



EYE OF THE STORM

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Chapter One

Las Vegas, Nevada
October, 14th 2002

She wasn't supposed to use her abilities outside the house. It was a hardened rule, enforced by the strictest of punishments--her father's belt to her backside. But as the boy raised his fist to strike for the third time, nine-year-old Katlin Campbell forgot everything. The world narrowed as the anger filled her mind and washed away all reason.

Her thirteen-year-old brother, Colin, lay on the ground, blood pouring from his nose. The first assault from the schoolyard bully had been unexpected and brutal. The second, calculated.

Katlin stepped forward, unconsciously balancing herself as she'd been taught by her instructors. Next, a few deep breaths to align her energy and concentrate her efforts. Katlin slowly raised her arms and focused on the sky. It was never easy for her to draw in energy, especially on a cloudless day. Luckily a storm was brewing overhead and the gray clouds gathering were full of electrical charge. A charge she could use.

It was true she wasn't the strongest of Talents, and if she'd been thinking clearly, she might have run for help rather than go one on one against the bully. The fact that he was stronger, both mentally and physically, never entered her mind as she closed her eyes and lowered her consciousness. Someone was hurting Colin, and she had to stop the assault.

Now as she focused her mind, she could clearly make out the lines of energy surrounding the clouds. They wrapped gently around each gray fluff of air like a delicate spider web. It was a web of energy that entwined the clouds inside and out, connecting each one to the other. Small strands of blue light hung down, suspended on the wind as they fell slowly to the earth. These strands, the ones closest to the ground, were the ones Katlin concentrated on. She raised her arms and called to them, willing them toward her body. Nothing happened.

She could hear Colin's cry of pain as a fist connected with his body. Colin would not defend himself. Not mentally. He would never break one of their father's rules. It was not in his nature.

She ignored the panic building in her stomach and took a deep breath. Settle down. Relax and concentrate. Stop trying to force it. She had heard the words so many times from her father, from Colin, from her instructors, she automatically repeated them to herself as she took another breath and gathered her thoughts, throwing them upwards.

Ever so slowly, the strands changed direction. She watched as they drifted down from the clouds, stretched and twisted toward her in a funnel of air, spinning as they picked up speed, until they resembled a small tornado. Suddenly, she was in the middle of the storm. Blue strings of light swirled around her head, encompassing her body as she siphoned the energy from the clouds.

She gathered the power around her and then threw it with all her might in the direction of the bully. In theory, a wall of blue should have washed toward him, overtaking him like a tidal wave. In reality, the energy backlashed and sent her flying. She slammed into the ground a few feet from where she had been standing.

The sky overhead opened up, and rain pelted her body as she lay in the dirt. She pushed herself upright and wiped the hair from her eyes with mud-streaked fingers.

Colin was now on his feet, and she watched as his right hand snapped out, his fist slamming squarely into the bully's face, sending the boy to his knees. Colin ignored the boy and walked over to Katlin, offering her his hand. She took it, and he pulled her to her feet.

"Are you crazy? That was a stupid thing to do. And you didn't even do it right."

She hung her head low. He reached down and lifted her chin and gave her a big smile. "Stupid, but brave. Thanks."

She returned the smile.

Colin started laughing. "Good thing dad wasn't here. You'd be grounded for life."

It was their father's turn to pick them up from school. Katlin looked at her watch and wondered where he was. Dad was a man who prided himself on always being on time, and he was all ready twenty minutes late.

* * * *

Only one windshield wiper worked. The other one moved back and forth, but did little to interrupt the stream of raindrops sliding down the windshield. A loud clap of thunder rumbled nearby, and lightning streaked across dark clouds. Emerson Campbell watched the storm from inside the car. Normally he loved desert storms, but today he was having a hard time finding pleasure in anything. His life had never appeared so bleak, his future never so uncertain.

Emerson had been playing a dangerous game, a role that was about to get him killed if he didn't keep his wits. He grabbed the manila envelope, clutching it tightly to his chest. Trembling fingers reached and touched a lock of white hair. The last vision had aged him, had actually left a physical white streak running through his sandy-red hair.

In the past, he'd always had some type of warning. His left hand would begin to tingle and pulsate, the sensation snaking up his arm and settling across his chest as the vision overcame him. But these recent ones had taken him completely by surprise. Each vision had increased in intensity, each episode lasting longer than the last. The images flooding his senses this time had been sent straight from hell. The horror movies flickering across his eyelids were not make-believe. For what Emerson saw was the future. A future he was determined at all cost to change.

He suddenly realized the bastards were forty-five minutes late. Not a good sign. Tapping his fingers nervously against the steering wheel, he realized he had little choice. However long they took, he would wait.

Whatever happens, he reminded himself, play it smart. Don't lose your temper. He couldn't afford to make a mistake. There was more at stake now than just his life.

And suddenly, they appeared. He watched a black SUV snake its way up the dirt road. He got out of his car and stood in the mud, drops of rain trickling down his neck.

He zipped his jacket and pulled up his collar. He had to stay in control. They would smell fear on him like rabid dogs. Another brilliant streak of white electricity flashed across the sky. An omen.

The SUV rolled to a stop next to him. A tinted window slid down, and a white-haired man peered out. "I love the smell of sagebrush when it rains."

It was the old man. No errand boys. The Boss himself had come in person, a man who prized his anonymity. It was a bad sign.

Emerson's eyes settled on the Boss. *Play it smart*. The words echoed through his head. Cupping his hands, Emerson shouted over a clap of thunder. "I don't want my kids involved!"

The white-haired man pulled out a silver cigarette case. "You know I can't make that kind of promise."

"You promised me my family would never be a part of this!"

"When I made it, I didn't realize how strong your Talents were. If the kids have inherited your power, they'll be brought into the Organization."

"I won't allow it!" Emerson shouted again, advancing toward the car. He reached out, intent on grabbing the other man around the neck. Emerson was no longer playing it smart. He was pushed beyond reason, beyond sanity. His fingers got as far as the edge of the window when the driver's door opened.

A gunshot echoed against the thunder. Emerson looked over at the driver. His arm was raised, a small black gun pointed toward the sky. The driver gave Emerson a big smile and slowly lowered the gun, resting it on the roof of the car.

"Do you want my help? Then you don't have a choice. When the kids come of age, you take them to get tested." The white-haired man opened the case and carefully chose a cigarette. "Don't look so grim. You should be happy. Look, I'll make you a deal. If the boy has your Talents, he comes straight into the business. If the girl does, I'll allow her a choice. It's her decision whether or not she wants to get involved with us." The hand holding the lighter trembled slightly as he lit the tip of the cigarette.

"I've your word my daughter will have the choice?" Even as he asked the question he knew the answer. Emerson had been a fool to come. He couldn't rely on their promises.

The man watched Emerson and puffed his cigarette. "You have my word. How old is the boy now?"

"Thirteen."

"So he'll be tested next year?"

"Yes." There was nothing more to say. Emerson had failed. He walked back to his car. In his youth, Emerson Campbell had been a stupid, arrogant fool, and now his kids would pay for those mistakes. Settling into the car, Emerson rested his head against the steering wheel. He had to be smart, had to come up with a plan. Whatever the cost, he had to keep his children safe.

Chapter Two

Las Vegas, Nevada
Eleven years later

It'd been a long day, and looked to be an even longer night. Ryker Duncan stood in his hotel room on the thirty-fourth floor, staring out the window. His current assignment, C.W. Halster, was not the cooperative type. The man whined at every safety precaution Ryker implemented, and every time he turned his back, Halster was breaking one of his Cardinal Safety Rules.

Ryker rested his forehead against the cool glass of the window. He had a strong desire to bang his head repeatedly against the glass. How hard was it to remember three rules?

He'd repeated them at least a dozen times, but the man seemed incapable of remembering, let alone following them.

Rule number one: Don't use the phone to call family, friends, or co-workers. This rule was just common sense. It didn't take a genius to know that with today's technology, it was a cinch to tap someone's phone. Twice today, Ryker had caught Halster reaching for the receiver.

Rule number two: Keep all drapes drawn and doors locked. Apparently Halster was not a fan of adventure movies. In movies, snipers took out people standing at windows all the time. In reality, it didn't happen often, but it was an easy enough rule to implement, so why not follow it? Ryker was getting tired of closing Halster's drapes. The man had a thing about reading by natural light.

Ryker himself was currently standing in front of a window with the drapes open, but it was nighttime, and Ryker had extinguished all interior lights. He hadn't done it consciously. After so many years working in this profession, most of the things he did to ensure his own safety had become habit.

Rule number three: Be ready to move at a moment's notice. Ryker kept his gear packed, and his gun close.

Halster, on the other hand, scattered his belongings across whatever room he currently occupied. Every time they moved locations, it took Ryker a half hour to gather up the man's stuff. Ryker was starting to feel less like a bodyguard and more like a nagging mother.

This time he didn't curb the desire to bang his head. He gently allowed his forehead to thump the glass a few times while he berated himself with names like *idiot* and *moron*. He stared at his reflection. He needed a haircut--his blond hair reached below his eyes, blue eyes bloodshot with lack of sleep. He should've followed his instincts and turned down the job. He'd known he would regret saying yes before his shift was over. But this was not a normal assignment, he reminded himself. If there was any chance Halster had information, Ryker had no choice but to baby-sit. This was the best shot he'd had in years to find out what the bastards were up to. But after a few days

in Halster's company, Ryker was beginning to doubt his sources. The more Ryker got acquainted with his client, the less likely it seemed that Halster was the type of man to be trusted with important information, let alone given the task of running a high-level operation for Vector.

Vector's mandate, in theory, was fantastic--freedom for all Talents from government control. What had started out twenty years ago as a rebellious group intent on making the government pay for its responsibility to the victims of its failed experiment had somehow morphed into a criminal group resembling the Italian mob. Mobsters. That's what Vector had turned into, no matter how noble their beginnings. Many of the key leadership roles were now filled by men with openly public backgrounds in gambling and prostitution. But where did Halster come in? Halster didn't fit the profile of underworld mobster.

After two years of investigating, Ryker was not any closer to those he sought. The elusive leadership of Vector did everything through middlemen, and every time he got close to finding the decision makers, the trail ended. The men who killed his wife were long dead, but whoever gave the order was hidden behind rows of disposable lackeys. Ryker rage was, again and again, denied a target.

He was beginning to give up hope when Halster fell into his lap. It was the break he had been praying for, but so far he had found not one shred of useful information. After several attempts to look at the papers Halster was constantly fussing over, what information Ryker had seen made little sense--pages full chemical formulas. Did the weasel really know anything useful? For months the streets were abuzz with rumors the man had inadvertently discovered something big. Something he was willing to use to buy his way back into a legitimate life. If it was true, the information could be just what Ryker had been looking for.

Legitimate life. The words made Ryker bang his forehead against the glass, harder this time. He'd once had a legitimate life. A life, a job he loved, and a wife he adored. Now he had little life outside of his work. Over the years, he'd gained a reputation for going after the high paying jobs, no matter how dangerous.

