with his confession tonight. It was my hurt. It was my loss.

It was working.

My hands glowed and I wrapped them around the only available real estate she left exposed—her neck. At the touch, she howled and seized backward.

I straddled her, my hair sticking to my face from the rain. “You want your demise debit or credit?” I asked.

Her eyes began to bulge. Her pulse hammered under my hands and her skin charred from my grip, as if she’d disintegrate to ash at any moment. There was a big “Huh...?” expression on her face, like she couldn’t believe it was almost over. And just like that, it all changed.

Something burned my insides, insidious and startling. Images pyroed into my mind. Crushed skulls. Dismembered limbs. Blood oozing from lifeless corpses. Mercy screams and ripped hearts still beating gushes of blood inside of hands. Her hands. These were her thoughts. She was inside of my head.

Get out. Get out. “Get out!”

Wraiths and demons. So many horrid, monstrous faces with piercing eyes. They seemed to look at me, their stares inviting as if to say, “Welcome.”

I pushed the thoughts away, deeper until they blurred around the edges and smudged. My Speak shot through my body in a jolt that I fed her going for the glory. All of it charring at her skin until she started to twitch and jerk.

Something started to rise from her.

A blackness I'd seen before, but in the shape of a woman. It hovered over me in pixelated ash. She pointed to me, shook her head, then dove into the ground.

I looked down on the girl beneath my hands, those pulsating eyes no longer white but hazel. The lids slowly closed over them.

"I killed it," I whispered to myself, and I fell back exhausted, holding my side.

Lucas polished off the last of the wraiths and came to me covered in black goop. He didn't speak, just carried me away from the body. I didn't have it in me to protest. Truthfully, I was glad he found me. The only thing I could attribute to that was his blood flowing through my veins.

I sucked in a deep breath through my raw throat. My thoughts kept flashing back to Bianca's eyes closing, to the O-demon descending into the ground—probably going back to whatever hell it came from. And as if the true weight of my victory dawned on me, so did the reality.

"Oh, no," I croaked. "I killed it."

twenty three

“IS SHE DEAD?” I PANTED.

Lucas stood over her, I could tell he was listening. It seemed like it took him an eternity to answer. “She’s alive.”

“Thank Baby Jesus,” I said and let my head fall back to the ground in complete exhaustion. “Point Team Me.”

“But she shouldn’t be. Mikayla,” he said. “If she’s still alive, that means the demon isn’t dead.”

Oh, fuck this. “What!”

“The *Oculi* is alive.”

“I heard that part.” I lurched from the ground and stood,

cradling my ribs. “What do we do now?”

“It’s most likely to find another host. When it surfaces, we need to find and kill it.”

“When it surfaces? You mean, when hearts start turning up missing?”

God, I couldn’t handle that again. At least not so soon. I applied pressure to my side to dull the pain. “What do we do with her? She can’t stay here. She looks like she needs a medic or something.”

“I’ll carry her to help.”

“Be easier if I just faded us.” Then I remembered, “That would mean exposing myself, though. Shit.” The pain in my side wrapped around my back. “Ahh.”

“Here.” Lucas grew a sharp nail and placed it to his wrist.

“Stop. No. I don’t want it.”

Lucas looked at me uncomprehending. “You’ve probably broken a rib. You’re in pain.”

“And I like to stay that way. I haven’t felt this normal in a while.”

He just stared at me. Then took back his wrist as if finally understanding and walked over to the girl. He picked her up and turned to me. “Go home then. I’ll meet you there. And please,” he said with concern in his voice. “Try and be safe.”

I gave him the Okay Sign with my left hand, while I clutched my aching ribs with the right. “Will do.”



All the lights were out. Mom and Dad hadn't made it home, but Uncle Joe's truck was still parked in the driveway. I guessed they were his designated driver's for tonight. I fell through my window trying to climb in and landing on my side. I moaned in pain and shut my eyes so tight I could see starburst exploding behind them. I remembered the doctors at the hospital saying that certain bones healed themselves. I hoped to hell that the ribs fell into that category. Especially after I refused Lucas's blood.

In the bathroom, I rambled in the medicine cabinet. The strongest thing Mom stocked were aspirins. I popped three and afterward grabbed a sheet from the hall closet and scissors. It seemed the more pressure I put to my side, the less it hurt. So I cut the sheet lengthwise and wrapped it snugly around my torso. Better.

I went back to my room and laid across my bed, too tired for anything else. My body still twitched and jerked involuntarily, like I was coming down from a high. Someone needed to press the F5 command on me quick. I could still hear my heart beating in my ears and drumming in the hollow part of my throat. And there were other sounds too, familiar ones.

My eyes whipped to the window, recognizing the tap, tap, tap I just heard couldn't have been Lucas. With spread wings,

the black bird stared at me. Its white feather seemed to shimmer in the soft light coming from the hallway.

