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## Back Cover Copy

*Some angels do not suffer their children to live.*

Grace Carrington has never been normal—she's a Nephilim, half human and half angel. The same psychic powers that make her a freak also make her a target, and she's on the run from an exploitive mother and two enemy beings whose powers far exceed her own.

One of them controls the Stalker, an inhuman killer no Nephilim has ever outrun. How long can a woman survive when angels want her dead?

## Highlight

"Kayla? What's wrong? Are you all right ... Kayla!"

Grace finally realized Megan was talking to her. She'd forgotten the name she gave the girl. "I..."

*You're dead, Nephil.*

The woman's voice ricocheted in her head. Grace tore her gaze from the awful grin and tensed, searching for an escape route.

*You can't run. I'll find you.*

Grace squeezed her eyes shut. "Megan." Her lips barely moved. "You have to get your ticket. Go—" She gasped. Pain tore through her head like a fishhook plunged into her brain. Thoughts and images flowed without her permission from the phantom rip: her mother, her first experience with power, her casino rip-off tour. The cop at the motel. Comp Roberts. *No!* She held on to that one, and felt the other woman attempt to pry it from her mind.

The tugging sensation stopped.

*Fear me. I am your end.*

She opened her eyes. They were gone.

**Hunted**  
By S.W. Vaughn

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Hunted

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**Dedication**

To my W, the greatest partner in the world ... in every way imaginable.

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## Chapter 1

Sometimes being able to read minds was a pain in the ass.

Grace heard the words bouncing between the security chief's ears. She preferred the words coming out of his mouth.

"You can leave just as soon as we finish checking your identification and reviewing the tapes. It's standard procedure whenever a ... guest wins such a large amount," he said. And thought: *No way you're twenty-one. If you're twenty-one, then I'm Elvis Presley. And I know you cheated, you smug bitch. I'll catch you, and I'm gonna laugh when they haul your pretty ass off to jail.*

Unfortunately, he was right on both counts. She wasn't twenty-one, and she had cheated. Sort of. She also knew he couldn't prove it. The knowledge provided little comfort. She tried not to hate him, knew he was just doing his job ... but he didn't have to be such a jerk about it.

Maybe she shouldn't have taken the slots *and* the blackjack table. If she'd stuck with one or the other, they wouldn't have been suspicious. But she wanted to stay out of the casinos for as long as possible this time, and the slots jackpot hadn't been enough. If the place wasn't so damned stingy on the payouts, she would have stopped there.

"Ms. Donovan, are you sure there isn't anything you want to tell me?" *Confess, damn it. My shift was supposed to end half an hour ago.*

Tough shit, Grace thought. She'd already been in this sweltering office for two hours, breathing in body odor and bitterness from a man who watched people make and lose fortunes every night, while he inched along on his casino salary and cleaned up the messes gamblers made. She did feel sorry for him, but this wasn't any easier on her. She had no choice—it was this or starve.

"No," she said at last. She'd learned the less she said, the better.

He glowered at her. Before he could think of a smart-ass reply, and say something bland to cover it, his desk phone rang. He picked it up with a gruff, "Lauder, security." He paused. "Yes, she's still here." His eyes narrowed. "You sure? You ran it twice?" A beat. "What about the tape?" After a longer pause, he frowned and hung up. "You check out, Ms. Donovan. I'll just ask you to fill out a form, and then you're free to go, with our apologies." *And if you ever step foot in here again, I'll be watching you. Closely.*

Grace kept her features blank. She'd almost gotten the hang of tuning out other people's thoughts, but the emotionally charged ones still insisted on coming through. The form he slid across the desk was standard: name, reason for visiting Las Vegas, address of the hotel, a yes/no checkbox for felony convictions with space to explain a positive reply. She gripped the pen, envisioned her current alias before she filled in the blanks. Susan Donovan, visiting for pleasure, staying at the fabulously cockroach-infested, off-the-strip Three Sailors Motel. No convictions.

It wasn't exactly a lie. Being a freak wasn't a crime, and she'd been a minor when everyone found out. Her court records had been sealed.

She slid the form across the desk and waited. The security chief's gaze skated over the paper. He huffed, stowed the form in a drawer, and stood. Her bag sat near his feet. He scooped it up and placed it on the desk, as though it contained ten pounds of dog shit instead of a change of clothing and a stack of cashier's checks—five grand apiece, fifty thousand altogether. The casinos never liked paying out that way, but she couldn't risk anything as traceable as a bank account, nor could she carry around that much cash. "I assume you can find your way out," the security chief said.

He must have calmed down. Grace couldn't hear his thoughts any more.

"Yes. Thank you." She picked up the single-strap backpack, slung it over a shoulder, and headed out. Down the access stairs, through the steel door, into the frenetic and blistering atmosphere of the casino floor. Hundreds of voices blended in a thick soup of conversation, good-luck prayers, muttered dissatisfaction and the occasional jubilant victory cry. Other sounds punctuated the human hubbub: the clatter-click-rattle of the roulette wheel, beeps and bells and cheery mocking jingles from the banks of slots and video poker machines, dice clacking in cupped hands and tumbling over felt.

Grace moved with piston purpose through the crowd, ignoring the inevitable drink offers and requests for lucky dice-blows. From the moment she'd entered this neon nightmare, she'd felt a disturbing electric undercurrent that whispered impending disaster. Casino security had thwarted her get-in, get-out strategy, and intuition—or whatever she had—screamed foul.

The guards at the front door glared but they let her pass without question. She stepped outside expecting the panic to ease.

It didn't.

The motel. She'd feel better once she returned to her room, and the few possessions that represented her portable home. Her contacts—blue today—had dried relentlessly during her stint in the security room and a burning itch consumed her eyes. She couldn't take them out until she reached the safety of the motel. She'd left her wraparounds in her briefcase.

Where were the cabs? A few of them always idled at the casinos, hoping to score fares giddy with takes, and in generous moods. But the street was practically deserted. She heard engines zipping in the distance, and turned right on the crowded sidewalk.

A brisk night wind kicked up and brought tears to her parched eyes. Her right contact shifted. *Damn it!* Squeezing her eye shut, she edged away from the crowd and leaned against the building beside the casino, a sagging shanty tacked on to the neighboring abandoned high-rise. She went for casual: *ho hum, just another disillusioned gambler bemoaning my fate, leave me alone, thanks.* A cigarette would have helped, but she'd left those in the room too.

She turned her head, right side away from the crowd, still thinking bland thoughts. *Oh, look at this interesting door.* She surreptitiously pushed the contact back into place and stared. The door actually was interesting. Faded, cracked and splintering, warped in the frame, but fitted with a gleaming brass knob and fresh hinges. Above the door, a single wide brushstroke of deep red paint had hardened on the lintel like dried blood.

The door called to her. She reached for the knob, watched her fingers brush the brass surface as though they belonged to someone else. They met pulsating warmth instead of cold metal. The electric undercurrent surged, became raw power hammering her nerves.

In the next instant, an unfamiliar voice shrilled through her head: *Get back!*

Grace obeyed the mental command instantly. The door burst open and missed her by a breath. A disheveled young woman flew out, into her. They both went down.

*Flew.* She'd been flying. Her feet hadn't touched the ground.

The assailant jerked her head back. Her eyes met Grace's. Her bright green, glowing eyes.

Shock rendered Grace speechless. Grace never seen another with eyes like that. Was this why she'd been drawn here? For six years Grace had known her mysterious affliction to be unique. But here was this girl with glowing eyes. Flying. And looking like the Devil would burst out the door after her and drag her into the flames of Hell.

The girl scrambled off and righted herself. Grace struggled to her feet. The girl stood spring-loaded, glancing behind her, left, right. Grace had to talk to her. She opened her mouth.

A man appeared beside the young woman. Just appeared from empty air. Heartbreak-beautiful, muscled as sin. Covered in streaks of blood and splashes of gore. The man clamped crimson-coated hands on either side of the girl's skull and forced her to her knees. Moving to stand on her shins, the bloodied apparition twisted hard—and ripped her head from her shoulders.

The world stopped. Someone screamed.

Grace stumbled back and pressed into the shadow of the high-rise. The killer's eyes followed her. He still held the head, oblivious to the grotesque and dripping spectacle. More screams rent the air. Someone vomited. Grace heard retching, a thick splash.

With her gaze locked on the killer, she watched a flame-haired woman wink into existence beside him. The woman's furious expression moved from the severed head to the killer's blank face. "You idiot! Put that down. Now."

The killer dropped the head. It landed on the girl's crumpled body, bounced, and rolled a few feet to stop in front of Grace. She whimpered, held her breath. The woman's gaze sought the shadows. Her eyes narrowed.

*I've marked you, Nephilim scum. Your time is up.*

Once again, the voice that filled Grace's head was not her own. Instinct commanded her to run. Before she could move, the woman gripped the killer's wrist and they vanished.

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## Chapter 2

Silver shifted them to the ravine, right in front of his crypt. At least he'd done something right. Lorin released his wrist, stepped away, and backhanded him. He flinched and dropped his gaze.

"Do you have any idea what you've just done?"

"I..."

"Shut up. Your voice sickens me." Lorin touched the base of her throat. She felt the raised outline of the inverted triangle there, burned into her flesh. She'd been marked. Branded like a cow. The hunters had been too close in Vegas.

"Look at me," she demanded. Silver raised his head. She pulled the collar of her shirt down to expose the blackened mark. "If I'm destroyed, I can't come back. That means you'll stay locked up forever. Do you understand that?"

Silver didn't reply. Lorin remembered she'd told him not to speak.

"Answer."

"Yes, Lorin."

"Go and wash up. You reek of Nephilim."

Lorin watched him walk along the floor of the ravine. Her monster, her burden. Her son. She'd been unable to kill him at birth, and so had been compelled to keep his existence secret. For six centuries. And his power only increased, even when she left him chained inside his crypt for decades at a time.

At least he was useful for killing mules. The ten he'd slaughtered tonight represented the most Nephilim she'd found in one place since Sri Lanka. Still, discovering another outside the nest had stained her victory. She would've had Silver kill it there in the open since he'd already screwed up once, if she hadn't felt the Presence saturating the air like an oil slick—and simultaneously experienced the burn of the Mark. Now the Bright Host hunters had her scent and she'd be pursued relentlessly.

She would not let Silver bring about her destruction.

*Damn him.* Silver wasn't equipped to make decisions. She'd never let him. She controlled his every move, his every thought. If he were allowed to do as he pleased, Lorin suspected he could destroy all of Creation—and he just might. Without a tight leash, he could quickly become a death machine. It was all he knew; how to kill. And he did it spectacularly.

She smiled, remembering the way he'd ripped off a mule's arm and used it to bludgeon another's skull. She'd never taught him that. He was getting creative.

The chill of night air saturated the ravine, a comforting cloak. Lorin knew the hunters would have trouble finding her in upstate New York. After all, Silver had remained undiscovered in his living tomb for centuries now. But she wouldn't stay long. She wanted to find that stray they'd left behind in Vegas and watch Silver tear it apart. No sense wasting her own power when her son had so much more.

First, though, she wanted to hurt something. Like Silver.

As though responding to her unspoken desires, Silver slid down the embankment wall at the far end of the ravine and started toward her. She glanced around at the brush and detritus, and considered throwing rocks at him for a while. Ultimately, though, stoning him would not satisfy. The rocks only struck once, and he'd heal too quickly.

No matter what she did, he would heal. The bastard always healed. At least she could make him scream, make him suffer.

She spotted a stout oak limb, freshly broken. Nice and straight, a good two inches around at its widest. She picked it up and began breaking the smaller twigs that sprouted from it, leaving jagged nubs to inflict more damage.

Silver stopped before her and stared at the branch. He shuddered once. Something that resembled fear flickered in his eyes and left. *Good.*

Lorin pointed to the ground. "On your knees."

Silver obeyed. Lorin circled him and stared at his back. Blast him for being so powerful, so perfect. For living so long. "You missed one," she said. "You'll pay for that. Tomorrow, we go back to find it. Today, you suffer."

*Please don't...*

His voice in her head. Lorin gripped the branch with both hands and swung hard. The impact echoed down the ravine, tore his shirt. "Don't speak to me. Don't Reach for me. Your existence disgusts me, miserable freak."

She drew back again and halted. *Waste not.* What she had in mind required considerable power. She'd make him do it. She circled him and held the branch out. "Take it. Impale yourself with it. Understand?" She almost felt sorry for him. If he would just obey her unconditionally, she wouldn't have to hurt him so often. But he was too powerful. Even the slightest act of free will made him a threat.

She didn't feel sorry enough to stop.

Silver shuddered again. He accepted the limb, hesitated, and plunged it into his abdomen. A groan left him. His repulsive, unnatural blood poured on the ground.

"All the way through."

He drew a pained breath and pushed harder. The branch broke through his back, ripped his shirt further. He sobbed, but said nothing.

Lorin left him kneeling in his blood, and went to find more branches.

\* \* \* \*

Despite the horror she'd just witnessed, Grace felt oddly calm. That woman—what had she called her? *Neffa limb, neffle him?* A gibberish word. She wouldn't think just now about the strength it must require to rip a person's head clear off, or the fact that the killer and his boss, or whatever she was, apparently had one of those transporters from *Star Trek* stashed somewhere.

Gradually, she realized the sense of peace had spread to the crowds. No one screamed or ran, or whipped out cell phones to dial 911. In fact, no one seemed to notice the rather hard-to-miss headless body lying on the sidewalk or the severed head at Grace's feet. How had they developed collective amnesia?

*Shit.* With the killer gone, she looked guilty. She edged out of the shadows and stared again at the door, left open on gaping gloom. She still felt that sense of electricity flooding everything. Maybe there were more like her—like *them*—inside.

Maybe she wasn't alone in the world.

Grace glanced back. No one looked in her direction. She slipped through the gap and closed the door. Seamless dark greeted her inside. Her eyes adjusted enough to realize there was nothing at all here. Just a floor, walls, a ceiling. No furniture, no debris or bare wires. She tried to sense something electrical. A light would be useful. Manipulating machines was another of her abnormal abilities. Thank goodness she hadn't shared *that* with her mother. The woman would have had her influencing lottery results, and probably brewing her morning coffee too.

Her mind connected with something, and she urged it to operate. Dim light shone to her right and illuminated stairs leading down. She approached them, stopped, and listened. She heard the steady beat of her heart, her own controlled breathing. Nothing more.

With a shrug, she descended the stairs. The walls blocked her view of whatever awaited her down there. She reached the bottom and dropped into analytical mode to avoid losing her mind at what she saw.

To the left of the stairs, a massive steel door lay flat on the floor. It looked like someone had ripped the hinges off and let it fall. An arm, without a body, had been dropped on the exposed surface, the elbow bent the wrong way. The dim light situated in the stairwell spared her a clear view of the room beyond the doorway. Still, she could make out vague shapes scattered in heaps and clumps across the floor. She guessed at least one of those shapes was minus an arm.

Unable to look away, Grace mentally searched for another light inside the room, found one. It flickered and stuttered as though reluctant to reveal the carnage beneath. When the light steadied, she pressed a hand over her mouth to stifle a cry.

Half a body, the upper half, had come to rest nearest the door. The missing portion appeared to have melted. This had been a male, and he still had two arms. Other bodies littered the room in impossible poses, interspersed with random chunks of flesh and bone—like some of them had swallowed lit sticks of dynamite.

Though their dead eyes no longer glowed, Grace knew at once these people had been like her. She also understood why she'd never seen another. A red-haired witch and a beautiful monster hunted them down and slaughtered them.

And now the killers had seen her face.

*Damn, damn, damn.* Now what? She couldn't stick around here. She had no doubt they'd come back. Her first step had to be the motel. After that ... well, she'd figure that out when she got there.

She let the light in the room go out, turned toward the stairs. And froze. The serene feeling that had infected the crowd outside swelled, filling her with a compelling urge to stay put, relax, take a chill. An absent smile rose unbidden to her lips. She struggled against the sensation. Beneath it lurked fury and lethal intent, a quiet command to be docile and accept her fate.

Sounds drifted down the stairs. Real sounds. Footsteps. Someone was coming.

Grace forced herself through the tranquil paralysis and plunged into the corpse-strewn room. She stepped in something slippery and spongy. Her stomach rebelled. Clenching her jaw, she moved deliberately toward the back of the room. *Just a wet, muddy field. I'm walking through mud. That thing rolling away, that's a rock. Not an eyeball...*

The footsteps reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped. "Hello?" A male voice, soft and reassuring and deadly. "Is anyone down here?"

Grace held her breath. Had there been another door in here? She couldn't remember, and she didn't dare juice the light again. Her gut fluttered and lurched. She longed for the dubious safety of the motel. The desire to be there instead of here, *right now*, consumed her. She pictured the bed with its faded blue-gray comforter, the desk with her laptop in the top drawer, the nice hot shower to wash away the stains of the night. She closed her eyes briefly.

And opened them in her motel room.

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### Chapter 3

Grace sat down hard on the floor. *What the hell...?*

This was her room. Her scant wardrobe hung in the open armoire. Her cigarette case lay on the desk beside the lamp. The door stood closed and locked. How had she gotten here?

A half-formed memory whispered through her mind. The beach. Autumn, just after she'd turned thirteen. Alone. She'd been sucked into a riptide and panicked. She remembered desperately longing for the safe, sandy shore beneath her—and in seconds finding it there with no recollection of how she'd escaped the deadly current.

Exhilaration and relief warred with nausea. Within seconds, nausea won out and she stumbled for the bathroom. At least she hadn't eaten any casino food. After a mercifully brief purging, she stripped and showered, wrapped herself in the motel bathrobe she'd left hanging on the back of the door, and wandered out to collapse in the desk chair.

Grace knew she'd moved herself here, but whatever she'd done had drained her. Even pulling out her laptop seemed a heavy task. She slouched in the chair and closed her eyes. She would just take a few minutes and rest.

Hours later, she awoke to the triple beep of the room phone that indicated the front desk calling.

Grace groped for the receiver and fumbled it to her ear. "Lo?" she muttered.

"Is this Ms. Susan Donovan?"

"Yes," she said before her sleep-fogged brain could think to lie. She immediately regretted the admission. No one had reason to call her for anything, least of all something pleasant. This wouldn't be good.

"I have a Mr. Howard Leiderman of the Golden Egg Casino on the line for you."

The line clicked and opened up. "Hello? Mrs. Donovan?"

Grace sighed. "Ms. Donovan," she said. "And yes."

"Ms. Donovan. My name is Howard Liederman, I'm the owner of the—"

"So I've been told." Fully awake now, Grace leaned forward and drummed the fingers of her free hand on the edge of the desk. Casino owners hated her. Hell, everyone hated her, but when it came to crooked and tight-fisted pricks, she returned the sentiment. "Your security staff has already interrogated me, Mr. Liederman. What do you want?"

"I understand you paid us a visit this evening and experienced a sizeable stroke of luck."

"And?"

"I'd like to offer my apologies for the way my staff treated you."

"Apology accepted. Good night."

"Wait!" A trace of desperation edged the word. Grace couldn't read minds over the phone but she had a fair idea regarding this man's thoughts. His next statement proved her right. "As a token of good will, we're offering you a complimentary three-night stay in our VIP suites, and a casino credit account for one hundred thousand dollars."

The high roller club. He wanted her to come back with his money, gamble it away again, and preferably end up deeper in the hole. "No thanks."

"How about five nights and two hundred thousand?"

Grace was tempted to play it out, just to see how high he'd go. Instead she said, "Not interested. Thanks anyway."

His tone shifted from quasi-sympathetic to frigid. "In that case, Ms. Donovan, I hope you understand that it would be in your best interests not to return to the Golden Egg. After all, there are plenty of other casinos to choose from."

"Understood. Goodbye." Grace hung up with a snort. It wasn't the first casino she'd been banned from. She leaned back and ran a hand through her hair. It was getting shaggy again. She would have to cut it soon. She'd liked it long, but her photo on the missing posters featured her former cascading curls and she sure as hell didn't want to be found. Especially now that she knew there were others like her—unless the massacre at the casino had wiped them all out.

The thought forced her closer to tears than she'd been in years. She'd tried to convince herself she could handle eternal isolation, a lifetime alone, and she'd almost believed it. But one glimpse of glowing eyes that weren't hers had erased her convictions—and an instant after her barriers had crashed down, her fragile hopes were drowned in blood. It wasn't fair. Had those mangled bodies been the only other ... whatever she was?

Somehow, she had to find out.

She pulled her laptop from the drawer and switched it on. She hadn't paid for an Internet connection in the room—no need, when her mind could jack into cyberspace at will. She would look for what the woman had called her. Maybe they were some sort of underground cult, or something. She tried *neffle him* and found a bunch of people with the surname Neffle. *Neffa limb* turned up the New England Folk Festival Association. She doubted the slaughtered ones had been accordion players.

Maybe it was one word. She entered *neffalimb*, and was prompted, *Did you mean nefilim?* She checked it. *Nefilim: a Los Angeles-based indie band*. Possible, but not likely. She added another f and ran a new search.

*Did you mean: nephilim?*

A chill snaked down her spine. That looked right. She clicked on the first link and found a reference article that began: *The Nephilim, referred to in the Torah and in early Christian and Jewish writings, were an alleged people born of the "sons of God" and the "daughters of man."* The article went on to quote the Bible, "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown."

She scanned the rest of the text with mounting alarm. This couldn't be right. It was ridiculous, impossible. At the bottom of the page, she found an image of a painting

—a naked woman clinging to a muscled man with a big set of ... wings. The caption read: *Portrait of a 'fallen one' and his bride.*

The Nephilim were children of humans and angels.

Stunned, Grace straightened and stared at the image. Angels, indeed. Even if they existed, what angel would be attracted to her mother? She'd never met her father, but whoever he was, she didn't blame him for not staying with Kendra Carrington. If she'd had a choice, Grace would have taken off at thirteen when her abilities developed.

This revelation brought her no further to the truth. Maybe the red-haired woman was simply psychotic. It wasn't hard to imagine anyone with abilities like hers sinking into denial, losing themselves in paranoid delusions. Grace had fought to stay logical and sane since the first time she heard someone else, a school classmate, thinking in her head. The girl had called her a ritzy whore, or something like that, and Grace had screamed at her, started a fight. She hadn't realized the other girl had never spoken aloud until later, in detention. The realization floored her, and she'd been almost catatonic for the rest of the day.

Things had gone downhill at school after that, until her mother had her institutionalized shortly after her "talents" became apparent in her eyes. The glow had become noticeable about a month following that first incident.

So maybe this woman was nuts—but dismissing the way her killer had ripped a man's head off with no more effort than opening a pop-top can proved harder. Was that even humanly possible?

She realized she'd started to think *not human* and stopped herself. Of course they were human. Certainly not normal, but definitely human.

Grace powered down her laptop with a twinge of unease. She'd have to leave Vegas. Whoever these two were, she knew they would track her down, and soon. And she liked her head right where it was, thank you very much. In the morning, she would cash one of the checks and head out.

She didn't know where she would go. Anywhere except here sounded good.

\* \* \* \*

Special Agent Lee Zane knew what happened—or rather, *who* happened—before he glimpsed the full crime scene. The torn arm in front of the door, tagged and bagged when he arrived for the second time, told him everything.

He had a knack for reaching scenes like this first. Despite his certainty one of them had still been alive when he'd come down before, he'd stepped back as always to give the local police their temporary jurisdiction. Now, it was time for him to take it away.

A uniform approached him with a hand on his gun. His drawn features indicated he'd seen the aftermath in the room beyond. "Get out of here," he snapped. "This is a police investigation."

Zane held out his badge. The cop looked at it, blanched. "Jesus, the Feds already?"

Nodding, Zane glanced through the doorway. There was no electricity to this abandoned building. Inside, high-powered flashlight beams passed reluctantly over piles of body parts. He'd seen the floodlight outside, waiting to come down after they'd gotten the extension cord plugged in next door. "Who's running the show?" he asked the uniform.

"Lieutenant Hughes. You want me to get him?"

"I'll find him. Thanks." Zane heard the unspoken implication to the question. *Don't make me go back in there.* Personally, the scene didn't bother him. He'd seen worse.

He stepped over the arm, into the gloom. "Lieutenant Hughes?"

"Who's that? George?" A flashlight beam swung toward him and shone in his face.

Zane hoisted the badge again. "Special Agent Zane. A word, please." He lowered his arm, waited.

Hughes grunted and picked his way through the carnage. "C'mon out in the hall. Light's better." The lieutenant passed him in a hurry.

Zane smiled. He had a feeling there'd be none of the usual reluctance to surrender jurisdiction this time. They'd be happy to get this case off their hands.

Once outside the room, the lieutenant moved to the bottom of the stairwell and produced a pack of cigarettes. "You don't mind, do you? I don't normally smoke on the scene, but what a fuckin' mess. You see any of that?" Hughes lit up without waiting for Zane's response.

"I saw enough." A clatter and thud sounded at the top of the stairs. Bringing the floodlight down. "How long have your people been here?"

"Twenty minutes, tops." Hughes took an almost violent drag and exhaled hard. "You got here damned fast. I didn't think the Feds had a stake around here."

"I was in the area." Zane watched two officers struggle to bring the massive grated lamp down the stairs. "I'm assuming you know why I'm here."

"I can guess. This is a bigger mess than it looks like, isn't it?"

"Yes." He'd been close tonight. Close enough to feel them. Not close enough to catch them, though. "The M.O. matches a pair of serial killers we've been tracking for a long time. Their timetable is erratic, but their methods are regular as clockwork. Problem is, we never know when or where they're going to strike next."

Hughes shook his head. "Damned frustrating. I take it we're out of this, then."

"As of now. I'd appreciate it if you leave the floodlight though. I'll make sure it's returned. My backup's en route." The floodlight in question was carried past them. Zane moved back to give them clearance.

"Sure, yeah. Just take us a bit to clear out."

"How many personnel are on the scene?"

"A dozen, including myself."

"No one talks about this. Understand?"

For the first time, Hughes favored him with a skeptical look. He indulged in a deliberate drag, and took his time responding. "You think I'm going to the press with this, you're nuts. It'll be in the reports though."

"No, it won't." Zane kept his gaze level. "You're not filing a single scrap of paper on this case. I've already cleared it with your headquarters. As far as you and your people are concerned, this never happened."

"Now wait just a minute. There's a fuck of a lot of bodies in there. Those people have families. Somebody has to notify them. By standard op, that job falls to us. We can't just bury it."

"You can, and you will. First of all, you'll never catch these two. How's that going to reflect on your department when ten simultaneous murders stay unsolved?"

"How do you know there's ten? So many goddamned body parts in there, it's impossible to tell—"

"I'm estimating. Second, if even a whisper of this leaks out, we'll never catch them either. This situation is top-level classified. Anyone who talks loses their job, and I'll personally make sure they do a stretch in federal prison. Not a pleasant place for cops. Are we clear?"

"You unbelievable bastard."

"Are we clear?"

Hughes glowered and pitched his cigarette on the floor. "Yeah, we're clear. Fuckin' crystal." He moved toward the scene and glanced back with disgust. "If I don't get my floodlight back, I'll sue your Federal ass."

Zane didn't reply. He stood back to wait, aware it would take them a while to vacate the scene. He almost wanted to reassure Hughes about family notification. These victims rarely had families, and those that did weren't likely to keep in touch with them.

Their deaths didn't concern him. He and the killers had the same agenda. The humans needed protection from creatures like the ones littering the floor in there. The problem in this case literally lay in the execution. Public slaughter constituted interference, especially when he'd had to alter the memories of dozens—no, *hundreds* of human witnesses at this scene alone.

Interference was the most common reason the Hunters had for destroying their own kind. And Lorin had taken things too far this time. She had been marked, and he would end her.

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## Chapter 4

The layered greens of the forest surrounded her. An earthy scent permeated the air: sweet crumbling leaves, fragrant pines. She walked on a carpet of moss beneath songbirds and dappled sunlight. Water bubbled and whispered somewhere in the distance. Ahead, the forest floor dropped into a deep natural chasm. She longed to reach the bottom where cool shadows bathed the remnants of a streambed and plump ripe blueberries grew on bushes with tiny waxed leaves.

Grace woke from the vivid dream with a purpose. She would track down her father and learn the truth from him—one way, or another.

Upstate New York. He lived there somewhere, alone, distanced from civilization. Like a hermit, her mother had scornfully believed. If he was anything like Grace, she didn't blame him. It was the extent of her knowledge regarding the man, and the forest made sense. She'd never been upstate. The closest she'd come was her mother's camp in the Adirondacks, and that only once.

She would find him. How much forest could there be?

Grace rose and showered, dressed, and retrieved her laptop. She located a New York State map and browsed the upstate region. The city of Syracuse appeared to be the rough center of the area. She would take a train there, establish a base in a hotel, and search until she found him. And if she ran out of money, there was always Atlantic City.

Packing took all of twenty minutes. After two years on the go, she had it down to an art form. A few times she'd been forced to leave all but the most vital things behind—her laptop and whatever money she had. She'd been careful, never winning too much at one place, always hitting consecutive casinos in separate parts of the city. This time she'd just wanted to stay hidden for a while. Apparently, it was too much to ask.

From her dwindling cash supply, she left a fifty on the desk for the maid and headed out with her backpack, duffel and laptop bag. She wasn't surprised to find the front counter deserted. Frowning, she peered through the scratched and dirty window of the office behind the counter. A lone figure sat bathed in the glow of a miniature television screen, apparently talking on the phone. Grace tapped the dulled brass bell on the counter. The figure waved or pointed, she couldn't tell which, but whoever it was didn't get up.

*Come on.* She'd paid for two weeks in advance and had only stayed six nights so far. With the refund, she could buy her train ticket and not worry about cashing one of the checks until she got to Syracuse. She sighed, turned, and leaned on the counter to wait.

The tall, narrow window in the motel's front door revealed glimpses of the occasional vehicle rolling down the street. Most of Vegas slept in, so traffic stayed light until at least noon. Something big and brown rumbled past, and Grace caught flashes of yellow lettering—a UPS delivery truck. Bringing packages to normal people who didn't have to stay in an endless succession of third-rate motels, who had permanent addresses and jobs, families, friends ... lives. Must be nice. She'd yet to think of anywhere in the world she could live without the stares and the questions, the constant need to avoid lasting relationships.

Another vehicle came into view at a crawl and stopped in front of the motel. A white sedan, black lettering Grace couldn't make out. She leaned to one side and saw a light bar across the roof. Cops. Damn it.

She made herself stay calm and turned back toward the office. They could be here for anything. Didn't have to be her. Probably wasn't. Cops made constant stops at motels all over Vegas. She rang the counter bell again and heard the front door open behind her just as the desk clerk, a sour-looking woman with a pan-flat face and too much makeup, emerged from the office. The clerk's dour expression lit with unpleasant surprise, and guilt lurked in eyes that refused to look directly at Grace.

"Oh, ah ... Miss ... can I help you?" *You were supposed to stay in your room. You always stay in your room all day.* The clerk's gaze darted past her shoulder to the cop Grace knew stood behind her. Through the open office door, Grace saw a single crumpled sheet of paper lying on the desk next to the phone, curled up enough to reveal *'ing'* in bold black letters at the top. Her stomach plummeted.

She knew the rest of the words on the flyer by heart. *Missing: Grace Carrington, beloved daughter of Kendra Carrington. Last seen in Palo Alto, California, on 10/28. \$100,000 reward for information leading to her return. Please bring my baby back home.*

All complete, unmitigated bullshit.



The cop tapped her on the shoulder. Grace froze for an instant. *Think fast.* She reached down, gripped the handle of her duffle bag, and let the shoulder strap slide off as she pivoted to face him. "Is something wrong, Officer?" she asked in her best gee-I'm-totally-clueless tone.

"Are you Grace Carrington?"

She heard a whisper of a thought from him: *don't know why I have to drag around after punks all day, that hotel bitch gets the reward...*

"No, sir. My name's Susan. Susan Donovan." She forced bland statements into her head. *I sure am hungry. Where can I find a decent restaurant? I wonder whether there are any good shows on the strip tonight. Keep calm. Breathe easy.*

The cop glared at the clerk and favored Grace with a skeptical glance. "Can I see some identification, please?"

"Sure thing. Just let me get it out of my bag."

Her fake IDs, all three of them, were in various locations. Two in pants pockets, one in her laptop bag. She had no intention of showing any of them. She just needed a minute or so to shift the load. Without releasing the duffle, Grace pulled the laptop strap over her head so it crossed her body. She let the backpack drop to the floor. Hefting the duffle, she held it awkwardly at one end and fumbled for the side pocket zipper and intentionally stumbled. The bag dropped. "Oops," she said. "Sorry. Hang on. This thing always gives me trouble."

She'd managed to put a few feet between her and the cop. She bent to the duffle, grabbed the handle and the end of the bag, and drew a breath. Her gaze settled on the door. Without looking away, she straightened fast and flung the bag at the cop.

The clerk shouted. The cop swore. Grace reached the door in two strides, jerked it open, and sprinted across the street with her laptop rhythmically banging her hip.

Good thing she'd invested in a Toughbook. Otherwise, the computer would never survive her lifestyle.

\* \* \* \*

Lorin sent Silver ahead to make sure the hunters had left Vegas. When he returned to her, she had him shift them both to the basement of the high-rise, near the casino she'd seen the Nephil outside last night.

"Stay here," she told him when they arrived.

Silver didn't even look at her. He'd been particularly docile today. She suspected he wasn't completely healed yet. She hadn't let him extract the branches from his body until she'd unchained him that morning, and he'd bled all night.

Wounded or not, she expected acknowledgement. She slapped him. He lifted his head reluctantly.

"Stay here until I call you. Understand?"

He nodded and dropped his gaze.

"You're pathetic." Lorin turned and clomped up the rusted metal stairs leading to the first floor of the dilapidated structure. She couldn't track the beast by sense from here, since any power it might have used would have faded by now. She would start with the humans in the casino and find out what they knew.

Ever since humans had developed law enforcement, Lorin had discovered the best way to get information from them was by flashing a badge, or whatever symbol their culture used to identify their police. If it became necessary she could employ more brutal tactics, but the badge or the shield usually sufficed. She carried several different forms. In this case, she would present them with FBI agent Jennifer Pope.

She made her way through the mildewing and debris-cluttered building and stepped outside to a deserted street. Though there were no crowds, she knew some of the casino staff would be working now, preparing for another night. She'd start with the owner and barring that, the one in charge of security. Someone must have seen the thing. The Nephilim stood out among humans—they were universally attractive, perfect specimens. They turned heads. And stomachs. Few humans understood what bothered them about the Nephilim, but the instinct to avoid them almost always prevailed.

It made the nasty little mules that much easier to find.

This one, at least, employed a measure of intelligence. It had managed to hide its damning eyes, probably with contact lenses. The precautions it took increased Lorin's desire to find it and kill it. The Nephilim did not deserve pride. They didn't deserve *life*.

Lorin reached the front doors of the casino and pushed. Locked. With a small, impatient gesture, she drew the steel tongue of the lock back and pushed again. Her entrance startled a human with a mop poised above a wheeled bucket. He thrust the mop down too hard, splashing brownish water up and over the sides.

Lorin gave him a curt nod. "I'm looking for the owner of this establishment."

"Er. He ... we're closed here, miss. Sorry. The bar opens at two."

"I don't want a drink. I want the owner." Lorin produced the FBI identification and flipped the leather bi-fold holder open. "Agent Pope, FBI. If you'd be so kind as to tell him I'm here."

"Oh. Jeez." The human's eyes widened. "S-sure, miss—ma'am. Agent ... er, I'll go get him. Right away." He dropped the mop handle, and it clattered and bounced on the floor in his wake. Lorin smirked after him. He was a young one, and likely thinking just now that his boss was involved in unscrupulous activities.

Several minutes passed before a soft-looking man entered the room and approached Lorin with forced confidence. The young one loped behind him, an awkward gaggle of limbs and bulging eyes. The soft one stopped. Sweat sheened his forehead and his clasped hands trembled. "My apologies, but Eddie here couldn't remember your name. I'm the owner, Howard Liederman. What can I do for you, ah, Agent..."

"Pope." Lorin showed the badge again. This man, Liederman, obviously had something to hide. If she weren't eager to track the Nephil, she would have played with him a bit, let him sweat for a while. "I'm looking for someone who may have been here last night." She extracted a folded sheet of paper from inside the jacket she wore. The paper was blank but as she opened it, she sent an image of the mule to Liederman's mind.

He blinked, and confusion clouded his features for an instant. "Ah, yes. She was here. Susan Donovan." Relief filtered through his body at the realization that she wasn't after him. Eagerness entered his tone when he added, "I know where's she's staying. The Three Sailors Motel on Vine Street across town."

Lorin nodded and tucked the blank page back. "Thank you, Mr. Liederman. We appreciate your cooperation."

"Not that I'm surprised you're looking for her, but can I ask what she's done? I spoke with her last night and she was rather rude. I'd only called to extend an invitation—"

"The case is classified."

"Oh. Of course. My apologies, Agent Pope."

"If you see her again, be sure to detain her and contact the local police. We'll take it from there." Without waiting for his response, Lorin turned and left the casino, already Reaching for Silver.

*We're leaving. Be ready.* She would find this Three Sailors Motel and exterminate the pest.

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## Chapter 5

Once Grace had put some distance between herself and the motel, she ducked into an alley to rest and think for a few minutes. The police would be actively seeking her now. She had assaulted an officer. Now she was a runaway *and* a criminal.

She had to get out of town fast. She couldn't show up at the train station without making some changes first. New clothes, a dye job. Maybe a piercing or two. Definitely different colored contacts. She'd stuck with blue this morning, so she would go with brown.

Unless she wanted to add shoplifting to her list of reasons to avoid cops, she needed money. That meant cashing a check made out to Susan Donovan.

With banks and stores out of the question, she'd have to go back to Comp Roberts' place. He'd take a hefty commission—twenty-five percent, maybe more if he knew she'd tangled with the cops—but he was reliable. Comp had set up two of her three aliases and neither had been questioned once. His cover business, a chintzy Tex-Mex bar and grill on the downtown fringes, wouldn't be open for a while yet, but she'd lay odds Comp was there.

For the moment, she had to make at least a few changes to her appearance. She fished in her bag for the wraparounds. The sun blazed overhead, a typical early summer day in Vegas, so sunglasses wouldn't stand out. She peeled off the light sweater she'd worn and wadded it tight, slung the bag over her shoulder and headed for the street.

The first trashcan she passed received the sweater. Grace walked for several blocks, headed toward downtown, sticking to the bus route. She slowed at each stop and finally spotted a white and blue Cat bus lumbering her way. The folded wad of bills she pulled from her pocket looked dishearteningly small. She peeled two singles from it, and minutes later settled into an aisle-facing seat on a half-empty bus, wondering why she didn't just rob a bank or something. It would certainly be easier than the hoops she had to jump through to scrape by.

It would also be wrong. Casinos could afford to pay out once in a while, but she wouldn't stoop to taking money from regular folks. Even if they had shown her nothing but contempt. Damned morals. Always getting in the way of the simple life.

Fifteen stop-and-start minutes later, she exited at the end of the line and headed for Second Street. Signs of life were limited since it was past the morning commute and not yet first call in the bars. This was the real Vegas, the part of town for serious gamblers, down-and-dirty deals, and everything that happened outside the neon cloak the city wore for tourists. Beyond the casinos lying dormant in the light of day, the buildings became shabby and dug in like nickel queens, the sidewalks dingy and desperate.

Three or four teens lounged on the steps of a stucco apartment building, passing a pipe. Grace didn't look at them, and they paid no attention to her. Only cops and tourists interested the local bangers, and she'd worked hard to ensure she appeared neither. Still, a measure of relief settled over her when she entered the dim interior of the Happy Gringo unscathed.

"The position's been filled. Sorry."

Grace started. The categorically unapologetic voice came from the far end of the bar. A dark-haired, diminutive woman sat on the curve of the counter, legs swinging lazily inside the barkeep space. She held a fork in one hand, a stained cloth in the other. Piles of silverware heaped on either side of her perch.

"I don't need a job, thanks. I need Comp. Is he around?"

"Maybe." The woman rubbed the cloth along the fork tines and held it up for inspection. Apparently satisfied, she dropped it on the pile to her right with a metallic jangle, and picked up a steak knife from her left. "Who wants to know?"

"A repeat customer. Tell him I've got juice for him."

The woman huffed. "He's not taking two-bit notes any more."

"Well, then. Guess it's a good thing I scored higher than two." Grace moved further into the bar. The woman held the knife in plain view but made no move to use it. "Just get Comp."

"Why? You in a hurry?"

"Actually, yes. I'm hungry. So unless you're planning to cook me breakfast, would you just tell him I'm here?"

"Fine." The woman slid down from the counter, came around the back, and flounced through the unmarked door to the right. Grace took a seat at one of the small back tables to wait. She'd no sooner slipped her sunglasses back into her bag than the brunette resurfaced and offered a slow shrug. "He says go on down."

Grace stood and crossed to the door. Behind it lay a short hallway. A door to the right led to the kitchen. Straight ahead, stairs provided access to Comp's lair. She headed down, paused to knock on the black door at the bottom, and faced the camera mounted to the left of the door. He never let anyone in without visual confirmation.

The intercom clicked once. "You look familiar. Have I ripped you off before?"

Grace smiled. "Twice."

"Ah! Now I remember. You're the ID junkie." The door slid open. Grace went through and it closed behind her.

Inside, the air was cool and dry. Light came from an array of monitors, television screens, and control boards, and a single lamp standing on a table in the far left corner. The soft whir of casing fans and the hum of laser equipment mingled with the not unpleasant smell of silicon and plastic and toner. Comp, clad in lanky poet

style with a black ribbed shirt and dark jeans, stood over one of his more mysterious machines, his back to her.

"Just a sec. Hey, you don't need another one, do you? Keep it up and I'm gonna run out of dead people to resurrect." He didn't look at her as he spoke.

"Nope. Just straight cash this time."

"Cash, huh?" He hit a sequence of buttons and turned with a crooked grin—one corner of his mouth raised, the other stiff and crinkled with burn scars that spread in a fan across his jaw line and widened along his neck. She'd never asked, but she knew how it happened—a dissatisfied customer had surprised him with a mini blowtorch. Comp had written it off as a business expense and later returned the favor with a jagged bottle. "What do you have for me, kitten?"

"Cashier's check. Five grand." She unzipped the laptop bag, pulled one out and extended it toward him. He took it and stared.

"Golden Egg, huh? Their games are rigged. You know something I don't?"

Grace shrugged. "I have hunches."