Ryker checked his watch. Another four days, three hours, fifteen minutes and thirty seconds left of Halster guard duty. Normally Ryker took an active interest in the arrangements that were made to ensure his clients' safety, even after he was off the clock, but this time he planned to walk away--make that run away--as soon as he could. Halster annoyed him so much that one afternoon he actually debated whether or not to shoot the man as a public service. The thought of taking out the twit brought a smile to Ryker's lips. Could time in jail be any worse than guarding him? How was it possible that one human being could be so annoying? Whenever Ryker appeared, Halster would start talking about his stamp collection or the invention of the Internet. The man barely stopped long enough to take a breath as he rambled on, even though Ryker's body language made it blatantly clear he was not listening, nor was he interested in participating in any conversation. Halster, the lecturing fool. The man was possessed with a dubious gift, an ability to convert fascinating topics into a monotonous spiel of words. After a week and a half of being cooped up with the man, Ryker was almost ready to shoot himself.

He reached over and poured himself a shot of tequila. Normally he didn't drink

while on duty, but at this point he told himself it was medicinal. Ryker watched the golden liquid swirl around in his glass. Tequila, a mouthful of serenity, his only defense in the daily struggle to keep from throwing his current assignment out the hotel window. He poured himself another shot and was about to drink it, when he felt the Black Void.

Vector had found him. But that was impossible, Ryker changed hotels every two days, and he was positive he had covered his trail. They must have been sweeping the general area and had gotten lucky. They were capable of mobilizing a team within minutes, which meant he had to get off his butt and get moving. No way was Ryker going to hand over Halster to those bastards. As much as he hated the guy, it was his job to protect the client at all cost.

Ryker dropped the glass and quickly crossed the room, grabbing his jacket, duffel bag and gun off the bed before kicking open the door leading into the adjoining room. "Come on, Halster, time to leave."

C.W. Halster was a small weasel of a man. Five feet, two inches tall, he had white streaks at his temples. He wore thick, dark-rimmed glasses that perched precariously on his hawk-like nose. Ryker watched Halster dart around the room in a panic, gathering up armfuls of books and papers, stuffing them into his briefcase.

"Halster, we've got to get out of here now! I thought I told you to be ready to go at any moment!"

"I must keep everything in order!" Halster whined as he knelt down and pulled a brown suitcase from under the bed. He flicked open the locks and carefully placed an armful of books inside.

"Look, your belongings aren't going to matter if they capture us. Move your ass!" Ryker picked up the phone next to the bed and dialed the front desk. "Let me talk to your supervisor. I need to check out fast, like we talked about. Yeah, there's still a hundred dollars in it for you. Take care of everything, and get the valet to bring my car around the back entrance. Remember, you never saw me, got it?" He slammed down the phone and put on his jacket. "Halster, I'm out of here, are you coming with me?" He slid the gun into his side holster and arranged his jacket so neither the gun nor holster were visible. Ryker took one last look around the room, picked up his bag and headed out the door.

"Don't leave me! I'm coming!" Halster whined as he stuffed the last of the papers into his briefcase.

* * * *

The meeting was going better than she expected. Katlin Campbell ran her thumb across the edge of the black marble conference table. She wished she could stretch and release some of the tension in her shoulders. She'd been under an enormous amount of stress. Her father's death a year ago had sent her life into a tailspin.

One moment, she was part of a tight-knit family. The next, she was burying her beloved father--a man who had been her strength, her support and counsel. Since his death, her mother had gone to pieces, and her brother had withdrawn completely into his work. Suddenly, Katlin found herself propelled into the role of family caretaker. She'd been so busy trying to take care of everyone else, she never gave herself a chance to truly grieve her father's death. And worse, her life had become derailed--goals and dreams all forgotten as she tried to take care of her mother, a woman who normally was extremely

competent, but now suddenly spent most of her days in bed.

The realization that she wasn't helping herself or her mother by taking care of everything was a slow one. The decision to get a job had been the toughest thing she had ever done. Her mother had accused her of abandoning her when she needed her the most, but what choice did Katlin have? The bills had started to pile up, and without her father's income, any life savings her parents had put aside quickly dried up.

It didn't take long for Katlin to realize that as a twenty-year-old, recent graduate of the Screening School with no practical experience, she was not the ideal hire. After two dozen rejections, she had no choice but to call in a favor. It was pure desperation that made her contact her father's business associate, Jonathan McDonald. Not only had Jonathan graciously agreed to meet with her, he had hired her on the spot. She hated using her dad's name to get a job, but at the time she told herself the bills had to be paid.

That was three months ago. Now here she sat, a certified Screener in her second business meeting. She looked over at McDonald--a powerful man both mentally and physically. Tall, dark and handsome, with a splash of gray at his temples, at forty-five the gray made McDonald look older, distinguished and sexy as hell.

A curl fell against her cheek. Katlin reached up and carefully tucked it back into place. She had pulled her long hair into a tight braid this morning, in an attempt to look older and more professional, but somehow curls escaped. Her hair was impossible to manage, a mass of auburn waves that grew down past her shoulders.

Katlin gazed across the room where a dozen colleagues, dressed in suits, skirts and ties, were seated around the conference table.

Everyone's expression was intent. The whole point of this meeting in Las Vegas was to try and buy a competing company. Katlin thought back to the stack of reports she had read in preparation. The software company was started by a small group of unemployed programmers. Four idealistic young men, heads crammed full of ideas and dreams, had taken their dwindling bank accounts and started their own company, Intrex. The types of business the government would allow Talents to run were strictly regulated, but their new start-up seemed to follow all of the rules. Government minders still monitored its activities, but Talents were used to the constant watchers.

Intrex stock doubled within the first month, and by the second year, it had gone public, trading on the exchange for forty dollars a share. They had become so profitable, McDonald was now determined to buy them out and add them to a long list of recent acquisitions.

The coming together of two companies run by Talents was enough to insure a representative from the government was there to give his blessing. The CIA had no authority to operate within the United States, so agents officially worked for NSA, ATF or some other domestic agency. But the research program at the Institute that had created the Talents, was run by the CIA. Technically all Talents were classified as "research subjects" owned by the CIA. This classification was a hard pill to swallow for men and women who just wanted to live their lives without Big Brother watching every moment for the slightest misstep.

The agent sent today was like most government agents, he was a powerful Talent himself. His role today as an observer meant that he just sat behind perfect, uniform mental walls. It was unsettling, no hint of emotion leaked out from behind those walls.

Katlin had heard that the indoctrination agents went through seemed to crush any vestiges of personality. From what she had seen, all the government boys seemed to project the same blank stare. It should have made him blend into the background, but Katlin found it was impossible to completely forget he was in the room. Even though she could not sense any part of him focusing on her, she still had the feeling he was somehow messing with her. The hairs on the back of her neck rose, and her arms were covered with goose bumps ever since he had entered the room. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing he rattled her. Besides, it was time for Katlin to stop daydreaming and get back to work.

Concentration and balance, she repeated a few times as her Screening teachers had taught her. She took a couple of deep breaths and lowered her mind into her surroundings. She tried to ignore the nervous butterflies in her stomach as she concentrated on McDonald. He was seated at the end of the conference table. A purple light surrounded his body. As McDonald started to argue with the man next to him, the purple light expanded. McDonald had a tendency to dominate his space.

The other Screener in the room grimaced as he tried to shield his lawyer from McDonald. The Screener looked over at Katlin, and she heard his plea, not in words, but in a wave of emotion. Katlin flashed him a sympathetic smile. She could understand the pained expression on the Screener's face. She had a hard time redirecting McDonald's energy. Twice during the meeting, without any warning, he had expanded his energy, flooding the entire room.

She tried to prepare herself for the assault on her senses. Having a wave of energy crash over you was never a pleasant sensation. It reminded Katlin of her childhood, bodysurfing in the ocean. When the cry of "Outsider" rang out, your best defense was to turn and run toward the wave. It took a lot of guts to run toward a ten-foot breaker. But if you were fast enough, and lucky, you could dive in low before the swell crested and broke on top of you. Screening was really not that different.

As she took a deep breath, everything in the room slowly faded until she was only conscious of herself and McDonald. She watched as streaks of red energy shot from his head and exploded like firecrackers onto the ceiling. He was angry, and even though he held tight control over his emotions, he couldn't seem to keep a small amount of his displeasure from showing.

She took her time forming her request. Normally it didn't matter what she actually said. Most Talents were only capable of deciphering the feelings behind a mental request.

Gathering her energy, she mentally dove across the room and straight into McDonald's defensive wall, a thick purple that only parted as she forced herself forward. This was the part she truly hated. Trying to push through a wall was like walking across a room covered in taffy. It took all of her control to push and part the energy until she found herself mentally standing behind his right shoulder. Her mind whispered, "Excuse me, sir, you seem to be broadcasting a little too loud."

The cloud of purple that had been expanding from McDonald collapsed so quickly Katlin jumped in her chair. He suddenly wrapped his energy tightly around himself until she could barely make out a thin trace of purple outlining his body. She sat stunned, completely in awe of his pinpoint power and control.

It took her a moment to realize that she had done it again, she had lost track of what was going on in the room. It was the second time in the past hour her mind had wandered. If she kept this up, she would surely be out of a job.

It was her sole responsibility to keep everyone in the meeting from unduly influencing each other. In the business world it was acceptable to argue your point. Add a mental push to an argument, and that influence became dangerous and costly.

Each contract held traps and loopholes. The negotiating team waded through those contracts, agreeing and disagreeing with points, accepting and rejecting terms. Negotiating was a hard and stressful enough job for anyone to tackle without worrying about being unnaturally influenced. Without wondering if someone was mentally pushing you into agreeing with them, or forcing you to gloss over important issues. Missing one tiny trap in a contract could cost a company millions.

Often the influence floating from one person to another was not intentional, but not everyone was in control of his or her natural abilities. There were many people in the business world who possessed small pockets of power that they shot across the room without any conscious awareness. Those people were easy to spot, and their power easy to control.

It was the other group Katlin had problems with. The Talents--people who were not only aware of their abilities, but had trained for years to control them. She had been told that over time and with experience, she would find it easier to deal with Talents, but for now it was taking all her concentration keeping tabs on the two strongest from the Intrex team.

The worst was a heavy set, balding man in his sixties. Every time he thought she wasn't focusing on him, he sent small tentacles of orange energy streaking across the table toward McDonald's lawyer. The lawyer had no protection of his own. Although he possessed a brilliant mind, it was wide open to any and all influences.

Katlin consciously shifted her attention to "Baldy," as she now thought of him. Once again he was sending slim threads of influence across the table. Rather than gently pushing aside his power, which she had been repeatedly doing throughout the meeting, she mentally slapped down as hard as she could, shearing tentacles of energy in half and causing Baldy to grunt in pain.

All conversation stopped, as everyone turned to stare. Baldy looked down to the pile of papers in front of him, his face red with embarrassment, and mumbled across the room, "Stubbed my toe."