It flapped, propelling backward onto the banister, then did the eerie hovering thing. It wanted me to follow it.

“And so the weirdness continues,” I whispered to myself. What did it want with me? Obviously, it didn’t want to hurt me. It had so many opportunities to do that.

I pulled the sheet a smidge tighter around my ribs and headed to the front door. Every step was electricity firing over my skin in anticipation. When I circled around the porch to my room window, the bird was high over the yard. He held my attention then flew into the woods. I followed, but grabbed Dad’s axe from the wood stump just in case something unexpected happened. Though the unexpected was starting to be the new norm around here. And if this axe failed me, I prayed my wishy-washy powers would kick in like they did earlier tonight.

I caught glimpses of the bird in the webby branches as it flew over the trees, the moon glinting off that feather. I stayed on the path already carved out and ended at my cliff. Only when I stepped out onto the cliff, there wasn’t a bird there at all.

He approached from the woods across the slab in front of me. His hair demanded attention, pure white, not blonde, that was knotted in a sloppy ponytail to the back of his head.

It was an extreme contrast against his mocha colored skin. The expression on his angular face was just as serious as his clothes. Black trench coat. Black V-neck. Black tall, military boots, untied with the legs of black jeans stuffed in them.

He stopped and looked me up and down. A crooked smile spread across his face. What I thought was a long dimple on his left cheek, turned out to be an old scar. “Put that away, *cher*. There is no harm here.”

His words were ripe with a mellow Cajun accent. I knew his voice.

“Who are you?” I asked.

The shorter hairs of his pony tail fell over his eyes, which glowed a pale orange. The color of clouds at sunset. There was a lost in the desert type feel to them and oldness in spite of his youthful face. “A fan.”

“You’re the black bird.”

“I prefer raven.”

That voice. So smooth.

I worked backward. “You helped me tonight. You carried me home after I killed that wraith...and you were there, those nights at the hospital. So I’ll ask again, who are you and why are following me?”

“I hoped to introduce myself our first meeting, but you were asleep.”

“First meeting?” I took my eyes away from him only

for a moment. The pieces of this mystery puzzle all coming together. And as the last piece fell into place, so did the memory of his voice. Smooth and velvety. *Live*, it said. The memory took me to a place so dark and hellish, I regretted going there. I shook off the cold feeling and pointed the axe at him.

“You’re the visitor from the hospital.”

He held his hands up in an take-it-easy way. “The weapon, *cher*. Lower it.”

“Oh, sorry.” I let it rest at my side, not too far from reach if I needed it. “You told me to live. Your voice—”

“Pulled you from the darkness,” he finished, smoothing the white strays back over his head. “I know such darkness.”

“How did you know to save me?”

“Pure coincidence that I should be in a position to help.”

“There’s no such thing,” I said.

He wet his lips. “This world is full of coincidence.”

Funny. I said it was full of perv’s with a boner for pubescent kids and murderers lurking in the shadows, and God awful things I didn’t care to think about.

God. I didn’t know if I qualified to say that anymore. How did things get so out of control, so messy? I was normal, once. Put on my bra one arms strap at a time, laced my Converse’s from bottom to top just like everyone else. Granted it was a slightly different version of normal. A little too far left of ko-

sher, maybe. But before all this twistedness happened, I was me. I was a little ignorant, a little naïve. I was whatever my social network profile said. But I hadn't updated in, like, three months, so...

Three months ago, I was the girl who wore her hair in a saggy ponytail, the girl with the stutter. I despised my mom's cooking, gamed too much, and laughed at all my dad's jokes even when they were corny as hell. I'd never been kissed, or gotten into trouble. I was Mikayla Blake, human, prone to fuckups and mishaps. No more, no less.

Three months ago, my new life started. And nothing's been coincidence since.

"Coincidence doesn't exist," I explained. "Calculated randomness, however, does. Like this moment. There's nothing coincidental about you and I tonight, is there?"

"No, there is not," he said.

"And when I died?"

"That is where you and I differ. They crave you at all cost and I only offered assistance."

I knew that. Knew from Lucas that the hellions of the Nether Legion wanted me and preferably dead. But what about the guy in front of me. "What do you crave?"

His lips twitched with a smile. "I crave to live, as well."

"You look pretty alive to me. Still doesn't explain why you're here."

“A favor,” he said. “One that only you can give. I hope my valor does not go unnoticed by you.”

Heat rose in my cheeks and I stepped back. “Hey, I appreciate that whole saving me from darkness thing, but I don’t know what type of party you think this is.”