The turned-up corner of his mouth descended like a drooping flag. "Is there some reason the slick I gave you won't hold up for this?"

*Damn.* She hadn't wanted to go into detail. "The slick's fine. But the alias is a little hot at the moment."

"Cops?"

Grace nodded.

"No big. I can change the name on this. For you, kitten, I'll even stick to the standard. Twenty-five percent. If you'll share your hunch about the Golden Egg with me."

"Sure. The blackjack tables post a three-deck spread, but they use four, and thin things out by removing the face cards and ten-spots from the last deck."

Comp laughed. "Some hunch." He tucked the check into a pocket. "Hundreds okay?"

"That's fine."

"Hang tight. I'll be right back." Comp edged around a bank of monitors and disappeared into the gloom.

Grace's gaze traveled the room in a slow circle. In addition to the money laundering and counterfeit ID service, Comp occasionally engaged in electronic spying and dirt-digging. For a price, he could find out just about anything concerning just about anyone—and if there was nothing to find, for a bigger price, he'd make something up.

A line of flat screens caught her attention. They displayed identical screensavers: rippling water, the brilliant blue of a mountain lake. As she watched, a realistic image of a rainbow trout broke the surface on the first screen and arched up to the right. When the head began to disappear at the right edge, the image slid into the next screen and continued until the trout plunged into the water there. The virtual fish leapt through all six screens, then emerged flailing on the end of a fishing line on the last one.

"I call that one hook, line and sucker." Comp came into the light with a thick stack of bills in one hand and his half-grin back on his face. "Thirty-seven fifty. Pre-crumpled for your convenience." He handed Grace the stack, and his expression grew serious. "You have somewhere to lay low for a while?"

"I think so." Grace tucked the cash in her bag in an inside zipper compartment. "I'm going to look up an old friend of the family."

"Good luck with that. See you around, kitten." Comp headed back for the mystery machine, and another idea occurred to Grace.

"Hey, Comp."

"Yeah?"

"Know a good place to get a few quick studs?"

His grin showed teeth. "There's one right here."

Grace snorted laughter. "I mean the metal variety."

"Crush a guy's ego, why don't you." He smiled still, and Grace understood. The only things that excited Comp processed binary code and ran on current. "There's a place on the boulevard that'll do you fast and clean, no questions. The Pony X. Should be open now."

"Thanks. You're a prince."

"I know."

Comp turned away, and Grace left with a small pang of regret. She wouldn't see him again. She missed him already.

\*\*\*\*

The packed train station allowed Grace to relax a little. She wouldn't be noticed easily here. It had taken longer than she anticipated to transform herself into Kayla Trumbull, apathetic Goth girl. She'd opted for an eyebrow ring and a small nose stud, and dyed her hair crayon-black. The license photo depicted her with dark brown hair and no jewelry, but the changes were unremarkable enough. The dye job couldn't be more obvious if she'd worn a sign that said *I just dunked my head in hot tar and set it on fire.*

Her outfit was a little over-the-top angst for her taste but it went with the image. She'd dressed in low-rider black jeans and a black zip hoodie emblazoned with aqua and gray skulls. The lace-up corset vest under the sweatshirt wasn't bad, but she'd only picked it up to maintain a seamless illusion, not to show off. And the plated skate shoes actually felt good on her feet. It had been a while since she'd worn sneakers.

The line at the Amtrak ticket windows snaked through two cordoned rows. Grace stood behind a middle-aged woman in business casual, who held the handle of a smoke gray wheeled tote in one hand and a cell phone in the other. With three windows open, the line moved at a steady pace, and in less than ten minutes the clerk at the far left window motioned Grace over.

"What can I do for you, young lady?"

The clerk, an older gentleman who managed to appear rumped in his crisp blue uniform, gave her a grandfather's grin, and Grace experienced a compulsion to lean

through the window and hug him. Strange. She never knew her grandfather. She cleared her throat. "I'd like a ticket to Syracuse, New York. Please."

"One way or round trip?"

"One way."

The clerk nodded like he'd known her answer all along. He turned to the computer terminal beside him and punched something in, hunt-and-peck style. A moment later he said, "We've got one leaving in forty minutes. Transfers in Salt Lake City and Chicago, and she'll get you there Friday night."

"That'll work."

"You betcha. I'll just need to see some identification."

Grace eased the Trumbull license from her front pocket and slid it into the cupped slot at the bottom of the window. The clerk plucked it from the depression, propped it on the back of the keyboard, and hunted and pecked some more. "Trumbull, huh?" he said while he typed. "Used to know some Trumbulls out near Boulder City. Had a daughter about your age. You related?"

"No." Grace snapped the word without meaning to. She sensed a pang of sadness from the clerk, and heard him think *such an awful thing. Tragic. The poor girl. Could have sworn her name was Kayla, too. Maybe it wasn't. You're getting old, Pete. Old, and stupid.*

Grace pressed her lips together to keep from blurting out a reassurance. Sometimes, it was hard not to answer people when they hadn't spoken aloud. Instead, she said gently, "I'm not from around here."

The clerk smiled. "Going home, are you?"

"Yeah." *Hell no. Never.*

While the clerk finished filing her fake information, Grace glanced around the inside of the ticket booth. It was fairly dark behind the glass. In addition to the clerks at the windows, half a dozen others occupied the space. A few closed doors stood in the back wall, probably leading to the inner offices. A cork bulletin board hung on the right, alongside the last door, with flyers and station announcements neatly stapled to the surface.

As she watched, a younger man in uniform stapled a fresh sheet of paper on the board. He stepped aside, turned to talk to a woman seated at a desk, and Grace read *MISSING*. Her younger self, blurred with darkness and distance, stared from beneath the damning word.

"All right, young lady. That'll be two-ten and sixty cents. Cash or charge?"

"Cash." Feeling gray as the photo on the flyer, Grace dug the two hundreds and the fifty she'd separated from her stash out of her pocket and slid it through. The cops had probably figured out that "Susan Donovan" had scored a sizeable sum and anticipated her leaving town. At least she hadn't decided to fly. Airport security was already rigid as hell. She knew they wouldn't launch a manhunt, but heightened awareness proved enough to get people looking harder than usual. Of course, her mother's reward offered a better incentive than justice or humanity. A hundred grand could make a "hero" out of just about anyone.

The clerk piled an accordion-folded ticket, her change, and the license in the window slot. "Don't forget to tag your carry-on bags. Enjoy your ride." He smiled and Grace returned the expression.

"Thanks." She scooped the stack out, stuffed it in a pocket without counting the change and headed for the waiting area before anyone decided to give her a second glance.

Though most of the wire mesh chairs were occupied, Grace managed to find an empty row of three near a window close to the boarding gate. She settled in, put the new sports bag she'd bought on the floor between her feet, and leaned the laptop bag against her body. Half an hour. She just needed to stay unnoticed for thirty minutes and she'd be safe again. For a while.

She leaned her head back and stared at the television screens mounted from the ceiling. Pairs of monitors, all tuned to the same news channel, were spaced throughout the waiting area every five rows or so. Though the sound barely carried over the general clamor filling the station, black bars across the bottom of the screens ran colored text transcriptions of the program. Grace watched without registering much. More violence in the Middle East. Some celebrity couple announcing their adoption of a token baby. A bizarre fashion show at a women's prison in south Florida. Must have been a slow day for international happenings.

A full screen banner announced local news. They ran the weather first. The weekly forecast showed five cheery, cartoonish suns lined up like a slots jackpot. Grace wondered why the Vegas meteorologists ever bothered letting people know it would be sunny and hot. Predicting the weather around here had to be about as exciting as fishing in a puddle.

The image cut to a coiffed anchorwoman. A text subtitle on the left of the screen read *Suspected Casino Fraud*. Grace stiffened for an instant and realized she was being ridiculous. Seconds later the Golden Egg Casino filled the screen, and ridiculous became wary.

A male reporter stood outside the place beside a pudgy, balding man stuffed into a cheap suit. The reporter's lips moved, and text scrolled through the bar. *Last night the Golden Egg Casino detained a woman they suspected of rigging the games to walk away with a whopping fifty thousand dollars. The casino's owner, Mr. Howard Liederman, tells us though they could not prove anything at the time, his hunch seems to have turned out correct. Can you tell us what happened, Mr. Liederman?*

A slow burn ignited in Grace's gut and spread. The crooked, greedy son of a bitch had gone to the media. Her fingers clenched tight in her lap, and she watched Liederman's face perform a pathetic semblance of concern. The text rolled. *We knew this woman, who claimed to be Susan Donovan, just wasn't right. Our cameras didn't catch her in the act but this morning, an FBI agent came to the casino to ask about Donovan. Fortunately, we had her records and I was able to tell her—the agent, I mean, where the woman was staying.*

The image changed and became Grace. A startlingly clear still-shot, culled from the casino's security feed, filled the screen. The reporter's words accompanied the picture: *Apparently, the local police have also taken an interest in Donovan, who may actually be Grace Carrington, the daughter of California socialite Kendra Carrington. Grace was reported missing two years ago...*

Panicked, her only thought to stop the devastating images before someone recognized her and put things together, Grace let her mind trace the power feed to the televisions and cut them all off at once. A loud electronic screech resounded through the waiting area and the center screen directly in front of Grace emitted a shower of popping sparks. Smoke hissed from the vented plastic on the heels of the fireworks. Dimly aware that her lack of reaction appeared suspicious, Grace leapt to her feet, grabbed the bag from the floor and scuttled away. Amid the shocked murmurs of the crowd, she headed for the restrooms to compose herself.

She stayed in a stall, shivering and perched on a closed toilet, for a full ten minutes. *FBI agent?* How the hell was that possible? Either Liederman had lied through his teeth to get on television, or whoever visited him had a damned good cover. Two possibilities occurred to Grace. The first was her mother, who may have had hired a marginally talented private investigator.

The second, and the one she feared more accurate, was the red-haired woman.

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## Chapter 6

Lorin sensed a ripple of power, tiny but definite. She glanced at Silver, further back in the alley. "You felt that. Didn't you?"

Silver nodded. He squatted on his haunches beside the broken body of the cop who'd responded to the call from the Three Sailors Motel. A faint, troubled look clung to Silver's normally vacant features. "More?" he whispered weakly.

Lorin held up a hand. She approached the cop and frowned over him. She wouldn't have had Silver hurt him at all if he hadn't insisted on checking her identification. Unfortunately, the cop didn't seem to know where the Nephil had gone. They'd been at this for almost an hour. Silver was running out of bones to break.

She knelt beside the cop's head. "My apologies, human," she said gently. His eyes, which had rolled back in his head, tried to focus on her. Alarm filled them. "Try not to worry. Hell is a lie, and so is Heaven—at least, as you know them. You'll be recycled. Better luck next time." She stood and nodded to Silver.

*Finish him off.*

Silver snapped the cop's neck with one hard twist.

"Come on." Lorin circled the corpse and gripped Silver's wrist. "Find out where that power came from and get us there. Now."

"Can't." Silver struggled to speak the word.

"Are you refusing me?"

"No. If I move us, I may lose it. It's ... weak. I can't focus on it."

Uneasy, Lorin relaxed her hold. Silver had never faltered on even the most impossible tasks she set for him. Had she gone too far with him last night? Perhaps he still hadn't healed. Next time, she would opt for length over intensity. "Fine. We'll walk, then. Move fast and avoid the humans as much as possible. Remember, you aren't to speak with them."

"Yes, Lorin." He shuddered, and made his way out of the alley, headed for downtown Las Vegas.

\* \* \* \*

The train pulled out of the station right on schedule despite the disruption Grace caused. Apparently, when she'd blown out the televisions, she'd also shorted a few computers, ATMs and digital information kiosks. Whoops. At least it had kept the station employees too distracted to notice her.

Still, she couldn't relax. Just before the train began boarding, she'd sensed the electrical presence that had troubled her at the casino—faint, and growing stronger. At first, she had thought the sensation stemmed from the others like her, the ones who'd been killed. Now she realized the feeling might be that woman, or the monster.

Grace sat beside a window in the last passenger car. The seat next to her remained empty. Altogether, no more than twenty people occupied this car, which suited Grace just fine. For the next eight hours, at least, she wouldn't have to make small talk or studiously ignore a stranger.

Thankful that trains didn't have televisions, Grace reclined her seat and turned toward the wall. Her eyelids felt weighted and gritty. As Vegas fell behind and the sizzling undercurrent of her intuition faded, the cadenced rattle and sway of the train loosened her muscles. Tension drained from her limbs until she felt fused with the seat. She closed her eyes and drifted.

The forest again. The chasm seemed closer this time, the light filtering through the trees stronger. Lattices of shadow lay on the ground and transformed the soft moss beneath her feet into a labyrinthine landscape. She moved forward, but the divide she longed to explore remained the same distance away. Why couldn't she reach it? A gentle wind cooled her brow and swirled discarded leaves. The breeze caught a single browned maple leaf and whisked it toward the ravine in quick loops.

A shaft of brilliant sunlight pierced the forest canopy and plunged into the chasm like a spotlight from heaven. The leaf entered the light, became charged with it, glowing as though it would burst into flame. It seesawed back and forth and descended into the shadow of the ravine, leaving her behind.

Grace woke with a sob lodged in her throat. Now she knew how the lame child who couldn't follow the Pied Piper felt. This place she dreamed about seemed more real than anywhere she'd been. Maybe she would find her father there. Maybe he could explain everything, tell her why she'd been cursed with such marvelous, crippling gifts. Where she'd come from, and where she belonged.

The train had stopped. Grace returned her seat upright and glanced out the window. Another station, and dozens of people had lined up to board. Damn. She might end up with a seatmate after all. She considered tossing her bag onto the empty seat beside her, but someone would only ask her to move it. At least she would only have to suffer company until the transfer at Salt Lake. The overnight to Chicago from there wouldn't be full.

The car swayed as the boarding passengers made their way back. An increase in noise swallowed the comforting hum of the cabin fans. Traveling companions muttered to one another, bags thumped into overhead compartments. A young mother shushed a fidgeting toddler. Grace stared out the window and willed them all to find other seats.

"Is anyone sitting here?"

The hesitant question was so quiet, Grace couldn't tell whether the voice was male or female. She turned to find a teenage girl, sixteen or seventeen, decked in full Goth glory. Black clothes, too much silver jewelry, blue hair. Great. The girl probably thought she'd found a kindred spirit. "Go for it," Grace murmured, and returned her attention to the window.

"Thanks." The girl sat down, and Grace realized she hadn't put anything in the overhead. Curious, she glanced aside. The girl carried a single strap backpack, similar to the one Grace had abandoned a lifetime ago at the motel, and nothing more. She dug through the bag, produced a slim MP3 player, and plugged the headphone buds into her ear. Next from the bag came a battered notebook with a pen stuffed into the spiral coil. The girl lowered the folding table from the seat in front of her, tossed the notebook on the surface, and started fiddling with the player.

Relieved the girl had something to keep her occupied, Grace leaned back and closed her eyes. Within minutes the train was in motion again. Making a mental note to pick up a pair of headphones and maybe a few DVDs for her laptop at the transfer station, Grace attempted to relax. Sleep flirted with her for a few moments, until the girl's voice drew her back.

"Hey, can you watch my bag for a sec? I gotta pee."

A strange urgency edged the girl's statement. "Sure," Grace said. She opened her eyes, and saw one of the conductors at the opposite end of the car collecting tickets. The girl's gaze darted to him for an instant and dropped.

"Thanks." She eased out of the seat and made a beeline for the bathroom at the back of the car.

Grace watched the conductor. At once, she realized the girl didn't have a ticket. Not smart. No way she'd stay unnoticed the whole trip, even if she managed to hide out in the bathroom until the conductor left the car. The ticket-puncher reached Grace, glanced at her and moved on. Maybe he hadn't seen the girl get up. Moments after he left the car, the girl returned and sat down with outward nonchalance. Her thoughts, however, were not nearly as calm as her appearance.

*Jesus what am I gonna do if they find me I can't go back please don't find me he'll kill me if he finds out I tried to run.*

The terror Grace sensed from the girl pierced her heart. She tried to think of something to say that wouldn't betray the knowledge she shouldn't have, but before she could speak, a shadow fell across their seats and the conductor grunted, "Need your ticket."

"Oh. Er, hang on." *Shit oh shit maybe I can play this off please let me stay.* The girl fumbled for her bag and rifled through the contents. A minute passed, then two. The conductor glowered down at her. "Um..."

"Can't you find it?" Grace said.

The girl flinched like she'd been slapped. "No," she said cautiously.

Grace gave the conductor a cool stare. "She's with me. She had her ticket a second ago. It was right there on the seat. You sure you didn't punch it already?"

"I didn't see it." The conductor sent an awkward glance up the aisle. "Look, I'm not supposed to let you stay on without a ticket..."

"We'll pay for it again. We're going to Syracuse." Grace lifted her laptop bag, opened it, and separated three hundreds. "You can call the next station, and get her a replacement printed for the transfers, right? And keep the change." She reached behind the girl and held the bills out to the conductor. He blinked rapidly, accepted the money and pocketed it.

"Sure, yeah. I can. Need your name, though." He produced a small pad and a pencil.

The girl shook herself. "Megan. Jones. Megan Jones."

The conductor printed the name laboriously. "Make sure you pick up that replacement."

When he disappeared through the rear door, Megan released a gusting breath. "Wow," she whispered. "Why did you ... I mean, thank you, but why?"

Grace shrugged. "Just seemed like the right thing to do. It was, wasn't it?"

"I guess." Megan stared at her feet. "I can't pay you back. And how did you know I was going to Syracuse?"

"I didn't, but that's where I'm going, and he'd already seen my ticket."

"Oh."

Grace managed a smile. "I'm Kayla."

"I'm M-Megan." *Oh man quit stuttering you dope she heard you the first time.*

"It's okay. I don't like my name either."

Megan laughed, and the tension drained visibly from her. "Thank you. Seriously."

"You're welcome."

The train gathered speed, and carried them both further from harm's reach.

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## Chapter 7

Within minutes, Megan had fallen asleep. Grace couldn't manage to drop off again, so she got her laptop out and engaged in a bit of research regarding her destination. Fifteen minutes into her search, she discovered the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, which informed her that when visiting the great state of New York, she would find 176 parks to choose from. And that was not counting the miles of wilderness.

Finding her father might be harder than she'd thought.

She abandoned the hope of stumbling across a photograph of the forest in her dreams. For a moment she considered looking for the man himself, but she had no idea where to begin. Her mother had never even bothered mentioning his name. Almost without thinking, she plugged *Nephilim* into a search engine instead.

The hits numbered over a million. She scanned the text snippets and found several allusions that the Biblical Nephilim had been giants, deformed and horned monsters like the popular conceptions of the devil. It certainly didn't describe the witch or her killer. Grace didn't make a habit of judging women's appearances, but the redhead was gorgeous—in a cold, psychotic sort of way. And the head-ripper ... she'd never seen a more attractive man. Even covered in blood, he could stop traffic. Okay, anyone covered in blood could stop traffic. That was beside the point.

His eyes. They didn't glow, exactly, but the color of them ... like honey in the sunshine, filtered through red-brown glass. She could still see them without half trying.

Grace shook herself and concentrated on the screen. On the second page of results, she found a link that mentioned Nephilim and UFOs. Something called SARET. Intrigued, she clicked on it, and discovered the Society for the Advancement and Recognition of Extraterrestrials. A quick scan of the shoddy but convincingly worded website revealed these people believed the Nephilim were actually aliens, and the scientifically ignorant folks in Biblical times had simply misunderstood their origins.

She'd almost rather believe in aliens than angels herself.

Grace settled in to read the information on the website, which contained pages and pages of documentation, personal essays and dissertations by SARET members, and a handful of blurred photographs said to have been taken at Area 51. Her initial impression shifted gradually away from belief. When she found an article detailing the proper ritual to harvest power from a captured alien-slash-Nephil, complete with links to photographic evidence, she shuddered and closed the window. This was a cult of the most dangerous order—the kind that looked rational on the surface. She mentally added “card-carrying SARET members” to her list of people to avoid, and resumed watching the night landscape fly past outside.

A soft moan rose from the figure balled in the next seat. Megan gasped and sat up, her eyes wild and unfocused. “Black,” she blurted. “Don’t go down there.”

Though Grace knew they were remnants of a personal nightmare, Megan’s words chilled her. She reached for her, intending to wake her fully, but Megan shuddered and slumped back against the seat. “How long did I sleep?”

“A few hours.” Grace realized she’d left her laptop running, and started the shutdown. “We should get to Salt Lake soon, and there’s a layover and transfer there.”

“Good. I need a smoke like you wouldn’t believe.”

Grace laughed. “Me, too.” In truth, she didn’t need one. For some reason the physical addiction had never taken hold, but the emotional one ebbed and flowed according to her stress level. Since her current stress had reached somewhere around orbital heights, she could use a cigarette. Maybe a stiff drink, too.

“We have a lot in common.” Megan offered a tentative smile. “It’s kind of funny. We could be sisters or something.”

Grace stared at her laptop. *Damn it.* She’d already gotten too close. She couldn’t afford friends, especially a green girl who took stupid risks like boarding trains without a ticket. Resolved to stop this conversation before it started, she shut the lid and slid the computer back into her bag. And said nothing.

Megan tried to suppress a sigh. It didn’t work. The girl produced her headphones and notebook, stuffed the buds in her ears, and started scribbling away, holding the cover at just enough of an angle to hide whatever she was writing.

The relative silence in the car, blended by the steady whisper of the train’s air circulation system, amplified Megan’s pen scratching on the paper. Occasionally she paused, vigorously crossed something out, and started again. Grace pinned her gaze to the window, but her attention insisted on returning to Megan. The girl’s thoughts ran in a steady stream, clear enough for Grace to hear if she chose.

*Crap, what did I do? I’m such a moron. Sisters. Sheesh. Why can’t I just shut up? I wish she’d ask me what I’m writing. Nobody ever asks. What if Michael doesn’t like me either? I’ll have to find a job. Where will I live? I’m hungry. Did I eat all those cereal bars already? Eyes. Cries, lies, dies, flies ... compromise? No, disguise. It would be so wicked if she asked me what I’m writing. I can be cool about it. If she asks, I’m not gonna gush. I’ll just shrug about it, like it’s no big deal. Maybe she’ll talk to me then. I hope she’ll let me bum a smoke. Guess I shouldn’t ask her, though. Ask me what I’m writing! God, I’m stupid. Nobody cares about me...*

Grace stifled a grin. Though her gut told her to let it drop, put some distance between them and avoid the inevitable questions, she leaned closer to Megan and said, “Hey. What are you writing?”

*Holy shit! Be cool. Don’t blow it.* “Oh, nothin’ much. I’m just working on a song.”

“You write songs?”

“Yeah. I sing, too. I’m gonna—” *Shut up, you idiot! She didn’t ask for your life story.* “It’s no big deal.”

“I think it’s really cool.”

“You do?”

“Yes. It’s awesome. I could never write songs.”

“Well, I don’t do all the parts. Just the lyrics, you know, and the tune sometimes. But when I get to Webster, that’s where I’m going after Syracuse, there’s this guy and he wants me to sing in his band...” Megan trailed off. Her lips pressed together and she dropped her gaze to the notebook.

“What kind of band?” Grace prompted. She had a feeling if she asked enough questions, the girl would just keep babbling and save her the trouble of attempting small talk. She’d never been a great conversationalist. No sense talking to people she’d have to eventually avoid.

Megan looked at her. “You really want to know? I mean, I don’t want to bore you or anything.”

“I’m not bored.”

“Really?” Megan beamed. “Okay. So, I met this guy online...”

Megan poured the story out with quiet desperation, as though it would poison her if it stayed inside much longer. She had a troubled home life. She glossed over that part, and Grace didn’t search her thoughts to find out more. She’d met Michael, a guitar player who claimed to be twenty-two, in an online music forum, and they had clicked right away. Michael’s band played weekends in a variety of bars and clubs in western New York and enjoyed a degree of success. When the band’s singer quit over “creative differences,” Megan had half-jokingly suggested that she move out there and take the singer’s place. Michael had been enthusiastic about the idea, and Megan made the colossal decision to go for it. And here she was.

By the time Megan finished talking, the train began to slow for the arrival at the Salt Lake station. Grace tried to ignore the knowledge that she’d have to somehow sever this blossoming companionship between them—because for now, it was nice to have a friend.

The train stopped. The lights in the car came up and the people around them stirred gradually: rousing those who’d fallen asleep, gathering purses and scattered belongings, pulling luggage down from the racks above the seats. Megan thrust her notebook into her bag and watched the shuffling exodus but made no move to rise.

“We’ll be here for a while,” Grace said. “How about that smoke? You can have one of mine.”

Megan threw her a smirk. “You reading my mind or what?”

*Actually, yes.* The temptation to confess passed quickly. Grace had learned the hard way that telling the truth convinced people she was a lunatic. “Come on. They’re going to kick us off anyway.”

Grinning, Megan stood and merged into the exiting throng. Grace followed. The loading platform gave way to stairs that opened into the train station waiting area. There were a few fast food places to choose from. After they stepped out, she’d get her and Megan something to eat while they waited for the transfer.

Grace started to remind Megan that she’d have to pick up the “replacement” ticket before they boarded the next train. Before she could speak, a familiar and

unwelcoming electric sensation coursed through her, stronger than it had ever been. Her senses heightened to an almost painful level. Within the vivid miasma of sight, sound and smell enfolding her, she was compelled to direct her gaze to the left.

Eyes of crimson-tinged honey met hers across the lobby. The monster stood before a window, real as the floor beneath her. He exuded complete apathy. No trace of emotion or intent lurked in his posture or his deceptively beautiful face. Her heart seized for an instant and leapt into her throat to hammer fear into every breath.

He stepped aside to reveal the red-haired witch, wearing an executioner's smile.

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## Chapter 8

"Kayla? What's wrong? Are you all right ... Kayla!"

Grace finally realized Megan was talking to her. She'd forgotten the name she gave the girl. "I..."

*You're dead, Nephil.*

The woman's voice ricocheted in her head. Grace tore her gaze from the awful grin and tensed, searching for an escape route.

*You can't run. I'll find you.*

Grace squeezed her eyes shut. "Megan." Her lips barely moved. "You have to get your ticket. Go—" She gasped. Pain tore through her head like a fishhook plunged into her brain. Thoughts and images flowed without her permission from the phantom rip: her mother, her first experience with power, her casino rip-off tour. The cop at the motel. Comp Roberts. *No!* She held on to that one, and felt the other woman attempt to pry it from her mind.

The tugging sensation stopped.

*Fear me. I am your end.*

She opened her eyes. They were gone.

"You look seriously sick. Do you want to sit down for a minute?"

Grace blinked hard. Still gone. "Did you see them?"

"See who?"

"A man, and a woman with red hair. Over there." She pointed toward the window. *Jesus. Maybe I am going crazy.*

"I don't see anybody."

"No, they aren't there any more. But..." Her legs trembled beneath her. "You didn't see them?"

"Well, I wasn't looking over there. I was scoping out the bathrooms, and then you went white as a corpse. Hey, I gotta write that down." Megan fumbled with her bag and managed to scribble something in her notebook without taking it out. "Anyway, was it somebody you know?"

"No. Well, yes. I don't know ... it was nobody. Let's go outside."

"Cool."

They crossed the lobby and exited through the double set of glass doors leading to a semi-circle turnaround drive and a massive parking lot. A bus rumbled at the far right end of the drive and a knot of people stood smoking near its open doors. Two were women. Neither had red hair.

Grace headed to the left and sat down on an empty bench. The warmth of the night air conflicted with the cold uncoiling inside her. Had she really been the only one to see them? Impossible. The crowd outside the casino had definitely reacted to the brutal murder, though they'd seemed to have forgotten about it immediately afterward.

Of course, the crowd's reaction would have been the same if they'd only seen a girl's head fly off her body in a shower of blood for no discernible reason.

No. They couldn't be invisible. This was reality, not a comic book, damn it. And if Grace sometimes felt like joining up with the X-Men, well, urban legends had to start somewhere. Resolute, she opened her laptop bag and found her cigarette case, took two out and passed one to Megan. She lit them both and ignored the impulse to peer into the shadows in case the killers lurked out there.

Why hadn't they come after her? They apparently had no qualms about killing people in front of witnesses. Grace's abilities served her well in a lot of situations, but she doubted she could stop the monster if he decided to tear her apart. So why wait? The woman seemed intent on playing with her, forcing her to contemplate imminent and brutal death.

Grace decided she didn't want to play.

"So," Megan said after a minute. "You want to tell me who those people were?"

"No."

"Okay." Megan shrugged and drew on her smoke. "Where are you headed?"

"Syracuse."

"You said that already. I mean, what's there for you? Do you live there?"

Grace sighed. "Can we talk about something besides me?"

"Sure. What kind of music do you like?"

"That's still about me." Grace smiled. "But I can answer that one. Actually, I like just about everything."



"Even country?"

"Some of it, yeah."

Megan made a face. "I hate country. I only listen to rock."

"You should broaden your horizons then." Grace dropped her cigarette in the tall, thin receptacle beside the bench, helpfully labeled *The Smoke Stand*, and got out her laptop. "Grab your headphones. I want you to hear something."

Megan flashed her a skeptical look, but she extracted her MP3 player and unplugged the headphones.

"Trust me. You'll like it." When the computer finished putting itself together, Grace logged on to her favorite video sharing website and found a copy of Alan Jackson's "The Talkin' Song Repair Blues." She jacked Megan's headphones in, settled the computer on the girl's lap. "Check this out."

Megan stared at the screen like she'd just been told to eat all her Brussels sprouts. Within seconds her dubious expression became a smile, then laughter.

Grace chuckled. The song was about a car mechanic overcharging Jackson for a laundry list of ridiculous repairs. In the second verse, the mechanic told the singer he'd written a song and asked for opinions. Jackson returned a mocking litany of problems with the mechanic's song and offered to "fix" it for a price—more than the mechanic quoted for the car. She knew Megan would get it right away.

The song ended and Megan pulled one of the ear buds out, grinning. "Damn, that was funny! Okay, my turn. Just thought of a good one." She located the search box and typed something in. "Your computer is awesome. What kind of a connection do you have on this thing?"

Grace froze for an instant. Lying had become second nature for her, no big deal—but it bothered her to lie to Megan. "I don't really know," she said. "I just told them I wanted to be able to get online all the time and this is what they gave me."

"Gotta be a WiFi, then. Whatever it is, it definitely works." Megan surrendered the ear buds and passed the laptop over. "The vid sucks, but the song rocks."

"Okay." Grace clicked the play arrow first, and glanced at the caption. Her breath caught when she read *Killer Angels—The Chase*. She stopped the feed and stared at Megan. "What is this?"

Megan's brow furrowed. "It's an indy band in Rochester. Michael knows their guitar player. Why ... what's wrong?"

"Nothing." *Just a coincidence*, Grace told herself. Still, her hand shook a little as she restarted the video, which turned out to be a recording from a club show. Whoever had recorded it seemed to fancy themselves an accomplished action director. Unfortunately, they didn't have the right equipment and the video was a montage of blurred close-ups and jittery cuts. The music, on the other hand, sounded great.

Two cigarettes and ten songs later, Grace glanced at the laptop's system clock and swore. "We have to go. We're going to miss the train!" She unplugged Megan's headphones, shut the computer down, and stood. "Tell you what. You go grab your tickets, I'll get us some dinner, and we'll meet at the gate. Okay?"

Megan stood reluctantly and stared at her feet. "You don't have to buy me dinner."

"I want to."

"Why? I mean, you don't even know me. You'll probably never see me again. And I can't pay you back." Megan blinked rapidly and a funny little hitch escaped her throat.

"You are paying me back." Grace scrambled to think of something the girl could do that didn't involve money. Inspiration struck. "You're going to write me a song."

"I am?" Megan looked up. Her eyes narrowed. "You don't have to humor me, you know. I'm not an idiot. My songs are worthless."

Grace caught the dull edge of loneliness in the girl's voice, the expectation of rejection. She knew the feeling too well. "Come on. How many people get to have songs about them? And you've already got one line down, and a band waiting for you." She held out a hand. "Write me a song, and we're even. Deal?"

"If you say so." Megan frowned, but she took the offered hand with palpable relief.

"Good. Now, what kind of sub do you want?"

"Ham and Swiss, with everything but onions."

Grace laughed. "Sounds good. See you at the gate."

They headed inside the train station. Grace only glanced over her shoulder once. No psychotic angels, invisible or otherwise, leered at her from the shadows.

\* \* \* \*

On the nearly empty train, Grace and Megan agreed to take seats across the aisle from each other with the caveat that if things got crowded, Megan would move over to Grace's side. It was after one in the morning when the train pulled out. Time to try for some sleep.

Grace faked it until she heard Megan's even breathing from the next seat. She slipped out and headed for the bathroom at the back of the car. Her contacts were fine to occasionally sleep with, but they had to be cleaned. Her eyes had been burning for a while now. She didn't relish the idea of waking up with swollen, watering eyeballs.

Cramming herself and her bag into the miniature bathroom proved tricky. She managed to wedge her bag under the narrow sink, and knelt to retrieve her cleaning kit while the train rolled and swayed beneath. Kit in hand, she set it on the counter and washed her hands, then lined the stainless steel basin with paper towels.

Though she was supposed to leave the moisturizing drops in for ten minutes, she only waited two or three before she removed the lenses. She didn't want to be in here long, especially with her contacts out. Filling the lens case with cleaning solution, she nudged them into the bath and stared at her reflection. *Freak*. Her glowing eyes served to put everything else over the top—with the piercings and the burnt mop on her head, she looked like a metal band groupie on a drug binge. Maybe that was how others like her survived in the real world. She giggled at the thought. Some conspiracy theory. Yes indeed, Marilyn Manson was actually a crossbred alien with supernatural powers. Or whatever. She'd bet the good nutcases of SARET would love to interview him.

Grace popped her lens case open, extracted and shook the right lens dry, and popped it in place with practiced ease. When she went for the left, the train lurched, sloshing liquid and lens out at once. The lens landed on the counter to teeter on the edge. Grace made a grab for the rapidly sliding contact. Her foot slipped forward and her balance shifted backward. The back of her head cracked solidly against the rear wall.

"Damn it!" She managed to grab the toilet and keep from going down completely. She straightened by awkward degrees, rubbed the back of her head. The contact had disappeared.

Grace inched toward the sink and hoped she hadn't already stepped on it. A closer inspection of the floor around the base revealed a quarter-inch gap between the sink's drainpipe and the floor. Flashes of the track below skimmed the space. She had no doubt her contact had found its way to the great outdoors.

Wonderful. This was her last brown pair. She'd have to use a different color. Megan would probably wonder why a night's sleep had made her brown eyes blue. Or green. She'd use the green ones. Megan's eyes were blue, and the girl might think she was a stalker or something.

She put them in quickly, tossed everything back in her bag, and weaved her way back to her seat. Megan hadn't stirred. Grace slid over to the window seat, propped her complimentary train pillow over the armrest, and curled on both seats. She closed her eyes and the forest returned.

Night this time. She stood closer, bathed in the songs of crickets and spring peepers. An owl's mournful hoot drifted on a feathering breeze. Though the floor of the ravine still wasn't visible from her position, silver-white moonlight washed the opposite wall. Tree roots clung to the edge of the drop and a tangled mass of creeper vines curled down the surface.

She willed herself toward the chasm. She wanted to dangle her feet over the edge, slide down the vines, and explore the cool shadows waiting in the depths. She moved and the ravine moved with her, remaining just out of her reach. A profound and painful sadness settled into her. She struggled harder against the invisible chains that kept her from this place.

*Black. Don't go down there.*

Grace whimpered. The words unraveled the dream. She wanted to stay.

*Hey. Wake up.*

The ravine retreated in the distance. The woods thickened around her and the ground shuddered.

*Please wake up I need help.*

Megan's voice. Not part of the dream. The shuddering ground became the rumble of the train. Grace surfaced from the depths of unconsciousness toward the light—and found it coming from a pair of glowing blue eyes.

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## Chapter 9

"I'm sorry," Megan whispered. "I wasn't going to wake you, but you started thrashing around and I thought you might fall. And ... I feel really weird."

Grace blinked several times. Shook her head. Megan's eyes remained luminous and worried. *When did that happen?*

"When did what happen?"

*Oh, crap.*

"What do you mean? Kayla, what's going on?"

"Megan." The remaining sleep fog dissipated and Grace knifed upright. *Do me a favor and close your eyes.* She didn't dare speak aloud. If anyone else was awake, the bizarre request would attract attention.

"Why?"

*Please. Trust me.*

"Okay, but I don't know how this is going to help." The glow disappeared.

Heart racing, Grace fumbled her bag onto her shoulder and tried not to think random thoughts. "We have to go to the bathroom." *Don't open your eyes until I tell you. I'll lead you. Don't let go, and don't say anything.* She grabbed Megan's hand, slid into the aisle, and shuffled toward the back of the car.

Megan came without a struggle, but her panicked thoughts screamed in Grace's head. *What's going on what's wrong with me am I bleeding why is everything so fuzzy I think I'm going to faint....*

Grace squeezed her hand in what she hoped was reassurance, though her grip felt desperate and clammy. It seemed ages before they reached the bathroom. She slid the door open, entered, and pulled Megan in after her. She reached around the girl, locked them in and turned her so she faced away from the mirror.

"Okay," Grace whispered on a shaking breath. "You can open your eyes. But I need you to try and stay calm, all right? I'm sorry for freaking you out. You're okay."

Megan's eyes fluttered open and fixed on Grace with shimmering fear. "What happened? Why did you bring me in here?"

Grace shushed her. "Take a deep breath. I'll explain, but you've got to keep it together. Can you do that?"

Megan nodded.

"Okay. First things first." She paused. *Can you hear my voice?*

Megan flinched. "How ... did you do that? Throw your voice?"

*You're reading my mind.*

"Bullshit. Come on, this isn't funny. Stop messing with me."

"Think back, Megan. When you woke me up, I didn't say anything but you still answered me. Those were my thoughts. You heard them."

"No. You said ... You said 'When did that happen?' and I didn't know what you meant."

I didn't say it. I thought it."

Megan shivered. *This is crazy. This can't be happening.*

"It's not crazy and it is happening. I can hear your thoughts, too."

"Jesus!" Megan stumbled back and bumped the sink. Before Grace could stop her, she whirled to face the mirror. She caught sight of herself, drew a sharp breath.

Grace grabbed her from behind and clamped a hand over her mouth. The scream vibrated against her palm.

"You can't do that. People will hear you. What do you think will happen if anyone sees your eyes like that? Calm down."

Megan froze for an instant, then frenzied against the grip Grace held. Her chest heaved with ragged gulps of air. *Let go of me you crazy bitch!*

Grace released her and stepped back. The girl's statement stung, more than any of the thousand insults she'd borne with stoic detachment over the years. "Fine. You go out there and tell someone the crazy bitch in the bathroom is reading your mind. With that lunatic story and those freak eyes, I'm sure you'll be a big hit in the psych ward."

Paling, Megan slumped forward and leaned on the sink. "Oh God. I'm sorry. I just ... can't believe this. It's impossible."

"You have to believe it because it's true. The sooner you accept it, the easier everything will be. Not that it's at all easy. But it's manageable most of the time."

Megan turned slowly, sniffled once. "What's happening to me?"

"I don't know. I only know that it happened to me six years ago, and I didn't have anyone there to keep me from flipping out. So I know what happens when you let it get to you. They lock you up and throw away the key."

"Shit." Megan stared at her. "Okay, so I can hear your thoughts and you can hear mine. But your eyes aren't all screwed up. They look..." She blinked. "Green? I thought they were brown."

"They were." Grace lowered her head and pinched out one of her contacts. She looked at Megan. "They're naturally this color. I call it 'post-nuclear reactor.'"

Megan uttered a weak laugh, and Grace finally let herself relax a little. She'd never voluntarily shown anyone her eyes. It was almost a relief. She replaced the lens and crouched to open her bag. "All right, let's get you covered. Ever worn contacts before?"

"You have more of them?"

"Lots. They're kind of a necessity." Grace smirked up at her. "We'd better stick with blue for you. Somebody might ask questions." She picked out a fresh blue pair in a blister pack, a lens case, and a bottle of saline solution. Straightening, she handed the supplies to Megan. "Stick the case in your pocket for now."

Megan nodded and did so. "Now what?"

Grace walked her through the steps, surprised to find the girl calm and willing to listen. At first she felt stiff and distant, as though she were giving a complicated order at a restaurant. Gradually, Grace realized her smile came easier, her words emerged lighter. She'd set aside her reserves, if only for a moment.

Friendship had never been in her repertoire. She hoped she was doing it right.

After Megan had both contacts in place, Grace put things back and reached for the door. "The train will make a stop soon. We might as well get out and smoke, and try to sleep after that."

"Good idea." Megan shifted and threw her arms around Grace. "Thank you, Kayla. I would be so screwed right now without you."

She hesitantly returned the embrace. "It's Grace."

"Huh?"

"My name is Grace. I ... just wanted you to know."

"Grace. I like that name better. It fits you."

"Thanks."

Grace sent Megan out first to allay suspicion, in case anyone was awake. She stood in place for long moments after the girl left. In an instant, her world had changed, the future an ominous fog of uncertainty. For better or worse, she'd finally found someone like herself. And her head was still attached—for now.

With the witch and the monster hunting her down though, she suspected things would only get worse.

\* \* \* \*

"So, like, before. When I said you were reading my mind, you really were."

Grace and Megan sat on a narrow ledge at the base of a massive pillar. The train purred in place on the opposite side. A bleary-eyed conductor had informed them they would be stopped for twenty minutes and cautioned them not to leave the platform.

"Yes," Grace admitted. "I didn't mean to. When I'm near someone and they're thinking really loud, I can't help hearing. It just jumps into my head. Haven't figured out how to stop that yet."

"I hear something right now. A lot of whispers. I can't understand them."

Grace nodded. "That's what I learned to tune out. I'll try to help you do that too."

"Cool." Megan drew on her cigarette. Her hand trembled when she lowered her arm. "What else have you heard me thinking?"

"Not much."

Megan gave her a doubtful look.

"Honest. I don't like spying in people's head." Grace glanced at the sky. Thin layers of clouds rippled across the surface in measured rows, obscuring all but the brightest stars. The sky in her dream had been clear. "I can pick up some things on purpose, but not everything. And I don't usually go looking for information. I haven't with you."

"All right. I trust you." Megan leaned forward and propped her arms on her thighs. "This is so unreal. You know what's the worst thing about it? My stepfather was right."

"What do you mean?"