Katlin had to fight down the urge to laugh. She looked warily in McDonald's direction. McDonald, deep in conversation with the CEO of Intrex, gave no indication that he'd noticed the interruption. But as she watched him, he paused in the middle of his discussion and reached toward a pitcher of water at his elbow. Slowly pouring himself a glass of water, he suddenly looked at her and winked. She quickly looked away, concealing her answering grin. It was good to know the Boss had a sense of humor.

Time to get back to work, but as she gathered her energy around her again she noticed something floating on the other side of the room. A black cloud of energy rolled across the conference table. She couldn't believe her eyes. It had to be a mirage. Quickly turning her attention back to McDonald, she realized his eyes were also following the dark energy's path, which meant she wasn't hallucinating--there was a

Black Void, a pocket of dark energy disrupting the business meeting.

She studied the Void with morbid fascination. She had heard about them, but she had never seen one up close. Its exterior had the texture of cotton candy, every few inches, tiny mountains of spikes, and at its center, whirlpools of gray and blue. It reminded her of a desert lightning storm, breathtaking, but deadly.

She considered her options as it hovered over the table. She had to make an excuse and get out of the room as quickly as possible. But before she could act, the cloud shot to the ceiling. It expanded, and within seconds it encompassed the room.

Katlin wasn't prepared for the attack on her senses. She was thrown into utter darkness, all sources of light and sound cut off. She gasped for breath, the air around her thick with dark energy. Her lungs protested and demanded oxygen. She tried to take another breath, this time covering her mouth with the collar of her white blouse, filtering out the sticky substance. Panic crawled up from her stomach, filling her limbs and her mind. There seemed to be no escape.

A coworker sitting to Katlin's right turned and stared, concern filling his eyes as he watched Katlin struggle to breath. The man reached out and touched her arm, but she was barely conscious of the man. Only Talents could see the Black Void, and there were only six of them in the room, including herself and McDonald. There was no way for her coworker to know that Katlin was currently battling for her life. As far as the world was concerned, there were no such things as Talents, no subculture with mental powers wandering around coexisting with the untalented. As far as her colleague knew, Katlin was having some kind of anxiety attack.

Katlin struggled to maintain her composure, but her mind was consumed by the Void. Panic and lack of oxygen made her lightheaded, and a tingling sensation spread throughout her body. Her thoughts narrowed, and her mind, unable to escape, fused with the Void. She heard a noise. Her body strained forward, and her mind tried to pull away from the dark. She turned her head back and forth, her ears scanning, desperate to find the direction of the sound. It came again this time, louder, a gentle whisper in her mind.

"Relax, Katlin. Keep trying to breathe. Whatever you do, don't give in to the panic." It was McDonald's voice, and he sounded angry.

Someone must have pulled the fire alarm. The screech overhead was almost unbearable, and with the sound, the Void collapsed, disappearing through the outer wall. It disappeared, and the room erupted into chaos. People scrambled out of their chairs and desperately gathered their belongings. The only person who seemed calm and in control was McDonald, but then again, he was a man with a reputation of keeping his head during a crisis. McDonald picked up his briefcase and walked toward the door. He stopped at the entrance. "Okay, don't panic! Chances are it's just a false alarm. I suggest until we find out what is going on, we head for the nearest exit."

Katlin's hands trembled as she reached down and straightened her clothes. That was not an experience she wanted to repeat. Grabbing her purse, she raised herself slowly out of the chair. She was still badly shaken and off balance. Holding onto the back of the chair for support, she willed her limbs to cooperate. She suddenly realized McDonald was watching her. Nodding in his direction, she tried to produce a smile to let him know she was okay.

He turned and addressed the room. "Everybody got their belongings? Let's go,

people, the quicker we get out of here, the better.”

McDonald led the group out of the conference room, down the hall and into the elevators. As they reached the lobby, it was apparent the entire hotel had been thrown into a panic. A crowd had gathered in the front entrance, and it was now crammed full of people pushing and shoving against each other in an attempt to get outside.

“Come on, we’re going out the back,” McDonald shouted over his shoulder.

Katlin bumped and bounced against bodies, carried by the current of people out onto the street. She stood under the bright hotel lights in the cool night. Everyone around her looked shocked, their eyes searching the hotel for signs of flames. It was easy to spot the Talents in the crowd. Instead of concentrating on the hotel, their eyes darted back and forth, as if they expected the Black Void to appear at any moment.

Katlin took a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself. Being in the room with the Void was the first time in her life she had felt true panic. Black Voids hadn’t been mentioned in the trip itinerary. She’d flown into Las Vegas two days earlier, hoping to get in a little gambling and sight-seeing between meetings. She thought she might lose some money and buy some knickknacks, but she never imagined she’d be battling Voids.

A light touch on her shoulder made her jump. She spun around and found herself standing next to McDonald.

“Katlin, see if you can talk to someone about bringing our cars around,” he ordered.

Before she could follow McDonald’s orders, he grabbed her arm and pointed. “There’s a valet over by that Jeep.”

As she made her way toward the valet, Katlin noticed two men scrambling out of the back entrance to the hotel. A big guy, over six feet tall, was dragging a smaller man out the door by his collar. Wide shoulders, blond, shaggy hair falling into his eyes, the tall one was good looking in a rugged, outdoorsy sort of way, she thought as her eyes scanned his athletic body. She watched him pull the smaller man effortlessly behind him. Katlin felt sorry for the man being dragged. He was desperately trying to juggle two bags in one hand. His other hand kept going to his face, pushing his glasses back into place.

The valet jumped out of the driver’s seat and jogged up to the tall man. Katlin could see the valet exchanging the keys for a tip, and she hurried her steps, past the Jeep, up the sidewalk.

“Hey, wait!” she called out to the valet’s back, but he ignored her and jogged back into the hotel.

She passed the two men and heard the small man gasp. One of the bags he was carrying suddenly fell from his hands and bounced against the ground. It burst open on impact, and the wind carried the papers up and into a spiral around the entrance.

Katlin’s first instinct was to stop and help. She grabbed at papers as they blew around her head and crouched to reach papers sliding across her feet. Spotting a pile to her left, Katlin knelt down, and as she did, the world around her exploded. For one brief moment her senses were filled with screaming, fire and debris. The blast threw her across the sidewalk and against the wall. Stunned, she tried to piece together the scene before her. The blue Jeep had exploded, that much was obvious by its charred remains. She slowly moved each of her limbs and ran her hands over her body. She felt bruised and sore, but nothing seemed broken, and she didn’t seem to be bleeding.

Katlin heard a soft plea for help coming from somewhere close by. The man who had dropped his suitcase lay sprawled on the ground, the Jeep door, part of the engine and other debris half covering his body. She looked around and realized everyone who had been standing next to her was gone, blown across the sidewalk. She was the only one within distance who was not injured and could help.

Pushing herself off the ground, using the wall for support, she made her way slowly to his side. Every instinct in her body was screaming at her to flee, to get away before something else happened, but she clamped down on the panic and forced herself to focus. Blood flowed from under the metal covering the injured man, forming small red rivers on the asphalt. She had always hated the sight of blood. Her jaw set in determination, she reached down grabbed the edge of the door and tried to lift it. She grunted and strained her muscles. The metal didn't budge. There was too much weight for her to move by herself. She changed her tactics, and instead of trying to pull the door off, she tried sliding one edge of it away from his body. Katlin pushed and shoved and finally felt the door give a little, then a little more, until it was far enough off him she could see the source of the stream of blood--a wicked looking piece of twisted metal stuck out from the man's chest.

Turning away in horror, she felt herself begin to gag.

What should she do? If she tried to slide the door any further, she would risk pushing the metal in deeper. The thought of the metal pieces squishing into the man's skin made her sick to her stomach. Katlin sat down, unsure what to do next, exhausted from her efforts.

She grabbed the man's hand and spoke words of comfort. "Emergency people will be here soon. Hold on. Someone will be here to help you."

"Please ... It hurts, help me," the man moaned.

Katlin had never felt so helpless. She didn't have any medical training, all she could do was take off her jacket and stuff it against his wound in an attempt to stop the blood. But the red stream didn't seem affected by her efforts, and her jacket was soaked within minutes. She kept pressure on his wound, staying by his side, trying to keep him calm until someone with medical training came along. Suddenly the man stopped moaning. Concerned, Katlin leaned over and gently brushed away the dirt and metal covering his face.

"Stay with me, keep awake." As she leaned over his eyes fluttered open. Their glances locked and her head filled with visions.

Images flew across her mind, scenes full of people and places Katlin had never seen before. Snippets of conversation floated past her ears. It was like watching a movie, but then the movie started to move faster, the images sped up. She could no longer make out the people or the sounds as the images flashed faster and faster across her mind. Moving too fast to distinguish, they become nothing more than a long blur of motions, vivid colors and indistinguishable sounds.

The problem was that the images were moving too fast. Her mind was having trouble keeping up. None of her training covered this type of connection. She tried to break free, tried to pry her eyes away from his. She started to pull herself physically back, but his gaze stayed locked into hers. She was frozen in place, unable to move. She didn't know how much longer she could stay conscious as her mind rebelled against the

intrusion. Her body started to shut down. She was on the brink of passing out when the visions started to slow down. As they slowly came to a stop, the rush of colors disappeared. The world around her was suddenly dark and quiet.

She sighed in relief and moved away, when the man's mind tugged at hers again. This time there were no images or sounds, only the feeling of being pulled. Like someone had tied a rope around her, and she was being hauled across the ground. Only it was his mind that was dragging her, not across the ground, but into the darkness. She hadn't been able to break the connection. Somehow his mind was still linked to hers, even as he was dying.

Katlin struggled to regain control. She knew she was in extreme danger. She felt his mind begin to fade, felt his spirit begin to fall, spiraling downward. He pulled her along with him, dragging her down into the darkness. She screamed, but it never reached her lips. She was immobile, as her spirit and mind fought to break free. She was losing the battle, she couldn't hold on any longer.

Suddenly the connection was broken. Katlin tried to focus on her surroundings. Her cheek burned as if on fire. She raised her eyes and saw the blond man raising his hand as if to strike her.

She screamed at him, "Stop!"

"Are you okay?" He was crouched in front of her, his jacket riddled with burn holes, streaks of dirt and blood covering his face. A small, jagged cut above his right eye was bleeding.

"Your friend is dead," she said, cradling her cheek with her hand. She wondered how many times he had slapped her across the face before she came to her senses.

"He's not my friend." The man turned and stared down at the lifeless body. "Are you sure he's dead?"

"Yes, I felt him die." Her head jerked up as she realized what had just come out of her mouth. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to focus. "I watched him die."

Reaching out he grabbed her wrist, and his fingers ran softly over her skin. She could feel the energy hum where his fingers touched her.

Leaning forward, his breath caressed her ear as he whispered, "You're a Talent? Don't worry, so am I. My friends call me Ryker." He pulled away from her. "Are you bleeding?" His face filled with concern as she struggled to control herself.

Looking down at her clothes, she realized her blouse was covered with blood. "No, it's his, not mine."