He gave me a lost look, his brows rising and forehead creasing with awareness. “I would never disrespect a lady,” he said and countered my step, reaching to caress my hand. His touch was freakishly feather soft. “Rest assured what I ask of you will not be *that*.” The cadence of his words lingered long after he finished. His lips moved to continue but he stopped, glancing over to his left. “Maybe some other time, when you’re not guarded, I will explain to you. Until then, can I ask that you keep our audience between you and I?”

“Why should I?” I asked. “I don’t even know you.”

“But I know you,” he said stepping toward the edge of the slab, letting my hand slip from his. “And I believe you trust me. Why else would you still be here?”

Why *was* I still here? I looked into his sensitive eyes, biting my lip while wondering that very thing. What about him didn’t scare me when it definitely should’ve. “What are you?” I asked.

“Gone. Good night, *ma chérie*.” He made a stepped toward the edge.

“Wait.” I dropped the axe. “Does mystery man have a

name?”

He laughed, and said, “You may call me Recay,” then jumped off the cliff.

I stood there a moment and watched as the raven with the white feather emerged, soaring into a speck in the distance.

That whole town below me slept. Must be nice to be oblivious.

“What are you doing out here?”

Lucas’s voice startled me but I didn’t turn around. “Looking at the stars.”

I heard the metal blade scrape against the slab as he picked it up. “With an axe?”

“Sure. Thought I’d chop some wood too.”

His heat reached out to me as he stood by my side. It felt good on this cool night. He felt good. But I didn’t have it in me to tell him this.

We didn’t speak for what seemed like prison term. I didn’t know what to say to him without falling into that emotional trap. And for the first time, I could tell he wasn’t sure what he should do either. It was much easier when we were fighting for our lives earlier. Who had time to be upset about anything else?

We just stood there, the silence gnawing at us until I couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’m going home.”

I turned to leave and his arm reached out for me. “Can we talk, Mikayla?”

I wondered if he wanted to call me Ever. And even though I knew the topic of the conversation, I said, “What about?”

“You,” he said. “I want to tell you everything but it seems you don’t want to know that whole story.”

His voice was so unsure it unnerved me. And I didn’t want to know the whole story. Not yet anyway. I hated being affected by him like this. I hated that he wasn’t truthful with me from the beginning. I hated he would have to claim Sable and lead a life with her when I felt something so strongly, so terrifying that I couldn’t put a name on it. More than anything, I hated that I couldn’t bring myself to hate him.

“I’m tired and just want to go home,” I said.

His hand slid down to my wrist, his fingers lacing with mine. The touch drove me crazy. “I’ll walk you,” he said.

“No Lucas.” I pulled away. “Not now. Okay?”

I still couldn’t look at him, but when I felt his heat leave me I knew he stepped away.

I headed back down the path. Every part of my body ached. And regardless of what I asked him to do, every painful step I took, I knew Lucas would be watching.

twenty-four

BEFORE I STEPPED THROUGH THE WOODS, I SAW someone standing on our porch. I held my side and squinted through the trees for a better view. They paced back and forth. And it wasn't until he came to the banister those blue overalls became visible. Uncle Joe. But where were my parents? And who dropped him off? He had to be pretty wasted earlier on for Mom and Dad to pawn him on someone else.

I stepped on the porch, prepared to deliver an awesome lie as to why I was out so late and my lack of a wheelchair. When I found the voice to say it, Uncle Joe turned to me.

“Hello Hunter,” Uncle Joe said with a demonic shrill.
“You’ve kept me waiting.”

About The Author

SHARDE RICHARDSON lived in a small town not unlike the one in *Watched*, minus the supernatural elements. After graduating from college in 2008, she worked in a nursing home dealing with behavioral residents. Her experiences with young residents and their mental illnesses furthered her need to write for young adults. She hopes to bring a realistic humor to her writing that readers of all ages can relate. This is her first novel.

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M IKAYLA DOESN'T WANT MUCH:

just to rock out to her favorite band, become the next Kwiki Stop video gaming champion, and keep her Q-tip habit under control. What she does want is the sight of the sudden inexplicable dark auras around everyone to stop. Problem is, those auras are demons and Mikayla is the last trait holder with the power to ban them. Which is a total buzz kill.

To make matters worse, the town folk of Sulphur Springs don't look the same, and her classmates are a little dark in the eyes. There are murders, suicides, reckless skinny-dipping, gratuitous use of Q-tips, and newfound powers that Mikayla must learn to control.

Her past becomes present when a shape-shifter tells her what her true identity is, and how to keep the demons of Hell from nipping at her Converse. Through him she'll discover who to trust, who to kiss, and how valuable her abilities are to the right beings. Because the evils of Hell aren't staying down without a fight...

OR WITHOUT HER SOUL.

S HARDE RICHARDSON lived in a small town not unlike the one in *Watched*, minus the supernatural elements. After graduating from college



Photo by Melissa Bridges

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