"He always said there was something wrong with me. He'd jump into my room all the time, trying to 'catch' me at ... whatever. And he—" She shuddered and hung her head. "Nobody ever believed me. Not even my own mother. After she died, he did it all the time."

"Did what?"

Megan slumped further.

"Hey."

She looked up, bit her lip.

"I'll believe you," Grace said. "If you want to tell me."

Instead of replying, Megan glanced around to see if anyone was watching and pushed up the sleeve of her sweatshirt. Scores of needle marks stippled the fold of her elbow and marched down her forearm. "Everyone I've shown just thinks I'm a junkie." Her voice shook and she yanked the sleeve back down. "But it was him. He had this room in the basement. He made ... I don't know. The black formula, he called it, and he kept testing it on me. He took blood from me too, every week, and sent it to this group he works for. S-A-R-something. Sarter, or Sartie..."

Grace's stomach turned. "Not SARET."

"Oh no. That's it. How do you know that?"

"I ran across their website. They think..." Grace glanced at her. "What about your real father? Who is he?"

"I don't know. Mom never talked about him, but I think it was a one-night stand kind of thing. I've never met him."

"Damn." Grace drew a sharp breath. "This group, SARET. They think we're half alien."

"What?"

"Yeah, they're pretty persuasive about it too. I was hoping you knew your father because I've never met mine either. So there's no proof there."

"Do you think it's true? About the aliens?"

Grace frowned. "No. I considered it but there are too many flaws in their arguments. I know they're convinced, though, and that makes them dangerous. The other possibility..."

When she didn't continue, Megan asked, "What's the other possibility?"

Grace hesitated. She didn't want to scare Megan, but she owed her the truth. Better to let her know what she might be up against.

"Yeah, the truth would be nice."

"Huh?"

"Did you forget already? I can read your mind now too."

A short laugh escaped Grace. "Guess I need to stop thinking so loud. Okay, the truth—at least as much as I know of it."

She started with the flying woman. Megan listened, cringing when she mentioned the decapitation and the room full of body parts. When she told her about the woman's voice in her head and what she'd called her—*Nephilim*—the color drained from Megan's features.

"You mean, like, half angels?" she whispered.

Grace nodded. "This woman might be a member of SARET, because they use that term too. But I don't think she is. It's not likely she's Nephilim, if there is such a thing, because she apparently hates them. Us. Whatever. I just don't know. But I suppose either she actually believes she's an angel..."

"Or she actually is," Megan said.

"Yes. And that's where I start having trouble." Grace sent her a puzzled look. "How did you know about the Nephilim?"

"Sunday school." Megan scuffed a heel against the pillar. "The church Mom went to was really out there. We learned all about the angels coming down here and sleeping with women and creating monsters. The Nephilim are in the Bible, you know?" She glanced up as though the night sky held the answers. "All my friends, the ones who didn't go to our church, believed angels were fluffy harp-players with robes and white wings. But our minister said they were God's enforcers, and if we didn't behave the angels would smite us in our sleep."

"If there's any truth to this mess, I think your minister might have been on to something." Grace laughed to cover the worry plucking her taut nerves. "Come on. We'd better get back on the train or they'll leave without us."

Nodding, Megan stood and followed her to the door. "Grace?" she said just before they boarded. Her voice sounded strained.

"What's wrong?"

"Can I ... sit with you?" *I'm scared.*

A lump formed in Grace's throat. "Sure. Of course you can."

The darkened, silent car offered a temporary haven. Grace found her seat and slid over next to the window. Megan grabbed her bag from across the aisle, plunked

down next to her, and settled the bag on the floor between her feet. The train eased through the night.

In less than five minutes, Megan dozed off, though her sleep was not easy. She twisted and fidgeted until Grace put an arm around her shoulders. Megan curled against her side with a sigh and stilled at last.

Rest evaded Grace longer. She stared out the window for almost an hour before a troubled half-sleep claimed her. This time there was no forest—only a madwoman with fluffy white wings, poised to smite her in slumber.

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## Chapter 10

The Nephil's train would not arrive in Syracuse for two more days. Lorin couldn't risk another public killing with the Hunters after her. She planned to lure it away from the station into the nearby woods. In the meantime, there were others to be found.

The rundown nightclub she entered for a drink yielded a happy accident. A Nephil sat alone at a corner table, sporting sunglasses and a light jacket with the hood pulled up. Power trickled from it in low, steady waves as it idly twirled a finger beneath the table to spin a glass ashtray on the surface. Wasteful. And stupid.

Lorin wordlessly urged a human at the end of the bar to seek another seat. She settled on the still-warm stool and watched the Nephil openly. It glanced at a watch on its wrist every few minutes, occasionally looking toward the main entrance of the club, as though it were waiting for someone. She skimmed its mind and realized it sought company of the female persuasion, though it had no one particular in mind.

It noticed her at last. Glanced at her, then stared. A weak, whispered suggestion flitted through her mind: *you want me.*

It was trying to seduce her.

She laughed. It was male, and beautiful in the sterile manner mules possessed. She would let it believe it controlled her, and play with it for a while before she summoned Silver. She had not taken many lovers since Silver's father. The idea of birthing another abomination, Nephil or otherwise, disgusted her. However, the half-breeds could not reproduce. She could enjoy the pleasures of the flesh without the risk and watch it die afterward.

*Come to me. Ask me to buy you a drink.*

Lorin manufactured a sultry smile and slid from the stool. The ashtray stopped its undulation as she approached the Nephil's table. It feigned disinterest until she took a seat beside it and said, "Buy me a drink?"

It turned to face her. A practiced smirk crossed its lips. "Sure," it said. A probing ripple entered her head, seeking her thoughts. It wanted to impress her by predicting what she would drink. She let it hear *Corona*. "You look like a Corona kind of girl."

Lorin widened her eyes. "How did you know that?"

"Lucky guess. And as it happens, that's what I'm drinking." It raised a hand, held up two fingers. A human behind the bar nodded in response and began to fill the order. "Do you like my club?"

"Your club?" Lorin allowed disbelief in her voice. "You own this place?"

It nodded. "This and three others. Are you from around here?"

"No. I just got here yesterday."

"Alone?"

Lorin sensed dark anticipation from it and caught a brief flash of an image in its mind: a human female, sprawled on a bed, glassy-eyed and covered in blood. It liked to kill. Her little game had just become far more entertaining. "Yes, I'm alone." She smiled, fluttered her eyes. "You're the first ... person I've met here."

"Well, then. I'm honored to be the one to introduce you to our little town." The Nephil pushed its hood down. Lorin gave the expected gasp at the sight of its flawless countenance, though revulsion drove her reaction. It held out a hand. "They call me Prince."

"I'm Jenny." She took the hand. It held her a touch too long and released her with a seductive stroke.

The bar girl approached their table balancing two frosty bottles and two chilled mugs on a tray. She avoided direct eye contact with the Nephil while she placed the drinks. Finished, she scurried back to the bar as though she expected it to demand something further and did not wish to indulge it.

Lorin allowed it to provide her with two further beers, and endured nearly thirty minutes of its pathetic bantering before her impatience crested. She finished the final mug, set it down, and brushed her fingers along its leg. "I have a room at the motel down the street." She'd seen one on her way here, the most convenient kind, with individual outside entrances for each room. "Would you like to take me there?"

The Nephil smiled its agreement. Lorin rose, swaying a bit in imitation drunkenness. She waited for it to join her and let it lead her outside. As they walked, Lorin sent an image of the motel to Silver. *Come here. Wait for my instruction. Do not be seen.*

Silver returned wordless acquiescence. Lorin tuned him out and concentrated on the Nephil's thoughts, a jumble of raw sexual energy and bloodlust. It practiced its intentions in graphic mental detail, imagined itself slashing her to ribbons with the knife it carried in its boot.

Lorin would let it. The look on its face when she failed to die would compensate nicely for the pain.

They reached the motel. Lorin selected an empty room and positioned herself so the Nephil could not see her opening the door without a key. She entered and it followed her. Unwilling to waste more time in idle chatter, Lorin compelled it to look at her and began to undress.

It perched on the bed to watch. If it had been human and without lethal intentions, it would have asked whether she worked for money by now. She gave it a show. The tremors of vicious pleasure shuddering through it thrilled her. Such futile longing. It would die empty.

Naked, she drifted to the bed and reached for its sunglasses. It caught her wrists and held. "Save that for last." The Nephil guided her hands to its jeans and shrugged free of its jacket while she unfastened and slid them down over the stiff bulge of its erection. She caressed it, eased a moan from her throat. It smiled and gently pushed her back.

"Allow me." It finished dressing to reveal a hard, muscular body as perfect as its face. Only the sunglasses remained. It had casually tipped one boot on its side with the opening turned beneath the bed. It intended to retrieve the knife at the penultimate moment through telekinesis.

Lorin placed a hand on its chest. It circled her with an arm and trailed fingers down the curve of her spine. "Can't I see your eyes?" she whispered, all innocence and longing.

"Don't be afraid," it said huskily. A rudimentary Presence emanated from it and bathed her in pseudo-calm. It eased the glasses off with its free hand.

Lorin's shocked intake of breath was only part simulation. Its eyes were black and glowed with an electric violet cast. She had seen similar eyes once before—on a Nephil that had evaded the Host for four centuries. A deeper probe of its mind revealed this one had indeed been a prince in a small Asian country somewhere around the seventeenth century. A bastard prince, shunned by its people and ostracized from its home. When its power had manifested, it had returned and slaughtered dozens of them. How had she underestimated its strength?

It sensed her hesitation and crushed her in an impassioned embrace. Its mouth sought hers, claimed her with powerful sensuality. Lorin surrendered to it. No matter how strong this creature was, it could not best Silver. She would still take her pleasures.

The Nephil proved skillful in bed. Lorin's manufactured responses became true reflections of the delicious heat it evoked in her body. It drove her to the brink time and again, and eased back just before the apex. Hours passed in a haze of simmering bliss. At last it brought the knife to its hand, caught her eyes, and drove the blade into her side.

The pain brought Lorin to explosive orgasm. She released a thin scream, let her eyes roll back in her head. The Nephil shuddered inside her. It drew the knife free. When she offered a look of mortal terror, it licked her blood from the blade and laughed.

Lorin stiffened. The Nephil poised for another slash. She grabbed its wrist and directed it toward her stomach. Its amusement morphed into fear when she plunged the knife in herself and twisted hard.

She threw its laughter back at its startled face. "Don't you wish to see me bleed, Nephil?"

"What..." it stammered. Its fingers whitened beneath crimson streaks of her blood as it gripped the handle hard. "You can't be..."

*Come to me, Silver.* Lorin shoved the unresisting Nephil to the floor and sat up. It scuttled back, grabbing for its jacket. It had another weapon. "Useless," Lorin whispered. "Your time is up. This is your end."

The Nephil glowered at her. It pulled a gun from an inside pocket. Before it could train the piece on her, the door behind it opened and Silver stepped inside.

Lorin didn't look at him. "Kill it."

The Nephil rolled and scrambled to its knees. It raised the gun. Silver approached, calm and emotionless. It pressed the muzzle into his stomach and fired. The impact bucked his body, but Silver remained standing and silent.

Undaunted, it fired again. Silver's glittering blood sprayed behind him, coating the walls and the floor. The Nephil finally noticed the aberrant splash and the color drained from its features. "What are you?" it whispered.

"I am hers."

Silver sunk fingers into the Nephil's throat and tore it open. It gurgled and twitched, sank to its knees, and collapsed in a pool of deep red liquid.

Lorin's features contorted with fury. "Idiot! Why did you wait so long?"

"I did not wait. I obeyed you."

A burbling sound rose from the floor. The Nephil shuddered and wrenched itself to its feet. Blood coated its chest and its stomach, but the gash in its throat had knitted itself nearly closed. With an unearthly hiss, it pivoted and launched at Lorin. The bed lifted behind her. It was trying to pin her down with the heavy furniture.

*Silver! Finish it!*

Silver caught it by the scruff, dragged it back and sent a surge of power through it. A thud shook the floor as the bed fell back. The Nephil screamed. Smoke poured from its ears and mouth. It jittered to the floor, its body deflated like a spent balloon.

Lorin glared at Silver. "Are you just going to stand there and watch me bleed? Come here and heal me."

Silver hesitated for an instant and stepped over the remains of the Nephil. Lorin's wounds closed with a few gestures from him. When he finished, she bent to retrieve the Nephil's discarded knife and slashed Silver open from shoulder to hip.

"Take this." She pressed the knife into his palm and dressed quickly. "I don't know what's come over you lately, but your behavior is completely unacceptable. I should flay the skin from your bones for this. In fact, I think I will. Disgusting, thick-headed creature!" She dug her fingers into his arm and snarled, "Bring us back to the woods. Immediately."

Lorin pushed back the fear beneath her anger. If she lost any more control over him, she would have to find a way to destroy him—or be destroyed herself.

\* \* \* \*

Grace woke to soft sounds of distress. Beside her, Megan hugged her knees. Her forehead rested on her thighs, and her eyes were squeezed shut. She rocked in counterpoint to the motion of the train and hummed in tuneless bursts, distracting herself from something.

"Megan," Grace whispered. "What's wrong?"

She didn't open her eyes or move. "They won't shut up."

"Oh, no." Most of the train had woken up, and Megan's head had filled with their active thoughts. Probably sounded like a phone booth full of yodelers in there. "Listen. Try to pick out one voice and concentrate on it. Just one. Any of them. Okay?"

Megan nodded against her legs. After a minute, she opened her eyes and lifted her head. "All right. I did it, I think. It's just one guy." She eased her feet down from the seat, bent forward and scrubbed a hand over weary features. "Now what?"

"Well. I guess you just ... ignore him."

"Huh?"

"Damn. I don't know. I've never really thought about how I tune everything out." Grace closed her eyes and tried to remember before, when she'd been certain she would lose her mind to the ceaseless tide of other people's thoughts. Isolating a single voice had been a final bid for sanity and her first small success. What had she done then? At once she recalled it had something to do with her mother. Unpleasant, but effective. "You need a strong emotion of your own. You have to feel something so powerful that it knocks everyone else out of your head. Think of a person or place or anything that makes you react with feeling. Good or bad. Preferably good." Grace had been compelled to rely on hating her mother to reclaim her mind. She hoped Megan could find a happy thought.

"Okay. I'll try." Megan frowned and stared at the back of the seat in front of her. A moment later, she smiled. "Got one." She leaned back with a shaking sigh. "Guess what it is?"

"That wouldn't be fair. Tell me."

"The Talkin' Song Repair Blues."

Grace laughed. "I knew it would come in handy. Don't worry, you won't have to use that trick forever. It'll get easier to keep your head clear."

"I don't know. I kind of like the idea of having a permanent earworm, especially a funny one." Megan hummed a bit, and sang the first few lines of the chorus in a soft, clear voice that mimicked Jackson's country twang almost perfectly.

"Wow."

"What?"

"You're good."

Megan shrugged. "I can carry a tune, I guess."

"No, really. You're *good*." Grace pushed up a few inches and scanned the rest of the car. Around a dozen others shared it with them. She wanted to talk with Megan, help her control her new abilities, but if anyone overheard their conversation and actually paid attention, they could find the cops waiting for them at the next station. Maybe they could get the hang of mind-to-mind conversation. *Can you hear me? If you can, don't answer out loud.*

*Don't be downhearted, I can fix it for you, sonny...*

Grace blurted laughter. Megan gave her a puzzled look. "What?"

"I was just ... wait. I have an idea." She grabbed her laptop, lowered the tray table, and turned the power on. When it finished cycling, she opened Notepad and typed: *Thought we could have a private conversation. Don't want anyone fitting us for white coats.*

"Oh. Right." Megan giggled. "Sorry. I got carried away there."

"That's all right." *Can you hear me? Don't speak. Just think.*

Yes.

*Good. Are the voices gone?*

*Yep. Just you and me in here.*

Grace smiled. "I think we can make this work." *We should find out what else you can do.*

*There's more?*

*I think so. There was that flying guy. And I can work machines.*

"Really? Wicked!"

*You said that out loud.*

*Whoops.*

This time, they both laughed. "We'll keep trying," Grace said. She opened the control panel on the laptop. "You know how to tell what this stuff means, right?"

"Sure. I'm online a lot—well, I was. Had to learn my way around a computer so I could fix it when it went wonky."

"Okay. In that case, you'll get this." She navigated to the network connections and leaned back to let Megan see the screen.

*Holy shit! You're not connected anywhere.*

Grace nodded, smiled. *I have a WiFi card but no service. I just plug myself into the 'net.*

*Awesome. Do you think I can do that?*

*Try it.*

Megan stared at the laptop. Grace opened a browser window and got an error message. *Anything?* she asked Megan.

*I don't know. How do you do this?*

*It's like reading minds, only with machines. I can just find them and connect.*

Megan looked at her. *Machines have minds?*

*Not exactly. It's hard to explain. Do you want to try again?*

*Okay ...* Megan returned her attention to the computer. A full minute passed. Finally, she closed her eyes and dropped back in the seat. "Feel like I just ran fifty laps," she muttered.

*Yeah, learning this stuff can wear you out.* Grace recalled the exhaustion she'd experienced after her unexpected disappearing act. No need for either of them to push right now. "Let's take a break." She shut the computer down, returned it to her bag. "How about some breakfast?"

Megan glanced at Grace's bag. "You got something to eat in there?"

"No. I thought we'd go to the snack car."

"Oh, right. Good idea." Laughing, Megan maneuvered herself into the aisle and stepped back to let Grace out. "They probably don't have scrambled eggs and pancakes, huh?"

"Doubt it. Cold cereal, maybe some muffins or something."

"Works for me."

Grace stood, slid past the seats, and hauled her bag out. No sense tempting fate by leaving a laptop and forty-five grand worth of incriminating cashier's checks lying around. She headed for the snack car, and a glimmer of an idea formed.

They needed more information on SARET. And she knew just the guy to get it for them.

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## Chapter 11

From the moment Zane arrived on scene at the motel, destroying Lorin became a top priority.

As an FBI agent, he wanted her for murder—even though her victims weren't worth the flesh they were printed on. As a Hunter, he loathed her for disobeying the one rule given to the Host—do not interfere with the humans' world. It was almost a shame. Lorin had sided with the Bright Host in the beginning, but six centuries ago she'd turned to the Dark Host and promptly disappeared.

Her activities were inexcusable.

What she'd done here was so inhuman, no mortal could view the aftermath as murder. For humans, this death was physically impossible. The Nephil's naked carcass rested facedown beside a pool of dark, half-congealed blood on the thin carpet. He—at least, Zane believed it was male—appeared to have liquefied from the inside and leaked out onto the floor.

Though he hadn't been dead for long, Zane couldn't detect even a trace of Lorin's power. Disturbing, since it must have required massive amounts to do this. He had to conclude that Lorin never lifted a finger against this Nephil. Meaning the other one was responsible.

The very existence of the one who did Lorin's dirty work infuriated Zane. He was no Host, and he certainly wasn't human. He could be among the older Nephilim, the ones who had developed means to evade the Host, though it made no sense for Lorin to employ a mule. Zane had never seen the other save through the jumbled memories of the rare human witnesses who managed to maintain their sanity during his killing sprees. And for some reason, the other had no scent. No power trace.

Compounding the savage death was an anomaly Zane failed to comprehend. Measurable quantities of mercurial liquid decorated the wall and the floor. He'd seen enough homicide scenes to recognize the mess as splash patterns from multiple gunshot wounds. The substance acted like blood too. It possessed the same viscosity, the same drying properties. But no being—Host, human, or Nephil—had silver blood.

Zane had managed to prevent the anxious humans from entering this room again. Still, the scene would have to be contained. It would take him the better part of a day to obliterate the evidence. He'd have to stop the local police from responding to the call placed minutes earlier by a woman who cleaned rooms for the motel. Alter the police logs and the dispatch records. Modify the memories of every motel staff member along with any friend or family member they might have contacted. Purge the room itself to prevent human forensics experts from discovering anything.

Fire was the cleanest, most efficient method of purging evidence. He would begin with that and work his way through the rest.

When he eventually caught up with Lorin, she would regret causing him so many problems. And pay for her sins with her life.

\* \* \* \*

After breakfast, Megan announced her intention to sleep for a while. The ordeal of the morning had exhausted her. She curled up across the aisle, and succumbed to sleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Grace envied her. Even before she'd been stricken with her bizarre gifts, she'd never been able to rest easily. And being on the run certainly hadn't improved her ability to relax.

She settled in with the goal of e-mailing a message to Comp. It would take a bit of finesse to get her point across, but she suspected he'd understand. She could send him the numbers from one of the checks easily enough for payment. Before she'd hauled her laptop out, a pleasant heaviness settled over her. Maybe a quick nap would help clarify what she wanted to know and how to ask for it.

She reclined the seat, closed her eyes. And dreamed.

The forest glittered with light. Not the rich gold of the sun, but a blazing and silvered white that caught each leaf and blade of grass in sharp definition. Grace shielded her eyes with a hand and made out the ravine a few tantalizing yards ahead. The brilliance hanging in the air seemed to flow up and out from the chasm, a phantom ocean swallowing the land to infect everything with luminescence.

She stepped forward. The ravine retreated. Frustration welled inside her. She crouched and leapt ahead, but the distance remained the same. Why was she forbidden this place? What had she done to be denied the satisfaction, the peace awaiting her there?

As though responding to her thoughts, the quality of the light flooding from it changed. It thickened, darkened, became translucent mercury. A wave of the stuff arched above the ravine wall. It crested and broke and washed over her where she stood.

Unspeakable anguish consumed her body, robbing any breath she might have used to scream. Something filled her head—not sound, but the idea of sound; a drawn and plaintive suggestion of keening that echoed the agony she felt. At last the light ebbed, leaving her unscathed and bereft.

*Run.*



A male voice, a broken and whispered plea. Almost familiar. *Father?* she thought despite the certainty she'd never heard her father speak.

*Run. Now.*

Grace pivoted and sprinted away from the ravine. Half blind with panic, she crashed through the woods, careening from tree trunks and catching her clothing on stiff branches. A powerful presence ate ground behind her and gained feet for every inch she progressed. Ghost fingers brushed the back of her neck. She jumped. Her upward momentum carried her above the trees until the forest became a green patchwork below. A gleaming silver crack marked the ravine like an alien wound. Grace stopped, mesmerized at the sight.

And began to fall.

She woke abruptly on the train. Her stomach performed a dizzying swoop and her throat clenched on a jagged intake of breath. She exhaled forcibly. Tremors set in.

*What the hell was that?*

Grace glanced across the aisle. Megan slept on, oblivious to the world. Just a dream. It had to have been or Megan would have felt it ... wouldn't she? But they'd already determined their abilities weren't quite the same. And it hadn't felt like a dream.

She sat up slowly. So much for rested clarity. She stood and wavered her way to the bathroom, locked herself in, and stooped over the tiny sink to splash cool water on her face. A habitual glance in the mirror confirmed her contacts were still in place. She grabbed for a paper towel, stopped. Stared.

A smear of silver liquid gleamed on her skin along her collarbone. Right where she'd felt the touch of fingers in her dream.

Horrified, she scrubbed at the mark. She succeeded only in smearing it further. The stuff acted like blood, tacky and drying to flakes when it thinned. She wet the towel and wiped at the glittering substance with deliberation. It came off clean. She crumpled the sodden brown paper, started to throw it away, and reconsidered. Instinct demanded that she hold on to it, if only as proof to herself that she wasn't completely insane. She straightened the towel, folded the silver blotches inside and stuck it in her pocket.

A shudder worked through her as she returned to her seat. Clear or not, she decided to e-mail Comp right away. If there was any chance the woman chasing her was involved with SARET, she had to know. Something waited for her, and whoever she—or it—was, wanted her dead.

She kept the message simple. A link to the SARET website and three brief statements: *Need the 5 W's. Can you? How much?* She sent it off and started some digging of her own.

\* \* \* \*

When the train stopped in Denver around dinnertime for a thirty-minute breather, Grace half expected to find the witch waiting for her. It was more likely she'd turn up in Chicago, but a little extra caution didn't hurt. She saw no sign of the woman or her monster.

More than herself, she feared for Megan. Would the woman be able to tell that the girl had become whatever Grace was? And what could they do about it?

"Oh, man. Does it ever feel good to stretch out."

Beside her, Megan folded her fingers together and thrust her arms over her head. They stood in the station's main concourse. A handful of kiosks hocking merchandise that varied from tee shirts and jewelry to posters and cheap novelties dotted the floor, and a few restaurants were spaced along the borders of the open area. Any of them would be better than train food.

"Yeah. Feel like I've been sitting in a movie theater for ten hours." Grace fingered the cash in her pocket. "You hungry?"

"Starving. Subs?"

"Perfect." *You read my mind.*

*Ha, ha.* Megan smirked. "Think we've got enough time to wait for mozzarella sticks too?"

"Sure." Grace smiled. They'd been practicing their silent communication all day on the train and Megan had improved quickly. She didn't have any luck with electronics though. Grace only hoped she didn't start flying. That would be tough to hide.

They headed for a pizza and sub shop on the left side of the concourse. Megan slowed as they approached a lone booth with a dazzling display of sterling silver jewelry and stopped in front of one of the glass cases. "Whoa. Check this out."

Grace glanced at the case. An array of weapons lay on a red velvet spread: ornamental daggers, functional switchblades and stilettos, brass knuckles. Torch-style cigarette lighters crafted into tiny guns, grenades, and even a few dragons marched down the right-hand side. The lighters had caught Megan's attention—but the blades held Grace's interest. She still wasn't convinced the people hunting her were anything more than people like her. And if she cut them, they would bleed. Armed, she and Megan might stand a chance.

The stall owner, an old man with leathery skin, gray-white hair and a bandana twisted around his head, noticed them and hobbled over from the other side of the display with stern features. "Choo wan' sometin'? Choo gels gotta pay fer dis stuff, hey." His toothless mouth garbled his already accented words.

Megan bristled, but Grace put a hand on her arm. *He's been robbed before. It's nothing personal.* She smiled and produced a fifty, pointed to a pair of black-handled stilettos with silver accents. "Are those spring-loaded?"

"Neh. Gravity. Choo know loaded, is not legal. I got legal here."

"All right. Guess we'll look somewhere else." Grace started to replace the bill. She knew the stall owner was lying, but he was still debating whether he wanted the money more than he wanted to risk a bit of harassment from the cops.

"Not loaded. A-seest. I got spring a-seest. Legal. Tiss one here." He pointed under the glass to a polished knife with a blood-red swirled marble handle.

"Spring assist?"

"Yeh. A-seest. Means it got safety. You wan' it, forty dollar."

Grace glanced at Megan. "Do you have two of them?"

Megan frowned. *What are you doing?*

*I'll tell you later.*

"I got tree, four. Two, I give discount. Sixty dollar."

"All right. We'll take two. And one of those lighters." She inclined her head toward the case and caught Megan's puzzled gaze. "Which one did you like?"

Megan grinned. "The blue dragon." *You rock. Thank you!*

*Can't take a trip without a souvenir.* Grace watched the stall owner place a flat white paper bag on the display case and slide a hand inside to open it. He bent and came up with two slender boxes, bearing Chinese or Taiwanese writing and photographs of the red knife. His movements were slow and precise, and it took him nearly five minutes to get the knives and the lighter into the bag. "Semty five dollar, all," he said.

Grace separated one of the hundreds from the folded stack in her pocket and handed it to him. "Keep the change," she told him. "We're in a hurry. And thanks."

"Neh. I got legal. You take change." He turned toward the cash register with the speed of an eroding rock.

"No, really. Keep it."

The stall owner hesitated. "You take bonus, den. Gift."

Before Grace could protest, he turned toward the back of the stall. He returned quickly with a small object wrapped in worn silk. "Gift for you. Buddha. Brink you luck." The old man flashed a gummy smile. "You like, gel. He pretty Buddha."

"Thank you." Grace accepted the bundle and unfolded the wrap a bit. Something silver gleamed inside the cloth. She decided to look later.

"Yeh. Tanks." The stall owner shuffled over to glare at a thirty-something yuppie looking at the necklaces hanging on the opposite side of the booth.

"Too weird," Megan muttered.

"I'll say." Grace slipped the silk-wrapped figure into her bag. "We've got just enough time for a smoke, if we grab something to eat on the train instead." *We need to talk.*

"Okay. I can deal with another burger."

They made their way out to the platform and selected an isolated pillar to stand by. Grace handed Megan the lighter, then one of the knife boxes. "Have you ever stabbed anyone?"

"Uh, no."

"Me neither. Let's hope we don't have to." Grace extracted the other box, crumpled the bag, and glanced around the pillar. No one paid attention to them. She took the knife out and slid it into her front pocket. "That psycho woman knew I'd show up in Salt Lake. It isn't hard to get train schedules. She knows I'll transfer at Chicago. Hopefully, she doesn't know about you."

"What if she does?"

"That's what these are for." Grace nodded at the box in Megan's hand. "If you have to, use it. I told you what the monster—the guy can do."

Megan took the knife out and held it on her palm. "Slick. How does it work, press this?" She jabbed a finger on the button near the hilt. The blade sprang out from the top of the handle. "Shit!" Her hand jerked back, opened. The knife clattered on the ground. Blood welled from her thumb and pattered down in fat, rapid droplets.

"Oh my God. That's bad. Crap." Grace yanked her bag open and pawed through the contents, searching for something to stem the flow. The only fabric handy was the silk wrapped around the silver figure. She pulled at it, but it snagged on something. "What if you need stitches? Can you see how bad it is?"

"Grace..."

"Hold on. You can wrap it with this." She finally worked the silk off the figure and yanked it out.

"Grace. Look."

Megan's voice shook. Still clutching the material, Grace looked at her outstretched hand. It wasn't dripping any more.

"What..."

With slow, trance-like movement, Megan plucked the cloth and wiped the blood from her thumb. The skin beneath appeared untouched.

"I fixed it." Megan gazed at her thumb as though she'd never seen it before. "I felt what was wrong and I put it back." She bent to retrieve the knife. "Watch."

"Megan, don't!"

The blade flashed across her palm before Grace could stop her. Her skin split, a moist pink smile that filled rapidly and discharged a stream of bright crimson. Megan turned her hand toward Grace. The blood running from the wound slowed, then stopped altogether. Her flesh seemed to stretch, meet, and close the split, forming an angry red line. In less than a minute, no evidence of the cut remained.

"Damn. Why can't I do that?"

Megan snorted laughter. She wiped the blade clean with the silk and stuffed the knife in a pocket. "I don't think I can do much more than that. At least not yet. I'm beat."

"Let's not push our luck then."

"I don't plan on it. And next time, we can test it on you. That *hurt*."

Grace chuckled. "I never would have guessed. We'd better hurry, the train'll be leaving in a few minutes. How fast can you smoke?"

"Pretty damned fast if I'm not getting another one for five or six hours."

Grace reached into her bag. Her fingers brushed cold metal. She glanced down and finally saw what the silk had caught on. The "Buddha" was well-defined and muscled, not the typical fat man with a complacent smile. And he had wings.

Just what she needed. An angel.

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## Chapter 12

*Kitten: Of course. Make it an even trade. 5 W's for 5 G's. Just send the numbers. CR*

Grace smiled and clicked the reply button. As the train rumbled through deepening night, she began entering the number string from the bottom of a cashier's check by the light of her monitor. She ran a finger along the screen to double-check them and added a post-script.

*If you don't find anything, say so. Don't make something up. Thanks.*

She hit send and tore the check in half. Once she got to New York, she'd have to find someone like Comp to cash the others for her. She made a mental note to ask him for a reference when he wrote back.

Megan slept, reclined in the seat beside her. Grace had no desire to sleep. She didn't want her last dream, or whatever it had been, to come back for an encore.

She signed out of her e-mail account and navigated to a search engine. Her own investigation into SARET hadn't yielded much. She'd leave that to Comp and put her mind to other mysteries.

She worked her way methodically through thirty pages of results for "Nephilim," rejecting the obvious rehashes, screwballs, and references to bands. Metal and Goth musicians in particular seemed to like the term. After an hour without discovering anything new, she changed the search term to "real angels." She found plenty of so-called evidence and true stories about angel intervention, but real angels were universally described as spirits or energy: auras, balls of light, vague shapes or patterns in swirling mist. There were cases of angels "possessing" people, but no mention of them in actual bodies of their own.

Grace frowned at the screen. Broad, general searches obviously wouldn't get her anywhere, but she didn't have enough specific information to find what she was looking for. Whatever that was. If she couldn't stumble across anything significant, she'd just have to try another approach. Something she knew related to everything awful, strange, desperate and hopeless in her life. Her mother.

She typed "Kendra Carrington" in the search bar. Nearly ten thousand results returned. She wasn't surprised.

The top result link read *Where Is Kendra Carrington?* Grace clicked on the link and found an article from a recent California newspaper:

*Shock waves pounded the jet set in the Beverly Hills community last night when eminent California socialite Kendra Carrington failed to make an appearance at the annual Kingsford Charity Wine Sale Gala. Carrington had been scheduled to receive a prestigious humanitarian award from the Kingsford Foundation for her recent generosity to several scientific research projects said to promote "the advancement of the human condition."*

*Close friends of Carrington were unable to comment regarding the heiress' whereabouts, though it seems she has been out of contact for several weeks. Some speculate that she may have launched an ambitious underground effort to locate her daughter, Grace, who disappeared from their Palo Alto area home two years ago. Others have hinted at a burgeoning relationship between Ms. Carrington and an unknown young male seen recently in her company, and believe she may have embarked on a lover's holiday.*

*Key members of the Kingsford Foundation have expressed puzzlement, bordering on indignant outrage, in regards to Carrington's recent behavior...*

Grace rolled her eyes and returned to the search results. Ambitious underground effort. Yeah, right. The woman's attempts to locate her consisted of throwing money at anyone who might do the work for her. Personally, Grace believed the second theory. Her mother's notorious string of affairs with playboys, aspiring actors, and the sons of rich men had been a source of endless humiliation for both of them—though Kendra neither noticed nor cared.

Three more pages of drivel about her mother's "generosity" interspersed with tabloid-style accounts of her exploits yielded nothing Grace didn't already know. She started selecting results pages at random, scanning them for anything different. On page seventeen, the words *wedding announcements* caught her eye. Her mother had never married. She clicked the link, expecting to discover some other Kendra Carrington. Instead she found: *Wealthy California Debutante Kendra Carrington Announces Engagement to "Mystery Man" at Private Adirondack Camp.*

Grace jolted upright and nearly knocked her laptop to the floor. She scanned the text on the page, read the usual rhetoric regarding the general outcry her mother's impulses caused among the social set. A single sentence stood out: *Carrington's beau, whom she identifies only as "Beckett," refused to confirm or deny the engagement when approached by this reporter.*

The article, scanned into website archives from a print newspaper, was dated seven months before Grace was born.

Her mother had been pregnant at the time. And apparently, she'd been prepared to marry her father. She wanted to blame the man she'd never met for failing to follow through, but she knew it was much more likely her mother's fault. Kendra had probably gotten bored and called things off. But the *why* of it wasn't important. Grace wanted the *who*.

She had a name. Her father's name. Beckett.

Her mind raced away, conceiving and rejecting possibilities. She wanted to run another search, find out more, but she had no idea whether Beckett was a first or a last name—or even a real name. Still, it was more than she'd ever had to work with.

Exhaustion tugged her eyelids down. She shook herself awake and glanced at the system clock. Three-thirty a.m. She'd have to sleep for a while and hope her dreams stayed in her head this time. She started to shut things down, but decided to check her e-mail again first. She had one new message, from Comp. Subject: Warning.

She opened it.

*Kitten: You've stepped in a snake's nest. Watch yourself. More later. CR*

Her heart slammed in her chest. She logged out, powered off, and gazed through the window at the night outside the train. Secrets whispered in the dark, and sleep eluded her for a long time. At last, there were no thoughts—and no dreams.

\*\*\*\*

The following morning passed in a haze of quiet desperation. Grace checked for messages every hour, but Comp sent nothing further than his initial cryptic warning.

Megan sensed pain but managed only a few wordless conversations between bouts of restless sleep. The girl's increasing fatigue worried Grace. It was possible that the reaction stemmed from overexerting her abilities. However, Grace didn't remember being this tired when she'd first changed.

They pulled in to Chicago around three in the afternoon. The layover on the schedule was an hour long, but Grace had already decided they should abandon the last leg of the trip. She suspected Megan would agree. The witch seemed to know where they were headed and if she wasn't waiting here, she would be in Syracuse. They could take a bus from here, somewhere they weren't expected.

"Megan. We're here."

The girl didn't stir. Grace touched her shoulder, intending to nudge her awake—and felt heat through her shirt. Fever burn.

Her stomach clenched. "Megan!" *Come on, wake up, we have to get off the train ...* Grace lifted her gently. Her wax-pale face gleamed with sweat. Deep shadows lay beneath her reddened eyelids. Megan moaned and tried to curl back on the seat.

Grace eased her back down and shouldered both of her bags, and then Megan's. She waited until the car cleared of people. Crawling awkwardly over her, into the aisle, she checked the opposite seats to make sure they weren't leaving anything behind. She bent and worked an arm beneath Megan's limp form. "Megan, try to get up," she whispered. "I'll help you, okay? Come on, we'll find a seat inside."

"Mmm ... c-cold. Where're we?" Megan's eyes fluttered open, moist and bright even with the contacts. A shudder wracked her body.

"We're in Chicago. You're sick, running a fever. We're going to find a place to rest for a while, but I need you to walk with me."

"Kay." Megan stiffened and lurched to her feet. She slumped against Grace, and managed to stand in the aisle. "Gonna throw up..." She wavered, fell on her knees, and retched. Nothing came out. Grace knew she hadn't eaten or drunk anything since dinner yesterday, but dry heaves meant dehydration. She had to get some liquid into her.

Grace knelt beside her and rubbed her back. "You okay?"

Megan nodded miserably. "That sucked."

"Yeah. Let's get off this thing. Maybe some fresh air will help." Grace put an arm around Megan's waist and slung the girl's hand over her shoulder. "Try to hang on to me," she said. Megan's fingers clenched feebly at her shirt. Grace boosted them both up and shuffled toward the exit.

Outside the door, a conductor gave them a concerned look. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes. She doesn't feel good. We're fine, thanks." Grace attempted a smile and kept moving. The station entrance lay ten feet away, but the distance felt like a mile. They struggled through the glass doors. Grace stared with dismay at two flights of stairs leading down to the main station. How would they manage that?

The door behind them opened. "Excuse me, miss? You, er, dropped this back there."

Grace shifted awkwardly. The conductor held the silk wrap from the figurine, stained with Megan's blood. "Thanks," she blurted, accepting the cloth. She shoved it in a pocket. "She had a nose bleed."

Concern creased the conductor's brow. "Do you want me to call an ambulance?"

"No," Grace said a touch too fast. If Megan ended up in a hospital, they'd see her eyes and lock her up. "No, it's motion sickness. She just needs something to drink. But thanks."

"All right. If you're sure..."

"I'm sure. Thank you."

Grace steered Megan toward the stairs.

"Wait," the conductor said. "I can get the elevator up here for you at least."

"Really?" Relief brought a genuine smile to her lips. It was a small thing considering the new crop of trouble sprouting around them, but it touched her. "That would be great."

"No problem." The conductor unfastened a ring of keys from his belt, selected one, and turned toward the brass door Grace hadn't even seen to the left of the entrance. He inserted the key and pushed a button. The welcome hum of machinery drifted into the alcove. The door slid open and the conductor stepped aside.

"Thank you so much." Grace moved into the elevator. Megan drifted along, still leaning heavily on her. The conductor nodded and touched his hat just before the door sealed him from view.

Grace thumbed the button for the first floor. "How are you doing?" she said softly.

"Better, I think," Megan murmured. "Still cold. Thirsty."

"Right. First thing when we get down there, I'll get you something to drink. Make sure you take it slow. We don't have to hurry. We can catch another train later. Maybe a bus instead."

"Yeah. Good." Megan hung her head. "So tired..."

Grace fought to control mounting alarm. If their choices amounted to hospitalization or death, she'd go with the hospital—but getting her out again would be hell. She'd barely managed to escape the institution her mother had imprisoned her in. For her own good, she'd said. Right. Kendra had expected to make her freak of a daughter famous and grab the glory herself.

She wouldn't let that happen to Megan.

A soft ding sounded, and the elevator stopped. Grace led Megan out and they started down the deserted hall toward the bustling station beyond. Before they reached the entrance, two men in jeans and button-down shirts separated from the crowds and came into the hallway toward them.

Grace eyed them briefly and dismissed the men as employees, or lost. She'd never seen them before, and Megan had no reaction to them. But they stopped in the middle of the hall and blocked her when she tried to walk around them.

"Excuse me," Grace said. She moved aside, brought Megan with her. The men moved at the same time and refused to let them pass.

"Get out of the way! Can't you see she's sick?"

The slightly taller man on the left glowered. "Megan Jones?"

Grace suppressed a gasp. Megan raised her head, blinked at him. "Who're you?"

The man who'd spoken grinned. His companion grabbed Megan's arm and pulled her away from Grace.

"Your stepfather is worried about you. We're here to take you to him."

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### Chapter 13

The man holding Megan dragged her down the hallway.

"Let go of her!" Grace ran after him.

The taller man intervened and pushed her to the floor with a laugh. "Down, girl! You run along back to wherever you came from. Megan can't play any more."

Bristling, Grace stood and glared at him. *Megan, can you hear me?*

*Don't let them take me back...*

I won't. Listen, pretend to pass out. Make yourself as heavy as possible.

*Okay.*

The shorter man grunted. "Damn it, she fainted. Gimme a hand, Kyle. She's heavy."

Kyle glanced over his shoulder and fixed Grace with a black grin. "See this?" He pointed to a bulging pocket. "That's a gun. Try and stop us, and I'll have to shoot you."

"Kyle!"

He turned and strode toward his companion. Grace sent her mind after the lights in the hall and shut them off. One of the men swore. The light spilling in from the station did not reach Grace's position. She slipped aside, flattened against the wall. Pulled the stiletto from her pocket.

"Leave her alone." Grace edged closer. She had a few feet before her silhouette would reveal her. "She doesn't want to go back."

"Ah, Jesus. We're gonna have to do something about her. She'll..."

"Shut up!" That was Kyle. He stopped, turned in a slow circle. "Where are you, girl? Come on. I was just kiddin' around. I won't shoot you."

Grace didn't respond.

"Honest. It's not even a gun."