Ryker stood and offered his hand. Katlin took it, and he helped her to her feet and then let her go. Katlin felt herself begin to sway, but suddenly strong arms reached out, and Ryker gently pulled her into his body. She leaned against him, closed her eyes and concentrated on the warm solid male against her, trying desperately to block out the rancid smell of blood, the moans of pain, and concentrated instead on the sound of his heartbeat. Her muscles relaxed.

"Do you hear a ringing?"

"What?" she asked, her voice muffled against his chest.

"A phone, I hear a phone ringing." He kicked a pile of debris on the ground near his feet. And there, underneath all of the dirt and metal, lay a small, black purse.

Katlin reluctantly stepped out of his arms. "That's mine." Bending down, she

opened the purse and pulled out her cell phone. "Hello?"

"Katie, are you okay?" It was her brother, and his voice sounded thick with worry.

"Colin, I'm fine." She realized her voice was now emotionless and flat. *I must be in shock*, she thought as she looked around at the carnage of bodies and scorched metal surrounding her.

"Thank God. I got this flash of you in danger. God, Katie, it was awful, some kind of fire or explosion."

"It happened, Colin, there was an explosion, but I'm not hurt." Colin didn't answer. She could hear him breathing loudly on the other end.

"Colin, are you there? Can you hear me? I said, I'm not hurt."

"Katie!" Colin cried out, "Katie, run! Get out of there, right now! Do you hear me? Run, Katie!"

Colin, the stable one, the one who never lost his cool, screaming at her in panic, was enough to set her in motion.

She grabbed Ryker's hand and tried to pull him with her. "We have to get out of here!"

But Ryker was strong, and even though she yanked on his arm trying to get him to follow, his body didn't budge.

"What are you talking about?" The expression on his face clearly indicated he thought she had lost her mind.

She tried to drag him into following her again, but when he wouldn't, she gave up and dropped his arm. "Run! For the love of God, move!" she screamed at him as she turned and started sprinting.

She could hear his footsteps behind her. Katlin didn't bother to look behind her, she just ran, jumping over debris and bodies. She ran as fast as she could, as far away as she could. When she heard the explosion, she didn't pause, didn't stop to look, she just ran faster. Small objects pelted her back, and some of them cut into her body, but she ignored the pain and blocked out everything around her. She blocked out everything, but the feel of the breeze on her face and the pounding of her heart.

The one thing Katlin knew how to do was run.

* * * *

"Stop. Will you stop!"

Katlin had completely lost track of her surroundings. She slowed down and looked over her shoulder. Ryker stood twenty feet back, leaning over from the waist. He was breathing heavily and holding on to his side. She jogged back and stood in front of him.

"Christ, lady, you can run," he said between breaths.

"The name's Katlin. Where are we?"

"From the smell of chow mien, I would guess we're in the back alley of Mandarin Gate's Chinese restaurant, about two miles from the hotel."

"Two miles, I can't believe we ran that far." Her feet were beginning to throb. Somewhere along the way, she'd kicked off her shoes. She didn't know how long she had been running barefoot, but it was long enough to shred the hell out of her pantyhose and feet.

"I've been yelling at you to stop for the last half mile." He straightened up and grimaced.

"Are you all right?" she asked as she watched him wince.

"Yeah, just got a stitch in my side trying to catch up with you." He stared at her, and she saw it suddenly dawn on him that she wasn't breathing hard at all.

She couldn't help herself--she smiled at his expression. "I train during the week." He looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"I used to run competitively in school. I kept it up after I graduated, mostly out of habit." She tried to straighten what was left of her skirt, but it was torn into shreds. She gave up on it and looked down in horror at her blouse. There was very little material left.

She started arranging pieces of fabric artfully around her, tying strips of material together. She ripped off a piece of her blouse and held it out. He just looked at her, so she motioned toward his face. "Your eye, you have a cut above your eye." She handed him the fabric, and he wiped the blood off. He didn't even flinch as he wiped across the cut.

"Thanks." He spun around as if trying to get his bearings. "I think we're about three miles from the main strip."

"That other explosion, did you see what happened?"

"Yeah, another car blew up. One parked on the road next to the hotel."

"Was it bad?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady. Another explosion meant more dead bodies.

"I don't know," he answered as he started walking down the alley.

She followed him, trying to ignore the throbbing pain coming from her feet as she made her way on the rocky gravel. "Do you think anyone survived?" Katlin hadn't given any thought to her coworkers until now. And McDonald, what had happened to him? More bodies sprawled out on the pavement. She shuddered at the thought and prayed that McDonald and everyone from the meeting were safe.

Instead of answering her, Ryker stopped and stared intently at the alley wall. Katlin almost ran into him. She reached up and shook his shoulder, trying to get his attention. "Ryker, do you think anyone survived?"

He spun around and pulled her into an embrace. Before she could react he whispered in her ear. "I heard you, be quiet." Crouching down against the wall, pulling her with him, a gun appeared in his hand.

"What is it?" She asked. Her mouth had gone dry, and her heart was pounding loudly in her chest.

"Two men coming down the alley. Katlin, did the man pass you information?"

When she didn't answer he shook her. "I know you were mentally linked to Halster when he died. Did he pass something on to you?"

"Yes."

He pushed her away from him. "Try to hide. You're in danger."

Another shot of fear and adrenaline pumped through her body. Kneeling down on the alley floor, trying to squeeze herself as close to the wall as possible, she scanned the alley. She had always had terrible night vision, and although there was some light shining into the alley from the restaurant windows, she could only make out one figure in the dark. He stood at the mouth of the alley.

The man cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Ryker!"

Ryker stood, but when she started to stand, too, he pushed her back down against the wall. Her body was concealed in the shadows.

"You don't have to shout, Murray, I'm here." Ryker shoved his pistol back into his pocket, but Katlin noticed he didn't take his hand off the gun. Whoever these people were, Ryker obviously knew them, but he was still expecting trouble.

Without turning in her direction, he lowered his voice. "Katlin, the man is a Talent working for Vector--you're broadcasting too loud. And for God's sake, get down and out of sight."

She immediately stopped mentally scanning, she didn't really have to, she could see the man's outline clearly now.

"I thought you were retired, my friend," he said as he walked farther into the alley toward Ryker.

Ryker immediately walked away from Katlin's hiding place. He moved slowly, his voice friendly. "I was thinking of retiring last year, but changed my mind."

Katlin could not make out the man's features in the dark. His voice was deep and raspy. "Give us the girl, Ryker. We have no beef with you."

Ryker walked across the alley. He casually leaned against the fire-escape ladder. "Why do you want her? She has nothing to do with this."

Katlin could see the man turning his head back and forth. He must be scanning the alley looking for her. She lowered herself onto the ground. She tried to ignore the puddle of mud she now lay in, and the smell of urine drifting toward her from the alley wall.

"Halster passed it to her," the man said, once again focusing his attention on Ryker.

Ryker had positioned himself directly under a stream of light shining out from one of the windows. He was trying to draw their attention away from her, she realized. He was allowing himself to become a visible target while the other man stood partially hidden in the dark.

She watched as Ryker put both of his hands in his jean pockets. "Impossible, she's not a Courier. She's just some woman in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"No, it's been confirmed. He passed her the info."

"Come on, Murray, you know how unreliable the Sight is. I'm telling you, you're dead wrong."

"Tony is my best man. He tells me the information is passed, I believe him. Did he pass it on, Tony?"

The second man, who had concealed himself in the shadows, stepped out into a stream of light. "Yeah, he passed it, Boss."

"Hey, Tony," Ryker called out, lifting one hand in greeting.

The man acknowledged the greeting and nodded his head, "Ryker, I thought you were retired and living the good life up at some ranch in the mountains?"

"Semi-retired and not a ranch, just a cabin. How's the family?"

The man's face split into a wide grin. "Good, we had twin boys four months ago."

Ryker laughed a deep, rich laugh that took Katlin by surprise. You'd have

thought he was at a party instead of standing in an alley facing down two men. “Really? I hadn’t heard. Congratulations. Tell Maria I said hi.”

Murray lit a cigar. “Are you going to give the girl to us?”

Ryker turned and addressed Murray, his voice losing all traces of friendliness. “Depends. What are you going to do with her?”

“We had a relationship with Halster. We had hopes of making some kind of arrangement with him. Killing him was an accident.” Murray paused and took a drag on his cigar. “My nephew is breaking into the business. He’s enthusiastic, young, trying to make a name for himself. You know what that’s like.”

“It’s tough getting started.” Ryker sounded amused.

“He was in charge of the explosions. They were only meant to scare Halster into coming back to us.”

“Who caused the distraction? That Black Void was a little bit showy just to get us out of the place. Those things are usually only used for large-scale assault, they cost a fortune.”

“Nah, the Vector’s got a guy on the payroll whose only Talent is projecting those things. He’s pretty creepy, but he works cheap.”

“If Halster hadn’t been such a klutz, you would have gotten us both.”

“Tony gave Halster a little mental push into dropping the suitcase. No one was supposed to get hurt.”

Ryker turned and saluted Tony. “Thanks for saving my life.”

Tony returned the salute. “I owed you for Mexico. Now we’re even.”

Ryker turned back toward Murray, “And the girl?”

“She’s a stranger to us. We have no past, no relationship, how can we trust her?” Murray’s voice filled with regret, “We have no choice. We have to kill her.”

“And if I let you have her? How much is in it for me?”

“Now you’re talking sense. Fifty-thousand.”

“I need some time.”

Murray threw down his cigar and exploded in anger. “Time for what? There’s nothing to think about. Your involvement in this situation is over! Your client is dead. Do the smart thing, Ryker. Hand over the girl.”

“Like I said, Murray, ‘I need some time’,” Ryker growled.

“Because of our past relationship I’ll give you three days. If you don’t turn over the girl, then everything between us is forgotten.” Murray turned and walked back down the alley. Tony followed closely behind him.

Murray stopped at the entrance, “You understand me, Ryker? I don’t get what I want from you, you’re both dead.”

Chapter Three

It was all a bad dream, it had to be, Katlin lay in the dirt and tried to convince herself she was back at the hotel, sound asleep. What she needed was a good stiff drink.

“Come on, the coast is clear. We better get a move on while we have the chance. Do you need help getting up?”

The strong arm he offered pulled her effortlessly to her feet. “Thanks.” As he started walking toward the alley entrance, she automatically matched his stride. “I don’t understand why they let us go.”

Ryker motioned behind him. She looked over her shoulder and noticed, for the first time, two sets of eyes peering from an opened door.

“A couple of waiters from the restaurant. If there weren’t any witnesses around, Murray would have made a grab for you.” He glanced down at her feet. “Are you able to run?”

“I think so, they look worse than they feel.” That was a lie, but she had learned after so many years of running to ignore the pain and keep moving.

“The farther we get from here the better.” He started jogging, and she had little choice, but to follow him. She slowly picked up her pace, until she was running a few steps behind his left shoulder.

No, this was not a nightmare. She was wide-awake, running the streets of Las Vegas, pursued by bad guys. Tired, hungry and scared out of her mind, the last thing she felt like doing was running down dark alleys. A hamburger with mushrooms and onions, that’s what she needed. She moaned as her stomach growled. She filled her mind with images of food as she followed Ryker.

They wound in and out of back alleys, until suddenly, the adrenaline that had been coursing through Katlin’s body, making her feel alert and powerful, left her system. Her limbs became weak, and her body went limp as a rag doll’s. She stopped and slumped against the nearest wall.

When Ryker realized she was no longer behind him. He jogged back and peered into her face. “What’s wrong?”

She reached one arm out and steadied herself against the wall, the other one rested on her knee. “I don’t know. I feel funny, like everything is narrowing in.”

“Shock. The shock of what happened has started to set in.” He stood a moment as if debating a course of action. “We have to find a place to hole up so you can rest and we can get some food into you.” He reached out and grabbed her arm. “It’s not much farther,” he said as he dragged her along behind him.

He pulled her along, turning left and then right, through the maze of alleys until he came to an abrupt stop in front of a motel. The place was run down, covered in peeling paint, with a roof that looked as though it might blow off in a stiff breeze. The flashing neon vacancy sign in front was missing every other word. It was a far cry from the luxury hotel the company had put her in.

She waited outside while Ryker paid for a room. When he finally wrestled the door open, he shoved her into the room and onto the closest bed. Mentally drained and physically exhausted, she desperately wanted to throw herself down on the bed and sleep for the next three days, but she glanced down and realized the shredded remains of her clothes were covered in filth. A shower, she needed to take a long, hot shower.

"You know Murray and Tony." It was more of a statement than a question. Now that the crisis was over, she was finding it hard to keep her hands from trembling as she reached up and undid her braid. As she loosened her hair, the room filled with the smell of smoke, and Katlin wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Yeah, you could say they're business colleagues."

"Do you work with them?"

"Sometimes, I mean I did before I retired, but I was freelance."

"A freelance what? Killer?"

It was the first time she'd seen him smile. He had an incredibly sexy grin. "No, bodyguard."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *God, I wish I was back at home in my big, comfortable bed, reading a magazine and eating a pint of cherry-chocolate ice cream.*

But instead, she realized as she opened her eyes, she was about to spend the night in a dive. The room itself was tiny, with two single beds. All the furniture and walls were painted dirt brown, and the carpet was worn and pitted with cigarette holes. Only one thing decorated the room, a gold-framed black velvet painting of Elvis in his early days.

"What do you do?" he asked as he moved across the room and sat at a table pushed against the wall.

"I'm a certified Screener for the Tolmand Company."

"Screeners. I've never met one before. What is it exactly you do?"

Now that was a harder question to answer. She had been trying to explain her job to her brother and mother ever since she was hired. "Screeners are responsible for making sure no one from the opposing company unduly influences the meeting. We screen off attacking powers." She patiently worked her fingers through her hair. She needed a brush, but even with a brush it, would take hours to get all the tangles out.

As he listened, Ryker pulled out his gun and started cleaning it. Her voice faltered. It was the image of the gun that did it. She could sit here talking to him about her work, pretending everything was normal, but it wasn't. The night's events suddenly became too much. Images washed over her--the explosions, dead and bloodied bodies strewn across the pavement, people chasing after her. Katlin's eyes swelled with tears.

Noticing her sudden silence, Ryker stopped what he was doing and stared at her.

Katlin bit down hard on her lower lip. She turned away so he couldn't see her cry. She never cried in front of people, and she wasn't about to start. As she bit her lip, she tasted blood, the pain was a comforting distraction. Moments away from throwing herself on the bed and sobbing, she cleared her throat and tried to sound calm, "So, what now?"

"They'll come for you."

"Will they kill me?" She could barely get the words out.

"Yes," he answered his voice low.

Her mind filled with panic. There were men out there trying to kill her. The whole situation was surreal, like some movie or TV show. *This can't be happening.* But it was, and as the realization sank in, she felt herself begin to shake.

Katlin heard Ryker get up, but didn't turn to face him. If she did she might lose what little control she had left.

"Stay here," he commanded.

She heard the door open and then shut. He was gone, and she couldn't keep the tears at bay any longer. They streamed down her face as she openly sobbed.

A sudden touch on her shoulder made her jump, and she let out a shriek.

"It's okay." He handed her a chocolate bar.

With shaking hands, she took the chocolate from him. She hadn't heard him come in. She kept her face lowered, unable to meet his eyes, and she felt like a fool for crying.

"It's the shock. You'll feel better once you get some sugar into you."

His voice was soothing and calm, but her tears kept coming. The bed creaked as he sat down next to her. Gently pulling her body into his, strong arms wrapped around her as her head came to rest against his shoulder. He slowly rocked her back and forth, until her hysterical crying turned into small, controlled sobs.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine now." She pushed her body away from his, ashamed that she had bawled like a baby in front of him. His finger came up and softly brushed a tear off her face. Katlin felt the heat from his hand travel from her cheek down the length of her body. He looked into her face, and his blue eyes filled with surprise. Her heart beat loudly in her chest as their eyes locked. They stared at each other in silence for a moment, and then he dropped his gaze and stood up.

"Eat the chocolate. The sugar will help." He crossed the room and sat at the table.

"Do you think we're safe here?"

"Yeah, for now, but Murray isn't a patient man. He'll start searching for us." He studied her from across the room. "What information did Halster pass you?"

"Is that your friend's name?" She took a bite of the chocolate.

"He's not my friend--he was my assignment."

Katlin tried to concentrate on the moment when Halster was dying, when their minds were linked, and for a moment, she thought she could make out an image. But there was a sudden rush of color and sound, and her head started throbbing. She rubbed her temples trying to alleviate the pain. "I don't know. I can't make it out. It's all just a blur."

"So what are your chances of breaking apart the images and figuring out what he passed?"

"Not good. Couriers are trained for this kind of work. They're used to getting jumbled info and turning it into a pattern they can recognize and store for later retrieval. But Screeners ... all we do is recognize and block hostile power."

"What about passing the information to a Courier?"

"I don't know. That could work." She noticed he seemed pleased by her answer.

A sudden thought slid into her mind and filled her with terror. "What are you going to do, Ryker, turn me over?" she asked, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money."

If he decided to turn her over to Murray, there was little she could do to stop him. She could plead for her life, but it wouldn't do any good if Ryker was the kind of man more interested in making a dollar than doing the right thing.

Katlin didn't know the man sitting next to her. She had been so busy trying to stay alive that she had followed him without question. Now she sat in a motel room, totally at his mercy, her life and safety completely in his hands. She tried to keep calm as she looked him straight in the eye and nodded her head. "Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Yeah, it is, but if Murray is willing to pay fifty, then I know it's worth ten times that amount to the right buyer."

He wasn't going to turn her over, at least not to Murray. Relief spread through her body, for the moment, she was safe. A plan. She needed to come up with a course of action, she thought as she finished the chocolate bar. The first thing she needed to do was get clean. She licked the chocolate off her fingers. The sugar was working. Her brain was starting to function again. "And if I walk out this door and go to the cops?" she demanded.

Ryker's eyes went suddenly cold. "You wouldn't last twenty-four hours. Murray has people in the department." He moved toward her, and Katlin, involuntarily, scooted backward.

She felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. Panic alarms went off in her head. *This isn't the type of man you get angry*, a voice in her head warned.

"I can't let you leave. I need the information." His voice lowered, and she suddenly felt vulnerable, like a small animal in the woods that had just picked up the scent of a predator nearby.

Ryker stood up and kept his eyes on her as he gathered his things together. "If you take off, I'll find you." He slowly put on his jacket and checked the clip of his gun before holstering it. "You can run, but if Murray finds you before I do, you're dead."

She tried to calm her pounding heart. It would be better to have Ryker as an ally than an enemy. She gave him her best smile. "Okay, for now, I stay with you." Looking down at what was left of her blouse and skirt, she realized the material was burned and torn beyond salvaging. "I need some new clothes."

"We need clothes, food and more firepower." He headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To get supplies. Lock the door and don't open it for anybody. If you hear someone outside or see anything, call the front desk. Tell the guy you need more towels. Got it?"

"Got it. What are we going to do?"

He opened the door, but didn't bother turning around as he answered. "We're going to find out what the hell is going on."

* * * *

Katlin couldn't take the smell of smoke coming from her hair and skin any longer. The hot water felt heavenly as she slid into the shower. It streamed, pounding against her

back, until her muscles relaxed. She had learned through the years to trust her instincts, and although Ryker scared her, especially when he growled at her, she felt deep down that she could trust him to keep her alive. Of course, he would keep her alive, if she died he would lose the opportunity to sell the information in her head. As long as he protected her, she didn't care about his motivation. Until she came up with a better plan, she would stay with him. Hopefully she would be able to figure something out before he got to the information.

The shower ran until there was no more hot water. Drying off, she gathered her long hair into a towel, twisting it and balancing it on top of her head. The mirror was covered in mist. Her hand ran over it, clearing away the dew as she studied her reflection. A mouth too full, forehead too broad and chin too pronounced to be called beautiful. Her normally lively emerald-green eyes were filled with fear. Ivory skin, flawless but for a generous sprinkle of freckles across her nose, was now tinged with gray. She looked scared and ill. Katlin turned away from the mirror in disgust. She had never thought of herself as the type that ran scared.

Ryker hadn't returned--the room was empty. She dashed across the room, into the closest bed, and under the covers. She winced as her back made contact with the sheets and reminded her of the dozen deep scratches on her back. It was too quiet. She wrapped the sheet around her body and made her way across the room. The TV was too small to watch from the bed, but the sound would be the white noise she desperately needed to relax her nerves. The knob came off in her hand, and she laughed and spent five minutes trying to put it back. When the set was finally on, she realized her channel options were limited. This was not a five-star hotel, with cable and over two hundred channels to choose from. Three channels were as good as it got. She chose an old black-and-white detective movie and made her way back to bed. Listening to the program, she rolled over on her side and tried to stay awake as she waited for Ryker, but she was exhausted, and after only a few minutes, her eyelids closed, her muscles relaxed, her breathing deepened. Within minutes, she was sound asleep.

* * * *

There was a knock at the door. Katlin got up gracefully from the couch and sauntered across the room. She wore a green slinky, backless silk dress. Her hair was cut short with uniform waves of curls down each side. She opened the door, and in the hallway stood a young man, his red hair slicked back, sporting a small, trim moustache and wearing white tie and tails.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

He pushed past her into the room. "I've been searching for you everywhere!" He stopped and took in her appearance. "Look at your dress." Looking down at his clothes, his hand went to his face. "A moustache, ties and tails, shiny cocktail dress. What is this, a nineteen-thirties mystery?"

"I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"And who are you supposed to be?"

"I'm Nora Charles."

"A Thin Man Mystery. Don't you ever dream like normal people? Do you always have to dream in stories? Time to snap out of character, Katie, it's me, Colin."

"Colin?" Her body swayed as her mind tried to assimilate what was going on.