Grace looked toward the end of the hall. The other man had drifted closer to the entrance, backlit with the station's lights and visible enough. Megan slumped forward in his arms. He struggled to hold her up. She needed him to let go.

*Grace ... what's happening?*

*Just keep it up. You're doing great. Try not to worry.*

"Hey, girl. Your friend's not looking too hot. Come out and we'll let you check on her."

Kyle paced toward her with slow, small steps. He stopped. His hand moved almost imperceptibly toward his pocket. "Aren't you worried about little Megan?"

In less time than it would have taken for Grace to draw breath, he pulled something out and thrust it into the shadow. The gun thumped the wall three feet from her position.

Grace closed her eyes and sought out the main power for the station. She strained for a moment, struggled to turn it off. A grunt escaped her clenched teeth.

Kyle whirled toward the sound. The gun skimmed the air, a hair's width from her arm. Finally, the electricity responded with a strident buzz and plunged them into blackness.

Murmurs and a handful of shouts drifted through the hall from the main building. "Shit, she's one of them," the man holding Megan said.

"Lou, if you don't shut the hell up..."

Grace backed away, silent as possible. Rustling sounds came from Kyle. A pause, a small metallic click. Sparks in the gloom formed a flame on a butane lighter. Kyle grinned in its flickering glow. "There you are." He raised the gun.

"There *you* are." Grace ejected the blade and slashed his outstretched arm.

Kyle screamed. The gun clattered to the floor. Grace swatted the hand holding the lighter, knocked it loose. She moved to the other side of the hall and approached Megan. Behind her, Kyle scabbled in the dark after his gun.

"Grab that little bitch!" Kyle shouted. Something slid across the floor. "Damn it. Lou! Get her!"

"I'm holding the other one."

"Put her down and grab the bitch! You hear me, girl? You're coming with us, too. We know what you are."

Megan. Did he let go of you?

Yesss ... I'm gonna...

The scrape of flint sounded hollow in the hall. Soft light bloomed from Kyle's lighter. Grace didn't turn around. She focused on reaching Megan, who lay in a heap near the entrance.

"Watch it, man," Kyle gasped. "She's got a knife or something."

Lou circled her, wary and watchful. "Can't you just shoot her? What if she does something weird to me?"

"Idiot. She can't turn you into a frog or anything. Get out of the way."

Grace hesitated, then dove for Megan. *Hold on.* Clutching the girl bodily, she closed her eyes and tried to think of a place—any place besides this. And hoped Megan would still be with her when she got there.

A sense of weightlessness filled her like light spreading from her core. She tightened her grip on Megan, felt her laptop bag dig into her hip. Buoyancy departed abruptly when they thumped against something firm. Sounds reached her ears—outdoor sounds; wind and birds and rustling branches.

Grace opened her eyes in the woods.

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## Chapter 14

Silver felt the echoes from the Nephil's shift travel through his wracked body. Somewhere west of him, he realized. Coming closer to the place Lorin intended to command yet another killing. The place called Syracuse.

Blood pooled around his feet on the floor of the crypt. Lorin had told him not to heal. She would call for him tomorrow. Today, she lay unconscious in a human dwelling with some dark substance running through her veins. It dulled her, this human poison, yet she seemed to crave it.

He approached Lorin's mind with caution. She had told him not to disturb her until he was summoned. The vague idea that he should inform her of the shift occurred, but she had not asked to be notified. He could not decide which would upset her more—a disturbance, or his failure to report the Nephil's activities.

But he would not be failing because she had not asked for a report.

Lorin had not sensed the shift. The substance she'd taken in filled her mind and altered her thoughts. He would not disturb her.

He desired neither further punishment nor the order to destroy this Nephil.

\* \* \* \*

When she caught her breath, Grace realized this wasn't the forest in her dreams. It was predominantly pine trees with a thick carpet of soft, browned needles. No ravine in sight, no trickling stream. She wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or relieved.

At least Megan had made the journey with her. Pale and limp, eyes closed, she sprawled on the ground beside her. Grace longed to stay where she was, to rest for just a little while. Moving them both had taxed her strength so completely, the idea of sitting up elicited a full body protest. But with no idea what condition Megan was in, staying put could be a deadly mistake.

The thought spurred her into action. She pushed herself up, sat next to Megan and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Megan," she whispered. "They're gone. Well, actually, we're gone."

Megan's eyes fluttered under her closed lids. Her lips parted and a small exhalation stirred the pine needles. "Gone," she murmured. "What happened? Feel like ... train hit us."

"I brought us somewhere else."

"Where?" Megan opened her eyes, blinked a few times. She flinched and sat up fast. "How ... Where are we? Did I pass out?"

"No. At least, not for very long if you did. I moved us here from the train station."

"What do you mean, moved?"

Grace shifted, shook her head. Exhaustion fought to claim her, but she forced it away. "It's hard to explain. Have you ever seen Star Trek?"

"I guess."

"You know those transporter things that take people off the ships and zap them onto planets?"

"Whoa. You can do that?"

Grace nodded. "Takes a lot out of me, though. I can't even hear your thoughts right now."

"I'm not thinking anything." Megan flopped back on the ground. "Where are we?"

"Good question."

"You don't know?"

"Not a clue."

"Crap."

"Exactly." Grace made a feeble attempt to rearrange the jumble of bags she carried. Taking them off would require too much effort. "How are you feeling?"

"Weak. Shaky. And my stomach hurts."

"We're going to have to get to a store or something. You need liquid, probably some food. Ibuprofen, at least. For the fever." Grace bent her knees and moved to stand. Dizziness grayed her vision for an instant. "Maybe you should stay here. I'll go find something."

"Wait." Megan propped on her elbows. "You're beat, and we could be miles from anywhere out here. Right?"

"Yes, but we don't know what's wrong with you. You could—" *Die*. "Get worse."

"I don't think so. Actually, I think I figured out what's messing me up."

Grace arched an eyebrow. "What?"

"Withdrawal."

"You're on drugs?"

"No. I mean the stuff my stepfather used on me." Megan rubbed absently at her arm. "He was dosing me every day. Three years, maybe longer. Said it was for my own good."

Grace shuddered. "Oh, no. I'm so sorry..."

"It's all right. I should have explained it better." Megan's gaze grew distant. "Sometimes he missed a day. I'd feel crummy but I never connected it with the black stuff. Just thought I'd caught a cold or something. But now ... I can feel it." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "My body is cleansing itself. Like this ... whatever it is, the power we have, like it's been there all along. And the black stuff smothered it somehow."

"My God." Three years? That meant ... "Megan, how old are you?"

"Seven..." She stopped, bit her lip. "Sixteen. Sorry. I'm used to telling people I'm seventeen because it sounds almost eighteen."

"So you were thirteen when he started giving you this stuff every day."

"Yeah. Right after Mom died, he went fanatical. Why?"

"Because I think you're right. I think it cancels out the abilities. I was thirteen when I started hearing voices in my head."

"Oh man."

Grace frowned. If Megan's stepfather did belong to SARET, and the group had access to this drug, they were in bigger trouble than she'd thought possible. "Those men at the train station. You've never seen them before?"

"No. I would have remembered assholes like them."

"Ever heard anything about them? Maybe your stepfather mentioned something. Their names were Kyle and Lou."

"I don't ... Wait. Last summer, he was screaming at somebody on the phone. Something about losing a delivery. I think he said Kyle in there somewhere."

"I'm pretty sure they're with SARET. It would make sense if they had people all over the place. Easy enough to keep in touch online." *We know what you are*. Though she still didn't buy the alien theory, these wackos must have figured out a few things about what made people like her and Megan tick. Bad news. Like Comp had warned her. "Wish I could check my email, and see if Comp found anything out yet. But I can barely move. Don't think I can work my computer right now."

"We both need rest." Megan sat up straighter and looked around. "Look, there's a huge tree over there. See how low the branches are? It's probably pretty comfortable underneath. We could sleep for a while. They can't find us here ... can they?"

Grace followed her gaze. "They can't. But what about wolves or bears? We don't know where we are."

Megan giggled. "Don't worry. Even if they're around, they won't bother us. We're not bleeding and we don't have any food." She grinned. "Girl Scouts. Mom insisted."

"Good. Maybe after we rest, you can find some water." Grace managed a smile that felt like lifting a hundred pounds with her lips. "Wish it wasn't so far away."

"Okay. It's my turn."

"Huh?" Grace blinked and her head snapped up. She'd almost passed out. Megan's voice seemed distant and lost.

"You helped me. Now I'm helping you."

Grace felt herself lifted from the ground. She sensed Megan beside her, helping her stumble toward a dark green blur she assumed was the tree. She surrendered willingly and let oblivion take her the instant they stopped moving.

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## Chapter 15

Lorin watched the last human, an elderly woman who leaned on the arm of a conductor, step from the train at the Syracuse station. The Nephil had not been among them.

Annoyed, she moved down the platform toward the opposite entrance for a better view of the remaining cars. The station itself lay behind her. They had searched thoroughly in case the train had arrived early, but it was not here. The chances it had slipped past her were slim. Perhaps it had fallen asleep. She would wait a few more moments.

Silver stood beneath the elevated track awaiting orders. If she peered under the train, she could just make out his motionless silhouette. He seemed to have returned to his usual state of unquestioning obedience. She had followed through on her threat—used a bullwhip to tear most of the skin from his back and chest and legs, and forbidden him to heal for a full day. She'd allowed him to repair himself just before they had come here. He would not trouble her further.

When the humans waiting on the platform began to board, the Nephil had still not emerged. Her annoyance approaching anger, Lorin Reached to the silent specter

below. *Silver, where is it?*

He paused too long for her liking. *I ... can't sense her.*

*What?* Twofold fury enveloped Lorin. The Nephil was more intelligent than she'd credited, and Silver had called it "her." She could not let him cultivate interest in the creatures. *Stay there. Keep searching for it. It, Silver. Understand?*

Yes, *Lorin.*

Her gaze swept the platform a final time. No sign of it or the companion it had spoken with at the station in Utah. Lorin descended the stairs, made her way to the station exit, and doubled back past the parking lot toward the tracks. She located Silver and demanded, "Well?"

"I sense nothing. She. It. Is not here."

He flinched in anticipation of a blow. Lorin sneered. "I'll punish you later. I want to find it. And when I do, you will take your time killing it."

Silver said nothing, but she felt a reaction from him. A wordless moan.

"Does this displease you?"

*Nnnnn...*

"Answer, damn you!"

"No, Lorin."

His voice broke on the words. Lorin summoned just enough power to stiffen her fingers into claws, and raked deep furrows across his face. He gasped and closed his eyes against the pain.

"Don't lie to me."

"Y-yes. It displeases me."

"Why?"

"I do not know."

"You don't know." Lorin's jaw clenched. Fear whispered in the back of her mind, suggested Silver might finally be coming apart. She pushed the idea behind a fresh wave of anger. "What are the Nephilim?"

Silver swallowed. "Dirty mules."

"And?"

"Blights on Creation."

"Who else does this describe?"

"Me," Silver whispered.

"That's right. And what is your purpose?"

"To obey my mother. Wipe out the Nephilim. Redeem ... my existence."

"So you do have something resembling a brain. You want to redeem your existence, don't you, Silver?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, Lorin."

"Good. Your answers are satisfactory. When we find the Nephil, as long as you do what you're told with it, I won't punish you."

A visible tremor worked through Silver. He dropped his gaze.

Lorin considered the options for tracking the Nephil. It had been scheduled to change trains in Illinois yesterday afternoon. If it knew she had found where it was going, it may have altered its course from there. By now though, the trail from Chicago would be cold, difficult even for Silver to follow. She thought back to what she'd taken from its mind before it had started to resist her. The mother would be useless; it avoided contact with her. And they had already destroyed the police officer it recalled.

The memory it had struggled to retain held potential. Lorin had gleaned a few words. Comp Roberts. A human name, she surmised, albeit an odd one. The Nephil had associated it with something ... pleasant? Happy. But not the emotion. Another name. Happy Gringo. Both Comp Roberts and Happy Gringo could be found in Las Vegas.

They would start there. Through fear or pain, one of them would cooperate.

\* \* \* \*

Grace woke gradually to warmth and unfamiliar surroundings. Clean, sweet air filled her lungs and brought a bouquet of natural perfume to her nose. Megan lay stretched alongside her, breathing evenly, the pallor of health returned to her skin. The soft light of early morning brushed the curtain of branches around them.

She eased away from the sleeping girl, sat up and stretched. If she'd slept for a year, she doubted she would feel this refreshed. Maybe she could live in the woods forever. Build herself a log cabin, learn to survive off the land, and avoid all the complications of greed, curiosity and fear other people tended to cause.

First, though, she had to find her father. And make sure Megan would be safe.

Their bags were propped against the trunk of the tree. Megan must have helped her get them off because she didn't remember doing it. She pulled out her laptop and



fired it up. A single bar of battery life remained. Not that it mattered—she could power it just as easily as the battery. She would charge it the next time she had access to an outlet. Whenever that might be.

Her e-mail yielded two new messages. Both from Comp, both no subject. One was significantly larger, with attachments. She opened that one first.

*You will not evade me again. If this SARET does not destroy you, I will. Your friend is quite knowledgeable. He sends his regards and regrets that he cannot type them himself with broken fingers. And legs. I spared him. I will not spare you.*

"No!"

Her shout woke Megan. The girl wrenched from the ground, tousled and bleary-eyed. "What? A bear? Where ... Grace!" She scooted over with fear etched on her features. "What happened?"

Grace gestured to the screen. Megan looked.

"Oh my God. Is that..."

"The redhead. The psycho bitch. She found Comp." The words stuck in her throat like bones. "I shouldn't have gotten him involved."

"Comp?"

"I met him in Vegas. He's ... into research. He was looking into SARET for me and she..." Grace drew a shaking breath. "She only had his name. And she found him."

Megan frowned and pointed at the bottom of the screen. "What's this about?"

The attachments. She'd forgotten about them. The tops of three dark squares showed beneath the threatening message. Images. Grace didn't want to see them. She scrolled down anyway, and shoved a fist against her mouth to stifle another scream. The thumbnails revealed enough without fully opening the photos.

There were six altogether. Two showed Comp's hands, twisted and bent at unnatural angles, the fingers splayed and limp. One captured him from the waist down, lying on the floor. His legs looked wrong. Almost backwards. The final three photos revealed heaps of wreckage that used to be his equipment. Smashed monitors, splintered CPUs, tables cracked in two with legs torn off. Unidentifiable fragments littered the floor.

Megan gasped. "Did she bomb the place?"

"No. They don't need bombs. I told you what that monster can do." She backed out to her inbox and moved the pointer to the remaining unread message with a trembling finger. "At least this one isn't illustrated." She clicked on *no subject* and read:

kitten voice recognition software god a love it  
your friends are brutal but I have names lore in silver  
don't worry I'm a big boy watch yourself  
stay alive you owe me I'm charging double for this

Grace sobbed, though the message elicited a wry smile. "Comp, if I make it through this, I'll pay you triple," she murmured. She checked the time on the message. 6:49 AM. Half an hour after the one the witch sent. At least he was still alive. "Lore in silver. That's a name?"

"It says 'names,' right?" Megan inched closer and squinted at the screen. "VR makes weird mistakes. I've used it a few times. He probably said 'gotta' where it put in 'god a'. There's two of them. Silver, and ... Lorin, maybe?" She shook her head. "What kind of name is Silver?"

"The kind a nut job who thinks she's an angel gives herself." Grace shivered at the memory of the dream and the silver fluid she'd come away from it with. The first remark the woman made to her back in Vegas returned clearly: *I've marked you, Nephilim scum*. Was that what she'd done?

Grace signed out and shut the laptop down. "Sorry about the rough wake-up call. We should get moving. Try and find some civilization. Or at least some food and water."

"It doesn't seem very civilized out there lately." Megan stood and brushed at the pine needles clinging to her clothes. "Grace, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. For starters, find somewhere safe." *If there's anywhere safe left.*

"I heard that."

The comment startled laughter from Grace. "At least we're both back up to speed." She stowed her computer, shouldered her bags, and handed Megan's to her. "We should probably keep wearing the contacts just in case we run into anyone out here. But we need to clean them before we start moving. Trust me, we'll feel it soon if we don't."

"I think I'm feeling it already." Megan blinked a few times. "Almost forgot about them. I wondered why my eyes felt so dry."

Without a handy sink, Grace made sure they doused the hell out of the lenses. She finished first, waited for Megan, and replaced her dwindling supply of saline. They'd need more soon. "Okay. Which way should we head?"

"Um ... well, I think we're supposed to look for moss on the trees or something."

"Or something?" Grace blinked at her. "Moss doesn't grow on pine trees."

"Then we should follow a stream."

"We need to find a stream first."

"Hmph." Megan shrugged. "What about spitting in the wind?"

"You're some Girl Scout."

"What do you want? I never made it out of Brownies." Megan smiled. "At least I can tell you what's safe to eat and what's not. And I weave a mean basket."

Grace shook her head, smirked. "Let's just walk. Eventually we'll find something. Maybe a stream, or some moss."

"Or a road sign."

"Yeah, that'll work." Grace parted the branches and held them for Megan. After a moment's hesitation, she headed left in the direction of the wind. She decided to skip the spitting part.

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## Chapter 16

It took most of the morning to find a stream. To Grace, the clear cold water tasted like rain smelled—fresh and green, full of promise. Unfortunately, it also amplified the emptiness of her stomach.

"See anything to eat yet?"

Megan straightened from the stream and rubbed water from her face with a sleeve. "No. You?"

"I don't know. I've seen a few bushes with little red berries on them."

"We probably shouldn't eat those."

Grace sighed. "Why not? They might be all right. I read in a book once about a girl in the woods who survived on them for days. Said they tasted like mint or something."

"Yeah, but this isn't a book. Red usually means poison, and I can't tell the difference between checkerberries and bird-berries."

"I'm starving." Grace perched on a flat rock and laughed. "Actually, I'm not. I just feel like I should be since I know there isn't any food around."

Megan sat next to her. "I know what you mean. I'd sell my soul for a hamburger right now." She stared into the endless trees. A moment later, she yanked her notebook out of her bag and scribbled something down, paused, hummed a bit. She crossed out, froze with pen poised over paper and scrawled a few more words.

Grace tried not to pry, but she couldn't resist asking, "Are you writing a song about hamburgers?"

"No!" Megan giggled and a blush crept over her cheeks. "And I'm not telling you what I did write down, either. I'm working on your song. It's a surprise."

"Really?" Grace stared at her hands, uncertain what to say. She'd never had close friends, and her family consisted of ... well, her mother. Not exactly pleasant company, considering the woman had barely acknowledged her existence until she thought she could use her for something.

After a few minutes of writing and scratching out, Megan stowed her notebook and stretched. "Well, we found water. Now what? Do we follow the stream?"

"Sure. I don't have any better ideas."

They walked with the flow, accompanied by the steady whisper of water and the crackle of vegetation underfoot. The ground seemed to slant steadily down. As they progressed, the stream widened, the banks became steeper. The water flowed faster, its surface bubbling and foaming at points to create inverted-v shapes. Grass and tangled brush beneath them gave way to rock. Ahead, the rushing sound became a roar.

Grace and Megan slowed and finally stopped a few feet from the point where the ground fell away, and the water cascaded in streams and shimmering spray to the rocks below.

"Well. Maybe we'd better start looking for moss." Suddenly weary and feeling the first real pangs of hunger, Grace picked her way back from the cliff. She sat on the first relatively smooth rock that presented itself. "I'm sorry."

Megan made her way over. "Sorry for what? I'm the Girl Scout flunky, remember?" A halfhearted smile surfaced and she took a seat on the next rock over.

"I shouldn't have brought us here. It was stupid. I mean, for all I know we could be in Canada somewhere. Or France. Hell, maybe an alternate universe. We could walk for days and never find our way out of this." Grace closed her eyes, hung her head. "You've got someone waiting for you. You have a life and I took you away from it."

Grace felt something warm around her shoulders. She looked up to find Megan next to her, wearing an earnest expression.

"Don't apologize for saving me. If you hadn't taken us out of there, I'd be on my way back to my stepfather right now."

"I guess. But..."

"No buts. I couldn't have stopped those two even if I wasn't sick."

"I had some trouble with it myself." Grace straightened. "Don't know if I told you, but I couldn't read them at all. I just couldn't find their minds."

Megan offered a nervous laugh. "Maybe they didn't have minds. Brainless thugs."

"Maybe. But I'm worried that they might have something to shield their thoughts. Like the stuff your stepfather gave you to suppress your abilities."

"So no one like us would be able to tell who they were, or what they were doing until it's too late."

"Exactly." A shiver trailed Grace's spine. "And that means no matter where we go, we'll never be safe."

"Maybe we should just build a house out here and learn to like eating rabbits. If we can find any."

Grace burst into laughter. "That's pretty much what I was thinking yesterday."

"Well, I am a mind-reader, you know." Megan giggled with her. "If we do find any rabbits, I think I'll let you skin them."

Their laughter died down gradually. After a moment, Grace drew a breath and said, "It's a nice thought, but we can't hide forever. And trust me, you don't want to keep running. We have to do something. I just don't know what yet."

"We'll figure it out. Right now, I'd settle for some food. Doesn't even have to be a rabbit." Megan gazed out over the rolling stream and a smile crept across her face. "I

think our first problem is solved. Look." She pointed.

Grace followed the gesture. On the opposite bank, the ground dipped down into a shallow tangle of bushes with serrated leaves, shaded by towering pines. She squinted. A few flashes of pale pink-red nestled between the leaves. "I thought you said the red ones might be poisonous."

"Not those red ones. Come on!" Megan bounded to her feet, grabbed Grace's hand, and pulled her toward the stream. "You don't mind getting a little wet, do you?"

"If it means food? Hell, no."

"Good." Grinning now, Megan splashed down and slogged forward. The water rose past her knees at the stream's midpoint. Grace followed, and tried to ignore the cold shock that embraced her legs. Megan reached the opposite side and waited while Grace floundered up the bank. "I was right," Megan said. "Check it out."

Grace regarded the bushes again. This time she noticed, in addition to the occasional pink specimen, glossy blackberries clung to the branches, clusters thick enough to weigh them down in places.

"Early blackberries." Megan bent to pluck a few from the closest bush. She held one out to Grace and popped another in her mouth. "Oh my God, I don't think I've ever tasted anything this good in my life. I don't even miss the whipped cream."

Grace accepted the berry. It felt cool on her palm and tasted like heaven on her tongue. Sweet, full and bursting with juice, the tangy aftertaste left her drooling for more.

She grinned at Megan. "Nice going, Girl Scout flunky."

"Yep. Just watch out for the thorns."

"No way I'm letting a few scratches stand in the way of food." Grace darted down the gentle incline, headed for the thick of the patch. Megan's delighted laughter chased her as the girl descended in her wake.

Warmth filled Grace like a light expanding from her chest to break through in the form of a smile. *So this is what it feels like.* She stopped, breathless with revelation, in the midst of the fragrant berries, and Megan collided with her, giggling.

The girl snapped off a thick cluster and handed it to Grace. "To the victor go the spoils—or something like that. Anyway, you won, so ... Grace? What's wrong?"

Grace shook herself. "Nothing. Now." She smiled again. "You sure these aren't poison?"

"Nope. But if you die, I'll be right behind you." Megan snatched another bunch and stuffed a few in her mouth. "Maybe we're dead already. I bet this is what heaven tastes like."

Grace laughed. "Just what I was thinking." She savored a berry and kept her thoughts quiet. She didn't want Megan to overhear them ... not yet. The concept remained delicate and uncertain in her mind, an illusion that could still be shattered—but one she wanted to hold for as long as possible.

*Friend.*

\* \* \* \*

Night crept over the woods in shades of gray, throwing shadows that blended gradually to darkness. Over miles of covered ground, no signs of civilization had presented themselves. No sounds of distant traffic or glimpses of manmade structures through the soldiering groves around them. Not even the occasional discarded bottle or rusted tin can. This was untouched wilderness.

Grace called a halt after she nearly walked into a dusk-concealed tree. A downed oak suspended a few feet above the forest floor provided a decent bench for them to finish the blackberries they'd gathered and bundled in one of Grace's shirts.

Tasty as they were, Grace knew they couldn't survive on berries and water for much longer. In here they faced starvation and Lord knew what other hazards: wild animals, disease, sudden acts of nature. Out there, SARET waited for them, and so did Lorin and Silver.

Time to choose the lesser of two evils. If they returned to the world, at least Megan would have a chance to survive.

Grace glanced at Megan. The girl was practically asleep sitting up. "Hey," she said. "We need to talk."

"Huh? Sorry." Megan flashed a sheepish grin. "Not used to all this walking. What's up?"

Grace frowned. "I think I'm going to have to move us again."

"You mean the transporter thing?" Megan's teeth caught her lower lip. "Not that I don't trust you, but what if we end up in the middle of the ocean or something?"

"I can control it. I think."

"You think?"

"The first time, I ended up right where I wanted to be. This time I didn't have a destination in mind. I just really wanted to be somewhere else."

"So you've only done this twice. You know, you aren't exactly selling this idea."

Grace smiled thinly. "Do you have a better one?"

"Rabbits. Log cabin."

"What about your band?"

Megan's face fell. "Yeah, there's that."

"And what do we do when our clothes wear out? Or winter comes? What happens if one of us falls and breaks a bone or accidentally eats the wrong thing?"

"I can heal. I'm getting better at it. Look." She pushed her sleeve up, and revealed fading scars that had been livid a few days ago. "But it wears me out. And that other stuff ... I guess you've got a point."

"Believe me, I wish I didn't." Grace shifted her laptop bag, which had begun to threaten her balance on the log. "The only problem is, where should we go?"

Megan didn't reply right away. After a minute she said hesitantly, "You could come with me. To Michael's."

Grace longed to say yes. She made herself answer no in her mind and her words. "I can't. Those people, Silver and Lorin, they're after me. Not you. I don't want to put you in danger. And besides, your friend doesn't know me. He's not going to want some stranger crashing at his house."

"He won't mind. I know he won't." Megan seemed almost frantic. Grace sensed her imposing false calm on herself. "Why were you going to Syracuse? You never said."

"To look for my father," Grace admitted softly. "I have to know."

"Whether he's an angel?"

"Something like that. No way my mother's the angel."

Megan laughed. "Sounds like your mother and my stepfather would get along great."

"Yeah. For a few days, anyway." *Until she got bored and threw him away. Just like everyone else in her life.*

"Oh, Grace. Did she throw you away?"

Grace flinched. For a moment she'd forgotten about their abilities. "Not exactly. Mostly she ignored me until she found out I was *special*. Then she wanted to turn me into a sideshow, have me tell people's fortunes and get me on television. Make her famous. Well, more famous."

"More famous?"

"Oh. She isn't a movie star or anything. Just rich."

Megan gasped. "You're Grace *Carrington*?"

"Unfortunately."

"Oh my God." Megan started swinging her legs. The log beneath them bounced gently with the rhythm. "Wow. I remember when she—you, I mean, disappeared. Everybody talked about it at school. Most of them were waiting for a body to show up, or a ransom note. They thought there would be this big showdown, you know, cops sneaking up on the kidnapppers and everything. I remember ... I hated Kendra Carrington."

Grace snorted. "You're not the only one."

"Her face was all over the news. Always crying and begging people to bring her daughter back. It looked so fake, like she squirted Visine in her eyes before the cameras came on. I hated her because I thought, if I had a daughter, and she was missing, I'd go find her myself. I'd never stop looking." Megan's breath left in a trembling gasp. "She didn't even try, did she? I mean, besides throwing her money around."

"No. She didn't." Tears stung Grace's eyes. Not for her mother, but because someone else understood. Another person in the world saw Kendra Carrington the way she truly was: greedy, selfish, and phony as a four-dollar bill.

"I'm sorry. But I'm glad she hasn't found you."

"Me, too." Grace managed a smile. "I have to find my father. All I know about him is that he lives in the woods somewhere in Central New York. And I think his name is Beckett."

"So why don't you come with me?" The earnest pleading in Megan's voice struck Grace's heart. "Webster's in Central New York, and there's plenty of woods around. You could start there. Stay for a few days at least. We can worry about long-term stuff later."

Grace couldn't reply.

"Come on." Megan dropped to a whisper. "You're my friend. I want you around."

*My friend.* The words lodged in her mind, an answered prayer she'd never known she wanted. "How am I supposed to say no to that?" Grace managed a laugh and ran a hand through her hair, dislodging pine needles and bits of leaves. "Well, as long as this Michael guy doesn't object, I'll at least stay long enough to get a shower."

"Good. I know he won't mind."

"Getting there might be a problem though. When I controlled it before, I could see the place I wanted to go in my head. I've never been to Webster."

"Me neither." Megan's legs scissored the air a few times. "Would you be able to do it if you saw the house? I have pictures in my email."

"That might work. I'll find it on a map, too. I think it'll help if I have some idea where it is." Grace slid to the ground, sat down, and got her laptop. When Megan joined her, she passed the computer over. "Here you go. Let's see the place."

Megan opened a browser. "This is so cool. You never have to worry about losing a connection." She signed in to a Web-based email account. Most of the messages in her box were from the same address, *axegrinder1@paupersgrave.net*. "Can you do this with cell phones too?"

"You know, I never tried it. Never had anyone to call, I guess."

"I bet you could." Megan clicked on a message labeled "my place" and scrolled quickly past the text. She opened the first of three images. The photo that filled the screen showed a tan bungalow with a railed porch. A young man—Michael, Grace presumed—sprawled on the steps, elbows propped behind him, a sultry half-smile on his face. Dark hair, frosted blond at the top; dark, reflective eyes. Golden brown skin. He wore jeans and nothing else. A black and red tribal tattoo formed a T across his muscled chest and down his stomach.

"Holy hell."

Megan grinned. "Beautiful, isn't he?"

"Yeah. You might say that." Grace smirked at her. "Do you have a picture of just the house? He's kind of distracting."

"Sure." Megan closed the image viewer and opened the next photo. The shot captured the whole house along with a few background details. Green house on the left, white one on the right. A modest front yard with a worn stone path led to the steps. Behind the house, a tree bursting with pink-tinged white blossoms extended above

the roof.

Grace stared at the image for several minutes, until she could close her eyes and see it in her head. "Okay. Can you save this to the desktop? I'm going to check a map, and look at it one more time. Then we'll try getting there."

"Sweet." Megan saved the picture, logged out, and passed the laptop over.

Grace located a satellite map and flagged Webster. The town lay just off Lake Ontario, fifteen miles or so east of a city called Rochester that seemed a decent size. At least it wasn't near the ocean. She closed the map, opened the image of the house. "You should look, too," she told Megan. "It might help if we both thought about the place."

At last, Grace shut things down and stowed the computer. "All right. Let's do this." She stood and offered a hand to Megan. "Do we have everything?"

"Think so."

Grace squeezed her hand. "Don't let go."

Megan nodded.

Grace closed her eyes and pictured the house. She willed herself to be there with Megan. A weightless feeling enfolded her and stole her breath. She gripped the hand in hers tighter, almost bone-crushing hard. Her feet suddenly encountered something solid.

"Whoa." Megan's voice was small, shocked.

Grace looked. There was the house, the porch lit against the night with a single amber bulb. White petals from the tree behind it littered the slope of the roof and gathered in drifts near the gutters. An intoxicating flowery scent permeated the air, weaving among the sounds of population: distant conversations, a rumbling engine, dogs barking.

"You did it!" Megan squealed and threw her arms around Grace. "Oh, I can't wait to see him and have him meet you. Come on!" She bounded toward the porch.

Grace wavered on her feet. *So tired.* She suspected the amount of effort she expended during these moves had some relation to the distance she covered. They must have come a long way. Putting one foot in front of the other required all of her concentration.

Megan turned and ran back to her. "Oh, no. I forgot how tired this makes you." She wedged herself under Grace's arm. "Lean on me. You can just go right to sleep when we get in, okay?"

Grace nodded, unable to summon enough energy to speak. They made it up the steps, and Megan rang the bell twice in rapid succession. A minute passed, then two. Finally, the front door opened. The Michael that greeted them appeared far less easygoing than the Michael in the photo. "Megan," he said stiffly. "I was expecting you sooner. And who's this?"

"Uh," Megan stammered. "Hi. She's my friend, I met her on the way here. She doesn't have a place to stay, and I was hoping you wouldn't mind..."

A smile broke across his face. "Geez, I'm sorry. Don't know what came over me. Come on in, both of you. Of course I don't mind." He stepped back and held the door open.

Grace felt Megan relax. When the girl started inside, she held back. Megan gave her a puzzled look.

*I don't like this. He's acting weird.*

Megan smiled. *He just wasn't expecting you. It's cool. Come on!*

Grace followed hesitantly. No lights were on in the room they entered, but a soft glow spilled from a short hallway on the other side. Michael headed for the light. "I was just going to fix something to eat. Are you girls hungry?"

"Starving!" Megan glanced at Grace, inclined her head toward the retreating figure.

When they reached the hallway, Grace stopped. *Megan ... I can't read his thoughts.*

Megan frowned. *You're tired. That's probably why.*

Michael popped his head out from the lit doorway on the left, presumably the kitchen. "Coming? I've got sandwich stuff, and frozen pizza, some bagels..."

"Let's get something to eat, okay?" Megan put an arm around Grace and drew her toward the kitchen. *If there's anything weird going on, we'll just leave later. You need rest.*

Grace capitulated. She wasn't sure how much longer she could stay on her feet. Leaning on Megan, she reached the doorway—and her heart rose in her throat.

Two men at the table with jeans and button-down shirts. And guns. Kyle and Lou.

"I'm so sorry." Michael backed against the opposite wall and stared at Megan. "I had to bring you to us somehow. To keep you safe. It's the only way..."

Kyle aimed his piece at Grace. "We only wanted her. We'll take you too, but if you try anything dumb, you're expendable. Get it?"

Megan moaned. Her arm tightened around Grace. "Oh my God. Should have listened..."

*Watch out!*

Another man who'd been standing to the right of the doorway stepped toward Megan and grabbed her arm before Grace could verbalize the warning. Megan shrieked once, paled, and stared at her captor.

"No..." Megan whispered. "You can't be here."

"I'm sorry, Megan," the man said. "I truly am. You don't believe it, I know, but I'm doing this for your own good."

Megan jerked in his grasp, but the man held fast. She slipped her arm out from under Grace and shoved her back through the doorway, into the hall.

*He's my stepfather! Run, Grace!*

Without Megan's support, Grace dropped to her knees. She watched, helpless, as the man plunged a syringe into Megan's upper arm and injected her with a dark liquid. Megan's eyes rolled back and she crumpled to the floor.

An instant later, Grace joined her in oblivion.

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## Chapter 17

A soft beep, a hiss of air. Stale silence. Something was wrong with the world beyond her closed eyes. Grace floated in a fog, searching for the splinter of warning lodged in her mind.

Stepfather. Thugs. Megan in trouble.

She fluttered awake. A bright blur seared her eyes. She squinted, tried to sit up, but her body refused to raise more than a few inches. Straining did not change her position. She let herself relax and fell back on something springy and firm. A mattress? Her eyes acclimated slowly to the light. Above her, a tiled white ceiling. To her right, a blank wall and a bed rail with a hand cuffed to it. Her hand. For the moment, she couldn't bring herself to care.

So quiet. Like cotton stuffed in her ears. The same muffled oddity applied to her vision, as though someone had washed the world in hot water and the color had bled from everything. In fact, all of her senses seemed diminished.

"Grace?"

The voice came from her left. It wasn't Megan.

"Grace, are you awake?"

She didn't want to hear that voice. It belonged far away from her, in California with the party boys and snooty tabloid fodder. She rotated her head and stared dully, unable to tap into the fury building inside. "Kendra."

"Oh, Grace! I've been so worried about you." Her mother's hand-wringing antics choreographed like a bad camp movie. "Didn't you see all the posters? The interviews? I wanted you back."

"You're with them. SARET." Her numb lips barely cooperated. "You bitch."

Kendra recoiled, paling beneath her perfect salon tan. "How did you know about them?"

"Where's Megan?" Though she still felt deficient in the hearing and vision department, Grace's emotional state experienced a sharp rise.

"Who?"

"Megan. The girl I was with. What did you people do to her?"

"Really, Grace. You people?" Kendra sighed and affected a wounded look. "This is actually a wonderful, beneficial group. They're going to help you."

"You haven't answered my question, *Kendra*." Grace jerked at her cuffed hand. It didn't budge. The other hand had been similarly restrained; her ankles too. "Where is she?"

"She's safe. In another room, with her father."

"Stepfather."

Grace attempted to read her mother's thoughts. Nothing happened. She couldn't even remember how she'd done it before. At last her murky mind noticed the needle in the back of her left hand, held in place with white tape. Black liquid filled a line leading to a pole stand. The stuff Megan's stepfather gave her to suppress her abilities. She tried to influence the IV controls. Nothing.

"Why?" Grace whispered. "Why are you with them? What's in it for you?"

"Not a thing, except the chance to help my daughter." Kendra put on her media-darling smile. "I donated the camp and all the Adirondack land to them, and I didn't tell a soul. Not even to claim the tax break."

"How benevolent of you," Grace said through gritted teeth. "Do you even know what they think? What they *do* to people like me?"

"Of course I do. They're going to help you live a normal life. Isn't that marvelous?"

"I don't want to be normal. I want to be left alone." Grace twisted her left hand, trying to dislodge the needle. "And they're not going to help me. They're going to slice me open and try to harvest whatever it is I have."

Kendra laughed, a hollow saccharine sound. "Ridiculous. It's strictly research and rehabilitation."

Grace stared at her mother. Either the woman had been brainwashed by this cult, or she knew exactly what they intended to do—and condoned it. Would Kendra Carrington actually be willing to sacrifice her own daughter for the vague promise of "alien" power? Grace wouldn't put it past her. However, without the ability to read her thoughts, she couldn't tell for sure.

"Look. This black stuff is really messing me up. Can you take the needle out?"

"Oh, no. I couldn't. It's part of the program." Kendra appeared close to contrite for an instant. "It will help you get back to normal. Here, I'll show you." She turned away, rummaged in a small purse tossed on a chair beside the bed and produced a powder compact. She flipped it open and held it in front of Grace. "Look at your eyes."

Grace looked. Someone had removed her contacts. Her own green eyes stared back, a shade more brilliant than the average person, but no longer glowing. Just normal. Exhaustion and a dull terror lurked in their depths. Her reflection pleaded for help.

She knew it wouldn't come from Kendra.

"I have to go." Kendra snapped the compact closed. "Michael will want to know you're awake."

"Michael?" Grace croaked.

"Yes. He's the leader. Incredibly accomplished for such a young man. He's quite the charmer, isn't he?" Kendra's lips curved in a wicked smile.

Dull weight settled in Grace's stomach. "You're sleeping with him."

"Now, Grace. A lady never kisses and tells." Kendra scooped up her bag and moved toward a door across the room. "Michael is a little worried about you, but I assured him you would be reasonable. You will, won't you dear? If you behave, they'll let you eat dinner with the others."

*Don't call me dear, you bitch.* "Others? What others?"

"The other children, of course." Kendra swept from the room and closed the door.

*Children?* Jesus, how many had these people kidnapped? Sorrow for Megan washed over her. The girl had to be crushed, finding out her so-called boyfriend ran an organization that wanted her dead. It had been a trap from the start.

Grace set her mind to other matters. Somehow, with or without their abilities, she and Megan had to get out of here fast.

\* \* \* \*

Grace slept on and off. She tried to stay awake, to plan, but her heavy eyelids refused her desires. She suspected the drug contained a mild sedative along with an addictive component and whatever it was that thickened her senses and rendered her abilities null. Time passed. At one point during a blackout, someone apparently removed the IV needle. Eventually the door opened. She recognized Lou from the train station in Chicago.

He stopped beside the bed, stared at her eyes and seemed satisfied. "Gonna take you downstairs for dinner. Boss says to tell you don't bother running. Everybody's got permission to shoot to kill with you. A'right?"

"Whatever." Grace knew she'd have to cooperate, at least for a little while. At least they didn't seem eager to operate on her. Yet.

Lou produced a sparse ring of keys and unlocked the cuffs. He lowered the bed rail and moved back like he'd just opened a tiger's cage. "You can walk, can't you?"

"Guess we'll find out," she muttered. She sat up, slid her legs off the bed and stood. Didn't fall. "So what's for dinner?"

"Dunno." Lou's face reddened and he turned to face the door. "I'm not in charge of cooking." He stepped out of the room and waited.

She joined him and looked around, hoping to gauge the general layout. The room she'd been in opened to a balcony hallway overlooking a vast, open area with a loft ceiling. At the far end of the hall, polished wood stairs doubled back along the balcony and turned at the midpoint to descend in a gentle arc. The floor of the area below incorporated a sunburst pattern laid in light and dark wood, glossy and glittering in the evening sun that streamed from an open bay window opposite the stairs. Art so ugly it had to be expensive adorned the walls. In short, the place reeked of her mother's money.

Grace grimaced inwardly and decided to keep Lou talking. "What are you in charge of, then?"

He shuffled toward the stairs, shrugged. "Security, I guess," he said without turning around. "Not just me, right. Lot of us."

"How many of you are there?"

Lou stopped short and turned to glare. "Never mind. Quit talking. Follow me."

*Damn.* It hadn't taken him long to figure out she was sniffing for information. Lou didn't seem too bright, so she assumed these people were under orders not to answer questions. Whatever she discovered, she'd have to find on her own.

He led her down the stairs and back through an ornate carved doorway under the balcony. The vestibule opened on both sides: kitchen to the left, dining room to the right. Voices and clinking dishes drifted from half a dozen occupied chairs around a massive oval table. Spotting Megan among them wasn't hard. She was the only one with blue hair.

Lou pointed. "Go on, help y'self. Remember what I said about running, huh?"

Megan turned at the sound of Lou's voice. A brilliant smile lit her features beneath non-luminous eyes. "Grace!" She stood, rushed across the room, and enfolded Grace in a welcome hug. "No one would tell me where you were," she whispered near her ear. "I thought they left you back there."

"No. I'm here." Grace glanced over her shoulder and glowered at Lou, who lurked in the doorway. "Are you all right?"

"Sure. At least they're feeding us." Megan released her, stepped back. "You'd better come and get something to eat. Here, sit with me."

Grace approached the table. The conversation had stopped. Five pairs of eyes stared at her. Other than her and Megan, there were three boys and two girls. None looked older than seventeen. Nothing unusual about them, except the beauty and physical near-perfection they all possessed. All flawless skin, silken hair, and faultless proportions, without a trace of adolescent awkwardness. No pimples or gangly limbs. No oily complexions or stringy tresses. Grouped together, they appeared caricatures of humans. Designer models.