He rushed over to her and grabbed her by the arm to steady her. "That's a girl! Now stay calm, or you'll wake up, and if you do that, it will break my connection with you."

Ryker walked into the room, wearing a tuxedo. His blond hair was cut short, slicked back and parted on the side. "Take your hands off her!" He managed to look annoyed and sophisticated at the same time.

"Who the hell is this? I thought all of your characters were people you know." Colin ignored Ryker and shook Katlin's arm.

"I'm her husband. Now take your hands off my wife." Ryker rushed Colin.

Colin spun gracefully around. "So you must be playing William Powell. Sorry about this, mate." He hit Ryker squarely on the chin. Colin watched Ryker fall hard against the floor "Your characters always did have glass chins, Katie."

"Nick!" She kneeled down and gently stroked Ryker's face. She looked up at Colin and demanded, "What did you do to my husband?"

"This is all a dream. None of this is real. It's all in your imagination. Come on, concentrate. Katie, you're not Nora Charles. You're dreaming." He swung his arm out encompassing the room, "All this is make-believe."

Katlin frowned, shaking her head back and forth, trying to clear her thoughts. She stood up slowly and stared at her brother. "Colin?"

"Yeah, that's it. I'm your brother, Colin. I've been looking for you. Where are you, Katie?"

She looked confused, so he tried again. "Not here in your dream, I mean in real life--you must be asleep somewhere right now, I wouldn't have been able to reach you. Tell me, where are you sleeping?"

"In the motel room."

"Good! Katie, what motel room? Where is the motel located?"

"It's not far from the Chinese restaurant."

"What Chinese restaurant? Where is it? Forget it. Let's try another one. Katie, are you alone?"

"No, I'm with him." She pointed toward Ryker's unconscious body.

"Is he holding you against your will?"

"No, he's protecting me."

Colin's eyebrows drew together in a puzzled expression. "Katie, I'm not talking about your dream. I don't mean Nora, your character in the mystery."

"Not Nora, me. He is protecting me."

"Protecting you from what?"

"The men in the alley. They want to kill me."

Colin grabbed her by the shoulders and started to gently shake her. "That doesn't make sense. Who would want to kill you?"

She tried to answer, but he started to shake her harder. "Colin, stop shaking me."

"Colin, that's the guy you were talking to on your cell phone before the explosion."

Katlin opened her eyes. She was in the motel room, and Ryker was sitting on the side of the bed, shaking her shoulders and trying to wake her up.

“Colin’s my brother,” she said, sitting up, forgetting for the moment she was nude.

Ryker’s eyes widened, but he didn’t move.

She looked down and let out a shriek as she grabbed the sheet and pulled it up to her chin. “Do you mind! I don’t have any clothes on here!”

“I noticed,” he chuckled as he went over to the table and grabbed a couple of shopping bags. He threw them at her. “I bought you some clothes.”

She had no choice, but to drop the sheet again so she could catch the bags before they hit her in the face. Ryker just sat down in the nearest chair and smiled at her. She grabbed both bags with one hand and wrapped the sheet around herself with the other, trying to look dignified as she made her way into the bathroom.

She gave Ryker one long glare before she slammed the bathroom door shut. She could hear his laughter through the closed door. She reached over and yanked on the knobs, turning on the shower in hopes of drowning him out. When it didn’t work, she turned on both of the sink taps, and in a final act of desperation, she flushed the toilet.

“Bastard,” she muttered as she slammed down the toilet lid. She sat down and started rummaging through the shopping bags.

* * * *

Ryker was packing tins of food into a duffel bag. He stopped and smiled at her. “You look good.”

She walked across the room and looked him up and down. He was dressed in the identical, all in black--black cotton T-shirt, jeans, leather jacket and boots. He looked incredibly sexy.

“You don’t look so bad yourself.”

“I went to a couple of shops on the strip.” He stood up and ran his hand over his leather jacket and gave her a grin. “I do look pretty good, don’t I?”

“Self confidence, I take it, isn’t a problem for you.”

He gave her a big grin and went back to packing the bag. “Your brother, Colin, he has the Sight?”

“Yes, he’s also a Tracer, a broadcaster and has some telekinetic abilities.”

Ryker’s head shot up in surprise. “Really, he has all those Talents? You don’t see a lot of that around. Most gifted people only have one or two.”

“What’s your Talent, Ryker?” she asked as she watched him move gracefully across the room. The man walked like a panther.

“Defensive stuff, mostly. Walls are my specialty, defensive walls to keep Tracers from locating my assignments.”

“Walls?” Katlin concentrated and lowered her mind into her surroundings. Nothing in the room glowed. She frowned and concentrated harder on Ryker. If he had any power at all, she couldn’t see it. She strained a little harder, when suddenly there was a bright, white flash of light that momentarily blinded her. Startled, her mind recoiled, and she was jerked out of the Lower Level back into the room. “What the hell was that?”

“Sorry, force of habit.”

“Is that some of the ‘defensive stuff’ you were talking about?” Katlin’s forehead was throbbing with a dull ache. “You should’ve warned me.”

“And you shouldn’t go pushing on people without their consent.”

“How do you visualize the Lower Level?” Everyone had a different interpretation of the Lower Level. Her brother Colin saw everything in black and white, her father’s view had been full of symbols, but to Katlin, the Lower Level was an explosion of color.

“Mostly color. But some things come across to me in black and white. What about you?”

“Every living thing is surrounded in a bright color.” She grimaced in pain and grabbed her head as she went to get up.

He stood and helped her to her feet. “Did I hurt you?”

Her face was just inches from his. He had the most beautiful blue eyes, the color of a cloudless summer sky. “No, I’m okay.” She stared into his eyes, trying to find some hint to his true character. She was starting to like him, and she trusted him to keep her alive, but he had already told her in so many words that he was planning on selling her out to the highest bidder.

“I know that you aren’t going to turn me over to Murray, because his price is too low. What are you going to do with me?”

“Right now, my main concern is keeping us both alive.”

“And after that?” She was so close she could feel his breath against her skin, feel the heat of his body only inches from hers. Her heart pounded loudly in her chest. His hand was still on her arm, and her skin felt hot under his fingers.

“I’m not sure what will happen. But you’re right, I’m in this for the money, so don’t trust me.” He dropped his hand and stepped back. “We’d better get going.”

“Where are we going?”

“Lake Tahoe.” He picked up his duffel bag and walked toward the door. “Ever been there? Great skiing in the winter.”

She stood in the doorway, watching him pack up the car, a beat-up, moss-green Cutlass he had bought on his shopping spree. She thought about calling Colin, but decided against it. She didn’t want to bring her brother into the middle of this dangerous game. As she watched Ryker, Katlin unconsciously rubbed the arm he had been holding. Even though his fingers were gone, her skin still felt hot, burned.

Chapter Four

They drove the rest of the night with Ryker at the wheel. Katlin slept stretched out in the backseat, a pillow stolen from the motel cushioning her head. It took them three hours to drive from Vegas to Tonopah.

Ryker found a motel on the edge of town. It was four o'clock in the morning, the sun wouldn't rise for another two hours.

Katlin bolted upright, hitting her head on the roof of the car, and let out a yelp of pain. "What's wrong?" she demanded, rubbing the top of her head. The passenger door was open, and one of his hands was wrapped around her ankle.

"I am trying to wake you up. You sleep like the dead. I can't drive any more tonight. You seemed really out of it, so I figured we would stop and spend a few hours sleeping. Do you want to get something to eat or go straight to bed?"

"Where are we?" She tried to maneuver herself gracefully out of the backseat, but finally gave up and wrestled herself out of the car.

"Tonopah, about six hours from Las Vegas."

"Never heard of it."

"It's a small Nevada mining town. Silver deposits mostly. It all started with Jim Butler chasing after his burro."

Katlin yawned and stretched. "What, are you a history buff in your spare time?"

He looked embarrassed. "You live in a mining state long enough, you pick this stuff up. Food or bed?"

"I'm starving!"

"Get back in the car. The only place open to eat at this hour is one of the casinos."

Katlin opened the passenger door, but suddenly stopped and turned to face Ryker. "Shouldn't we find some place to hold up like they do in the movies? Is it smart to go out in the open? I don't mean to be rude, but you don't seem to be doing anything special to keep me from getting killed."

She inwardly cringed as she watched him cross his arms and glare at her. She had pissed him off again.

He watched her a few moments in silence before answering. "It's almost impossible to stop a determined assassin. It takes a team and resources to make any location totally secure. Since we don't have either at the moment, we're relying on speed to keep ahead of them, because if they can't find us, they can't kill us."

"Did you do that with Halster?" she asked.

"No, Halster refused to leave Las Vegas."

And now these same people were after her. She had no choice--she would have to trust Ryker to keep her alive.

"What will it be--the Station House, Mizpah or Banc Club?" Ryker asked.

"You've been here before, what do you recommend?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's all casino food, edible and cheap."

"The Station House."

"Okay, the Station House it is."

* * * *

She didn't know what was more startling, the sound of the casino (a bombardment of ringing bells and payout coins clunking against the metal trays as they fell) or the sight of people sitting on round stools and stuffing coins into slot machines at six in the morning.

Ryker laughed at the expression on her face. "After living around casinos and slot machines awhile you don't even notice the noise."

"How could you get used to this racket?" Katlin covered her ears as a machine she was walking by, Wild Cherry written across the bottom half in neon colors, started flashing lights and making loud noises. A sixty-year-old woman sitting at the machine hopped off her stool and jumped up and down with excitement as a storm of coins spewed out into the metal tray.

Ryker took Katlin's elbow and guided her through the rows of slot machines. "Did you notice, no clocks on the walls, and they make sure all the windows and outer glass doors are darkened, so the customers can't tell if it's morning or evening."

"Why would they do that?"

"To keep the customers from realizing how much time has passed."

"But how could anyone afford to play for hours?"

"You can't if you live in a city with casinos. Not if you want to keep your material possessions. You should see the pawn shops in the bigger cities where people have sold all their stuff to keep playing a few more hours."

They made their way into the restaurant and followed the waitress to a booth.

"That's terrible. I saw a slot machine out there that had a slot for a credit or debit card."

"It's called adult entertainment for a reason."

"Do you gamble?" Katlin asked as she watched people pouring one coin after another into machines.

"Only blackjack, and I never spend more than twenty dollars." He gave her a wide grin. "I like my money." He handed her a plastic menu. "What do you feel like eating, breakfast, lunch or dinner?"

The waitress brought over a white container full of coffee and left it on the table.

Katlin poured herself a cup. "Breakfast. I have to have breakfast in the morning. A stack of pancakes looks good." She motioned to the carafe. "Coffee?"

"No, thanks, I don't like coffee."

She stopped spooning sugar into her cup and stared at him in shock. "You don't drink coffee? How's that possible?"

Ryker shrugged his shoulders. "I don't like it."

"Everyone drinks coffee." Katlin added another spoonful of sugar and two creamers to her cup. She watched the white cream spiral around in the black liquid as she stirred it. "That has to be un-American. I've never heard of an adult that doesn't drink coffee. Well, except for Mormons. Are you Mormon?"

"No," he answered.

“Do you drink cola?”

“Yes.” He sounded annoyed.

“So, what’s the difference between cola and coffee? They both have caffeine in them. I mean if you drink cola, I can’t understand why you wouldn’t drink coffee.”

“Do you always talk so much in the morning?” he growled at her.

“Sorry, Colin always says I ramble on before my second cup. What exactly about coffee don’t you like?”

“The taste.” He gave her a threatening stare. “Not one more question about coffee.” She opened her mouth, and he raised his hand to stop her. “I’m serious, the word coffee comes out of your mouth, and I’m not responsible for my actions.”

Katlin looked down at her cup. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were so grumpy in the morning.”

Ryker reached over and lifted her chin and smiled at her. “Tell me more about your work.”

“I’ve been with Tolmand only a few months.”

“Impressive company. I was reading a profile in the paper last week about the guy that started the company. What’s his name?” Ryker’s brows drew together in concentration.

“Jonathan McDonald.”

“He looks like a real powerhouse. I’m surprised he would hire a Talent.”

“Jonathan is a Talent as well as my immediate boss.” As she sat across from Ryker, she had to admit he was not hard on the eyes. His rugged good looks reminded her of a young Harrison Ford, except Ryker’s hair was blond. His hair was a tad too long in front, and she found herself curbing a desire to brush it away with her finger tips. She suddenly realized Ryker was talking to her.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“I’m surprised you can get away with using your powers so publicly.”

“No one except another Talent would know I was using them during a meeting. All the Normals think I am just a chief negotiator.”

“Do you construct defensive walls?” he asked.

“No, mainly I have to hack down tentacles of power I see stretching across the room from one person to another.”

Ryker had given up on waving a waitress down and settled back into the booth. “So you were at the hotel on business?”

“McDonald is trying to acquire Intrex.”

“The new computer gaming company? I’ve played some of their stuff, they’re good.” He started stacking sugar packets on the table.

Katlin tried to keep from grinning. Ryker looked like an impatient seven-year-old trying to keep himself entertained. “We were in the middle of a buyout meeting when the Black Void appeared.”

“You felt the Void?”

“Yes.”

She watched frown appear on his face. “You know what kind of power it takes to create one capable of covering the whole hotel? If Murray was lying to cover for someone, then there is a very powerful Talent near the top of Vector”

She had no idea. She never dealt with Black Voids before, nor had any Talent she knew.

His face relaxed, and he smiled and asked, "Do you like the job?" he asked as he carefully balanced another sugar on top of the growing tower of packets.

She had the feeling he had just changed the subject. But that was okay by her. Talking about it had sent a shiver down her spine. Did she like her job? She liked the paycheck and title that went with the job. She considered the question for a few minutes before she answered. "It's okay." The worst part had been telling her family about her new position. Her mother had been indifferent, her brother disappointed and her father, well, he was probably rolling over in his grave. At the time, being a Screener had seemed a good idea. It was a respectable and well-paying job. The perfect fit for someone who had been wandering with no real direction since her father died.

A waitress walked over, pencil and pad in hand.

"Do you know what you want to order?" Ryker asked.

"Pancakes. No, scratch that, I'll have a mushroom and sausage omelet. What are you having?"

He took a quick glance at his menu. "Two stacks of pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon, a pile of toast and a gallon of milk."

Katlin let out a whoop of laughter. "You've got to be kidding me! You can't possibly eat all that."

Ryker unfolded the napkin, arranged it on his lap and rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Just watch me."

Katlin waited until the waitress was out of earshot to ask him the question that has been bothering her. "Ryker, you don't work for the Institute, do you?"

"No."

"How is it they let you roam around?"

"They don't have much choice."

"I don't understand."

"Have you always been part of the system?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What the Big Boys forget to put in the brochure is that there are many Talents working outside their control. Living life, having jobs and being free."

"Don't they harass you?" she asked trying to get her mind around the concept of living outside the rules and regulations.

"Worse, if you cross paths with them--well, let's just say a few people I know never had a chance to put in a formal complaint about the government's treatment of them. It's kind of hard to fax in a complaint from six feet under."

"You aren't saying the Institute kills Talents."

"I'm not?" He took a drink of orange juice and looked around the room before continuing, "There are a lot of things Big Brother has done they wouldn't want made public." His eyes rested on Katlin's face, and he suddenly laughed. He reached over and put his hand under her chin giving it a pat. "Sorry, Dorothy, didn't mean to mess with your world view."

"Very funny, I am not from Kansas, and I don't own a dog named Toto."

He chuckled, "You're a tough, cold-hearted bitch, who can take care of herself,

right?"

"Right," she said, giving him her most confident smile. She just hoped it was true, because if it wasn't, she didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of surviving.

* * * *

The door opened a crack. "Sorry, Boss, you said you wanted to know when the Tracers arrived."

The drapes were drawn, a small lamp on the desk was the only source of light in the room. The man behind the desk had his feet propped up and was working on emptying the bottle of scotch in front of him. The knock at the door had interrupted the crystal glass on its way to the man's lips, and he yelled out in annoyance. "I told you I don't want to be disturbed! All right, bring them in."

The door opened wide, and a giant of a man walked into the room. The man was over seven feet tall, with fuzzy, short red hair and a nose that bent too far to the left. It had been broken over a dozen times. Even though he had a huge gut that jiggled when he walked, he was built solid, strong muscle hidden under a thick layer of fat. He was christened Charles Creepman, but somewhere over the years, he had acquired the nickname Creepers, and it had stuck. He was a powerful Boxer, mentally capable of downing a man with a single thought.

Although he was a powerful man, both physically and mentally, he was afraid of his employer. There was something about the man that always gave Creepers the willies. Something dark and deep inside his Boss reminded Creepers of decaying, rotting flesh. He knew most people were not aware of this aspect of his employer, but then again, most people weren't capable of digging down past defensive walls.

"Come on in, guys, and sit down." Creepers waved his arm toward two leather chairs.

Two men, both dressed in black, walked into the room and sat down.

The man didn't bother to change his position, he kept his feet up on the desk and reached over, pulling open the top drawer and bringing out a green folder. He opened it and looked up, addressing his visitors. "Gentlemen, you may call me Mr. Smith. I've brought you here today because I understand that you're two of the best Tracers in the business."

The two men both spoke at the same time, and Mr. Smith raised his hands, silencing them. "I know that you're considered competitors in your line of work. But I need you both to put that aside for the moment." He opened another drawer and pulled out a checkbook. "I need to find someone. And if you're willing to put aside any bad feelings you have about each other in order to work together on this matter for me--" He finished writing out two checks and pushed them across the desk. "--I think I can make it worth your while."

He turned his attention back to Creepers. "Has Murray showed up?"

"Yes, Boss, he's in his office." Creepers dug into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He handed it to his Boss. "He is writing up a formal report now, but wanted to give you the highlights."

"Very well, if you will excuse me, gentlemen, I have important business to attend to."

Creepers started to escort the Tracers out of the office when he was stopped cold

by his Boss's voice. "What the hell! Creepers!"

Creepers reluctantly stepped back into the office. "Yes, Boss?"

"Tell Murray to get his ass in here ASAP!"

Creepers sighed and nodded his head. "Yes, Boss. Right away, Boss."

Murray strode into the room like a man bravely going to the gallows. It was obvious that Murray was not surprised by the Boss's anger, but was resigned to it. Creepers could not help but pity him for what was coming. When the Boss faced anyone with the expression currently crossing his features, they were in for a short, painful death.

"I have read your fascinating report Murray, do you have anything useful to add?" The Boss leaned casually against his desk, tossing what looked like a black crystal paperweight. Its polished black surface made a meaty smack into his palm each time it landed.

Murray stopped in the middle of the floor and seemed to consider his answer fully. His stance was unapologetic. His defensive walls glittered in the dim room, so thick that they were actually visible.

"I owed him a life."

"And you are going to give him one!"

Murray flew across the room with his walls shredding away in tatters. His back slammed into the wall with his limbs splayed out. There was a crunching sound, though if it was from the trembling wall or from Murray, Creepers could not be sure. A rain of white powder and wall board fell around him and painted his complexion gray even as the color drained from his face.

The sheer brute power of the attack was eerie, made even more so by the fact the Boss remained casual, leaning against the desk, slowly tossing the paperweight in the air.

"My employees all have to know the consequences of crossing me, you know. If I don't make an example of you, it will be impossible to maintain discipline in the future." To accentuate his words the paperweight flew across the room with dizzying speed and slammed into Murray's right forearm with crushing force. As Creepers turned away from the mangled mess it had created, the Boss was again tossing the black orb calmly in the air. Murray's bellow of pain and anger had not yet even stopped echoing through the room.

"'Honor among thieves' is such a quaint concept. See what your backward thinking gets you." Again the stone flew across the room with sickening results.

The one-sided dialogue went on for what seemed like hours, but it could not have been more than a few minutes. Murray's bellows quieted down to whimpers and then died out entirely. Eventually the Boss tired of his play, the stone whistled into Murray's chest too quickly to be seen. The body crashed through the wall, bringing the wall and some of the ceiling with it.

When the dust cleared, the Boss could be seen in his same relaxed pose. He looked at the collapsed wall with disgust. He turned and threw the paperweight to Creepers. Creepers struggled to retain a grip on the gore slicked orb.

"Get this mess cleaned up."

Creepers made a hasty retreat to the outer office, necessitating an undignified scramble over a loose pile of rubble. The forgotten Tracers sat in the waiting chairs with mixed expressions of fear and awe.

“What are you idiots sitting here for? Get to work!” They scrambled from the room. Creepers followed them slowly, ever conscious of the towering danger in the room behind him.

Chapter Five

Katlin was so stuffed she could barely move. It had seemed like a good idea to order a piece of apple pie à la mode for dessert. She'd been starving when she sat down to breakfast, and she had eaten way too fast. Her stomach hadn't had a chance to catch up, and now everything was digesting, and she felt like she needed to be rolled out of the car. Ryker had consumed three times the calories she had, and he seemed to be feeling fine. Katlin wondered how he stayed so trim.

What she really needed to do was find a pair of running shoes and put in a couple of miles, but at the moment all she wanted to do was to go straight to bed. She was exhausted. Too much had happened in the last forty-eight hours, Katlin's body wasn't accustomed to dealing with this level of stress and mental strain. She wondered how Ryker could handle living in danger all the time. Ryker had seemed relaxed, and even calm, throughout each crazy episode. How someone could get used to living this kind of chaotic life was beyond Katlin.

Bed and sleep were her only concerns at the moment. She followed him into the motel room and collapsed onto the nearest bed. "This one's mine," she said, her voice muffled by the yellow-and-orange-flowered bedcover.

"No, I'll take the bed closest to the door." He took off his jacket and holster. "If you give me some names and numbers, I can have my friends get in contact with your family and let them know you're alright."