The youngest, a strawberry blond boy of around eleven or twelve, spoke first. "You're old."

"David!" The girl next to him, an auburn-haired beauty with sapphire eyes, cuffed the back of his head. "Just ignore him," she said with a smile.

"Well, she is." David shot the girl a narrow-eyed look and shoved a forkful of mashed potatoes in his mouth.

The girl rolled her eyes. "I'm Dawn. David's my pain-in-the-butt brother."

"I'm Grace." No sense using a fake name here. If she tried, Kendra would correct everyone anyway. And she didn't plan on staying long.

Megan sat across from Dawn and patted the empty chair next to her. "Okay, let's see if I can remember everyone," she said as Grace settled in. "We've got Dawn and David. Evan, Bailey, and ... crap."

"Crap?" the last boy echoed. "Okay, but I'd rather you call me Ace, since that's my name." He grinned, flashing teeth as white as his hair was black. "Nice to meet you. And David's right for once. Nobody stays here past eighteen. Kaden turned eighteen two days ago, and he left last night. You gotta be what, twenty? Twenty-one?"

"Actually, I'm nineteen." Grace tried to keep her expression neutral, but Ace's blithe statement chilled her. If that was true, she probably didn't have a lot of time before these people took her apart.

"Practically a hag." Bailey, blonde and buxom, giggled and picked up a glass from the table. "Just kidding. Hi, Grace. Welcome to the family."

Grace detected a hostile note in Bailey's tone, confirmed by the warning gleam in her pale violet-gray eyes. "Thanks." She realized Bailey viewed her as competition. Maybe these kids didn't have any physical flaws, but they weren't lacking in the teenage hormone department.

"Lay off, Bailey." Evan, a cocoa-skinned teen with thin cornrows who hadn't even glanced up after Grace's initial entrance, locked gazes with Bailey for an instant and looked away.

"The zombie speaks!" Bailey laughed, and Evan's chocolate complexion darkened. "You should feel honored. Evan's not sociable."

Grace watched Evan for a moment. He looked like the oldest one here after herself. The plate in front of him appeared clean, as though he hadn't eaten anything. Even without her abilities, she sensed isolation in him, a self-imposed distance from the others.

Evan raised his head. His eyes met hers. Grace forgot how to breathe.

Megan nudged Grace, jolting her attention from Evan. "You need to eat," the girl whispered. She reached for a nearby serving bowl, scooped mashed potatoes and plopped them on an empty plate. "Ace, can you pass the chicken down this way?"

"Hey, you remembered my name!" Ace grabbed a serving platter piled with portions of grilled white meat, drizzled in a pale beige sauce and garnished with deep green parsley sprigs. He held it toward Megan and his grin resurfaced. "Only I don't think that's chicken."

"Yeah," David chimed in between mouthfuls. "I bet it's kangaroo. Or rat meat!"

"Gross! Knock it off, guys." Dawn heaved a long-suffering sigh and wound a curl around her finger. "See what I have to put up with? Don't worry, it's chicken. I saw Dorinne making it."

Megan located a pair of tongs and transferred two portions to Grace's plate. "I think there's carrots here somewhere, and steamed broccoli. The biscuits are gone, though."

"You snooze, you lose." Ace pointed to a platter dusted with crumbs. "Too bad. They were good today."

"This is fine. Thank you." Grace picked up a fork and poked at the potatoes. She wanted to ask a hundred questions. Did Megan know about Michael's betrayal? Did any of these kids know why they were here? She doubted they did. No one's eyes glowed, so they must all have been drugged with the black stuff. She wondered how many of them actually knew about their abilities and why they thought SARET had taken them in. Had they come willingly?

She couldn't ask any of them. Not with Lou glowering in the shadows.

More than anything, Megan concerned her. If the girl did know about Michael, she was hiding it well. And if she didn't, she was in for a nasty shock.

Grace swallowed a forkful of potatoes. They should have been delicious—they were real, not instant, buttery and lightly seasoned, whipped smooth, and still warm. But it was like eating glue. She put the fork down and frowned. She had to know. "Megan," she whispered. "Have you ... seen Michael recently?"

"Michael." Megan paled and her hands started to tremble. She clasped them together and forced them into her lap. "He's fine. I'm sure he's fine."

Grace stared at her barely touched plate. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

Megan shot to her feet. Her chair toppled and clattered to the floor. "No, you shouldn't have!" she shouted. "Don't say anything about that! Just don't!"

The others, who had fallen to bantering among themselves again, fell silent and stared at Megan. Tears pooled in the girl's eyes. She shook her head and blinked them back. "You don't know. I can't. They..." She glanced at the entrance to the dining room, and her mouth firmed. "Damn. Grace, I'm sorry."

Footsteps behind her. Grace turned to find Lou and his buddy Kyle approaching. "Sorry, kids," Kyle said. He pulled Grace's chair back and gestured for her to stand. "Your new friend here needs a little more rest than we thought. Come on, girl. Back to bed."

Grace gained her feet before Kyle could force her. She didn't have to read his mind to understand the vengeance in his eyes. She glanced at Megan, and for an instant thought she could read her, too.

*You have to cooperate. So do I. It's too soon.*

Shuddering, Grace followed the men out of the room. She didn't look back.

\* \* \* \*

When they reached the stairs, Kyle stopped to let them pass and fell into step behind Grace. Lou opened the door to the room she'd been in. He stood back, an awkward expression on his face and didn't look at her when she entered.

Grace headed straight for the bed. She didn't bother resisting the inevitable cuffs. Once she'd been strapped back down, Lou turned to leave. He stopped when he realized Kyle wasn't following suit. "You comin'?"

"I'll be down in a few," Kyle replied. "I need a word with little Miss Carrington."

Frown lines creased Lou's forehead. "You ain't supposed to hurt her unless she tries to run. She's bein' good, Kyle. Don't be a jerk."

"I'm not going to hurt her. I just want to talk." Kyle flashed a reassuring smile. "You'd better go check on the others. This won't take a minute."

Grace listened to the exchange with mounting concern. Being helpless and alone with Kyle probably wouldn't end well for her. If she were any judge of character, he seemed the type to be more upset about their escape than the injury she'd inflicted on his arm. She had wounded his pride, and he wanted to return the favor.

"All right," Lou said slowly. "Jus' take it easy, huh?"

"You betcha."

Lou glanced at Grace, stepped out, and closed the door.



Kyle said nothing at first. He watched her tentatively, as though he expected her to attack, or maybe disappear again. When she failed to evaporate, he moved to the door and listened.

Grace turned her head toward him. "Whatever you're going to do, could you get on with it? I'm tired."

"You are? Oh. Poor baby." Kyle advanced, unsmiling. "I'm pretty wiped out myself. Been flying all over the damned country looking for Dr. Jones' precious little girl. I finally find her, and some freak cuts me and takes her away. How about that?"

"Gee, that does sound unpleasant." *Cooperate*. Great idea. Throwing his sarcasm back in his face wasn't exactly cooperating, but Grace couldn't think of anything better.

"I had to get ten stitches. I don't like stitches. I hate needles." Kyle stopped beside the bed. "What about you, Grace? Do you like needles? You're in for quite a few of them. Not as many as the others, though."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Kyle grinned. "He'll have to rush you through things and get you out of here fast. You're already old enough. Fine with me because I don't want to look at you any longer than I have to."

"Why are you still in here then?"

"I just want to make sure we understand each other." Kyle fingered the end of the strap that bound her left wrist to the bed rails. "You're a freak and I'm not. I'm in charge and you're not. I know Lou told you about the shoot-to-kill order. Let me assure you that if it comes down to it, shooting you won't break my heart. I'd suggest you be real careful about doing anything suspicious."

Grace stiffened. "Suspicious. And that would be..."

Kyle's arm shot over the bed rail. His hand clamped on her throat. "Just stay out of my way, girl. Keep your head down and don't try to stop us. Understand?"

Grace nodded, unable to speak. The pressure increased sharply. Kyle released her just before she stopped breathing altogether. She coughed, drew a ragged breath, and glared at the bastard. "Stop who from what?" The raw edge in her voice grated her ears. "You've already got Megan. And me."

"You shouldn't be here. You ask too many questions. Keep it up and I'll find an excuse to shoot you." He whirled and stalked from the room. The door slammed in his wake.

Grace stared after him. More than ever, she was convinced something unpleasant awaited anyone over eighteen here. At the moment, that included her. She replayed Kyle's irrational threats, turning them over in her mind, looking for an explanation. Exhaustion thwarted her attempts. She stopped trying and waited for sleep to claim her.

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## Chapter 18

Grace woke to her mother's disapproving frown. "I thought you were going to behave."

How long had she slept? The last thing she remembered was a sour-faced woman who reminded her of the hotel clerk in Vegas, who entered the room after Kyle left to reinsert the IV and start the drug drip again.

Vegas. It seemed a lifetime ago.

"Grace, I'm talking to you. You're making a liar out of me."

"You don't need my help with that."

Her mouth was dry, her lips cracked and shriveled. The weakness in her wasn't entirely due to the drug. *Hungry. Thirsty*. She swallowed. It felt like fishhooks in her throat.

"Maybe I should just tell Michael that you're hopeless." Beneath Kendra's haughtiness, Grace detected a thread of hurt. Not because she had struck some emotional cord. Because what she'd said was true.

"Maybe you should. Leave me alone, Kendra." Grace tried to curl away, remembered the cuffs. She rotated her face to the wall instead.

"Grace. Please."

That got her attention. She couldn't remember the last time her mother had said "please," except as a dismissal. She faced her but said nothing.

"Michael's willing to give you another chance. But if you have another meltdown, you'll have to stay in your room until the treatment is finished, and that could take weeks."

"I didn't have the meltdown." Grace closed her eyes and tried not to remember the look on Megan's face, the fury and pain. "Megan did."

"Yes, but you instigated it."

"I—" Grace closed her mouth abruptly. No point in defending herself when Madam Judge and Jury there had already decided on her guilt. "Okay. I'm sorry." *Cooperate, damn it*. If she gave any indication of dissent, she was finished.

But the rules didn't apply to her mother.

Kendra looked aslant at her. "Are you?"

"Yes." She forced herself to look and sound contrite. Projecting weakness was easy. "I'm really hungry," she said. "Any way I could get something to eat?"

"They're just about to eat lunch. You slept through breakfast." Kendra whipped out a cell phone and punched in a string of numbers. "Lou has the keys. He'll be up in a few minutes."

Grace looked at her hand. Once again, the needle had been removed while she slept. "So, the other kids. They think I'm old."

"Ridiculous. You're only seventeen."

"Nineteen. I'm nineteen, Kendra." Oh, yes. Her mother had thought about her often while she was gone. Couldn't even be bothered to remember that two of her birthdays had passed.

"Of course. I ... It's been a while."

Grace stared at her. Was she actually blushing? *Please*. "They said no one stays here past eighteen. Is that true?"

"Well, yes. I told you, it's rehabilitation. Once the children turn eighteen, they're ready to return to the world." Kendra studied the ceiling as though unable to meet her daughter's eyes. "Michael has an arrangement with the government. They're trained to join the Special Forces, work for the FBI or the CIA. Doesn't that sound exciting?"

Even Kendra didn't seem convinced that a career in undercover government agencies sounded like a trip to Disney World.

"No. It doesn't." Grace waited until Kendra looked at her. "Have you ever seen any of these kids who go out and become super spies? Any of them ever call, write postcards, drop in between missions to visit with their buddies?"

"Of course not." Kendra uttered a nervous laugh and glanced toward the door. "They don't have time for that sort of thing."

"These people are killing them. Cutting them up. That's why they don't come back. When they turn eighteen, they die."

"No!" Kendra shook her head for emphasis. "It's not like that. Grace, you have to stop believing these wild fantasies. It's only making things harder on you."

"And you. Right, Kendra? My behavior reflects poorly on you."

Anger tightened Kendra's eyes.

"Don't worry," Grace said before her mother could respond. "I'll be a good girl. Eat my vegetables, take my drugs. Stay chained up like an animal."

"They wouldn't restrain you if you'd just cooperate," Kendra hissed.

The door opened. Lou walked in, concentrating on his keys. Kendra moved aside to let him unlock Grace. She sat up slowly, feeling lightheaded and dazed. How long did she have? A week, a day, a few hours? If she could just talk to Megan alone and find out if the girl had been brainwashed already, or just staged the explosion to avoid revealing what she really thought about Michael, as Grace hoped was the case. To do that, she'd have to get them to trust her.

Without another word to Kendra, she followed Lou to the dining room. The others had already gathered and started filling their plates from the spread on the table. Cold cut sandwiches, a vegetable and dip tray, two kinds of soup. Grace's stomach growled loud enough to attract attention above the chatter.

Megan greeted Grace as though yesterday had never happened. She hugged her, brought her to the table, filled her plate. Grace drank first, draining an eight-ounce glass of ice-choked water in less than a minute. She filled it again, tossed back half, and finally attacked the food. This time, she wouldn't talk to anyone until her stomach was full.

No one else seemed inclined to converse anyway. They ate like it was a contest and the top prize was a million dollars and a trip to Aruba. Grace wondered whether the drug stimulated their appetites along with all the other delightful effects. Then again, it could be the mountain air—at least for the others. They were in the Adirondacks. For Grace, who hadn't been outside yet, the impetus was simple famine.

Sated at last, the room filled with the staggered sounds of plates being pushed back. Only David and Ace kept eating. Grace regarded Megan warily, baffled at her apparent memory loss. She noticed dark circles under the girl's eyes and the deep-set, downturned corners of her mouth. "Are you all right?" she asked. "You look awful."

"Thanks a lot." Megan tossed her a weak smile. "I'm just tired. Didn't sleep well last night. Hey, I'm really sorry about ... well, you know. Yesterday."

"It's all right. Totally my fault." Relief temporarily overshadowed her misgivings. "So, what's there to do around here?" *Assuming the goons don't tie me down after lunch.*

"There's a pool," Dawn said. "Sorry, I know you weren't asking me. Just thought I'd mention."

Grace managed a grim smirk. "Sounds great. Where is it?"

"Out behind the house. It's enclosed with solar panels. We can swim all winter when it gets here."

"Nice. I don't have a suit, though."

Bailey cut in with airy dismissal. "I've got an old one you can use. Too tight for me in a certain area, you know. But I'm sure it will be perfect for you." She looked pointedly at Grace's chest.

"Thanks." At the edge of her vision, she caught Megan rolling her eyes. "I guess we can't spend all day in the pool though. What else is there?"

"Video games," David offered. "Good ones. Down in the basement."

Dawn nudged him. "David could spend all day there. Ace, too."

At the mention of his name, Ace looked up from his plate and grinned. "That's right. Video games promote good hand-eye coordination. Ask anybody."

"Yeah, especially if you always win," David grumbled.

Ace laughed. "There's a reason they call me Ace. You think my mother named me that?" He reached across the table, but his hand fell short of the sandwich plate. "Hey, Grace. You wanna slide that over my way, please?"

Nodding, Grace started for the plate. Her gaze fell on Ace's arm, and the thick band of scar tissue at his wrist, as though it had been slit repeatedly. She reacted with an involuntary gasp.

Ace snapped a fist. He turned his hand over slowly and spread his fingers again. The marks went all the way around and thinned slightly at the back. Grace looked at him, an apology on her lips. "What?" he said, his tone no less cheerful than if they'd been discussing the weather. "Can't you reach it either? Don't strain yourself now."

can just stand up and get it." He smiled, but the expression didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I've got it." Grace pushed the plate toward him. She wouldn't ask. Whatever had happened, Ace obviously didn't want to draw attention to it. She looked away, but not before she caught a glimpse of nearly identical scars around his opposite wrist. "So," she said, more to distract herself than anything, "any other options?"

"There's a weight room."

Grace looked at Evan. The instant her eyes met his, he dropped his gaze. Probably a good thing, since she couldn't seem to stop staring at him. "Is that in the basement, too?" she asked.

"Yeah." He didn't look up again.

Brief silence settled over them. Grace tried once more to sense something from Megan, anything to help explain what was going on. Useless. She was no more psychic than the chair she sat in. She pasted on a smile to hold back a flood of despair. "Who wants to go for a swim?"

\* \* \* \*

In battle, a wise general knows when to fall back and regroup.

Lorin craved rest and indulgence in mindless pleasures. A vacation, the humans would call it. If nothing else, it would ease some of her frustration at the inability to locate the current object of her hunt. When she found that one, it would suffer for the inconvenience it had caused her.

She also needed to restore her control over Silver. There had been too many minor mistakes, small acts that for her son constituted rebellion. A period of pain and isolation would erase his wayward behavior.

After a brief, failed attempt to locate this SARET place the human Comp had mentioned under duress, Lorin ordered Silver to return them to his crypt. The stone closet she kept him in had been his design. Nothing she built could have contained him should he choose to escape. Of course, he had created this prison nearly three hundred years ago. He was stronger now. Her will alone kept him at bay. She doubted he was even aware that he could break free.

"Open it." Lorin gestured at the crypt.

Silver moved the heavy stone door aside as though it weighed no more than paper. She pointed, and he stepped inside the space just large enough to hold him standing.

"I'm going away for a while." She reached in and straightened the manacles attached to the inside walls with short chains. "I still want that Nephil. You're to stay awake, keep searching for it." Lorin locked the first manacle in place. She'd never allowed him to remain conscious when she left him here. She had no idea what his range was, how far away he could influence things. Probably pretty damned far. But she'd take the risk for the chance of finding her prey.

Silver hadn't answered her. She hefted a loose manacle and swung it. A bone snapped. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes, Lorin." His voice shook.

She secured his other wrist, and knelt to fasten his ankles in place. "Tell me when you find it. Do not contact me for any other reason. Understand?"

"Yes, Lorin."

Already, his blood drizzled down his hands and feet. The inside of the manacles bore razor-sharp barbs designed to keep him debilitated. It didn't weaken him nearly enough, but the constant bleeding forced at least part of his power to remain occupied in replenishing his supply. Lorin stood and reached above him for the last restraint, a stiff leather collar outfitted with similar barbs. She pressed it into place around his neck, pulled it tight. His blood welled along the bottom edge and streaked down the hollow of his throat.

"Find it, Silver. I want it dead."

Yes, *Lorin*. With the collar constricting his windpipe, he could no longer speak.

The final step in the restraint system particularly pleased Lorin. The thick iron stake, attached to the back of the door with a locking hinge, was the exact length of the crypt's depth from front to back. When the door was in place, the stake would be plunged through Silver's abdomen. He could not remove it himself. Unless, of course, he ripped the manacles free—and she feared that, given the choice, he could.

Silver's eyes didn't leave hers while she maneuvered the stone door back into position. It unnerved her. He'd never stared at her for so long before. She considered punishing him for insolence, but pleasure and rest spoke louder at the moment. She'd torment Silver later.

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## Chapter 19

Grace spent the day creating a mental map of the house and trying to talk to Megan alone. She accomplished the first task and failed at the second. By the time Lou and Kyle escorted her to her room, she hadn't managed to discuss anything more pressing than the length of time it took for their fingertips to wrinkle in the pool.

At least her show of cooperation seemed to be getting her somewhere. Instead of hooking her up to the IV, the resident pseudo-nurse gave her an injection of the stuff. The thugs didn't cuff her to the bed, but one of them stood guard outside her door. If she'd been feeling generous, she would have told them it wasn't necessary. She was too exhausted to escape.

Grace slept. And dreamed.

Night again. The moon peered through the canopy, winking above waving leaves. Its beams pattered down like silver rain. She'd reached the edge of the ravine at last. Two or three paces would carry her over the side.

Eagerly, she moved forward only to smack into something solid that wasn't there.

She waved a hand in the air. Her fingers bumped nothing and went no further. She patted a palm against the invisible obstruction. Banged on it. Solid air like a glass wall with no reflective glare. No! It wasn't fair. She kicked, pounded, threw herself against the barrier. It didn't yield to her efforts.

She stopped and stared into the chasm. Though it was night, she had no trouble seeing everything in vivid detail. The opposite bank stood fifteen, maybe twenty feet

away. Steep walls descended to a floor thirty feet below, only slightly narrower than the rift. In at least three places, using vines and tree roots and stones embedded like natural steps, descent would be difficult, but not impossible.

Rock, varying in size from pebbles to boulders, cut a swath through the center of the ravine floor. There must have been a stream or a river here once. Soft moss padded the ground on either side of the stone vein. Almost directly below lay a deadfall, the jumbled bleached bones of trees past. Clumps of bushes with tiny, tear-shaped leaves formed a patchwork on the ground. Blueberry bushes. She could practically taste them.

A touch of symmetry in the asymmetrical landscape caught her eye. Far to her right stood a structure that nature had not created. Something rectangular and stone, draped in vines and embedded in the earthen wall. A house? Her heart beat faster. Was this where her father lived?

It was hard to get a sense of proportion from here. Placing both hands on the unseen barrier, she slid sideways toward the structure, hoping for an end to the wall. As she drew closer, the light faded and plunged her into blackness.

She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Bands of pain encircled her wrists and ankles, crushed her throat. Something warm and wet trickled down her hands. It felt like blood.

She woke with a snap, ejected from the dream like a cannonball. A sticky substance coated her palms. She fumbled for the lamp beside the bed, switched it on, and bit back a scream at the sight of the silver streaks on her hands.

Instinctively she decided not to let anyone see the shimmering liquid. That ruled out cleaning her hands on the sheet or her clothing. No tissues or paper towels presented themselves. She pinched the hem of her shirt between her fingertips, drew the material up, and wiped the stuff on her stomach. She'd ask to use a bathroom and wash it off there.

A few faint smears remained in the lines of her palms. She spat on her hands and rubbed them together. The substance faded and disappeared.

Grace hauled herself upright. No sooner had her feet touched the floor, than the door opened and Lou stopped short. "Er. Guess you're up. They're havin' breakfast in a few minutes."

"Thank you." Grace smoothed her shirt. "Is there a bathroom close by I can use? I really have to go."

"Yeah, next door down. Go on, I'll wait."

Lou moved back, and Grace walked by him with a nod. In the bathroom, she relieved herself and wiped her skin down with moistened wads of toilet paper, then flushed the mess. Lou escorted her downstairs. She was second to arrive, behind Evan. Again, his perfection struck her: ruler-straight cornrows, not a hair out of place, even first thing in the morning. No freckles marred his skin. Every feature perfectly symmetrical. Only his eyes hinted at humanity—guarded pools, hiding secrets in their depths.

"Hey." She slid into a seat across from him and surveyed the table. Scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes, toast, a fruit tray and two kinds of juice. Every meal they'd been served was practically a banquet. Like they were pigs being fattened for slaughter. She'd never gained excess weight no matter what or how much she ate, and she assumed it was the same for the others. A fringe benefit to being a freak.

Evan didn't look up. "Hey."

Grace poured a glass of grape juice and offered the pitcher to Evan. He shook his head. With a shrug, she put it down and reached for the toast. "I never got to thank you for sticking up for me," she said. "So ... thank you."

"Bailey's a drip." His features clouded for an instant. He blinked a few times and helped himself to some sausage links.

When he said nothing further, Grace decided to try a little covert investigation. "Do you like it here?" she asked.

"I guess. Better than ... before." His eyes unfocused, returned. "Michael takes care of us."

Grace refrained from exhibiting her disgust. "What was before?"

"My mom ditched me on the street when I was ten. Said I creeped her out. When all the weird stuff started happening, Michael found me and brought me here." Evan looked startled, as though he hadn't meant to say that aloud.

Grace felt as shocked as he looked. Nothing here made sense. Michael took Evan in, but he'd basically kidnapped Megan. And her. Yesterday, she'd gotten the general impression that all the kids adored him. Megan wasn't even mad at him any more. But he was drugging them, and killing them at eighteen. Wasn't he?

Dawn's voice floated in from the vestibule. "David! Stop messing with that."

"I'm not gonna hurt it." A loud crash sounded. "Oops."

"Don't tell them about that, okay?" Evan muttered, slouching in his chair. "They don't know."

"I won't."

Dawn flounced in, trailed by a red-faced David. "He broke that statue thing out there," she announced. "Dope!"

David scooted into a chair and grinned. "Prove it. I'm not even near it."

"You're impossible."

"You're annoying."

"David!"

Ignoring his sister, David piled food onto his plate. Dawn heaved a sigh and sat down next to him. "Good morning, Grace. Evan."

"Good morning," Grace replied. Evan nodded, lost to the world again.

Within five minutes, they'd all trooped in for the feast. Grace pushed her concerns aside and tried to enjoy the company sure that one way or another it wouldn't last long.

Afternoon arrived under gray skies and a halfhearted drizzle of rain accompanied by intermittent thunder of the distant, throat-clearing variety. The house huddled beneath the gloomy blanket, subdued and drowsy.

Grace helped herself to a can of soda from the refrigerator and headed for the stairs hoping to find Megan in her room. Before she reached the main room, the girl's muted voice drifted from the open basement door. She changed course and started down.

In the central den, the backs of two heads hovered above the couch: one strawberry blond, one blue. Pulsating low-volume music mingled with thumps and grunts in a stream of sound from the television on which two colorful characters smacked each other around.

"Hey! That's cheating!" David leaned forward and pummeled the controller in his hands.

"It's not cheating if I don't know what I'm doing." Laughing, Megan pushed buttons with more restraint. "Isn't there a move list or something?"

"Yeah. Hit pause."

The characters froze and a chart appeared superimposed over the image on the screen. Grace took the opportunity to announce her presence. "Hey, guys."

Megan turned with a ready smile. "Hi, Grace. Is it still raining out there?"

"More or less." Grace nodded at the game. "Having fun?"

"I sure am. I'm kicking her butt," David said.

Megan huffed. "Yeah, right." She peered at the screen. "Geez, this guy is pathetic! Doesn't he have any good moves?"

"No. You should've stuck with the girl."

"She was boring." Megan pushed a button and the chart scrolled up. "Lame. Next time I'm using your guy." She glanced at Grace and said, "I'm almost done here. Just going to finish this fight."

"Aw, c'mon, Megan! One more? It's boring by myself."

"No way. We already played like fifty games."

"Nuh-uh! Only thirty-three. And a half."

"Thirty-four is my daily limit. If I play thirty-five, I'll explode."

"You are really weird."

"Yep." Megan grinned. "And you're really dead." The chart disappeared and the music restarted.

"Hey!" David snapped back toward the screen and pushed buttons with renewed fervor. In less than a minute, one of the characters crumpled to the ground. "Ha! You suck," David said.

"First round, champ. You still have to beat me again."

"Watch me." The screen went black and displayed *Round 2*. "Grace, will you do me a favor?" David said without turning.

"Like what?"

"Ask Ace if he'll play with me when the wuss quits? He's in the weight room. Back there." He jerked his head to the right. His eyes didn't leave the television. "Please?"

"Sure." Grace moved to the side of the stairs. The main room narrowed behind them and light shone from a recess at the back wall. "Down that hall?"

"Yeah, that's it. Crap! How'd you do that?"

Grace started to reply, but realized David was talking to Megan. She headed for the light, turned the corner, and spotted a single door on the left side of a short hall toward the end. A soft knock yielded no response. She rapped a bit harder, and called, "Ace, you in there?"

Nothing. He probably couldn't hear her through the door. She pushed it open and stepped through. "Ace? Hello..."

The clink of metal on metal sounded to her right. Ace lay on a weight bench, angled away from her, his hands on a barbell. White wire led from a slim plastic device clipped on his shirt to a set of headphones nestled in his ears. She heard tinny strains of rock music even from her position a good ten feet away.

No wonder he hadn't heard anything.

Ace sat up slowly and swung a leg over the bench to perch sideways facing her. His eyes were closed. Sweat plastered tendrils of dark hair to his temples, beaded across his forehead and dripped down the sides of his face. A dark, inverted triangle moistened the front of his gray tee shirt. He exhaled long and low through pursed lips, grabbed the hem of the shirt and lifted it to mop his face.

Grace drew a shocked breath. The scars on his wrists paled in comparison to his stomach, where thick ridges of pink-white skin spelled *PIG* in crude capital letters.

The shirt dropped down, covering the horrific sight. Ace opened his eyes, stood, and finally noticed he had company. Smiling, he clicked a button on the player and removed the earbuds. His smile faltered. "What? Can't get a workout if you don't sweat a little."

"I..." Grace swallowed. Her gaze flicked to his stomach.

"Oh. That." He sighed and sat back down. "I don't suppose you're just wondering how I keep up my incredible six-pack."

Grace shook her head. "You don't have to explain," she said softly. "I can tell you don't want to talk about it."

"No, it's okay. I don't mind explaining ... if you really want to know."

Grace wasn't sure she did. She hesitated and at last said, "All right. What happened?"

Ace looked at his hands. He rubbed a thumb over a scarred band, held his hand out. "Wire."

"What?"

He lifted his gaze. "If I touch people, I can see memories. I found out the hard way when I started high school two years ago. Tripped over my own feet and landed in a bully's lap. Lenny Jackson. Big guy. Senior for the second time, more than his share of testosterone, with the IQ of a spiral notebook."

"Sounds like a winner."

"Oh, yeah. Dipshit of the Century." Ace gave a weak laugh. "Obviously I wanted to get off Lenny fast, and the closest solid object was his fat head. I pushed on him and had a ... vision, I guess. A locker full of pot. And somehow I knew he'd gotten it that morning, and he planned to cut it with d-CON and sell it at school. He'd heard rat poison enhances a high—but that's not how he thought it. I think his actual words were *fucks you up good*."

"Oh, God."

Ace smirked. "Of course, I told the principal to check Lenny's locker. Kids would've died. Lenny wouldn't have been a loss, but I didn't think he should get to take more with him. They expelled him that day. Permanently."

Grace shivered. "I take it he did that to you, then."

"Yep. He was patient though. I'll give him that." He clasped his hands until his knuckles whitened. "I spent three weeks looking over my shoulder, convinced he was going to kill me. He didn't, but it was close."

Ace stopped, long enough for Grace to assume he didn't want to elaborate. He drew a deep breath and continued in low and shaken tones.

"Bullies never work alone. There were four of them. They dragged me into the woods and beat the shit out of me, but that wasn't enough." He rubbed his wrists, stared at them. "They tied me to a tree with baling wire so Lenny could carve his little masterpiece. A warning, he said, for any other dweebs who might want to squeal on him." He shrugged. A slow smile spread on his face. "At least he spelled it right."

Grace closed her eyes against the nausea rolling in the pit of her stomach. She tried to express regret, condolences, a murmur of comfort or sympathy, but words would not form. Had they all suffered for their abilities? Her years of aching solitude seemed a pittance in comparison to what Ace had experienced. Finally, she found her tongue and said, "I'm so sorry. That's just ... awful." *Jesus, can I sound any lamer?*

Ace shrugged. "Hey, it's over. After that, Mom decided school wasn't the best place for me. She kept me home, and Michael showed up after I healed."

"Michael?" A flash of anger crept into her voice. If he'd "saved" the rest of them, why had he snatched her and Megan against their will? "How did he know about you, where to find you? It seems kind of strange."

"I'm not sure how he knew, but he did. To be honest, I'm glad to be here. People can be pretty stupid sometimes."

"Yeah. I guess you're right." She'd witnessed first-class stupidity often enough—the stares, the whispers, the unspoken and the outright hatred.

Ace grinned. "I'm always right. You'll figure that out soon."

She stared at him, then laughed aloud.

"Hey, what are you guys doing in there?" David spoke from just outside the door, his voice drenched with indignation. "Are you gonna come out some time this year? Me and Megan have been done forever!"

"Oh, I almost forgot." She turned to Ace and smiled. "David wants to know if you'll play some video games with him."

In the hall, David snorted. "You haven't even *asked* him yet? Geez, you're slow!"

Ace chuckled, shook his head. "Sure, I'll play for a while. I want to change my shirt first, okay? If I don't, it's not going to smell pleasant down here."

"Right." Grace started for the door. She paused. "Ace?"

"Yeah?"

"Nothing. I'm ... sorry." If there were appropriate words, she didn't have them. Maybe what Michael did here was a good thing for people like Ace, and for Dawn and David—as long as he didn't kill them. Kids with no one to understand them and protect them from the assholes of the world. Fine. She'd give him that.

But this setup wasn't for her. Especially if it meant staying anywhere near Kendra.

"Don't be. It's not your fault." Anger flickered through his gaze and dissipated fast. His voice lowered as he said, "Just do me a favor and don't mention this to David, okay? He's too young to worry about it."

*So are you.* At fifteen, Ace shouldn't have to know what kind of horrors people were capable of visiting on each other. "Sure," Grace replied aloud. She nodded and stepped into the hall to let David chatter at her.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, Grace excused herself and headed outside alone. Sorting out her thoughts lately had seemed an almost insurmountable task. She wasn't sure whether it was the drug or the despair. She had to get out of here. So far, though, she'd seen no way to escape.

Kendra's absence for the past few days neither concerned nor surprised Grace. Her mother had better things to do than ensure her daughter's welfare. In fact, Grace doubted she was even staying here. There were no parties, no opportunities to make a scene or attract the press. Boring.

The term "polar opposites" had been coined with her and Kendra in mind.

Grace wandered the grounds with no direction or purpose in mind. She passed the enclosed pool and discovered a small garden tending toward the wild side. Vegetables grew in clumps and crooked rows, thriving somehow despite the weeds and vines that choked them. She'd never seen an actual garden. Weren't they supposed to be more organized than this? It looked like someone had tossed random seeds at a patch of ground and waited to see what grew.

In the distance she spotted a small building with stacked stone walls. It was the old camp, the place she remembered visiting as a child. Beside the building rose a wooden frame structure covered with opaque plastic sheeting. She doubted it contained another pool.

Grace glanced over her shoulder. No one seemed to have followed her. She headed toward the place, curiosity overruling caution. When she drew near, she made out

vague green blurs inside the plastic building. Was it a greenhouse?

A simple frame door on springs stood at the end of the building. It wasn't locked. Grace slipped inside and the door creaked shut behind her. Warm air greeted her, carrying the fresh, earthy scent of the plants that grew in wide dirt troughs along both long sides of the greenhouse.

Plant, she soon realized. It was all the same plant.

She'd never seen anything like it before. It was some sort of shrub with zigzagging stalks that sprouted long, pointed leaves at each bend. The green leaves bore pale outlined edges ranging from white to a delicate pink. Some of the plants featured clusters of red blossoms with green undersides that resembled tiny birds.

Grace leaned in to examine the closest one. Toward the base, a few stalks had been snapped off. The remaining ends oozed a milky white substance. She knelt and reached toward the broken stems.

"I wouldn't do that."

Grace flinched and whipped her head toward the voice. Michael stood just inside the door. She hadn't heard it open or close. Her eyes narrowed. "Why not? Is it going to kill me?"

"It might. We've never used it raw."

"Excuse me?"

Michael moved closer, running a hand lightly over the tops of the shrubs. "This stuff is kryptonite for us. We use it in the drug. *Pedilanthus tithymaloides* ... Devil's Backbone. Appropriate, don't you think?"

"Appropriate?" Grace straightened and backed away. "How?"

"Well, we're half angel. It makes sense that a devil plant would weaken us."

A peaceful feeling crept over Grace, similar to what she'd felt in the basement with the bodies, though not as strong. She fought it and wondered if this was how he kept the others happy with their fates. "No, that isn't right. You think we're aliens. Your website..."

Michael laughed. "It's not my website. They're a different branch, a splinter cell. Crazy, every one of them. Actually, we've been trying to shut them down."

"You're lying." She couldn't summon enough emotion to shout.

"Do you always believe everything you find online?"

"At least I don't believe I'm an angel."

"Half-angel. Nephilim. It's a Hebrew word, derived from fallen. Like our so-called heavenly parents." Michael drifted closer to her. "And that's too bad, because I am. And so are you."

"I know the word. But angels aren't real." Even as she said it, Grace realized she'd started to believe anyway. *Angel*. It sounded so beautiful, so enchanting. Like a fairy tale. If she accepted the truth of it, she would have to believe Silver and Lorin really were angels. There was nothing enchanting about them.

Michael smiled. "It took me a while to accept it, too. You will in time."

"Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Trying to manipulate me. I don't like you. You tricked Megan, and you kidnapped me."

"I'm sorry. Really." Michael's shoulders sagged. "I had to get Megan here somehow and I didn't know about you being with her until ... well, it was too late."

"Why? Why do you need Megan, or any of us for that matter?"

"To keep you safe. You know what it's like out there." Michael gestured at the greenhouse walls. "Regular people are afraid of us. They don't know what to do about it, so they either try to use us or lock us up."

"That's what *you're* doing. Locking us up." Despite her protest, she recalled Ace's scars and shuddered. She couldn't deny the logic behind Michael's actions, twisted as they were.

"No! I'm giving you a chance at a normal life." Three steps brought him directly in front of her. His fingers brushed her cheek.

She slapped them away. "Did you not hear the part where I said I don't like you?"

"I did. I just didn't believe you."

"Believe this, then." She shoved him hard and stalked past. "Go ahead and get your goons to tie me in bed again. I don't care."

"Grace ... wait."

Grace stopped. She didn't turn around.

Michael exhaled slowly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. It's just that I didn't know what to do with you. No one has ever not wanted to stay."

Slowly, Grace pivoted to face him. "Well, I don't. So why don't you just let me go?"

"I can't do that."

"There's a shock."

"You don't understand." His lips compressed, relaxed. "If you left, you'd be wandering around out there knowing all about this place. I can't risk letting ... certain people find us. If they did, they'd try to kill everyone here."

"What certain people?"

Michael paused. "The Host," he said at last. "The angels. They don't like us."

"Really. I hadn't noticed."

"You've met angels?" Michael stammered.

"Two of them, apparently. I ran across them in Vegas when one of them tore a girl's—a Nephil's head off in front of me. The other one got into my mind and told me I was next."

"And you're still alive?"

"Last I checked."

"Can I see them?"

Grace frowned. "I didn't stop to take pictures."

"No, I mean..." He took a step, stopped. "If you let me touch you, I can see your memories. It won't hurt."

Bitter laughter erupted from her. "So you make the rest of us take this black crap, but you don't have to? What a hypocrite."

"I'm taking it too. It's a lower dose, but I'm still on it."

"Yeah, right. You can still use your abilities."

He smiled. "Ah, that's what you don't understand. The drug lets you learn to suppress your power so you can look normal but still access it when you have to. Watch."

Before she could stop him, Michael reached out and touched his fingertips to her temple. His dark eyes grew lighter, turned yellow. And glowed. Her head swam with his presence.

Abruptly, he pulled away. His eyes shut off like a switch being flipped. "Shit. That's the Stalker!"

"The what?"

"The Stalker. He's killed dozens of Nephilim. Maybe hundreds. No one knows anything about him or the angel he travels with, except that he's a monster and can't be stopped." Michael folded his arms and frowned. "I'm sorry, Grace, but there's no way you're leaving now. Not until you're ready to safely join the Bureau."

"What if they find me anyway?" Grace shivered despite the warmth of the greenhouse. "They were able to do it before. You'd be safer without me here."

Michael shook his head. "The Host track us with our powers. When we use them, especially for something big, they can sense it and hone in on it, depending on how far away they are. They can't find you as long as the drug is masking your abilities."

"So, if I leave..."

"They'll find you. Through you, through your memories, they'll find us. And kill us all."

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## Chapter 20

Grace fled the greenhouse. Michael called after her, but she ignored him. The sun dipped the horizon ahead, its dying rays blazing above distant trees and rolling mountain swells. She squinted against the light and kept running.

Part of her insisted Michael was right. She'd already experienced the angel's ability to plunder minds firsthand, and she knew she couldn't have resisted for long. As if that wasn't enough, she couldn't do a thing against the monster. No amount of mind reading or controlling machines could compete with a being capable of ripping people limb from limb.

Grace slowed her pace and stopped. She'd accepted it. Angels.

A moment later, she started walking again. Regardless of the danger, she wanted out. She didn't want to work for the government for the rest of her life. There had to be another way. She could get a new identity, change her appearance again. But a new look hadn't stopped them from finding her outside of Vegas. When she changed course, they'd resorted to torturing people who knew her.

Images of twisted, swollen fingers and shattered legs rose in her mind. She couldn't let that happen to Megan. Or the other kids here. Not even Bailey deserved anything like what they'd done to Comp. The protective instincts she'd always reserved for herself had begun to spill over and infect the way she dealt with others, starting with Megan. She'd discovered profound relief, an almost holy experience, in calling another living being a friend.

No way in hell she'd let that angelic bitch hurt her friend.

The screwy little garden lay ahead, and beyond that, the house. Grace considered walking by, finding out how far she'd get before someone shot her. She dismissed the notion and instead tried to envision the good points of being forced into the FBI. Nothing came to mind.

She didn't even see Megan until she walked into her.

"There you are!" Megan clutched her, slightly breathless. "I went all over the house like four times looking for you. Come on, I want to show you something."

The girl grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the house toward a thick stand of trees Grace hadn't noticed before. Something wooden and out of place huddled in the branches of the largest one. When they neared, she made out a large, well-constructed tree house.

"Neat, huh? They built it for David and Ace, but they're more interested in video games. They hardly ever come out here." Megan paused at the base of the tree, waited for Grace to catch up, then clambered up a rope ladder dangling from the bottom of the structure.

Grace followed with a heavy heart. She should enjoy the time she had left, but even Megan's enthusiasm failed to lift the veil of desolation smothering her. Michael was



right. She couldn't endanger everyone here.

She emerged into a cheery, fragrant room. The floorboards and walls were deep red wood, smoothed until they shone. A gabled window let the late sun stream inside. Two round, cushioned chairs flanked a table built into the wall beneath the window. Shelves spanned the adjacent wall, stocked with books, board games and an assortment of recreational odds and ends. One shelf held a small stereo and a wire rack with a few dozen CDs. A doorway in the wall opposite the window led to a screened porch complete with bunk beds. Colorful beanbag chairs stacked in a pyramid completed the cozy space.

"Isn't this amazing?" Megan said. "Must have cost a fortune."

"Not for Kendra. It was probably like buying a candy bar." Grace smiled despite her caustic comment. "It is pretty cool though."

Megan curled into one of the chairs and grinned. "Ever tried one of these before? They're moon chairs. Don't worry, they won't fall over."

"If you say so." Grace settled gently on the other chair. She pushed back into the cushion until her feet left the floor. She imagined sitting in a hammock would feel like this, as though gravity had been suspended. Must be why they were called moon chairs.

Megan's grin flagged. "I guess it's my turn to tell you that you look awful."

"I believe you." Grace ran a hand through her hair. It felt brittle and stiff. "I think I'm just tired like you." *And terrified.*

"I heard that."

Grace stared at her. "What?" she whispered. *You heard my thoughts?*

Megan nodded deliberately and held a finger to her lips.

*But how..*

"I'll try and explain later. Where have you been?"

"In a greenhouse. Talking to Michael."

"Oh." Megan studied her lap. "What did you talk about?"

"He told me why I should stay. Why I have to stay until I'm 'ready' to work for the government."

"Grace ... I don't want them to send you away." Megan's voice shook. "I don't want to go, either. Not to the FBI, or the CIA, or whatever. I want us to get out of here together."

*We can't.* Grace closed her eyes against rising hopelessness. "There are killers out there waiting for me. If they find me, they'll find this place, and ... everyone will die."

Megan fell silent for a moment. "There has to be a way..."

"There isn't." *Those two are too strong. I can't risk everyone's lives—your life—by leaving.*

"It's not fair." Megan clasped her hands tight. "I don't want to lose you."

"Believe me, I don't want to go. Right now, though, it looks like I don't have a choice."

"What if you did?"

Grace smirked. *I didn't think coming back was an option.*

"Well ... I have a plan. Sort of."

"What is it?"

"Will you trust me?"

*Always.*

"Good." A tentative smile clung to Megan's lips. "Just remember this. When the time comes, don't leave without saying goodbye."

Grace nodded. "I won't."

"So, how about a game? I bet I could kick your butt at Battleship."

Laughing, Grace sat forward in the chair. "Bring it on."

\*\*\*\*

Complete blackness filled Silver's open eyes. His mind crawled the world outside his crypt, searching for a trace that would lead to the Nephil, the one Lorin desired.

He did not wish to find her. It. *Her.*

These thoughts, desires of his own, were new to him. For all of his existence, he had been an extension of Lorin. The rare occasions he attempted to question, to stray, had been met with brutality and viciousness. Many times, he had wanted Lorin to succeed in destroying him.

Now, the constant pain she inflicted barely registered. He cried out only to satisfy her.

He had tried to please Lorin. Not once had he done so. No matter how carefully he followed her instructions, always some error occurred. He had learned to expect, if not punishment, then indifference and disgust at the least.

Silver had long ago resigned himself to his duties. He killed them, one after another, an endless succession of Nephilim. He excelled at killing them. It seemed his only talent. Lorin constantly assured him he was good for nothing else. Yet for centuries, he had failed to understand why his stomach clenched and his body revolted against him with each kill. He'd been certain it was Lorin punishing him. Perhaps for not destroying them fast enough or spectacularly enough.

But Lorin was not responsible for the screams.

His mind recorded the dying scream of every Nephil he destroyed, and played them back at random times, and random volumes. He suspected now that the discomfort had always stemmed from his own suppressed desires. He did not want to kill them. Especially her.

And if he did not find her, he did not have to kill her.

He continued searching—slowly, with as much hesitation as he dared. Something warm and wet burned his eyes and trickled down his cheeks. Perhaps they were bleeding too.

\* \* \* \*

That night, Lou failed to restrain Grace when he escorted her to her room. He didn't even stand guard outside. Unfortunately, when the nurse walked out after her evening shot, Kendra walked in.

Grace groaned. "I'm tired. What do you want?"

"I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"Fine. You've seen. Goodbye."

Kendra helped herself to the chair beside the bed. "Michael says he spoke with you today."

"He did. I guess this means you aren't leaving."

"Grace. Do you really hate me that much?"

"That's a pretty stupid question. Even for you."

Kendra opened her mouth, closed it. "Now that you've talked to Michael, you're going to stay, aren't you?"

"I don't have a choice."

"I wish you wouldn't look at it like that. It's really for the best."

"The best for who? The government? Are they paying him to hand us over?"

Kendra glared at her. "Michael cares about you. He cares about all the children."

"Unlike you."

"I care, too. Why do you think I gave him the camp and had this house built?"

"For the sex."

"Grace!" Kendra shot to her feet. "If you're going to be abrasive, I'm not going to talk to you." She started for the door.

"Good," Grace muttered. She turned toward the wall. When a minute passed and the door didn't close, she said, "Are you still here?"

"Yes."

Grace sighed and flopped on her back. "Why?"

Another minute crawled by. Kendra returned to the chair. "Isn't there anything I can do to make you stop hating me?"

*Take back everything you've ever done to me. Give me a normal life. Let me feel wanted.* No, there wasn't anything she could do. Why would Kendra care how she felt, anyway? The woman must have a hidden motive. Probably wanted to manipulate her into doing something stupid, use her for some grand new scheme.

This time, Grace would do the using. She'd get the information she wanted.

"You can start by not trying to make me do things. I'm not a child any more, Kendra."

"You never were."

Grace swiveled her head and regarded her mother with disgust. "You refused to be responsible about anything. One of us had to be the grownup."

"You wouldn't listen to me! It was so infuriating. You were tediously responsible—never wanted to have any fun. But ... I suppose you're right."

Kendra sounded almost apologetic. Grace decided it had to be an act, or an accident. Once again she wished she could still read thoughts and find out how her mother really felt. She'd learned not to trust anything the woman said.

Grace sat up and crossed her legs. Since Kendra was in a talkative mood, maybe she could take advantage of it. "I'd like to know about my father."

"Your father." Kendra blinked rapidly. "What about him?"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. Probably still out in the woods somewhere. He was never comfortable with civilization."

"Doesn't sound like your type."

Kendra ignored the insult. "That's where I met him. In the woods. I thought he was a deer and I almost shot him."

"You hunted?"

Kendra sighed and looked away. "Yes. Father insisted. Our people ... you know. Old money. It's a social convention. When one is in the woods, one hunts."

Grace stared at her, fascinated in spite of herself. Kendra had never discussed her family. When she said nothing further, Grace prodded, "Okay, so you almost shot

him. And?"

Kendra smiled without pretense. It was the first time Grace had seen her exhibit genuine emotion. "He was beautiful. I loved him, you know."

"So you loved him, but not me."

"I did love you. Do love you." Anger and sorrow clashed in her features. "I was seventeen, Grace. Seventeen and heartbroken. He left me. Disappeared into his beloved forest."

"Before or after you planned the wedding?"

"What?"

"I saw the newspaper announcement. You were going to get married."

Kendra stiffened and dropped her gaze. "Yes. Father was furious about it. He'd already handpicked half a dozen richer and more suitable men for me. He only relented when I told him I was pregnant. And then, Beckett vanished. Father forced me to say he'd died so the family wouldn't be shamed."

"So, that is his name." Grace's head buzzed with shock. If her mother wasn't lying, she actually had been wronged. Not that it excused her for years of neglect and exploitation. Still, it was a step in a better direction. "Is it his first name or last name?"

"I don't know. It's the only one he ever told me. I thought it was exciting. He was so mysterious. Unique. I've never met anyone like him, before or since."

*That's because he's an angel.* Did Kendra know about that? "I want to find him."

Kendra offered an indecorous snort. "Good luck with that. He's probably moved on by now. These aren't the only woods in the world." She stood and studied her feet. "You're tired. I'll let you rest. I'm sorry I can't tell you anything more. I just don't know."

"Don't know, or won't tell me?"

"I don't know, all right? He left me!"

"Gee, Kendra. That must have been a real kick in the ego for you." Grace sneered at the shock on her mother's face. "Usually, you're the one doing the leaving."

"Grace. Can't you cut me some slack? I'm your mother."

"No."

Kendra blanched. "No you can't, or no I'm not?"

"Both. Neither. I don't know." Grace lay back and closed her eyes. "Look, just leave, okay? I don't want to talk any more."

She stiffened, expecting an outburst or a sharp rebuke. Instead there was silence. After a moment, the door opened and closed softly.

For Grace, sleep didn't arrive easy or fast.

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## Chapter 21

Another day passed. Slow, uncomfortable, maddening. Grace couldn't get Megan alone again—if one of the kids wasn't around, Kyle or Lou kept an obvious eye on her.

Not that she'd go anywhere. Michael's damned logic had ensured her compliance ... for now.

She went to bed early. After a few hours of broken half-sleep, she realized that once again, rest wasn't coming any time soon. She rose, dressed and crept into the hallway. Silence laced the air and swallowed her footsteps on the carpeted floor. Dim light guided her to the stairs and down to near darkness.

Soft sounds on the first floor pierced the quiet: the low hum of the refrigerator from the kitchen, the muted tick of the grandfather clock in the main room, the faraway drone of night insects beyond the windows. Grace headed for the front door, not sure what she intended. Maybe she'd sit on the porch for a while and get some fresh air.

Maybe she'd run across the yard, head for the woods and find out how long it took for someone to shoot her.

She sighed and reached for the doorknob. Suicide wasn't the answer—and it would be suicide to tempt Kyle. She gripped cool metal and froze when the creak of a floorboard sounded from outside. Was someone else out there? Right now, company stood fairly low on her list of desires. She backed a few paces and shifted to peer through the narrow side windows.

A tall silhouette leaned against the right-hand column beside the porch steps, the glowing orange ember of a lit cigarette visible at waist level. The arm lifted and a drag on the smoke illuminated Kyle's sharp, sullen features.

Grace decided to use the back door.

As far as she knew, the ground floor had only two exits. The one in the rear of the house opened to the enclosed pool. Another door at the end of the solarium-style room led outside. She made her way to the windowless pool door, and opened it secure in the knowledge that at least Kyle wasn't waiting on the other side.

Humidity and the pungent odor of chlorine assaulted her. The room itself was dark as the night pressing against the glass walls and ceiling. Four small lights, two on each long side of the pool, played across the shimmering blue-green surface of the water and tapered out a few feet shy of meeting in the center.

It took a moment to realize the dark shape streaking the length of the pool beneath the water's surface wasn't part of the ambiance.

*So much for being alone.* Grace almost turned to leave, but she didn't want to startle the swimmer. A head broke the surface in the deep end. Glistening black braids, smooth dusky skin. Evan. He didn't seem to notice her, so she cleared her throat and tapped a foot on the tiled floor.

He whirled, whip-fast, sending a swell of water against the pool wall. For an instant he looked angry, but he seemed to shake it off and return to his usual solemn

silence. Tipping his head in greeting, he sank beneath the surface, pushed off the wall and torpedoed toward the shallow end to surface a few feet from the steps.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt." Grace headed for the shallow end and the door beyond. "I was just going to get some fresh air."

Evan stood at waist-deep level. Rivulets of water streaked his chest and arms, and Grace couldn't help noticing how well defined those particular parts of him were. In fact, not an inch of him lacked definition. She suspected he spent a lot of time in the weight room—and she wondered why the water didn't turn to steam when it touched him.

*Whoa.* Heat suffused her face in response to her outrageous thoughts. She'd never bothered with men—with her "condition," sex might have landed her back in the nuthouse—and Evan was barely on the safe side of boy. He couldn't be eighteen yet, or he wouldn't be here.

Seventeen, she decided. An old seventeen.

"Light sleeper?"

"Huh?" Grace blinked, and realized she'd been staring at Evan's abs. Her blush deepened. "Er, yeah," she stammered. "You too?"

"Sometimes." Evan shrugged and moved toward the steps. While he mounted them, Grace deliberately kept her gaze above waist level. It wasn't easy. She breathed an inward sigh of relief when he grabbed a towel from a nearby railing and wrapped it around himself.

She swallowed, tasted chlorine and Evan's clean scent. *Damn.* "You didn't have to get out," she said. "I was just..."

"Getting some air. I know." Evan smirked. "It's all right. I need a breather." He unfastened the towel and rubbed it over his head, giving Grace an uninterrupted view of everything outside the form-fitting bike shorts he wore—and a hint of everything inside.

Christ. Even his feet were perfect.

She managed to look away before he finished drying his hair. "So, you're a light sleeper sometimes? What does that mean?"

"Sometimes I sleep. Sometimes I don't." His eyes clouded and he stared at the floor.

"I understand. Unfortunately, for me it's more don't than sleep." Grace smiled. "How long have you been here?"

Another shrug. "A couple years."

Grace stared, then snorted laughter. "I meant, how long have you been in the pool?"

"Oh." This time his smirk encompassed both sides of his mouth. "Maybe half an hour."

Before Grace could think of something else to say, the door to the house opened and a curly-haired head poked through. "Hello?" a girl's voice called. "Is someone out here?"

"Yes," Grace replied.

"Oh, good. I'm not crazy, then." A hand reached inside and flipped a switch to the left of the door. Soft lighting cast a glow around the room. Dawn emerged with David in tow. "David was hungry, and we knew Dorrine was asleep, so we were in the kitchen and I thought I heard voices out here. Hi, Evan! Grace. What are you guys doing?"

Grace shook her head. "Doesn't anybody sleep around here?"

David let out a huge yawn. "Evan, are you swimming? Cool! I wanna get in too." He peeled off his shirt, dropped it, and started wiggling out of his shoes.

"David, wait! It's the middle of the night." Dawn leveled a stern gaze at her brother. "We need to get back to bed."

"Aw, c'mon." David flashed a dimpled grin. "Just for a minute?"

Dawn sighed. "I don't know..."

"Thanks, Dawn!" David pivoted and ran for the deep end. He rounded the corner, jumped almost straight up at the edge of the pool and hugged his knees on the way down. A column of water exploded up from his impact, and a wave sloshed the deck tiles.

"David!" Dawn rolled her eyes and turned to Grace with an exasperated expression. "I hate it when he does that. Well, I guess we'll stay for a bit. Wanna soak your feet with me?"

"Uh ... sure." Grace glanced at Evan. He looked just as good dry. "Are you going back in?"

"Soon." Evan watched David splash in a clumsy circle. The boy bobbed up and down, squirting a stream of water from his mouth every time he surfaced. Evan's smirk returned. "When the excitement level drops."

Dawn laughed. "He'll settle down in a few minutes. Come on."

They moved to the deep end. Dawn removed her shoes and socks, rolled her pants legs up, and Grace followed suit. Dawn surveyed the streaks and puddles on the tiles and frowned. "We're gonna have wet butts."

"Probably." Grace settled on the narrow strip of ridged rubber edging the pool and slid her legs into the water. "Is it always this warm?"

"Yeah. It's heated." Dawn sat a few feet away. "Nice, isn't it? I bet it cost a ton to put this baby in."

Grace struggled to contain her revulsion. For a moment she'd forgotten whose money had provided this little piece of paradise. The pool lost some of its appeal. "Sure," she said evenly. "It's great." She turned to look for Evan and spotted him standing near the glass wall, watching them. Watching her? In the low light, she couldn't be sure.

David clambered out at the shallow end and walked down the length of the pool toward them. "Isn't anybody else coming in?" he called.

Dawn shook her head. "No way. My hair takes forever to dry and I hate sleeping on it wet. It frizzes out like crazy."

"Count me out," Grace said.

"Fine. Wimps." Grinning, David kept going until he reached the wall behind the deep end. "Betcha you're about to get wet anyway."

"David, don't you dare." Dawn scrambled to rise, but David was already running toward them at full speed. "Stop! You're going to—"

It happened fast. David slipped, went down and skated over the tiles like a wet bar of soap in a bathtub. He curled reflexively and rammed into Grace's back. Frothy water closed over her before she realized she'd gone in.

Water muted the world. Garbled shouts reached her from somewhere above. The initial shock dissipated and darkness rushed toward her. She was sinking, facing down. She twisted her body, found shifting and refracted light. Light meant up, surface, air. She let the descent continue. She would push off the bottom.

Her back bumped something solid. She extended an arm, touched the smooth vinyl of the pool floor. Felt a powerful tug on her shirt that refused to slacken. A vacuum grate.

*Don't panic.* Bracing her palms against the floor, Grace pushed hard. Her shirt strained against her, tangled tighter. She bucked and thrashed, kicked her legs, tried to slip out of the restricting material. Her lungs burned and begged for oxygen. The light, far above, began to fade.

A distant splash sounded. A dark shape descended from a cloud of bubbles, blocking the light. Arms encircled her, wrenched her free. A body pressed against her. Weightless now, they rose through depthless blue and entered the light.

Grace gulped air and coughed out water. Evan held her firmly above the surface, waited for her breath to catch, and guided her to the edge of the pool. With Evan's hands on her waist and Dawn's beneath her arms, they hauled her out and laid her on her back to the accompaniment of David's babbled apologies.

"Oh my God. I'm sorry. Grace, are you all right? I'm so sorry. That was really stupid. Can't you swim? Grace? Are you okay? I'm sorry! Evan, is she all right? She isn't saying anything..."

Grace closed her eyes and held up a hand. "I'll live." She felt Evan climb out and settle beside her. "Thank you. The grate..."

"I know." Evan's voice had taken on a husky timbre. "You're welcome. You need a towel."

Grace grunted agreement. She remained still, drawing careful breaths until her dizziness subsided and the roaring in her ears diminished. At last, she opened her eyes and sat up.

Dawn released a shuddering sigh. "Well. I think we've had enough excitement for one night, don't you?"

"I'll say." Grace spotted Evan approaching with an armful of towels. She struggled to her feet, stepped back from the pool, and looked at David. "I guess you were right about me getting wet."

David flushed crimson. "Does that mean you forgive me?"

Grace nodded. "Actually, I feel kind of refreshed." She smiled, and David rewarded her with a dimpled grin.

"Here, squirt." Evan stopped behind Grace and tossed a towel to David. While Dawn moved to help her brother, Evan draped another one gently around Grace. His hands stayed on her shoulders a touch too long, and his fingers trailed down her arms. A pleasant shudder worked through her body.

"Thanks," she whispered. "Again."

He didn't answer immediately. At last he spoke softly beside her ear. "Just ... don't die, okay?"

"I won't."

"You guys coming?" Dawn called.

Grace shook herself and glanced at Dawn. "Yes. I think I can sleep now."

"Me, too." Evan smiled, small but genuine. "For about a year."

They headed for the door behind Dawn and David. As Dawn opened the door to usher the boy through, David said, "This was kinda fun. Can we do it again tomorrow night? Except, you know, not the drowning part."

"David!" Dawn admonished.

Grace turned to Evan. "Is he always this ... happy?"

"Pretty much. David runs on two speeds—hyper and asleep."

"Mm-hm." Articulate response eluded her. Evan's proximity banished the chill from her damp skin and melted her thoughts in mid-formation. A twinge of disappointment accompanied speculation on what might have happened if Dawn and David hadn't interrupted.

It worried her that she wanted to find out.

They tramped upstairs in mutual silence and parted amid murmured goodnights. Grace stumbled into her room, and didn't bother changing her wet clothes before falling into bed.

Sleep claimed her instantly.

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## Chapter 22

Every day, the Adirondack house felt a little more like home.

The others accepted Grace completely. Even Bailey warmed up to her after the girl realized she had no interest in Michael. In fact, Grace went out of her way to avoid him after their initial confrontation. He served as a reminder of the bleak life awaiting her when she was deemed ready. And besides, he was sleeping with her mother.

Grace's observation gradually gave way to interaction. The detachment she'd always maintained had slowly eroded in the knowledge that almost everyone here shared what set her apart from the rest of the world. They knew what it was like to glance in a mirror and fear the image it reflected. They understood the confusion of hearing words without sound not intended for their ears. They were company to her misery.

She had been shattered, and they didn't know they were putting her back together.

Saturday afternoon found Grace, Megan, Dawn and Bailey in the pool. Ace and David had eschewed video games in favor of exploring the woods. Evan had declined a swim and wandered off after the younger boys with a sketchpad and an iPod.

Grace lounged in the shallow end, watching Megan and Dawn sit on the steps and fail to play underwater ring toss. The object of the game was to land a series of heavy, bright-colored rings on a weighted stake at the bottom of the pool. Their throws fell consistently short or to the side, and Dawn insisted between giggles that the stake kept running away.

In the deep end, Bailey broke the surface near the edge and pulled herself out of the water with a single smooth motion. Her electric blue suit clung like skin, glistening in the bright sunlight reflected through the glass panels of the pool house. She crouched and executed a series of fluid stretches, stood, and dove in without a ripple. Her body torpedoed through the water, under the rope that marked the division between shallow and deep. She surfaced a few feet in front of Dawn and Megan holding one of the rings.

"You guys are doing it wrong." Bailey wasn't the least bit breathless after swimming the entire length of the pool underwater.

Dawn made a face. "Let's see you do it, then."

"Fine. Move over."

They scooted. Bailey settled on the step next to Megan. She held the ring out, waved it in the air a few times, and tossed it underhand. The bright yellow circle sailed in a smooth arc and plunked into the water, drifting gently down to ring the stake and slide to the base.

"Wow." Dawn regarded her with frank admiration. "How'd you do that?"

Bailey smiled. "I'm not as blonde as I look. See, the water distorts things, makes them look closer than they are. You have to aim past the stake."

"Cool!" Dawn grabbed a green ring from the stack next to her on the deck. She jiggled it in front of her and copied Bailey's underhand toss. The ring wobbled in mid-air and hit the water at an angle. It nudged the stake during its descent, but failed to loop the post.

Dawn laughed. "At least I hit it this time. Wanna try, Megan?" She passed a ring over.

Megan gave the stake a dubious look. "I still think it's running away." She shrugged, drew back, and flipped the ring out over the water. The inner edge of the ring caught the top of the stake and hung there. "Wicked! It does work."

"Told you." Bailey stood and ascended the steps. She crossed the tiled deck to a bench stacked with folded towels, leaving wet footprints on the surface in her wake. "Think I'll try and soak up some of this poor excuse for sun."

Megan tossed her head. "The sun's not good enough for you?"

"It was better in Florida." Bailey wrapped a towel around her waist and spread a second one out on the deck. "The water was warmer, too."

"Why don't you go back to Florida, then?" Megan said under her breath.

Bailey stretched out on the towel. "Because I like the view here. And I don't mean the mountains."

"Michael's taken, you know."

"Not for long. She's not like us. She'll get old and ugly."

"Do you mind?" Grace said before she realized her intention to defend Kendra.

"Oh, that's right. She's your mother. Sorry." A tight smile appeared on Bailey's face. "Well, not really."

Grace uttered a sarcastic snort. "No matter how pretty you are, Bailey, you can't compete with my mother's money."

"I don't have to. The way I figure it, mistresses get the best of both worlds. He'll use her money to indulge me, and I'll warm his bed when that frigid bitch can't."

"Oh, give it a rest," Grace said. "Michael doesn't even look twice at you."

Bailey pasted on a saccharine smile. "He hasn't even looked once at you."

Grace stiffened. "If you think I want anything to do with that piece of—"

"Guys! Do we have to fight?" Dawn swished her feet in the water and frowned. "Let's talk about something else. Bailey's from Florida. Where are you from, Megan?"

"Utah. Cedar City." Megan grinned. "The middle of nowhere."

"Does that mean you're Amish?"

Megan laughed. "No. Utah's famous for the Mormons, not the Amish. They live in Salt Lake, and there aren't even that many there. We had electricity and everything."

"We didn't." Dawn pointed her toes and circled a foot. "Me and David ... I mean, David and I are from Kansas. We're Amish Light—that's what Mom always said. They kicked her out after she had me, but she still wanted to stick with the life."

"Oh. Damn. I'm sorry."

Dawn shrugged. "It's okay. That whole live-off-the-land thing isn't as cool as it sounds. It was hard because we were alone, but Dad came around sometimes. That's how Mom ended up with David."

"Whoa. You actually knew your father?"

"A little. He couldn't stay very long, but he helped to a lot when he came."

"Did you know he was..."

"An angel?" Dawn smiled. "No. Not until Michael found us."

"Angels suck."

All eyes turned to Bailey. She lay on her back, eyes closed, arms folded under her head. Her expression remained neutral, but a muscle twitched along her jaw.

"That's not nice, Bailey." Dawn's voice trembled a bit.

"Why not? It's true." Bailey sat up, her eyes flashing fire. "Maybe your father turned up once in a while, but I bet he didn't give a shit about you. Probably just wanted to bone your mother a few more times."

Dawn flushed. She buried her face in her arms with a stifled sob.

"You're such a bitch!" Megan whirled toward Bailey. "You're not the only one who never met your father, you know!"

"It was my mother." Pure ice edged Bailey's tone. "She squeezed me out and took off. Left me alone with my father. Apparently I look just like her—at least, that's what my father said when he started 'confusing' me for her. The bastard."

"Oh, no," Megan whispered. "Bailey, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I took care of him, when I got strong enough." Something in her face shut down and she shook her head. "Sorry, kid," she said to Dawn. "Maybe your father's all right for an angel. But he's still an angel, and they're all jerks."

Dawn released a watery sigh and raised her head. "It's okay. I—" She broke off and looked to her right, out the back door of the pool house. "David?" She shot to her feet, splashing water everywhere. "David!"

Dawn jumped out of the pool and raced through the door. Megan glanced at Grace and ran after the girl.

"What's going on?" Grace waded toward the steps as fast as possible.

Bailey stood. "Ace and David just ran out of the woods. They look scared. I think ... oh, Jesus. I think they're bleeding."

"Come on!" Grace pounded up the steps, and Bailey followed her out.

They reached the boys less than a minute after Dawn and Megan. David and Ace collapsed on the ground, panting. They were scratched and filthy, their clothing torn. Bits of sticks and leaves tangled in their hair. A few splotches of bright blood stood out on David's grungy white shirt. The front of Ace's dark shirt was soaked. Maroon smears decorated the thighs of his jeans.

Dawn knelt beside her brother. "What happened? Are you all right?"

David shook his head hard, still too winded to speak.

Megan dropped next to Ace with fear in her eyes. "Where are you bleeding?"

Ace gulped in air and glanced down at his shirt. "Not my blood," he gasped. "Evan's."

\* \* \* \*

*No!* Grace shivered and stared toward the woods. "Where is he?"

"We couldn't carry him." Ace winced, closed his eyes. "Oh, man. I'm sorry. We tried, but he was too heavy. Ran as fast as we could. We gotta go back and get him." He struggled to one knee and slipped back down in the grass with a pained grunt.

Megan helped him to his feet. "What happened?"

"A bear." Tears shone in David's eyes. He lurched upright and collapsed against Dawn. "We were having a snack and this bear just came from nowhere. We played dead. It wouldn't leave us alone. You're s'posed to play dead with bears, aren't you?" A shrill note entered his voice. "It wouldn't stop. And Evan ... we didn't know he was out there. He jumped out and yelled. Then he ran and the bear chased him. He saved us..."

Grace silently cursed Michael all over again. If she wasn't drugged, she could have gotten to Evan and brought him back in a few seconds. He couldn't be that far away. She forced herself to calm down and think. "Okay, Bailey, can you get Michael and tell him what happened?"

Nodding, Bailey turned and sprinted across the yard toward the distant greenhouse.

"Dawn, take David and Ace inside. Get somebody to check them over. Megan, will you come with me to get Evan?"

"Wait a second." Ace grimaced and swayed, then righted himself. "You don't know where he is. I do. I'm going with you."

Grace hesitated. "All right," she said after a pause. "But we have to hurry."

Ace nodded. "I know."

Dawn hustled David toward the house, and Ace set off for the woods with Grace and Megan in tow. Halfway to the tree line, he stumbled and fell on hands and knees.

"You're wiped out." Megan helped him up again. "Just tell us where he is and we'll find him ourselves."

Ace shook his head. "Not wiped out. My back..."

"What's wrong with your back?" Megan lifted his shirt and gasped. Four crimson furloughs scored him across the center of his spine. "You said it wasn't your blood!"

"Not on the front." Ace tried to smile. "I'll be fine. Evan won't be if we don't get to him quick. Let's go."

"Wait." Megan glanced at Grace and held a finger to her lips, as she had in the tree house. She laid a hand flat against Ace's back. He drew a sharp breath and stilled.

After a few seconds, Megan moved her hand.

Ace turned to stare at her. "What did you do?"

"The bear never touched you. Got it?"

His mouth opened and snapped shut. "Got it."

"Lead the way." Megan gestured at the trees.

Ace broke into a run. The girls sprinted after him. They crashed through brush and bushes, weaving through trees and scrambling over logs for what seemed like hours. At last they reached a clearing that bore evidence of a struggle. Ace stopped in the center and turned in a slow circle.

"This way," he said, pointing at a claw-torn tree. He moved slowly, glancing back and forth until he spotted his objective. "There."

Grace followed his gaze. Evan lay facedown and motionless on a sprawling patch of moss, his face turned to one side. Deep gashes and flaps of torn skin showed clearly through shredded clothing. Splashes of glistening red contrasted sickly with the deep green carpet around him. The bottom of his jeans had been torn from his right leg, and flashes of bone were visible in his mutilated ankle. A thick, splintered branch lay just beyond one outstretched arm as though he'd tried to defend himself with it.

"Evan!" Grace rushed toward his head and knelt, brushing pine needles and debris from his face. His eyes were slits of white. She held a trembling hand in front of his mouth and felt a faint puff of air. "He's breathing. Megan..."

Megan dropped at his feet. "I can't heal him completely. They'll know ... and I don't think I'm strong enough yet. But at least I can make sure he doesn't die." Her hand hovered over his torn ankle and hesitated. She placed it just above the wound. His flesh knit over the bone, and the gash closed slowly. "Jesus," she said through clenched teeth. "Feels like his guts are ripped out."

"Should we try and turn him over?"

"No. I don't have to see it. Besides, it'll probably damage him more."

*What if the bear's still around?* Grace twisted to view the surrounding woods. A shambling, uneven path of torn earthen clods led away from Evan, deeper into the forest. Several broken branches and trampled vegetation marked the bear's escape route. Though she couldn't be certain, Grace thought the animal had left at a run. She turned back to Evan. Some color had returned to his skin. His breath quickened, stirring particles of dead leaves.

Ace looked on, wide-eyed and pale. "Is he gonna be all right?"

"I think so," Megan said. "He..." She jerked back. Evan's body convulsed once and stilled.

"Megan?" Grace whispered. "What happened?"

Megan slumped and leaned away from him. Branches crackled beneath her. "Don't know," she murmured. "Think he's better, but I'm so tired..."

At once, Evan scrambled up from the ground, his eyes wild and unfocused. "Get away! G ... Grace? How..." He sagged to his knees, cradling his stomach with one arm. "The bear. It's gone?"

"Yes," Grace replied.

"Ace and David. They're out here." Evan clenched his teeth and stood again.

"We're okay," Ace stammered. "David's back at the house. We tried to ... We got help."

"Thanks." Evan managed a smile. "Gonna sit now."

He thumped to the ground. Ace approached and sat in front of him. "Don't thank me. We would've been goners without you."

"You're welcome. Can we go now?"

"Good idea." Grace bent to help him up. "Can you walk?"

"Think so. Maybe a little help..."

Grace smiled. "You can lean on me. Just don't die, okay?"

"I won't," Evan whispered. "Thanks." He looked down at Megan. "Thought the bear ripped my stomach open. Did I remember wrong?"

Megan blushed and nodded. Ace helped her stand, and Evan gave her a grateful smile.

"Okay."

The woods seemed brighter as they made their way out.

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## Chapter 23

Michael closed the door on the small infirmary where Evan lay hooked to half a dozen drips and machines. Grace stood with Megan and Ace in the hall, holding back a flood of fresh anger. If they weren't all drugged, none of this would have happened. They could have worked together to prevent it.

"You do understand that you aren't allowed in the woods any more, right?" Michael spoke to them all, but looked at Ace.

Ace bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Michael. We were just..."

"It's all right. You didn't do anything wrong." Michael moved forward and squeezed his shoulder. "I just don't want something like this to happen again. Okay?"



Ace nodded miserably.

"Cheer up. He's going to be fine. In fact, I'm surprised he's in such good shape, considering." This time, Megan received the weight of his gaze.

"What?" Megan managed to look nonchalant.

"Nothing." Michael sighed. "I have some things I need to take care of. Are you guys going to be all right?"

Grace gave him a cool stare. "We'll be fine."

"Good. I need to speak with you later, Grace."

"About what?"

"Later." Michael walked past them, and called over his shoulder. "If you want to head to the library, I've had Dorinne make some lemonade for you. The others are there."

Megan led the way to the library. Inside, a folding card table held two frosted pitchers of lemonade, an assortment of cookies and stacks of plates and glasses. Dawn and David sat on a sofa. David's hair was damp and tousled as though he'd taken a shower, and he'd changed into clean clothes. Bailey stood beside a bookshelf, wearing a blank expression.

David jumped up and rushed Ace when they entered. "Is Evan okay? What took you guys so long? Are you hurt? Did you see the bear again?"

"Whoa!" Ace laughed. "Evan's all right. I'm fine. We didn't see the bear, and Megan is really slow."

"Me?" Megan shoved him lightly and grinned. "Only because I had to wait for someone who kept tripping over his own feet."

"Good. Now I can get something to eat." David wandered to the table, selected a plate and began piling cookies on it. "Want some, Dawn?"

"No, thanks."

"More for me." He added two more and resumed his seat.

Dawn's features resembled Bailey's—drained and vacant. Grace assumed they'd been worried about Evan. She watched Ace load up a plate. When he finished, she poured a glass of lemonade. "Anybody else?"

"I'll take one." Megan accepted the glass with a trembling hand. "Think I'd better sit down." She dropped next to Dawn and exhaled slowly. Healing Evan must have exhausted her.

"Do you think they'll make him go now?" Dawn whispered.

Megan's brow furrowed. "Who? Go where?"

"Evan's almost eighteen." Bailey drifted to the table. She picked up a cookie, stared at it, and put it back down. "He's supposed to ship out to the government soon."

Dawn plucked idly at the hem of her shirt. "I don't want him to go. I miss Kaden, too. They didn't even let him say goodbye."

"Quit being such a sop, kid." Bailey's features hardened. "We're all headed that way. If you ask me, it's better than being out there."

Megan put an arm around Dawn and glared at Bailey. "Maybe for some of us."

"Does anyone know if Evan wants to leave?" Grace put her drink down. Her hands clenched with the effort to refrain from shouting. "I don't know whether it's for the best, but I think it's wrong to force us into this."

"Evan doesn't mind. Kaden didn't either. He was excited." Ace reddened and stared at his plate. "I'm not. Excited, I mean. I wanted to be ... well, not a soldier."

"Soldier?" Grace echoed.

"We're not joining the Army, dope." Bailey crossed her arms and backed up a step. "It's the CIA. Or the FBI. Or something."

"I thought we were gonna be secret agents," David said.

"So nobody knows what really happens." Grace shook her head. "Don't you see? This is wrong. We shouldn't have to be sent off to who-knows-where just because we're different."

Dawn shrank back into the couch. "I don't want to be a secret agent. And I don't want to leave David. He's all I have left."

"You won't have to."

"Oh, really?" Bailey sneered at Grace. "What are you going to do about it? You think Michael's just going to say forget it, you can all stay here forever?"

*That's what you want him to say, isn't it?* Grace suppressed a smirk. Despite Bailey's cynical remarks, the girl didn't want to leave any more than the rest of them. "I don't know exactly what I'm going to do yet," she said. "Michael said he wanted to talk to me tonight, and I'll definitely bring it up then. For now, I need to see Evan."

"I'll go with you." Megan gave Dawn a brief squeeze and stood. "Maybe I can translate."

Grace cast her a puzzled look, but an instant later remembered Megan could still read thoughts. Evan might be just as disparaging as Bailey—say one thing, mean another. She nodded.

Bailey rolled her eyes. "Good luck. You're gonna need it."

\* \* \* \*

Grace and Megan returned to the infirmary, hoping for a little privacy. The nurse guarding Evan, however, took exception to their plan. Grace recognized her as the woman who handed out injections. She thought she'd heard Lou call her Vera.

"He's sleeping." Vera planted herself in the doorway and attempted to block their view. "You can visit with him tomorrow."

Grace glanced past the irate nurse. On the far side of the room, Evan sat propped in a bed by a window, staring outside. "No, he isn't," Grace said. "We have to see him. It's important."

Evan's head turned slowly. "Vera? What's going on?"

"He needs rest." Vera spoke firmly and began to shut the door.

Grace wedged a foot inside. "We need to talk to him now."

With a sigh, Vera relented and stood back. "Fine. But you can only stay for a few minutes. You'll wear him out."

"Thank you."

Vera returned to her desk, grumbling and shaking her head. If she weren't so furious with the so-called people in charge here, Grace would have laughed.

"Grace. Megan." Evan offered a weak smile. "Thanks for coming after me."

"Any time." Grace returned the smile in what she hoped was a reassuring way. He looked worse now than he had when they'd brought him back. A monstrous bruise had swallowed half his face. The bear must have swatted him. His eyes looked different, too. At first Grace thought they were bright with exhaustion or fever. A closer look revealed they were almost glowing.

Evan caught her staring and turned toward the window again. "You guys should go," he whispered. "Vera was just getting a shot ready."

Grace frowned. "Can't it wait a few minutes? We wanted to..." She glanced at Vera. The nurse glowered, tapping a finger on the edge of her desk. "Damn," Grace murmured. "She's not going to go away, is she?"

Evan closed his eyes. "I can take care of that."

"You can?"

He cleared his throat. "Vera. Go start a load of laundry."

His voice sounded strange—deep and hollow, louder than usual. Vera jumped from the chair as though she'd sat on a tack and hustled from the room without a word.

"That'll keep her busy for a few minutes." Evan cast his eyes down. "So, what's up?"

"Er. How did you do that?"

"It's my ability. One of them, anyway."

Grace recalled the forest, the damage left in the bear's wake as though it had fled from Evan in fear. "Is that how you got rid of the bear?"

"I had to. It wouldn't stop coming. I just got to the point where I can use it with the suppression, like Michael." Evan looked up, and his gaze settled on Megan. "I think you knocked the drugs out of my system. You did heal me, didn't you?"

Megan nodded. "You would have died."

"I know." Evan sighed. "I'm grateful, believe me. But I want the drugs. I don't want to be able to do that automatically."

"Why?" Grace asked. "I mean, that's an amazing gift."

Evan laughed bitterly. "Gift. I've never thought of it like that. For me, it's a curse."

"Sometimes I feel that way too. Still, I don't think covering it with drugs is the best way to deal with it."

"I do. I want it gone." Anger laced his words. "The first time I found out I could do this..." He trailed off and stared at Grace. "I keep telling you things I've never told anyone before. Do you have a forced confession ability or something?"

Grace chuckled. "No. But I'll say I do, if it makes you feel better."

"What do you have?"

"We're talking about you."

"Oh. Right." Evan grimaced. "I was thirteen. Living on the streets—had been for three years. I told you about my mother."

"Yes. I remember," Grace said. Megan sent her a questioning glance, but she shook her head. She'd explain later.

"Anyway. I don't remember exactly why, but I was furious at the world. And miserable. I wanted to die. I climbed up to the highway and sat on the guardrail, trying to decide which car I was going to jump in front of. And somebody pulled over." Evan stopped abruptly, swallowed hard. He didn't continue.

"Are you okay?" Grace asked.

Evan blinked a few times. "Yeah. So, this guy got out of the car. Kinda tall, clean-looking, probably around thirty or so. He came over and asked if I was okay, said he could give me a lift somewhere or lend me his phone if I needed to call someone..." Evan's breath hitched and his voice dropped to a guttural octave. "I screamed at him. Told him to get away from me. He turned and ran onto the highway. A truck hit him."

"Evan..." Grace moved closer to the bed and laid a hand on his shoulder.

He looked at it, but didn't seem to notice. "He was just being nice, trying to help. And I killed him."

"But it was an accident! You didn't know. You were just a kid..."

"I'm still just a kid, Grace." Evan shuddered. His eyes closed again. "I don't want this power. I'm not responsible enough for it."

Grace gave him a sad smile. "It takes a responsible person to admit they're not responsible."

"Huh?"

"What I mean is, I think you're smarter than you give yourself credit for."

"She's right." Megan grinned at him. "Trust me. I can read your mind."

"Great. So even if I manage to duck her coercion, you'll know what I'm thinking."

"Fraid so."

Evan sagged back against the inclined bed. One corner of his mouth turned up. "All right, I know you two didn't come here to ask if I've ever killed anyone. What did you want?"

"Bailey said you're turning eighteen soon. We wanted to know if you really want to leave for ... wherever they send us."

"I don't know." Evan smirked. "Always thought I'd make a pretty good drill sergeant."

An image formed in Grace's mind: Evan in a uniform—that coincidentally looked damned fine on him—barking orders to rows of camouflage-clad soldiers, who dropped and performed perfect, synchronous push-ups with bewilderment stamped on their features. She blurted laughter and clapped a hand to her mouth.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Really." Grace drew a calming breath. "Seriously, do you want to leave?"

"Well ... no. But I didn't think we had a choice."

"That's about to change." *I hope*. "Okay. I'm going to talk to Michael about it, but I don't know how far I'll get. Can I ask you to do something, Evan?"

"You can ask. But if it involves heavy lifting, forget it."

"No, nothing like that. I want you to stay off the drug—at least for a few days. I think you'll feel a lot better, and I believe you can control your abilities."

Evan frowned. "I guess I could convince Vera she's already given it to me and dodge the shots for a while. But what if there's another ... accident?" He blinked, plucked at the sheet. "When I talk, people die. I can't let that happen again."

"It won't happen. I know you can handle it." Grace squeezed his shoulder. The brief contact sent heat spreading through her and she had to let go quickly. "Will you try?"

"Okay." His voice faltered a bit, then steadied. "Do you really think you can keep him from sending me away?"

"Yes." She spoke with more conviction than she felt. Still, Grace resolved to do everything she could to stop Michael—no matter what he did to her.

The infirmary door opened. Vera swooped in, looking flushed and confused. "I'm sorry, but you girls have to leave now. Evan needs his rest." She stopped, shook her head. "I don't know what came over me. I just had to wash a load of sheets, right that second..."

The three of them looked at each other and smiled.

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## Chapter 24

Evening tumbled into night, with no sign of Michael.

Grace wandered the first floor. She glanced at the grandfather clock, startled to realize it was after ten. Maybe Michael's "later" meant tomorrow. Or next week.

Too bad. Grace decided now was later enough.

She knew he and Kendra stayed in the old camp by the greenhouse. She'd have to head that way and hope he'd lifted the ridiculous shoot-to-kill order Lou had warned her about. She doubted Lou would actually shoot her ... but Kyle might. Apparently, the man held a grudge for a long time. She hadn't cut him that badly, though. And it was self-defense.

A flashlight would help. Or a candle, if she had to resort to that. They didn't have streetlights in the mountains, and even if there were light in the camp or the greenhouse, it wouldn't reach far enough to let her see the ground. Grace headed for the kitchen hoping to find something useful.

Light spilled from the kitchen doorway. Grace entered cautiously. The refrigerator door stood open, a pair of sock-clad feet visible beneath it. "Dorinne?" Grace said.

Megan leaned out from behind the door and smiled. "Hi, Grace. Did you get hungry too?"

Grace laughed. "No." She moved to the first drawer she spotted and opened it. Potholders and dishtowels lay stacked neatly inside. "Hey, Megan. Happen to know where there's a flashlight around here?"

"Why do you need a flashlight?" Megan closed the refrigerator. She held a can of soda in one hand and a wrapped brick of sharp cheddar cheese in the other. "I need crackers." She headed for the cabinets.

"I'm going to see Michael."

Megan whirled. "Are you crazy? It's pitch black out there. And Evan just got attacked by a *bear*, remember?"

"The bear's long gone. This can't wait. Who knows when he'll decide to send Evan away? Or me? I passed eighteen a long time ago, you know."

"Oh, man." Megan slumped. "I keep forgetting that. Guess it's because I don't want to think about it." She set the cheese and soda on the counter. "Can't you wait until morning, at least? I mean, what if you get hurt?"

"I thought about waiting, but it's better to do it now. He won't be expecting me."

"Yeah. But I still don't want to go out there." Megan crossed the room and stopped in front of her. "I was going to hold off. Didn't want anyone getting too suspicious. But..." The girl threw her arms around Grace and whispered, "Don't move."

Curious warmth spread through Grace's body. She could feel the blood flowing in her veins, the light Megan directed into her flushing the darkness of the drug. Her nerves tingled and hummed with sensation. Color and texture built to a shimmering crescendo and acute awareness of the world around her returned.

*Can you hear me?*

Grace smiled. Yes.

*Good.* Megan sagged back and stumbled over to a stool chair near the counter. She sat with a grunt. "Never done two in one day before."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Megan lifted her head. "I've been practicing. Apparently, the more you use it, the easier it gets. Got something else for you." She thrust a hand in her pocket and extracted a contact lens case. "Would you believe I've been carrying these around for a week? Ever since we got here."

"Thank you. For everything." Grace approached her, accepted the case.

Megan grinned. "Don't thank me yet. They're blue. He's going to notice eventually." *There's so much I want to tell you...*

*Can you start with why the drug doesn't work on you any more?* Grace settled the case on the counter and inserted the lenses. At least she hadn't forgotten how.

*Lawrence ... my stepfather. He hasn't been giving it to me. Just a placebo.*

*I take it you're getting along now.*

*Yes. He really was trying to protect me. He hates them.*

Them?

*The government. He works for them, not Michael. If they found out what he's been doing...*

Grace shivered. If Michael wasn't working directly with the government, they probably had separate agendas. How much did Michael really know about what happened to them when they left? "I've got to talk to him. Right now."

"Wait. I'm coming with you." Megan stood, swaying slightly. *You can't talk to Michael about Lawrence. They won't just arrest him. He knows too much.*

"I won't say anything." *But you can't come with me. I don't want Michael to decide to send you away, too. And you're exhausted.*

*I'm going. I won't let you go alone.*

Grace shook her head. "You're just as stubborn as me. Can we compromise? I'll aim for the greenhouse and you can wait there. That way you'll be close if I need you."

"Aim? I don't know if I like that word. It means you might miss."

"Don't worry. If I do, we can always rely on your Girl Scout skills." Smiling, Grace grabbed her hand. "Ready?"

"No. But let's go anyway."

Grace closed her eyes and pictured the greenhouse—the double rows of greenery tinged with pink, the warm air heavy with moisture, the earthy scent of soil and leaves. Gravity ceased to affect them for a moment and returned as her vision became reality.

Only the faint light of a half-moon reached the greenhouse, diffused through the heavy plastic covering. Layered shadow saturated the interior of the long building. At the far end, a silhouette froze with a long, slender object in hand. It looked like a gun. The figure darted behind the left-hand row of bushes. The plants rustled in its wake like hissing snakes.

Megan gasped. "Lawrence?"

\* \* \* \*

The whisper of power from the Nephil seemed to pierce Silver's chest, effectively as the spike through his stomach. He knew where she was. He didn't want to know.

Had Lorin felt it? His mother's ability to sense power was not as developed as his own. With something this small, if she were far enough away, she would not know—unless he told her.

He sought Lorin, found her miles to the west. No longer in the mountains. He sensed no awareness in her, nothing to indicate she'd felt the Nephil give herself away. He lingered undetected in her mind, conflicted and bewildered.

She'd commanded him to report the Nephil's whereabouts the instant he discovered them. He had discovered them. Every moment he did not convey this information to Lorin was a moment of disobedience, refusal.

He should tell her.

She would force him to kill the Nephil. And torture her first.

He couldn't do that.

Lorin would kill her anyway. Leave him here forever, impaled and bleeding, an eternity of anguish. Augment his torment with periodic visitations of further, extended pain. Make him long for death, though she could not grant it. He could not destroy himself either. He had tried.

He should tell her.

Regardless of what happened with this one, Lorin would not stop until she had destroyed them all. If Silver refused to cooperate, he would suffer, and they would still die.

But at her hands. Not his.

He should tell her.

He would not.

\* \* \* \*

"Megan?" The voice rose from the shadows, thin and quavering. "How did you ... Who's that with you?"

"It's Grace. She's safe."

"All right." More rustling, and the silhouette emerged. As he approached, his features became more defined and Grace made out the object he carried. The "gun" was a trigger device connected with a hose to a slender metal canister. He must have been spraying the plants with something. "How did you girls get in here? Not through the door."

"Grace brought us. It's kind of hard to explain."

"No need. I understand now." A small smile formed on his slender lips. "It's nice to finally meet you, Grace, though I think the circumstances could have been better."

"I'm such a dolt," Megan said. "Grace, this is Lawrence, my stepfather. I never introduced you."

"Hello. I'm sorry, but can I ask what you're doing out here in the dark?"

Lawrence sighed. "I could ask the same of you. Look, you really should get back to the house. If Michael finds you out here ... or me..."

"Actually, I came here looking for him," Grace said.

"Oh. Well, I didn't. In fact, I'm trying to avoid him."

"What *are* you doing, Lawrence?"

"Stopping this. At least temporarily." He held up the device. "It's plant killer. No Devil's Backbone, no drug. Until they find another source. But I'm just trying to stall until I come up with something better."

"You can't do that," Megan whispered. "What if they find out?"

"Megan," Lawrence said gently. "I'm past caring what they do to me. It's what they're doing to you and your friends I'm worried about. It isn't right, and I'm not going to stand around and watch it happen any more. I'm certainly not going to enable it." He set the canister down, hesitated. "Chances are, they'll find someone else to do this. What I hope is that you'll be long gone by then. I was going to talk to you about it..."

Megan giggled. "Grace and I kind of had the same idea." She hugged him, and smiled. "I'm sorry about before. You know. I was a bitch to you. I didn't know..."

"I'm sorry, too. Maybe if I'd explained all this to you sooner, it wouldn't have come to this. I just thought you'd be better off not knowing." Lawrence squeezed her for a moment and stepped back. "I'm ashamed of my part in this. I want to do something to make it right."

Megan nodded and looked at Grace. "Maybe we can come up with something together?"

"The more, the merrier." Surprised and pleased to have another ally, Grace glanced toward the camp house. "Do you know if Michael's there?"

"Probably. He came back about an hour ago and I haven't seen him leave."

"Back from where?"

Lawrence shrugged. "Town, somewhere. He might have been picking up supplies, but Dorinne usually does the shopping. The van is the only transportation up here."

"Okay. I'm going to talk to him."

"I'll stay here and help Lawrence." *Call me if you need me.*

*I will.*

Grace left the greenhouse and started around the back of the camp house. One way or another, they would settle this tonight.

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## Chapter 25

Light glowed dimly behind a drawn curtain in one of the front windows. Grace hoped that meant someone was there. She knocked, waited. Kendra opened the door.

"Grace? What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. Can I come in?"

Kendra glanced back inside the house. "I guess so. No one ever ... yes. Come in." She stood back, and closed the door behind Grace.

"Is Michael here?"

"He's in the shower." Kendra worried her lower lip. "Did something happen?"

"Not yet." Grace stared at her mother. Clad in cotton pajamas the color of creamed coffee, her hair loose and unstyled, she looked like a teenager in a department store catalogue. Not the type of sleepwear she'd pictured Kendra wearing—especially around Michael. Maybe she had grown up. A little.

"Here. Let's sit down." Kendra gestured to the room on the right where two overstuffed chairs and a love seat had been grouped around a brick fireplace currently devoid of fire. A corked bottle rested in a bucket of ice on the stone hearth. Mismatched wine glasses lined the mantle. One glass sat half-full on a table beside the chair to the left.

Grace shook her head. "Planning to get lucky tonight, Kendra?"

"How did you get so tactless?" Kendra grabbed the bottle, flipped the loose cork out with a thumb, and refilled her glass. "I never raised you to speak like that."

"You never raised me, period!" Grace drew a sharp breath and forced herself to calm down. "Look, I didn't come here to fight with you. Let's agree to disagree and I'll just sit here and wait for Michael."

Grace dropped into the right-hand chair. Kendra hesitated and reached toward the mantle. "Would you.... Oh, you're not twenty-one. You probably don't even like this stuff." She started to replace the bottle.

"Actually, I would like some." Grace almost added *please*. She decided against it. Drinking had never been a regular occurrence for her, but she had a feeling it would help tonight. Besides, the appalled look on her mother's face came close to making her laugh.

Kendra wordlessly selected a narrow, lilac-tinted glass flute with a stem that coiled like a spring. She poured it half-full, handed it to Grace, and replaced the bottle. Taking the chair opposite Grace, she sipped from the glass beside it and let out a sigh. "Why did you come out here?"

"I told you, I have to talk to Michael." Grace tried the wine. It was crisp and bittersweet, heavy with fruit. Like thinned apple cider with a bite. Not bad.

"About what?"

"A lot of things."

"Grace..." Kendra put her glass down with a hollow clink. "I'm not completely stupid, you know. I haven't been the best mother. Believe me, I'm aware of that. I only want to help, but I can't if you don't tell me what's going on."

Grace frowned. Kendra sounded sincere enough, but her mother had a knack for lying with a straight face. She searched her thoughts.

*What is she doing here, anyway? I just don't understand why she has to be so difficult. If I was her, I'd be happy to have someone help get rid of the weird stuff. The glowing eyes, the mind-reading thing. I wouldn't want people thinking I was some sort of freak.*

Shallow, self-serving crap. Kendra hadn't changed. She still obsessed over other people's opinions—except when it came to her men. Disgusted, Grace drained the rest of the wine and set the glass down hard on the table beside her.

"Grace?" Kendra said. "What is it? You..." She gasped and leaned forward. "Your eyes! They're blue. They've never been blue before. What does that mean? Are you sick?"

"Yes, do tell. What does it mean, Grace?"

Michael's voice drifted into the room, low and reproachful. Grace turned to find him leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, staring at her. "Does it really matter?" she said.

Michael straightened and offered a careless shrug. "I suppose it doesn't. It is interesting, though. I doubt you've mastered suppression in a week. Especially since I haven't even lowered your dosage yet."

"Do you expect me to believe you were going to?"

"No. But I was." Michael crossed the room to the fireplace and poured himself some wine. "I'd planned to bring you here tonight anyway. Not sure why you came, but you did save me the trouble."

"Trouble. That's what I am to you?" Grace shifted and leaned forward. "What about the rest of them? What about Megan, is she trouble too? You were trying to pick her up."

Kendra paled and cast her eyes down. Anger tightened Michael's features. "I already explained that. I had to get her here. And if you're suggesting ... Christ, she's only sixteen. I would never."

"Yeah, and you're twenty-two. And my mother is almost forty. Sorry, Kendra, but don't you think there's something wrong with that?"

Michael stood silent for a moment. At last he returned his untouched glass to the mantle and faced Kendra. "I'm sorry to have to ask this, but would you mind if I spoke with Grace alone? It's important." He offered a hand.

"Go ahead." Kendra took it and Michael helped her stand. "I think I'll go straighten up in the kitchen."

Michael kissed the corner of her mouth. "Thank you."

Kendra sent Grace an imploring look and left the room.

"It's nice to have my mother's money, isn't it?" Grace said when Kendra was out of earshot.

Shaking his head, Michael moved to the loveseat and dropped onto the cushions. "Not everyone in the world is out to use you. Or your mother. I'm not."

"Right. Your intentions are entirely altruistic. And I'm ... Elvis Presley."

"What?"

"Never mind." Grace drew a breath and let it out slow. "You do understand why I'm a little suspicious. It's an old trick—younger man, rich older woman. Believe me, you're not the first to think you can land Kendra Carrington."

"I'm not trying to land her, Grace," Michael said quietly. "And I'm sixty years old."

Grace snorted. "Oh, come on. I figured you were lying to Megan, but that's pushing it. I'd give you thirty, maybe."

"I'm sixty," Michael repeated. "We don't age. At least, not like normal people."

"Uh-huh. So what happens when we hit eighty or ninety? Do we just drop dead?"

"If we don't die of ... unnatural causes, we can live for centuries."

Grace started to object again, but her intuition whispered that Michael was telling the truth. "Centuries," she said. "So, you expect us to spend centuries working for the government?"

"No. I expect you to spend a few years learning to survive. I can't protect any of you here for very long. Those unnatural causes I mentioned? I'm talking about the angels. They're older, stronger, and more powerful than all of us combined. And they hate us."

"Not all of them do. What about Dawn and David's father?"

Michael closed his eyes briefly. "Just one of them could slaughter all of us here without breaking a sweat. Especially the one that controls the Stalker. The one looking for you. That's why I had to talk to you." He paused and passed a hand over his face. "Keeping you here, even with the drug masking your power, is a serious risk. I've tried everything to come up with an alternative, but there just isn't another option."

"Another option besides what?"

"My contact will be here in a few hours. You're leaving tonight."

From somewhere in the depths of the house came the sound of shattering glass.

Michael sprang to his feet and whirled. "Kendra! Are you all right?"

Silence replied.

Michael made his way around the couch and strode for the doorway. Kendra stepped into view before he reached it. She regarded him with moist, accusing eyes. "You said a few days," she whispered. "A few days. Not tonight! I didn't even get to..."

"Oh, Kendra. How much of that did you hear?" He drew her to him, rubbed her back. "I'm sorry. I really am. Please try to understand ... It's the only way she'll be safe. I'm trying to protect her. Protect all of us."

Grace stood. Her hands clenched at her sides, nails digging her palms. "I don't need your protection," she said in a tight voice. "I'll leave because I don't want anyone else getting hurt. But I'm not going with your government buddy. You might want to reconsider your strategy, Michael, because none of the others want to participate. In fact, before I go, I'm going to ask them to come with me."

"You really don't get it, do you?" Michael said. "If you head off alone, they'll find you. They'll kill you. And anyone else with you."

"I've managed to survive so far." Grace clenched her jaw. Why did he have to be right, again? She couldn't protect anyone else. Asking them to come would be selfish and cruel. Still, she would try to accomplish what she'd come here for in the first place. "Look, Michael. I'm the danger here, right? I'm the one with the bulls-eye on my back."

"There's more to it than that."

"Fine. Debate semantics if you want. But that's what it boils down to." Grace took a fortifying breath. "I'm going to leave. By myself, not with your contact. The others don't want to join the Army, or the CIA, or whatever. Just ... please. Let them stay here. Without me around, they'll be all right. Won't they?"

*Grace, no!*

Grace flinched. Megan's voice screamed in her head, drowning Michael's reply.

*I have to go, Megan. I can't let those monsters kill you.*

*Either you stay, or I'm going with you.*

*Megan...*

"Grace?" Kendra stared at her. "Will you think about it?"

"Think about what?"

Michael's brow furrowed. "I said, I might be able to let them stay if you go with my contact. I have to know you're safe. If they find you, they can force you to tell them about this place. Remember?"

*Can you hear me?*

Grace fought to conceal her reaction. That was Michael's voice.

*You can! How? You're not supposed to be able to do anything. They'll sense it!*

"Get out of my head!"

Michael recoiled, nearly knocking Kendra over. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You forced me out."

"I did?" Grace shook her head, attempting to clear the ringing in her ears. "I ... didn't know you could do that. The telepathy thing, I mean."

"It's called Reaching. The one power we all share. Mind abilities are different with everyone, but technically, you should be able to Reach any Nephil."

*Grace. Megan's voice sounded small and worried. I think someone's coming...*

Grace glowered at Michael. "Your contact is early."

"What? No, he can't be. He was too far away to get here so soon."

Someone pounded on the door. Once, twice, three times.

Michael glanced at Kendra and then Grace. "Can't be him. Impossible."

A heavy thud shook the house. The windows rattled with the force.

"You two stay here." Michael left the room, headed around the corner. A brief pause followed. The door opened. Michael spoke in strangled tones.

"Oh Jesus no ... Kaden!"

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## Chapter 26

Kendra raced from the room. Grace followed, speaking to Megan as she moved. *You guys better come to the house. I think there's trouble.*

The front door stood open, the porch light on. Kendra froze just outside the entrance with one hand clasped to her mouth. To the left, Michael crouched beside a filthy, ragged heap that vaguely resembled a person—a young man, though beyond that it was impossible to determine more. Dirt caked his hair, smeared his face and lined his cracked lips. Dark beads of blood glistened at one corner of his mouth. The remnants of his clothing were stiff with mud and red-brown stains that looked like blood as well.

"Kaden," Michael murmured. "What happened?" Not expecting an answer, he hooked his hands under Kaden's arms and pulled the lax form toward him to prop him on his thighs.

Kaden stirred. His lips parted and garbled sound emerged.

"Don't try to talk." Michael's voice broke. "Let me get you inside first. Kendra, would you please get some water and bring it into the den?"

Nodding, Kendra rushed inside. Grace stepped onto the porch just as Megan and Lawrence thundered up the stairs and stopped short.

Megan uttered a brief shriek. "Who is that? What's going on?"

"It's Kaden," Grace whispered. "The guy Dawn was talking about earlier..."

Michael glanced at the new arrivals. "I'm not even going to ask how you two got here so fast. Lawrence, will you help me bring him in?"

"Of course." Lawrence moved to Kaden's feet. They lifted him, and Grace moved aside to let them into the house. She and Megan brought up the rear and left the front door open.

They settled Kaden on the couch. Megan sent Grace a worried glance and approached the motionless figure. "Let me see him," she said to Michael. "I can help."

"Megan, don't!" Grace blurted. *You've already done too much today. We don't know what will happen if you go too far.*

"I have to try." Megan reached for him, but Michael caught her wrist in mid-air.

"What are you doing?"

Megan wrenched her hand away. "Healing him."

"Well, that explains a lot." Michael stepped back. "You two are something else. I don't know whether to be grateful or furious."

Megan ignored him. She slipped a hand behind Kaden's back, pressed her palm between his shoulder blades. A groan escaped her. "So tired..." Her eyes rolled and she folded to the floor.

"Megan!" Grace ran to her and dropped beside her.

The girl shuddered. "I'm okay. Need to sit. Thirsty."

Grace helped her to a chair. "Kendra's bringing water."

"Good." Megan glanced at the couch. "I couldn't finish, but he's better now. Is he awake?"

As though responding to her question, Kaden twitched. His eyes flew open. Amber light shone from them, highlighting his bewildered expression. "Michael?"

"I'm here." Michael knelt in front of Kaden and put a hand on his shoulder. "What's going on? You should have been long gone. Safe. What happened?"

"I've got water," Kendra announced from the doorway. She entered with a pitcher and a stack of plastic cups and set them on the hearth. Grace scooted over and helped hand out cups to Megan and Michael, who helped Kaden drink.

"Thank you," Kaden gasped. His gaze flew to Megan. "Another healer. You saved my ass. I owe you."

"Another?"

"Me, too. I was spent, though." He faced Michael again, and his eyes flared. "You have to evacuate this place. Right now."

"Why?"

"Your contact. Zane." Kaden's hand brushed his throat. A dark red line scored the surface, just visible beneath the dirt. "He tried to kill me. Must've thought he did, otherwise he would've stuck around. He slit my throat and dumped me in the ground. Good thing it was a shallow grave."

"No..." Michael lurched back and sprang to his feet. "No. He's an FBI agent. A recruitment specialist. You're remembering it wrong."

"He's an angel, Michael." Kaden struggled to stand. "The others are dead. He killed them. We have to get the kids out of here."

"No!"

"It's not your fault. He fooled everyone. Even the government."

"You're wrong. They're not dead..."



"Michael." Kaden reached for his hand and lifted his unresisting arm. "Look." He pressed Michael's fingers to his temple.

Michael went rigid. His eyes locked open, staring blindly. Endless seconds passed, then violent tremors shook his body.

"Stop it!" Grace reached out automatically to steady Michael.

Kaden's eyes tracked her movement. "Don't touch him!" he shouted.

The warning came too late. Grace's hand brushed Michael's shoulder and clamped down as though she'd stuck it over a vacuum hose. A powerful shockwave slammed through her arm and exploded in her mind, releasing fragmented visions.

A car, driving through dark woods. Worry. This is the wrong way, deeper into the mountains. The car stops. A door opens. *Come on.*

There's nothing here.

*We're staying on a base tonight.*

Secret military operation? Maybe. Feels wrong. The man's foot taps.

*You want to serve your country?*

Get out. Walk. Trees rush by. A clearing, bathed in moonlight. Packed mounds of earth—a dozen, more. Loose dirt piled around a hole. Not a base. A graveyard...

*A useful Nephil is a dead one.*

Steel flashes. Blood pours. Dirt tastes like sorrow, sounds like death.

Grace screamed and wrenched her hand free. Reality shattered the visions. She fell to her knees and buried her face in her hands. So many dead.

So many more to follow if they didn't get moving. Zane was headed here, now.

The realization shook her from stupor. She stood. Michael faced her and his expression said he'd realized the same thing. "We'll get the others and drive into town," he said. "No ... further. I can drive through the night. After we get some distance, we'll worry about long-term decisions."

"We can trade off." Kendra rose from the hearth, pale and determined. "I'll do some driving, too."

Michael nodded. "Thank you."

Lawrence, who had been watching from the doorway, straightened suddenly. "What's that smell?" Before anyone could react, he darted around the corner. His footsteps pounded across the porch, down the stairs. Less than a minute later, he bellowed from outside, "Michael! Get out here!"

Michael took off after him. Grace helped Megan up, and the two of them headed out with Kendra and Kaden close behind.

There was no sign of Michael or Lawrence in the yard. They descended and circled the camp house, until the main house came into view. Thick black smoke billowed from the rear of the structure, and flames licked along the roof at an alarming rate.

Lawrence and Michael were shadows streaking along the ground. They'd already closed half the distance. The rest of them shed their collective exhaustion and sprinted for the house.

\* \* \* \*

"Lemme *go!* Ace, make him let go! *Dawn!*"

Grace heard David's frantic cries before she reached the group huddled on the lawn, and her heart sank. Dawn was still inside.

This close, the flames crackled and spit their lethal intentions. Immense heat radiated from the house, flattening grass and baking the moisture from the air. Evan held a struggling David with both arms locked across the boy's heaving chest. No one attempted to enter the conflagration—and with good cause. They wouldn't come back out.

Bailey turned away from the blaze, her features smudged and somber. "Lou went in after her. It's been too long already."

"Jesus," Grace said. "We can't just stand here! Is there a hose somewhere, or a pond? Buckets? Anything..."

Michael shook his head. "There's nothing. The closest fire department is an hour from here. We're helpless."

Bailey stared at Megan. "Heal me."

"What?"

"Heal me. Knock the drug out. I know you can do it, and I can go in there."

"I ... can't. I'm spent."

"I can." Kaden stepped forward.

Bailey gasped. "Kaden? How..."

"I'll explain later. Come here." When Bailey moved toward him, Kaden stepped aside and settled a hand on her back. A moment later, he sat down hard. "There. Oughta do it. Do your thing."

Bailey's eyes shone in the dark. Nodding, she turned and walked toward the house. As she moved, the heat shimmer saturating the air seemed to part, to flow above and around her. She reached the front door and kicked it open. Flames shot through the opening, swirling and congregating in mid-air a few feet in front of her. She forged ahead without pause.

David slumped against Evan. "Is she going to get Dawn?"

"Let's hope so." Evan's voice was a harsh croak. He stared briefly at Kaden, but didn't ask questions. His grip on David refused to relax.

Michael scanned the yard, his expression drawn and shattered in the flickering firelight. "Dorinne?" he said. "Vera, Kyle. Are they..."

Ace shook his head, stared at his feet.

"Vera woke me up, and then she went to find Dorinne." Evan grimaced. "I think Lou got everyone else. Haven't seen Kyle at all."

"All right. Listen." Michael sent an anxious glance at the house. "If ... I mean, as soon as Bailey and Dawn get out, we have to get to the van. Everyone stays together. Understand?"

Weak murmurs of assent replied. Ace shook himself and walked over to Kaden, who still sat on the ground. "Since nobody else is asking ... What's going on?"

"Ace!" Kaden looked up and smiled. He struggled to his feet and gave the boy a clumsy hug. "What've they been feeding you, Miracle-Gro?"

"You've only been gone a week." Ace smirked. "So, I guess you're not going to tell me anything. Right?"

"It's a long story."

"Later?"

"Promise."

Ace flashed a tired smile. "Whatever happened ... I'm glad you're back."

"Me too, kid."

A sharp groan rose above the steady roar of the flames, commanding attention. From just inside the doorway, a heavy thud sounded. Showers of sparks spit through the opening. Thick smoke chased the sparks. When it cleared, a massive solid shape lay blocking the exit—a charred chunk of rafter from the loft ceiling in the front room.

Bailey wouldn't be able to get out. Especially if Dawn couldn't walk.

*Bailey!* Grace called without thinking. David's renewed, panicked screaming sounded distant and muffled as Grace attempted to focus inside the house.

*Who ... Grace? Is that you?*

*Yes. Where are you?*

Bottom of the stairs. I have Dawn. Can't see the door.

I'm coming in.

You can't!

*Trust me.*

Someone touched her shoulder. Grace whirled, her concentration shaken.

"You're not thinking what I think you are..." Megan spoke through ashen lips. "There's two of them. And Bailey has some kind of shield. What if you can't get through it?"

"I have to try." Grace managed a smile. "You know I do." She lowered her head, pinched the contacts out and shoved them in a pocket. They'd be ruined. It didn't matter now.

"Try what?" Kendra's voice, shrill with concern, startled her. "Grace, what are you talking about? You can't get in there. The door is blocked!"

"I'm not going through the door."

She had to move quickly, before anyone tried to stop her. *Bailey. Whatever that shield is you have, I'll need you to turn it off for a few seconds. When I say now. Okay?*

*Okay ...* Bailey's response wavered.

Grace closed her eyes. She pictured the stairs, Bailey, Dawn. Tried to imagine exactly what it looked and felt like in there: dark, hazy with stinging smoke. Suffocating heat. Without precision, she might move herself into the flames.

*Now.*

An instant of stomach-turning weightlessness. A blistering inferno replaced warm outside air. Heat pressed in from all sides. The floor beneath her feet threatened to melt her shoes. Bailey huddled in front of her, cradling Dawn's unconscious form. Grace knelt and embraced them both tightly. "Hold on, if you can. I won't let go."

Vertigo slammed her the moment she initiated the move out. She felt something slip. Her fingers clenched harder. At last, the heat vanished. Her back hit the ground. Two bodies slammed into her, knocking the breath from her lungs.

"Damn." Bailey stirred and rolled off. "I want that power."

"Trade you," Grace murmured. "That shield is awesome." She squeezed her eyes shut against the smoke stinging them. The scent of singed hair hung heavy around her. She blinked rapidly, let her tears cleanse the soot and smoke, and swiveled her head aside. No longer brilliant blonde, Bailey's hair had blackened and crinkled to resemble a cheap Halloween wig. Dawn had fared little better.

They'd survived, though. The rest didn't matter.

Running feet and mingled shouts approached them. Someone lifted Dawn away and laid her on the grass. Grace sat up, narrowly avoiding David's flying tackle. "Dawn! Wake up!"

Dawn erupted in a spate of violent coughing. The spell wore down slowly and she drew a gasping breath. "David," she whispered. "Okay. I'm awake. Get off me."

Sobbing, David threw his arms around her. "You're alive. You're not charcoal."

"Yes. Seriously, get off me. You're heavy."

David scrambled up and regarded Bailey and Grace with solemn features. "You saved her. Thank you."

"Thank Grace," Bailey said. "I wouldn't have gotten out without her."

"I couldn't have found Dawn without you. I have to know where I'm going."

"Oh. Well, maybe I'll keep my shield, then."

Dawn curled on her side, and another coughing fit overcame her. When it stopped, she pushed herself up and looked back at the house. "Did everyone else get out?" she whispered.

"We'll talk about that later," Michael said. "We've got to leave. Not much time. Can you walk?"

"I'll help her." Evan bent and scooped Dawn to her feet.

"All right. Everyone find a partner and stay together."

Megan approached Grace and offered a hand. *Just as stubborn as me.*

*Damn straight.* Grace took it, wrenched herself from the ground. The tattered group headed for the camp house with shared and silent urgency.

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## Chapter 27

The camp house greeted them with stark mockery, an unsafe haven. Michael ushered them inside and lingered on the porch. "Pack whatever you think might be useful, in anything you can find. I'm going to bring the van around."

"I'll go with you." Kendra pushed her way to the fore. "You shouldn't be alone. Everyone stays together, right?"

"Right." Michael gave her a grateful smile.

Grace stepped out on the porch. "I'm coming, too. No, Megan," she said before the girl insisted on joining them. "I think you should help Lawrence coordinate things here." She wanted to give them as much of a chance as possible. If Zane didn't know about Kaden, he was still only coming here for her—and if he showed up in the next few minutes, she wouldn't be here.

"Fine. Killjoy." Megan shrugged. "Honestly, I'm glad you said that. I really don't feel up to walking much more. Not even a couple of feet."

"Where's the van?"

"Around the other side of the greenhouse, in the garage. It's not far." Michael jogged down the steps and glanced over his shoulder. "You ladies coming?"

Grace and Kendra followed him across the yard, past the darkened greenhouse. "Grace," Michael said without breaking stride. "I owe you an apology."

"For what?"

"Basically for being a dick." He stared straight ahead, his expression inscrutable. "I shouldn't have been so suspicious of you. If I hadn't insisted on drugging you into oblivion, it would have saved a lot of trouble. Maybe even a few lives."

The pain in his voice wrenched her heart. "Michael ... Kaden was right. This isn't your fault. No one could have stopped what happened. But now we can make sure it doesn't happen again." Grace glanced back at the camp house. "I have to apologize to you, too. I was wrong. You do care about them ... about us. I'm sorry for refusing to see that."

"That's all right. I understand why you thought what you did."

Grace looked sidelong at Kendra, who remained grim-faced and determined. Her mother had been unusually helpful since Kaden arrived, and far less abrasive. She couldn't help suspecting it was an act for Michael's benefit. But maybe, in her own way, she did care—at least whether Grace lived or died. The woman had seemed genuinely distressed at her entering the burning house.

No time to contemplate the psychology of Kendra now. First, they had to get the hell out of here.

The garage came into view, darkened and silent. It was a one-plus model with a wide vehicle door and a smaller door for quick entry. Michael reached the building first. He opened the small door, leaned in, switched on a light. "Shit."

"What? What's wrong?" Grace looked inside. Tools, workbenches and boxes lined the left side of the garage. A dark blue cargo van occupied the space to the right, resting on four flat tires. "Oh."

Michael wandered into the garage, stunned and shaken. "How could this happen? I just took it out a few hours ago." He approached the van. "I don't have four spares. Any brilliant ideas?" He crouched to examine the front tire.

Grace and Kendra joined him. Grace moved to the rear of the vehicle and ran a hand along the top of the tire. Her fingers brushed frayed strands of rubber. She stopped, poked at the strands, and discovered a long slit in the surface. They'd been slashed. Deliberately.

"Michael," she said slowly. "I think we'd better..."

"Hey, freaks. Took you long enough to get here."

Grace recognized the voice before she found its source. Kyle stood framed in the doorway. He must have been waiting outside. His gaze swept each of them in turn, and settled on Kendra. "You first, I think. All that money and you never paid me enough."

Swift movement at his side. A deafening roar erupted in the enclosed space. Kendra slammed back against the van. She hung frozen for an instant, then slid to the floor, leaving a glistening smear along the vehicle's side door.

Shock robbed Grace of the scream exploding inside her. Kyle stepped forward and this time raised the gun in plain view. "I warned you before that I'd have to shoot you if you tried to stop us. Now look what you've done—you got everyone all riled up and leaving before the party starts. Time to say goodnight, Gracie."

Grace reacted viscerally. She sent an immense surge of power at the garage wiring. A strident drone sounded. The light bulb flickered rapidly and shattered. Darkness consumed the room.

*No!* A male voice in her head. The one from her dreams.

*Who are you?* she replied instinctively.

The voice didn't answer.

"Damn it!" Another shot followed Kyle's epithet. Grace felt the bullet pass inches from her and heard it punch through the van behind her. She closed her eyes to hide the light, hoping he wouldn't be able to aim.

*Grace, get down!* That was Michael.

She dropped to the ground. One hand brushed something warm and firm, motionless. Grace stifled a sob. *Kendra. Jesus...*

"Michael, Michael. Such an idiot." Kyle moved cautiously toward them. Gray light, wisps of the moon creeping through the open door, revealed his dim outline. "You're still dead, even if you manage to get by me. Zane's on his way." Kyle pivoted and fired into the dark. The muzzle flash seared negative images in the air. "I saw your little friend Kaden crawl back in. Zane wasn't happy to hear that he managed to survive. So he's just going to take you all out now."

Silence replied to his taunts.

*Grace. Whatever happens, don't move.*

Light burst in the gloom to Kyle's right. Michael stood in the center of the glow, silent and furious. Kyle grinned. He raised the gun.

"Idiot."

He shot, point-blank. Michael evaporated.

"What the—"

Another silhouette loomed behind Kyle, leapt on him, and bore him to the ground. A brief struggle ended with a sharp, meaty thud. Something metal skittered across the floor and hit the far wall.

"Grace," Michael panted. "We need light. Van's unlocked. Turn the headlights on ... go around the back."

Grace moved carefully. Using the van for support, she stood and felt around the back, up the side, until she located the front door handle. She pulled it open, fumbled for the headlight knob. They sprang to life. Grace shuffled back the way she'd come and tried not to think about what lay on the other side.

She saw the metal object first: a crowbar, the bend coated in dark, viscous fluid. Michael came into view. He knelt on Kyle's back, pinning him down. There was no need. Kyle's skull caved in at the back, misshapen and broken. He wasn't getting up.

Grace risked a glance alongside the van, and realized Kendra wasn't either.

"No..." Grace wavered on her feet. Shades of gray swarmed her vision. She pitched forward, unable to stop the descent.

Michael jumped from the body and caught her before she hit the floor.

"Breathe. Grace, honey, you have to breathe. Come on."

Grace closed her eyes and sucked in a harsh breath. "She's dead."

"Yes. I know. Christ..." Michael stiffened. "But we're not. We have to get to the others. Can you make it back?"

"I will." Grace drew herself up. "Where should we—"

*Run.*

The dream voice again. A shiver danced down Grace's spine. *Why? Who are you?*

*Run, Nephil. He is near. She will come.*

*Who are you?* she insisted.

*Silver.*

"Oh my God." Silver wasn't the angel. He was the monster. The Stalker. Warning her? Why would he do that?

*Run.*

Michael stared at her in confusion. She caught his gaze, and repeated Silver's directive.

"Run."

\*\*\*\*

The bars blended together over the centuries. Lorin's sole objectives in entering them were drinks, sex, and kills—not in any particular order. Tonight, no Nephil had presented itself for destruction. Tonight she would play with a human. She never killed human sex partners. They amused her.

Lorin ordered another Corona and surveyed her choices. More than one looked promising. The bartender who brought her drink was a lovely specimen. Even teeth, dimpled chin, muscled arms. Perhaps she would remain until closing, if no others caught her interest.

She brought the beer to her lips and halted. A distant jolt of power tingled her senses, familiar and maddening. The escaped Nephil. The one she'd told Silver to alert

her about immediately. It was closer to him than her. He must have felt it.

*Silver! How dare you disobey me?*

He didn't respond.

Lorin stood and hurled the bottle across the room. It shattered against the far wall. Jagged shards of clear glass embedded in the plaster. The humans averted their eyes. No one challenged her. *Answer me, you filthy, festering, walking plague!*

*Yes ... Lorin...*

Pain marked his words. Lorin stalked out of the bar, so she could concentrate on the signal. Crowds of humans tended to muffle power. Outside, she strode down the sidewalk and fumed. *Did you not sense it? The Nephil! It's near you.*

*I...*

*Worthless fool!* Lorin sought the Nephil again. The power had begun to fade, but she could follow it easily enough, once she moved further from the humans. She would force Silver to take it apart a piece at a time. Apparently, he still hadn't learned his lesson.

*I will fetch it and bring it to you. Then you can redeem yourself for failing to locate it.*

Once again, Silver offered no response. Perhaps he'd passed out from the pain. The image brought a smile to Lorin's face. She walked faster, eager to begin.

The Nephil's screams would be music. Beautiful music.

\* \* \* \*

Grace found her tenth wind somewhere around the time she rounded the greenhouse, and the camp house porch became visible. Michael pounded the ground three steps behind. *Almost there.* Her mind whirled with a gruesome kaleidoscope of thoughts and images. Near-photographic memories warred with her frantic search for an answer to the crisis at hand.

Where should they go? The main road was out—and this was a mountain. The main road was the only road. Zane had a car. She'd seen Kaden's memories. But if he was an angel, did he need a car? They could take to the woods, face the bears and cougars and Heaven knew what else. How long would they survive? Grace harbored the sinking feeling that sooner or later, they would have to face Zane. How could they beat an angel?

A bizarre answer whispered in her mind. *With another angel.*

Grace shook her head. They didn't have an angel handy at the moment. The instant her foot touched the first step, Megan burst through the door, a hinged metal box in her hands. "What happened? Where's the van? And Kendra?"

Grace stopped short. Michael collided with her. She hit the stairs with a sharp gasp. Michael hauled her up and half-carried her to the porch.

"Tell everyone to get whatever they can carry and get out here." Michael paused, caught a breath. "We can't take the van. What's that?" He nodded at the box.

Megan glanced down and seemed surprised to find her hands full. "What's left of the drug," she said. "Lawrence thought, since it works on the angel part of us, that maybe if we ran across one..."

"It's worth a try. Here, let me see."

Megan handed the box to him. He opened it, glanced inside, and put it down next to Grace. A dozen or so filled syringes lay lengthwise and stacked in rows.

"All right. On second thought, you stay out here with Grace. I'll get the others. Tell me if you see or hear anything at all. Okay?"

Megan nodded solemnly, and Michael dashed inside. The girl crouched beside Grace. "You look awful," she said. "Grace ... what's going on?"

"Kyle. Shot Kendra."

"No! Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Megan moved toward the steps. "Can you still do that transporter thing? Take me to her. I rested a little. I can probably..."

"Megan." Grace interrupted, her voice a dull scrape of sound. "Thank you. But even if you were at full strength ... you can't heal the dead." With distance from the initial shock, her admission drove the point home. Tears slipped from her eyes and bathed her face in reality.

Without a word, Megan dropped and embraced her. Grace allowed herself the luxury of the moment, and then pulled back.

"Kyle slashed the tires on the van. Probably started the fire, too. He's dead." Despite the misery feasting on her, a smile crept through. "Michael brained him with a crowbar."

"Wicked! Wish I could've—" Megan stopped abruptly, turned her head, and peered out at the darkened lawn. "Grace." She choked out the word.

*What is it?*

*If Kyle's dead ... who's that?*

Grace followed her gaze, and spotted the shadowed figure striding rapidly toward them.

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## Chapter 28

"Hey! You girls okay? Is everyone else here?"

"Lou!" Grace stood, but her tentative smile faded. If Kyle worked for Zane, maybe Lou did, too. *Be careful,* she told Megan. *Watch his hands.* She studied them herself. They seemed empty. "How did you get out of there?"

"I, uh ... dunno." He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, rubbed the back of his head. "Somebody clobbered me. I woke up on the back lawn."

"Kyle." Grace's expression darkened. She wanted to resurrect him and kill him all over again. *Michael. Lou's alive. He's out here.*

"Kyle? Why would he..." Lou frowned. "Dawn, Dorinne and Vera. Did they get out?"

"Dawn did," Grace said gently.

"Oh."

The door opened. Michael stepped out, a sports bag slung over his shoulder. "Lou. You're not going to shoot anyone, are you?"

"Not unless you say so, boss."

"Good." Michael glanced back into the house. "Let's go."

He descended the steps and the others trooped out. After he told Lou what happened, Michael turned to face them. "All right. We're going to head west, down the mountain. There's a little tourist town about halfway down. We should be able to rent a couple of cars there. Lawrence, Lou and I can trade off driving. Lawrence?"

Lawrence moved through the gathering and joined them on the ground. "Where are we driving to?"

"I'm not sure yet. Somewhere besides here."

"Good plan, Michael. But I'm sensing a few flaws."

The quiet voice came from around the corner of the house. A man in a dark suit stepped into the pool of light cast by the porch bulb. One arm extended and terminated in a gun. "One, there is nowhere on Earth you can hide from me. And two, I'm already here."

Grace knew who he was before Michael reacted.

"Zane. You lying son of a bitch."

Keeping the gun trained on the three men, Zane turned cold blue eyes to the porch. "Why don't you ... children go back inside? I'll get to you in a few minutes. Don't bother running."

Megan sent Grace a terrified glance. *What should we do?*

*I don't know..*

At once, Lawrence released a guttural roar and lunged toward Zane. Three reports rang out in rapid succession. Lawrence collapsed in a heap at Zane's feet.

A chorus of cries erupted on the porch. "Lawrence!" Megan shrieked. She gained half a step before Grace and Evan both grabbed her and hauled her back. "No! I can save him. I can!" She struggled and heaved against their grip.

Zane laughed. "Any more heroes here?" He nudged Lawrence's body with a foot. "I don't usually kill humans, but Dr. Jones here would have endangered my position with the government. Kyle, too. Thanks for getting rid of him for me, by the way." His gaze fell on Lou. He waved his free hand. "You don't matter. You're a raving lunatic."

Lou froze. His eyes widened, unblinking. His mouth opened and a runner of saliva oozed from one corner. He fell to his knees, paused. Keeled over and twitched. His open eyes unfocused, as though seeing something visible only to him.

"What did you do?" Michael demanded.

Zane shrugged. "I showed him the truth."

"You bastard. He didn't do anything."

"If you can insult me by existing, then he is guilty by association." Zane moved forward, his features grim. "I don't want to shoot you. This is my official piece and I'll have to file a report. Decisions, decisions."

*Grace. Can you move that box toward the stairs?*

Michael hadn't looked her way. He kept his eyes on Zane, apparently trying to distract him. Grace waved Bailey aside, grabbed the box, and Reached to Michael. *Say something so he doesn't hear what I'm doing.*

Michael glared at Zane. "Good for you. Personally, I think it's pretty pathetic that an angel has to rely on a gun."

Grace settled the box on the top step while he spoke. *Now what?*

*Stand back.*

"Idiotic mule!" Zane lowered his arm. "You should count yourself fortunate. If another Host had found you first, you would have been destroyed long before now. At least I'll give you the dignity of a burial."

While Zane spoke, three of the syringes rose from the box and steadied themselves in mid-air. They hovered for an instant, then flew toward him like darts to bury in his stomach. Zane snarled, glanced down. The plungers depressed in unison.

"Why, Michael. Are you actually trying to stop me?" Zane pulled the syringes out with a grunt and tossed them aside. Immediately, another barrage launched itself. Two more hit home, and a third bounced to the grass.

"Enough!" Zane moved like lightning. His empty hand clamped on Michael's throat and drove him to his knees on the grass. "You will die. And all of your vermin, too."

Grace grabbed a syringe and leapt down the steps. Zane raised his gun arm without looking away from Michael. She caught Zane's wrist, forced it aside, and jammed the needle in his upper arm. She barely managed to push down the plunger before Zane jerked his arm free and fired at her.

The impact knocked her flat. Her left shoulder went completely numb for an instant, and then screamed agony. Behind her, footsteps pounded the stairs. Zane released Michael's limp form, pivoted, and trained the gun in the direction of the porch.

Megan knelt beside Grace and sat her up. *Don't have much left. I'll do what I can.* A hand settled between her shoulders. The pain eased enough to focus her vision.

"You can't take us all out." Megan panted and dropped to the ground.

"Please. I don't even need this." Zane straightened, lowered the weapon. "You Nephilim are pathetic. You have no idea what true power is." He shook his head and wavered in place. Astonishment flashed in his eyes. "What..."

"Feeling a little strange, Zane?" Michael's voice rasped from his crumpled throat. He pushed himself to a seated position. "A little weak? Maybe you're going to need that gun after all." The gun flew out of Zane's hand and sailed over the camp house. "I hope one of your true powers is being able to see in the dark."

"You..." Zane's features contorted in fury. He stepped toward Michael. Stopped. "That was my official piece." He reached inside his jacket and drew out another gun. "This one isn't."

Behind Zane, a figure materialized from nothing. Grace caught a glimpse of white clothing and red hair. The witch. Alone.

The woman's shocked voice rang out. "Zane!"

Zane's lips curved in a wicked smile. "Lorin. I've been looking for you." He swung the gun at her and fired.

A dark, jagged hole appeared in her stomach. Crimson blossomed on white. She crumpled to her knees, her eyes fixed on Zane in shock.

"That should hold you for a few minutes. I'm busy." Zane returned his attention to Michael. "Where were we? Oh, yes. Dying."

As he moved toward Michael, Lorin vanished. A hand clamped on Grace's arm. A voice hissed near her ear. "You're mine to destroy, Nephil. Your friend can come along. Target practice."

Grace glanced at Megan in horror. Lorin's other hand gripped the girl's shoulder.

Zane's furious face was the last thing Grace saw before the world left.

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## Chapter 29

*You did not run.*

Silver whispered in her mind. Grace stood at the bottom of the ravine, alone and uninjured. Was she dreaming? The place felt alive. She smelled the forest, heard nature's night sounds fill the spaces above. The stone house stood just ahead. From here, she could determine its size—no bigger than a broom closet. Or a coffin. Shimmering argent liquid seeped beneath the door, pooled on the threshold, soaked the ground.

Whether or not this was a dream, Zane was real.

Grace struggled to beat back panic. *Michael! The others! Please ... help them.*

A pause.

*It is done,* Silver replied.

Grace shivered. *Thank you.*

*I do not understand.*

Understand what?

*Thann ... kew.*

He didn't understand thank you? Grace frowned. She moved toward the stone structure. It didn't get any closer. She stretched an arm out. Her fingertips brushed air two or three feet short of touching the surface.

*She will destroy you.*

Grace didn't have to ask who.

The ground shook beneath her. She stumbled and collapsed. Above her, the ravine walls closed, met in mid-air, sealed off light and sound. The trembling continued. Her teeth chattered with it.

*Wake up, Nephil! You will witness your friend's death.*

The woman's voice. Lorin. She had been dreaming.

Grace forced open eyelids that felt coated with cement. Lorin stood above her. The angel gave her another violent shake, released her abruptly and walked away. Grace sprawled on soft green velvet—a carpet of moss. Familiar sounds reached her ears. Familiar scents teased her nostrils. No dream this time.

A brilliant full moon, directly above the ravine, illuminated the area but failed to reveal Megan. Grace shouted her name. Only the wind answered. She rolled, wincing as fresh agony slammed her shoulder. Righting herself proved an exercise in frustration. She gained a few inches and dropped back down when her muscles jerked with exertion. At last, she managed to achieve a half-inclined position with the uninjured arm wedged beneath her.

Megan lay facedown and motionless on a tangle of dead branches against the side of the ravine five feet away. Her exposed skin was a sickly yellow-gray. At some point she'd lost a shoe. Though Grace couldn't tell with certainty, it looked like one shoulder hung lower than the other. Probably the one Lorin had gripped.

Setting her jaw, Grace forced her spent body to cooperate long enough to sit up. There was the stone closet, lodged in the earthen wall a few yards beyond Megan. Lorin stood before it. The bullet wound still glistened darkly in her stomach. Blood had soaked all but her sleeves. She turned her head, bared her teeth at Grace in a rapacious grin. Her fingers slid through the spaces on either side of the door. She gripped the slab and pulled. The door moved with exquisite slowness as though mired in mud.

A groan, low but audible, drifted from inside the structure. Though Grace had known the closet contained Silver, hearing him for the first time outside her head shocked her system. The pain in that soft sound eclipsed sensation, smothered thought.

She soon discerned the source of his anguish. A metal rod extended from the center of the door. After the first few inches cleared the wall, the rod was coated with thick silver liquid that beaded and dripped like syrup. His blood.

At last, Lorin wrenched the door free. A strangled cry erupted from the depths of the closet. Lorin staggered beneath the weight of the slab for an instant. She heaved it aside, gasped for breath and approached the unseen Silver.

Grace summoned her remaining strength and began to crawl toward Megan. If she could reach her, maybe she could find enough power to move them. Even a short distance would afford precious minutes.

She gained a foot, two. Megan stirred. Evidence that the girl still lived lent Grace renewed determination. She rose to one knee, stood and lurched the remaining distance.

A macabre screech split the air. Grace glanced back just in time to see Zane appear behind Lorin. He grabbed her by the hair and threw her across the ravine as though she weighed no more than a pebble. Lorin hit the far wall, landed upright. Zane leapt over the rocks splitting the center of the chasm, and Lorin flew at him before his feet touched the ground.

Wild hope bloomed in Grace's chest. Maybe they'd keep each other busy long enough for her and Megan to escape. She dragged the girl off the branches, slung a limp arm around her shoulder. Almost instantly, she realized the futility of attempting instant transport. She could barely stand.

Moving away from the warring angels meant passing Silver, who still hadn't emerged from the stone structure. All that blood ... maybe Lorin had killed him. He hadn't made a sound, aloud or telepathically, since she'd taken the door off.

Determined, Grace forged ahead pulling Megan alongside her. Megan regained consciousness by degrees, and her feet began to stumble across the ground in an attempt to walk. Grace slowed a bit, allowing her to find a rhythm. *Don't look*, she commanded herself as they neared the closet. *Keep moving. Don't look...*

She failed to take her own advice. She looked. And halted.

Silver stood rigid as a statue, his breathtaking eyes open and alert. He wore only pants, and what looked like gallons of impossibly mercurial blood. The stuff was everywhere. Splashes and streaks coated his chest, his arms, his hands and feet. The walls bore trace amounts and the floor was a gleaming puddle. Still, he didn't appear to be injured—despite having been impaled on a thick metal spike just moments before.

She looked closer. Two leather bands lined with glistening barbs dangled from short chains attached to the back wall. Two more trailed limp in the fluid gathered on the floor. Had he been restrained with them? Lorin must have been attempting to free him when Zane arrived ... and Grace suspected she'd put them on him in the first place. The monstrous idea brought tears to her eyes, even as she wondered how she could have sympathy for a man—or whatever he was—who regularly slaughtered Nephilim with apparent abandon.

"Grace," Megan slurred. "Don' know what's goin' on, but I bet stopping's bad."

"Yes. We should..."

*Run.*

Grace flinched and stared at Silver. His eyes met hers. Nothing else moved. Why was he just standing there? And why did he want her to escape Lorin, when he'd already killed hundreds ... or thousands?

*I do not wish to kill.*

A thunderous crash sounded somewhere in the distance. Megan stiffened at her side. "Grace? We should move..."

"Wait." *Then why do you?*

*Lorin demands it.*

Why listen?

*She is ... my mother.*

Grace reeled. *You ... you're Nephil?*

Silver didn't reply.

She forced herself to study him. His eyes—brilliant, but not glowing. His skin—golden bronze, inviting and warm, but not flawless. Unlike any other Nephil. But what else could he be?

A fresh stream of blood trickled down his chest. Grace finally noticed the strap cinched around his neck, the fluid welling steadily along the lower edge. Horror shriveled her stomach; bitter bile scalded her throat. She knew instinctively the band contained the same barbs as the ones hanging from the wall. *Why haven't you taken that off?*

*Lorin has forbidden me.*

*Screw Lorin. She hasn't forbidden me.*

Grace eased Megan to the ground. "Just a few seconds," she whispered. "I have to do this." She moved hesitantly toward Silver, reached for the collar.

*Grace! Are you insane?* Megan screamed in her head. Her features reflected her terror.

*Maybe.* Grace slid her fingers around the back of the collar, searching for a release. The movement brought her so close to Silver, she felt heat radiating from his body. He made no move to touch her, but his eyes remained locked to hers.

She found the clasp. Pulled the strap through. Silver's jaw clenched visibly, but he remained silent as the barbs ripped free of his flesh one by one.

The gashes they left healed almost as rapidly as Grace removed them.



She dropped the collar and stepped back. "Are you going to kill me now?"

"No."

His spoken voice embodied what angels should have sounded like. Deep and melodious, so beautiful it almost hurt her ears. Grace managed a tenuous smile and bent to help Megan stand. "That's good to know."

Silver emerged from the blood-soaked structure. He stopped, cocked his head as though he couldn't comprehend her words.

Another tremendous commotion sounded, this one much closer. Panic replaced the calm Grace had imposed on her shattered nerves. She glanced back. Lorin and Zane rushed through the air toward them, impossibly fast, limbs locked in a mutual death grip. The pair veered and crashed to the ground scant feet from the standing stone.

"Silver!" Lorin screeched. "Take care of him!"

With a deep frown, Silver approached the brawling duo.

*Don't listen ...* Grace implored him.

He shook his head and turned away.

Silver reached down and ripped Zane clear of Lorin with one hand. The furious angel squirmed, struggled, pummeled him with fists that gashed skin and dented bone. Silver didn't flinch. He slammed Zane into the stone box, and held him against the back wall with a knee while his hands fastened the restraints.

The angel's thrashing increased, punctuated with pained gasps as the barbs bit his flesh. Silver tightened the collar and stepped back. He stretched an arm out from his side. The discarded door rose and floated toward him. He gripped one edge, sidestepped and slammed the door in place, spike and all.

Zane shrieked. The sound carried through stone and drew out for endless seconds. At last, the scream dwindled to a bubbling moan, then silence.

"Useless bastard!" Lorin snarled from the ground. "You will beg for death every remaining moment of your existence. I'd start now, but you will finish the task I've set for you first. Get over here and heal me."

*No! Silver, please...*

Silver looked at her. His eyes shone with despair.

*I must.*

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## Chapter 30

Grace watched with dull despondency as Silver knelt beside his mother.

*We're dead.*

She kept the thought to herself. She'd been certain Silver wouldn't hurt them. She still believed it. Lorin, on the other hand ... well, Grace didn't expect an apology and a warm welcome when the woman came around.

She linked her arm through Megan's. Closed her eyes, tried to move. Nothing.

*Grace ... I'm tired.* Megan folded to the ground. Grace huddled next to her. She couldn't carry her. Couldn't even hold herself up. She held the girl, and waited.

The healing happened quickly. Lorin stood. Wrath twisted her features and blazed from her eyes. She whirled and struck Silver with a brutal backhand. "Wretched creature! Did you not see Zane? Even you should have realized he meant to destroy me, stupid as you are."

"You did not tell me to stop him."

"I was busy staying alive!" Lorin's hands clenched into fists, relaxed. "Fortunately for you, I am pleased enough with the mules to forego punishment at the moment." She pointed to Megan. "Kill it. Let the other one watch."

"No!" Grace crab-crawled in front of Megan, attempting to shield her. "Leave her alone. You wanted me, and you've got me. Let Megan go."

Lorin's lip curled in a vicious sneer. "Do you honestly think you're an exceptional prize, Nephil? You are a cockroach. You and your kind. Nasty, skulking insects, pathetic and infinitesimal mockeries of the pure Host. I will exterminate you all."

"We never asked to be what we are." Grace glared at her. If she had to die, she'd do it with dignity. "And if I'm nothing special, why did you go out of your way to hunt me down?"

"You irritate me more than most. If not for Zane, I would have finished you at first sight." Her sneer became a dark smile. "And I needed you, to teach Silver a lesson in obedience."

Silver stiffened, stared at the ground. Lorin slapped him again.

"I told you to kill it. *Now*, Silver."

*No!* A sob caught in Grace's throat. She met Silver's eyes. *You don't have to listen. You're stronger than her. Better than her. Don't let her use you.*

*I am unclean.*

"Silver! What are you waiting for?"

Silver stepped toward the girls. Stopped.

*Please ...* Trembling, Grace tried to drape herself over Megan. She knew it wouldn't hold him back. *You're not unclean. You're not the monster. She is.*

Silver glanced at Lorin.

"Kill it!" Her face twisted, a rictus of hatred.

Another step brought him within reach. He bent and lifted Grace gently from Megan. She felt him shaking violently. He meant to comply with Lorin's command.

*Fine. Then kill me too.*

Silver settled her on the ground. *I will not harm her. Or you.*

He hunkered beside Megan, bending his body to shield his actions from Lorin's view. *She is fading. I will revive her.* He placed a hand on her chest just below her neck. A faint shimmer surrounded his palm.

Megan opened her eyes. Drew a startled breath. And screamed.

Lorin's laughter transcended the shrill sound. "You see, Nephil? Silver obeys me. Wait until you hear what I tell him to do to you."

Grace's mind raced. Lorin thought he was killing Megan, but the girl was just frightened. An idea formed.

*Megan. He won't hurt you. Play dead.*

*Wha...?* Despite her troubled response, Megan immediately fell silent and limp.

Silver's brow furrowed. *I have injured her.*

*No! She's just ... sleeping.* Grace suspected Silver wouldn't understand the concept of a ruse. *She'll be all right now.*

"Get that one on its feet."

Grace met Silver's troubled gaze. *Do what she says.*

Silver stood. He circled Megan and pulled Grace upright.

*I will not harm you.*

*I know.*

"Good." Lorin offered a triumphant smirk. "Keep it up, Silver, and I may go easy on you. Now break its arm."

"No."

"What did you say?"

"I will not."

"Insolent pest!" she hissed. "You will, and you'll do it now!"

"No." Silver stepped in front of Grace. "I am ... stronger than you. B ... better. Than. You." He struggled to speak the words. "And I do not wish to kill. I will not kill again."

Lorin's eyes narrowed. She raised her arms, turned her palms upward. A series of sharp, splintering cracks echoed through the ravine. "Abomination," she whispered. "I will send you to oblivion!"

Two long, thick tree limbs with fractured ends flew through the air and settled in Lorin's hands. She gripped them together and drew back as though she were about to swing at a baseball.

Silver whirled and shoved Grace away. The branches met his back with a massive, sickening thud. He hit the ground face-first. Moving with inhuman speed, Lorin dropped one of the limbs and drove the other between his shoulder blades, through his body, into the ground. His blood spurted from the wound and splashed his skin. Within seconds, more seeped from beneath him. Lorin snagged the remaining branch and plunged it into the small of his back.

"You!" Teeth bared, Lorin straightened and advanced toward Grace. "How dare you speak to him? And put such ideas in his head? Stupid, filthy, ignorant Nephil!" She paused to drive a foot into Silver's side. "He has no thoughts of his own. He can't. Do you know what he might do if he were allowed to think for himself?"

Grace swallowed the fear rising in her throat. "He might *live*, you horrid bitch. How could you do this to your own child?"

"Child!" Bitter laughter spilled from Lorin's lips. "Silver is no child. He's a monster. But he *is* mine. My instrument to do with as I please." She glanced down at his motionless form and approached Grace again. "Once you're gone, he'll obey me again. So I'll simply destroy you myself."

Grace stumbled back and sat hard on the ground. Lorin lunged. Grace closed her eyes, grateful that at least Lorin was too furious to draw out her death. It would be quick.

A rush of air caressed her face, as though Lorin had lashed out and missed. Grace risked a glance. Lorin stood scant feet from her, wide-eyed and unmoving.

Silver loomed behind her, still impaled by the branches. He gripped her neck with one hand, his fingers pressed into her flesh like claws. A thin stream of bright red blood drizzled from beneath his thumb.

He forced Lorin to her knees and rested a palm flat between her shoulders. Her mouth opened in a silent scream. Streaks of light formed and pulsed beneath her skin, glowing and intensifying until a golden glow engulfed her body. Beneath the shimmering aura, her flesh shriveled and darkened, became brittle black leather. The glow coalesced at the base of her throat. Her head fell back and a thick stream of light flooded from her lips to ascend skyward. The remaining husk shattered into a pile of ash.

Silver met Grace's eyes for an instant, and collapsed.

\* \* \* \*

Megan let out a piercing shriek. She sprang to her feet and ran to Grace. "What the hell happened? Did he ... Is she..."

"Gone." Grace winced and struggled to view Silver. He lay on his side, his back to the charred remains of his mother. His blood flowed copiously from the massive rips

in his body. He didn't appear to be breathing. "We have to help him." She started to rise.

"Wait. Let me heal you first."

"Hurry."

Nodding, Megan pressed a hand against her. The constant pain in her shoulder, which she'd ceased to notice, flared briefly and ebbed to nothing. Her quivering muscles stilled. Fatigue fell away like shedding skin, allowing her to breathe.

"Thank you." Grace stood, skirted the pile of ash and rushed to Silver's front. She crouched near his head. "Silver?"

So still. Lips slightly parted, lashes lying like dark feathers on his cheeks. Blood pouring from him to saturate the ground.

*Please wake up.*

Grace reached for the nearest limb, the one protruding from his shattered breastbone. She wrapped both hands around the slick surface, hitched a breath. Pushed. It didn't move.

"Don't..."

A broken whisper. His eyes fluttered open. "You do not have ... the strength."

"No." Grace sobbed her relief. "No, I don't."

Silver sat slowly, teeth clenched in a grimace. He glanced down. Gripping the top branch, he pulled it forward, hand over hand. When the opposite end cleared his chest, a startled cry burst from him. He hurled the branch away.

"Holy shit." Megan hung back, pale and trembling. "There's a hole straight through him. I think I'm gonna..." She turned away and retched.

Silver repeated the process with the second limb. By the time he tossed it after the first, the upper hole had closed. Ugly wounds remained on his chest, stomach, and back, but the bleeding had stopped.

He shifted and stared at Lorin's remains. "I destroyed her. My mother." His voice cracked and wavered.

"Silver," Grace whispered. "Don't blame yourself. You had no choice."

"I could not let her..." Moisture filled his eyes. A tear streaked from one, then the other. "My eyes burn. They are bleeding."

For a long moment, Grace couldn't find her voice. *Thann kew*. His confusion began to make sense. Lorin must have kept him isolated every moment she wasn't using him. He'd never experienced emotions, didn't even know what they were. She moved closer to him. "You're not bleeding," she said gently. "You're crying." She brushed the wetness with her fingertips, to show him.

He flinched at her touch. Her heart broke. "She never touched you without hurting you, did she?"

Silver said nothing. His gaze moved to the mound of ash behind him and back to Grace.

"We'll take it slow." She stood and waited. He joined her.

Megan approached them cautiously. She went around Silver and stuck close to Grace. *Is this guy for real?*

*Seems pretty solid to me.* Grace smiled. "We probably shouldn't stick around here for long. It's nice and all, but sooner or later we're going to get hungry. And even though Megan here is a Girl Scout, she isn't a very good one."

Silver stared at her, expressionless. "I will build another crypt."

"You'll what? Crypt?" Grace looked at the stone structure, currently full of mangled Zane. "Why would you do that?"

"To stay in." He regarded the burnt pile. "I have no purpose."

"No. Silver..." Renewed sorrow flooded her. Lorin had crushed him so thoroughly, he wasn't even aware he had options. "When I said 'we,' I meant all of us. Megan, me and you. I'd like you to come and live with us ... wherever we're going to live."

"Live?"

"Yes. There's a whole world out there you haven't seen. Full of people who are nothing like your mother."

"I see." Silver scanned the moonlit ravine slowly, as though committing every rock and bush and blade of grass to memory. At last he said, "We will go and live."

Grace took his hand. He didn't flinch this time. "You won't regret it. Trust me."

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## Chapter 31

Once she climbed out of the ravine, Grace regarded the dense forest surrounding them and realized she had no idea where they were.

Megan emerged immediately behind her. Silver trailed at a distance, glancing back occasionally as though he expected to find someone following them. Grace watched him mount the steep incline she and Megan had struggled to climb, and ascend with a languid stroll. He made it look effortless.

"Doesn't anything tire him out?" Megan stared at the approaching figure. "I don't know about this, Grace. Are you sure he's not going to ... you know, flip out and kill us?"

"I'm sure."

"Why are you so convinced?"

"I don't know."

"Great. That isn't very reassuring."

"True. But it's all I've got. Sorry." Grace gave a tired smile. "Without that bitch around, he isn't going to hurt anyone. I know he won't."

Megan shook her head. "I hope you're right. I mean, he just killed two angels and ... Christ, look at him. He's..."

*Beautiful.*

"I was gonna say huge, but yeah. That, too."

Silver had nearly reached them. Grace returned her attention to the unfamiliar landscape. "Hey, Megan. Any idea which way is home?"

"None. I was hoping you knew."

Grace sighed. "Well, I guess I could try..."

"Nephil, what do you seek?"

Silver's voice jolted her. He stood at the edge of the ravine, watching her, his features blank. "Er. I'm looking for ... you know, maybe we should introduce ourselves, so you don't have to keep calling me Nephil. My name is Grace."

"Grace." He seemed to taste the word, a new delicacy.

"Yes. And this is—"

"Megan," he said.

"Right." Grace smiled. "Okay. I'm looking for home. Lor ... I'm not sure which way we came here." Mentioning Lorin right now probably wouldn't be a good idea.

Silver pointed beyond her. "This direction. What is home?"

"Home is where we live." Fresh sorrow filled her. So many little things he wasn't familiar with, had no idea existed. "Do you know how far away we are?"

"Yes."

Grace waited. He didn't elaborate.

"So ... how far is it?"

"It is there."

"Uh..."

Silver extended an arm to each of them. "I will shift you to home."

"Shift?" Grace glanced at Megan. The girl shrugged. "Okay," Grace said. She took his hand and Megan did the same.

No sooner had Megan made contact with Silver, than they stood before the camp house in the glow of the porch light.

"Whoa." Megan grinned. "He's way better than you at this, Grace."

Grace laughed. "I think he's had more practice. Come on, let's go inside."

"Wait a minute." Megan stared at the front door. "Are they even here? I mean, we have no idea what happened after we left. And that angel guy had a gun! What if he..." She glanced at Grace, paled, and ran up the steps.

"Megan, they're okay. Silver—"

The door opened just before Megan reached it. Michael stood inside, drawn and haggard, a flashlight in one hand and Zane's gun in the other. "Megan! What happened? I was going out to look for you. Is Grace with you?"

"Yes, she's right here. We're fine. Is everyone here all right?"

"We are, oddly enough." Distress clouded his face. "After you two and that crazy redhead disappeared, Zane came after me and he just stopped. Like he couldn't get to me. And then he vanished." He set the flashlight down and patted Megan's arm. "I'm going to call a couple of cabs and get us out of here before he comes back. Why don't you..." His eyes widened. He pushed past Megan and lifted the gun. "Let her go, damn you!"

"Michael, no!" Grace moved in front of Silver. "He's not ... I brought him here."

"You *what*? Have you lost your mind?" The gun shook in his hand. "Jesus. He's controlling you. Grace, please, come here. Come up here with us."

"He's not controlling me."

"Megan, get inside." Michael approached the steps slowly, his gaze and his gun locked on Silver. "Let her go. I'll kill you, I swear to God I will. I know what you are." *Grace, get away from him.*

*No! Michael, please ... listen to me. He's not dangerous. It was his—*

Michael jumped to the ground and shoved Grace aside. She sprawled in the grass with a startled grunt. He pressed the gun into Silver's throat and fired.

Silver stumbled back. He remained on his feet, staring wordlessly at Michael. His gleaming blood flowed from the wound. Splashes and droplets stained Michael's arm and face.

"What the hell?" Michael shook his head and pulled the trigger again. A mercurial spray erupted from Silver's shoulder.

"Stop it!"

A shriek from the porch drowned Grace's cry. Megan ran at Michael and jumped on his back. She scabbled for the gun, pushed down on Michael's arm.

Grace struggled to her feet. Tears blurred her vision. She moved in front of Silver, her back to Michael. "Are you okay?" she whispered. "Can you heal?"

Silver nodded.

"I'm so sorry. He shouldn't have done this." Grace whirled to face Michael, who still fought to dislodge Megan and raise the gun. "Damn it, Michael, he saved your life!"

"Yeah, right!" Gasping, Michael threw Megan off and brought his arm up again. "He's a monster, Grace. Whatever he said, he has to be lying. Get out of the way."

"He saved your life," Grace repeated softly. "He stopped Zane from killing you. Because I asked him to."

"Bullshit."

"He saved *my* life. And Megan's. Michael ... Zane is dead. Silver killed him."

"Silver?" Michael blinked and glanced at the streaks on his arm. "But Zane is an angel."

"Yes. And Silver is Nephilim. He's one of us, Michael." Grace stepped forward and gently pushed his extended arm down. He didn't resist. She lifted his free hand, touched his fingers to her temple. "Look."

Michael froze. Memories rushed through her and into him: Silver chained inside the box. Grace releasing him. Silver trapping and skewering Zane, as though the angel had no more power than an angry kitten. Lorin striking him. Lorin pinning Silver to the ground to go after Grace. Silver destroying her. The rush of painful recollection threatened to knock her flat.

At last, Michael pulled free. He regarded Grace for a long moment. "Okay," he said in hollow tones. "I was wrong. I'm sorry."

"Then he can stay?"

"What, here? With us?" Michael shook his head. "No. No way." *He can destroy angels. If he decides he wants us gone, we can't stop him. Nothing can. He's too powerful.*

"Michael, please. He doesn't have anywhere else to go." *He won't hurt anyone. I know he won't.*

*How do you know?*

*Ask him.*

Michael frowned at Silver. "Hey. Stalker."

"His name is Silver," Grace said.

"Fine. What are you going to do if you stay here? Will you kill us, like you did the other Nephilim?"

A shudder passed through Silver. "I do not wish to kill. I will not kill again."

When Michael didn't reply, Grace Reached to him. *He could have killed you a hundred times now if he wanted to. Don't you think he would have when you shot him?*

"Grace, I'm sorry. I just don't think..."

*The tree house.* "He can stay in the tree house. No one uses it anyway, right?"

"Yes, and there's electricity up there," Megan chimed in. "If it gets cold, we can bring heaters in. Michael, I think Grace is right. He's not going to hurt us."

Michael's eyes narrowed. "If there's any sign of trouble, he's leaving. Anything at all. Understand?"

"Yes." *Thank you.*

"Don't thank me yet. I may change my mind in the morning." Michael sighed and stuffed the gun in his pocket. "You two are something else, you know that?"

Grace smiled. "We know."

\* \* \* \*

Silver stood in the center of the tree house, displaying no reaction to the place. His sheer size made the ample space and its full-sized furnishings look like a child's bedroom.

Grace worried he wouldn't fit on the bed.

His wounds had healed and Grace had washed the blood from him, but he remained half-dressed. No one had a shirt or shoes big enough for him. The evenings stayed warm for now, but soon he'd need more substantial clothing. Probably. Maybe. Did he even get cold?

He hadn't spoken a word since Michael addressed him directly. Grace suspected it would take some time for him to start acting instead of reacting. She moved beside him and gestured vaguely. "What do you think? Do you like it?"

He looked at her, uncomprehending.

*Damn.* Something Lorin had said resurfaced in Grace's mind: *He has no thoughts of his own.* The bitch had been proud she hadn't allowed her son to think for himself. "Okay," she said after a moment. "We'll take this one step at a time. First, I want to make sure you're warm enough. Wait here."

Silver nodded. Grace entered the screen porch, grabbed a blanket from one of the bunk beds and returned to drape it around his shoulders. "That should help. I'll get you some real clothes soon."

Silver fingered an edge of the blanket. His gaze moved to the porch doorway and back to Grace. He said nothing.

Grace sighed. "Maybe you should just get some rest for now. Things might look better in the morning. There are beds out here." She started toward the porch and stopped when she realized Silver wasn't following her. She turned to face him.

"Lorin is gone." His voice emerged hesitant, as though he didn't dare believe his words.

"Yes." Grace refrained from elaborating, certain that expressing her joy at Lorin's demise wouldn't benefit Silver at the moment.

"Will you command me now?"

"Oh, no. Silver..." Her throat clenched. For an instant she couldn't speak. "No. I'm not going to tell you what to do. I won't order you around like a dog. She shouldn't have either. She was wrong."

"I have no purpose. Who will command me?"

"You will."

"I do not understand."

Grace closed the distance between them. "You can choose your own purpose. You're free, Silver. I'll help you learn about the world, about people and feelings and all the wonderful things Lorin kept from you. If you let me, I'll guide you—but I won't command you. You'll make decisions. You'll think for yourself." She paused, tried to gauge his reaction. "Do you understand, even a little?"

"I will ... command myself. Choose my purpose."

"Yes." A tentative smile formed on her lips. "For now, you can start with a simple decision. Would you like to get some rest? It's been a long night."

Silver scanned the room slowly. He moved toward the table beneath the window and touched one of the moon chairs. "These are ... seats?"

"They're supposed to be."

He settled cautiously into one. "I have decided to think."

"Good. That's good." Grace stifled a yawn. "And I've decided to sleep. I'll be back in the morning to see how you're doing." *Will you Reach for me if you need me?*

Yes. With that, he seemed to shut down and resume his blank state.

Tears scalded her eyes. She blinked them back and started for the ladder. *One step at a time*. At least he'd done something without being told. For him, any progress at all was a miracle. She did hope he wouldn't remain a zombie for the rest of his life, but with the living hell Lorin had put him through, it wouldn't surprise her.

She descended a few rungs, stopped. "Goodnight, Silver."

He met her gaze and offered no response.

Grace continued to the ground and trudged toward the camp house. Exhaustion and despair slowed her steps. Maybe Michael was right. Maybe she couldn't do anything for him, and he didn't belong here. She still didn't know why she believed he could become anything more than a tool—a discarded tool, now that Lorin was gone. Should she trust her feelings?

Halfway across the yard, a tenuous voice sounded in her head.

*Good night ... Grace.*

Relief and hope brought tears she couldn't hold back. Her feet found a lighter rhythm and she covered the remaining ground with ease.

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## Chapter 32

Grace closed the door of the room she temporarily shared with Megan. After only two weeks, the four-bedroom camp house already seemed cramped. Bailey and Dawn had become fast friends after the fire and bunked together in the next room down. David had proudly accepted the invitation to stay with Ace and Kaden, and Evan roomed with Michael.

Silver apparently didn't need sleep. He also didn't seem to require food or water. For the first few days, she'd brought him three meals. Each time, she found him still seated in the chair, the food untouched. He acknowledged her presence but made no attempt to communicate. She'd cut back to two, and then one, to avoid wasting food he apparently wasn't going to eat.

If he didn't snap out of it soon, she would have to do something. She just didn't know what.

Grace opened her laptop and pushed the power button. She still had to get online through her ability, but the new house being built further back on the property would have cable access complete with Internet. They anticipated completing construction in mid-fall. Kendra had not only deeded the property to Michael, she'd also transferred a substantial amount of money to an account in his name. Paying for a rush job on a thirty-room mansion barely made a dent in the supply. The rest of the Carrington fortune would eventually fall to Grace when the court dust settled. A Federal judge had issued a media gag on the case until the investigations into the deaths here were completed.

Thoughts of her mother summoned guilt and confusion. She'd wanted to understand her, to know why she'd acted the way she had. Now she would never have the chance. She glanced at the brown paper bag resting on the surface of the desk, and reminded herself to bring it to Silver after she finished here.

Her laptop finished pulling itself together. Grace sat down and accessed her e-mail. A week ago, she'd sent Comp the numbers from four of her remaining cashier's checks. Twenty grand altogether. No amount of money would compensate for what he'd been through on her account, but at least it was a start. As of yesterday though, there had been no response.

Today she had three new messages. Two were junk. One was Comp. She clicked it open and smiled as she read the note.

*Kitten: I said double. That's two times, not four. You need to work on your math skills. I won't turn it down though. Obviously, I'll need new equipment. This helps. You're a doll.*

*Glad to hear you redheaded pal is taking a permanent vacation, too. I had plans for her. One of these days you and I will have to get together and chat. I still haven't told you all the weird shit I found. I'd say you wouldn't believe it, but something tells me you would.*

*Keep in touch. Broken bones come and go, but an ID junkie is forever. Especially one as dangerously fascinating as you. CR*

Grace signed out shaking her head. Comp remained one of life's greatest mysteries. It was impossible to determine what made him tick. She suspected he didn't know himself, but at least he enjoyed trying to find out.

Her gaze fell on the top drawer of the desk. She'd left it open a crack—it had a lock, but the key was long gone and it had taken her hours to get it open the first time. This had been Kendra's room. Her mother had left a few things behind, including a journal.

Grace pulled the drawer out and extracted a slim, leather-bound volume. Like most things in Kendra's life, her interest in journaling had been sporadic. Grace knew what a flake her mother had been. If the woman had just exercised a bit of empathy, a little concern for things outside the realm of appearances, a lot of struggle and heartache might have been prevented. In retrospect, Grace suspected Kendra had been terrified to lose the spotlight. She almost felt sorry for her.

Then again, without those few disastrous years, she never would have met Megan or Michael and the others. Or Silver.

The journal entries in the front of the book dated back to before Grace was born, when Kendra had summered here with her parents. Grace intended to read them all through some time soon. For now, though, the ones that interested her most were the last half-dozen or so. They were more recent. And they concerned her father.

According to her journal, Kendra's primary reason for donating the land and permanently moving to the Adirondacks had little to do with Michael. She'd cared for him, but the heart she'd poured onto these pages still belonged to Beckett. She had lingered here where they'd originally met, and built a house that was visible through miles of surrounding forest in the hopes he would return. She'd wanted to tell him that her father was gone, no longer a threat. Finally, she'd longed to know whether he still returned her affections. Her love.

From the moment she'd read the journal, Grace became determined to pick up where her mother left off. She would remain here and watch for his return. Soon, she would expand the effort, start searching the surrounding woods for signs of a hermit angel who shared her blood, and her heart.

First, though, she would learn to defend herself against bears.

Grace closed the book and replaced it. Shrugging, she stood and stretched and headed outside with another meal that would go uneaten. Sandwiches, an apple, and a bottle of water. No doubt she'd end up replacing the last untouched bag with this one.

Muffled rock music reached her ears from the porch. She glanced toward the former greenhouse, saw vague silhouettes of people and instruments inside. They were practicing again. Megan's compelling voice rose above the strains of guitar and bass, the rhythmic riff of drums. Though Michael had lied about quite a few things, including the existence of a band, he actually did play a mean guitar. He should; he'd been at it for thirty years.

Now the band had officially formed. Evan and Kaden rounded them out, and Grace had to admit they sounded good—at least, from a distance. She hadn't yet braved standing inside the greenhouse while they played. She'd decided to hold off on a face-to-face performance until Megan had finished "her" song, which the girl had said would be any day now.

The late afternoon sun slanted east, casting dappled and shifting shadows on the exposed surfaces of the tree house. If she didn't know it was there, she wouldn't have been able to find it. The music from the greenhouse carried clearly today. Just before she reached the rope ladder, the current song ended and they switched to a slow and haunting ballad.

Grace paused. *Silver, I'm coming up.* She always let him know, to avoid startling him. He never replied. This time proved no different.

She ascended the ladder and pulled herself into the room. Yesterday's bag had remained in place. Silver had not.

"Silver?" She crossed to the table, scanning the room. Not that he could stay hidden anywhere in here. She moved the old lunch and discovered it hadn't been touched.

A soft sound, an intake of breath, drifted from the tree house porch. Grace dropped everything and rushed out. Silver stood beside the bunk beds, gazing through the screen toward the camp house. His eyes caught the sunlight and amplified the glow until they appeared burning coals. An expression of wonder had replaced his vacant stare.

Grace shivered. He had been beautiful. He'd become ethereal. *Alive.*

Silver raised an arm and rested his fingertips on the screen. "Grace. Do you hear? The sound. The..." She felt a gentle stirring in her head, as though he were searching her memories for the right word. "Music."

"Yes." She whispered it, afraid to break the spell.

He closed his eyes. Grace watched him bathe in the sound, draw it into himself like oxygen. When the song ended, he remained motionless for a full minute. At last he regarded her with glittering eyes and said, "Will the music return?"

A lump formed in her throat. "I'll see what I can do," she said, and Reached to Megan.

*Can you guys play that song again?*

*Grace? Uh ... I guess. But why?*

You have a captive audience.

*Who?*

Grace smiled. *Silver.*

*Holy shit! Hang on...*

Several seconds passed. The poignant melody drifted on the air again.

Silver went rigid. His eyes closed, and Grace remained silent for the duration of the song. The last notes dissipated.

*How was that?* Megan asked.

*Perfect. Thank you.*

Silver straightened and lowered his arm. "You brought it back."

"I only asked Megan and the others to play again," she said gently. "They were making the music."

He faced her fully. "Thann ... kew."

"Oh! I—" Tears flooded her eyes and slipped down her cheeks. "You're welcome."

"You are crying." He lifted a hand, stopped just short of touching her.

"Yes, but I ... It's because I'm happy. For you."

Silver stared at her. "I feel you," he whispered. "Inside. As I felt Lorin. But ... she is dark. And you are light."

It took everything she had not to dissolve into sobbing. "Silver. I feel you, too." She swiped at her streaming eyes and glanced back inside the tree house. "You know, you can hear music whenever you want."

"How?"

"I'll show you." She stepped in from the porch and headed for the stereo on the shelves. Silver followed. "This is a stereo, and these are CDs," she explained, gesturing to each in turn. "Together, they make music. First you have to turn the stereo on, like this." Her finger hovered over the power button. She glanced back to make sure he was watching, then pressed it gently. The display lit and flashed *ready*.

"Now, we'll put a CD in. Let's see what we have." Grace scanned the titles in the rack beside the stereo and spotted a compilation of rock ballads. She eased it out, opened the case and held up the CD by the edges. "This side goes up. The shiny side goes down." She turned it over to show him. "Don't touch this side or the stereo won't be able to play the music."

Silver's brow furrowed. "Does Megan not make the music?"

"Not this music." Grace smiled. "This is a recording. The sound is stored here and the stereo plays it back." She opened the CD tray. "You put the CD in here. One at a time. You can play any of them—just take one out, and put another in." She placed the disc, closed the tray and pointed at the play button. "Then push this button. Go on, you try it. Don't push hard ... you only need to touch it."

She stood back. He raised a hand, hesitated, and touched the play button. The player clicked and whirred. The music began.

Silver caught his breath. "I have made music."

"Yes, you have."

Grace showed him the volume control, and explained how to skip and repeat songs and stop the CD. Silver learned quickly. He remembered everything the first time. After she'd gone over all the functions, he ran his fingers over the spines of the CD collection and regarded her with wide eyes. "This music. I can play it any time?"

"Of course you can. Whenever you want."

"Grace." He closed his eyes, opened them. "Thank you."

"You're more than welcome." Warmth expanded inside her, a bubble threatening to burst. This was more than a step. Nothing short of a miracle. She tempered her emotion, aware he would need time to adjust. "I can bring you more music."

"There is more?"

Grace laughed. "A lot more. I'll get Megan to help me pick some, and I'll come back tonight with new CDs. For now, you can listen to these."

"Yes. This, I will ... like."

Grace left him with his music and descended the ladder. When she reached the ground, he turned the volume up to what she suspected was the stereo's highest setting. The music swelled above, clear and soaring and free. Like Silver.

Like her.

A gentle wind rippled the grass and caressed her face. Grace smiled. She turned and walked back to the house. To live.

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### Acknowledgements

They say it takes a village to raise a child. What they don't say is that, though writers are by nature odd and solitary creatures, it also takes a village to raise a book. Therefore, in no particular order, I would like to thank my village:

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S. W. Vaughn wrote *Hunted* over a long and brutally cold upstate New York winter—the second winter in a row with no heat in the house. Sometimes she had a little electric heater, but sometimes she just bundled up in a lot of layers (including fingerless gloves) and typed away in the cold back room she uses for an office. You may have noticed that this story takes place in the summer, and there is frequent mention of heat and warmth. This is evidence of Vaughn's wishful thinking at work ... that, and the indoor swimming pool, which would otherwise have no rightful place at an isolated house in the Adirondacks. Fortunately for Vaughn, her characters have more money than she does.

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