Ryker didn't know she was in contact with Colin via her dreams. She knew that Colin would let their mother know she was okay. Knowing Colin, he would come up with some bizarre cover story to keep her mother from worrying.

Colin, a brother who, up until a few days ago, had virtually disappeared into his work. She was tired of hearing her mother go on and about Colin's accomplishments. Katlin was happy her brother had found his niche in the world as a researcher, but she wished her mother wouldn't always act as though the sun rose and set by her oldest child.

Katlin had spent three years of college looking for a career, something she had a passion for, but finally, when it became obvious she was no closer to figuring out what she wanted to do with her life, she dropped out of school and entered the workforce. Her parents had been bitterly disappointed. Katlin was the only one in their family without a college degree.

She had worked one job after another, until one day a friend had told her about Screener's school. She knew she could do the job. She had the bloodline and raw Talent. That had always been one of her biggest problems, her bloodline. With it came too many expectations. None of the other Talents in the Tolmand Company knew who her father was, except for McDonald, and she planned to keep it that way.

"No, I don't have anyone I need to contact." Katlin moved over to the other bed. She sat on the edge of the bed and took off her boots. "Did you happen to get anything for me to sleep in on your shopping trip?"

Ryker's face split into a wide grin. "I sure did." He grabbed his duffel bag and pulled out clothes and tins of food. As he raised the black teddy, Katlin's eyes narrowed.

"Not a chance in hell."

"But this is all I could find on such short notice."

"Yeah, right. No, way. Give me that white T-shirt."

Ryker threw over the shirt. He lifted the teddy with a hopeful expression on his face. "Are you sure?"

Katlin didn't bother to answer. She got up and went into the bathroom, slamming the door shut.

She came out a few moments later dressed in the T-shirt. It was an extra-large and it was almost long enough to cover her five-foot, nine-inch frame and her underwear, but not quite. She tried pulling it down and holding the edges as she made her way over to the bed.

Katlin tried to ignore Ryker as she folded down the bedcover and sheets and slid into bed. "Do you do this a lot?"

"What?"

"Guard someone on the run, with people trying to kill you?"

"Yeah, it's part of the job description."

Katlin arranged the sheets and cover carefully around her, tucking the sheet edges under her feet. When she was finally settled she looked over at Ryker. "Did you get to know Halster well before he died?"

"Yeah."

"Was he a nice guy?"

"He was a pain in the ass. Are you going to sleep anytime soon?" Ryker asked as he put his bag under the bed.

"Aren't you going to sleep?"

Ryker went over and sat down at the small table in the corner. He took out a pack of playing cards from his jacket pocket and started laying them across the table. "I can't sleep right after I eat. I think I'm just going to stay up a while."

"Okay." She yawned and closed her eyes. "See you in a few hours." She fell asleep to the sound of cards shuffling.

* * * *

Katlin sat stretched out on the couch. She was wearing a red empire-waisted gown with ties at the back and a white bow on the front. The dress fell all the way to her ankles and had a slight train. She was waiting for her husband Nick to come home. He was busy at the police station trying to gather information about a blackmailer in a new case he'd just started.

The phone rang, and she reached over and picked up the receiver, speaking into the slightly raised mouthpiece. "This is Nora Charles."

"Katie, it's Colin."

"Colin who?"

"Your brother, Colin. The guy who used to pull your pigtails when you were a kid and called you freckle face."

"Colin, my brother?"

"That's right, Katie, you can do it. Focus, remember who you are."

"I'm Katlin," she said sitting up in surprise.

"Good girl, now, Katie, tell me where you are."

"In Tonopah."

"Where the hell is that?"

"Where the guy with the burro found all that silver."

"Okay, I'll find it. Stay where you are, Katie, don't go anywhere. I'm coming to get you."

"Colin, stay away from me. It's too dangerous." When he didn't answer she thought for a moment the phone connection was dead. As she started to put the receiver down, she heard a hiss on the other line. "Colin, are you still there?"

He suddenly shouted across the line, "They're coming for you! Hurry up! They're going to find you! Wake up, Katie, they're coming!"

Katlin dropped the phone and ran for the door. She opened it and walked through.

It took her a moment to realize where she was. She was sitting on edge of a bed, in the motel room, and Ryker lay in the bed next to hers. He was breathing deeply, obviously sound asleep.

Katlin rolled across the bed and reached out intent on shaking Ryker's shoulder and waking him up. As soon as she touched him, he exploded off the bed, arched up and flipped her along with him onto the floor. She hit the floor hard enough to knock the breath out of her. Ryker straddled her, hands around her neck. She tried to pry his hands loose, but he was just too strong.

Ryker's eyes opened. "What the hell is going on?"

Katlin was incapable of breathing, let alone responding.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, taking his hands away from her neck.

She sat up and rubbed her bruised neck and tried to gulp in oxygen. "You were trying to kill me," she gasped between breaths.

"You shouldn't touch me when I'm sleeping."

"Thanks for the warning."

"Are you okay?" He started to reach for her.

She couldn't stop herself from scooting back a few feet out of his reach. "Yes, thanks, I'm fine."

"What's wrong, why did you wake me up?"

"Someone is coming after us!"

"Did you hear something or see something outside the window?" he asked as he scrambled back onto the bed and grabbed the gun from under his pillow.

"No, I got a message."

"I didn't hear the phone ring."

"Well, it was on the phone, but not this one."

"Stop talking in code, Katlin, and spit it out."

"I just have this gut feeling."

Ryker's eyes scanned the empty room before settling back onto her face. "No one followed us out of Vegas." He studied her, and she felt uncomfortable under the scrutiny. If she told him the truth, he would think she was a nutcase. There were no other Talents that communicated telepathically through dreams. At least none that she had ever heard

of. It was something her father had demanded she keep to herself. Being different, even within a subculture, would more than likely bring ridicule and worse--unwanted attention.

Katlin straightened her shoulders and stared back at Ryker, trying to squelch the butterflies that rose as his eyes narrowed. Suddenly, in a burst of movement, he got up off the bed and stalked to the bathroom. Katlin heard water, and when he came back his face and hair were both damp. He must have filled the sink with water and dunked his head. *I should go do that*, she thought, trying to focus her sleep-fogged mind.

"If someone is following us, it has to be Tracers." He wiped off his face and started rubbing his hair with a towel.

"Can you block them?"

"It depends how good they are. Top-level Tracers are expensive. Murray won't pay for one. He doesn't like to cut too deeply into his profits. Contract operatives like Murray pay everyone they hire out of their share." Ryker made himself comfortable on the bed, his back against the headboard. "No matter what happens, don't concentrate on the Lower Level."

"What can I do to help?"

Ryker leaned over the side of the bed and pulled his duffel bag out from under it. He rummaged around the bag, finally pulling out a small black handgun. "Do you know anything about guns?"

Katlin got up from the floor and reached out for the gun. "No. Tell me what to do."

"See this button? It's the safety. I'm putting it on, but if you hear something, then switch it off and point the gun out away from your body toward the door. If someone comes through the door, then put your other hand below the gun to steady it." He demonstrated, pointing the gun toward the door. "Brace yourself and pull the trigger."

He handed her the gun, handle first.

Katlin nervously took the weapon. She turned it over in her hand, looking at it, more than a little horrified at the thought of shooting someone.

"Katlin, you have to decide right now, this moment, if you're capable of using it."

"Point and shoot, I can do that." She lifted the gun, getting used to the weight of it in her hands.

"Listen to me, this is important." His voice sounded angry.

She looked over at him, giving him her full attention.

"People get guns taken away from them. The bad guy comes in, you hesitate, he takes your gun and shoots you with it. It happens all the time. Katlin, you have to decide right now if you are capable of shooting someone."

Blue eyes met green--blue full of power and anger, green sparkling with fear and determination.

"Katlin, are you capable of killing a man?"

Her words came out shaky. "Yes, if it means staying alive." She cleared her throat, and said, with more conviction, "Yes, I think I could kill someone."

Ryker settled himself back against the headboard. "Stay awake, if you hear anyone coming, say my name a couple of times and throw something at me." He looked

at her, his expression serious. "Don't touch me."

Katlin rubbed her neck. She wondered if tomorrow she would have bruise marks on either side of her neck in the shape of his hands. "Don't worry, I learned my lesson."

Ryker closed his eyes and started breathing deeply.

Katlin sat and watched him, trying desperately to fight the urge to lower her consciousness to see what he was doing.

* * * *

It had been over an hour. She sat on the floor, her back against the wall. The gun was in her right hand. Every time she heard a noise outside, she raised the gun and pointed it at the door, trying to remember to breathe. She stared at the door. Any moment, she expected to see it burst open. But no one came.

The room was getting cold. And her muscles protested against sitting on the floor. She got up and walked quietly over toward Ryker. He could've been asleep. But he wasn't, his expression was one of concentration, a frown on his forehead and small beads of sweat trickled down his face. Katlin had an urge to wipe her hand across his forehead, smoothing out the frown and wiping away the sweat. She slowly sat down on the edge of his bed. She studied his face, noticing for the first time a scar just below his lower lip. He had sensual, full lips.

Katlin suddenly realized her hand was stretched out, reaching toward Ryker's face. She pulled her hand back, her face flushed red with embarrassment. *I must be tired. I'm tired and scared out of my mind.* True, she had been staring at Ryker's lips and had an uncontrollable urge to run her fingers across them, but she couldn't believe she had started to act on her thoughts. Besides the threat of being thrown across the room again and almost choked to death, what exactly would she have said to explain her actions? She pictured herself telling him, "Buddy, it's your own fault. You have incredibly sexy lips, and I just had to touch them." Ryker would think she had lost her mind.

And maybe she had. Two days ago, she had a reasonably boring life, a life she had carefully arranged, and a life that held very few surprises. And now suddenly she had been dropped into this crazy world of chaos. She was on the run, with people trying to kill her. Her head was crammed with information she couldn't figure out or get rid of, and instead of worrying about staying alive, she was currently sitting a foot away from a very edible, half-naked man and lusting after him.

She should be guarding the door, listening for sounds outside. She should get off the bed and go back to her post. But she didn't. Instead she stayed where she was and resisted the urge to brush the hair out of Ryker's eyes. He needs a haircut, she thought as she watched him. Sighing loudly, she wondered why there weren't more dangerous, attractive men back in her boring life.

Chapter Six

Ryker needed reinforcements. He had wiped away all energy tracks leading back to himself and Katlin, not unlike taking a broom and brushing away footsteps in the sand, but he could feel the Tracers getting closer. There were two of them, and rather than just randomly scanning for energy strings, they had set up some type of grid system and were systematically scanning out from Las Vegas. And they were not your average Tracers. They were very powerful and worked at a speed Ryker did not think was humanly possible. They were fast, and in minutes, at the rate they were scanning the area, they were going to find Katlin.

Ryker had mere minutes to summon the energy needed to make himself and Katlin invisible, and Ryker was tapped out. He had used up too much energy sweeping the area clean. He didn't have enough left to put up a strong non-traceable defensive wall, a black wall that absorbed energy rather than reflecting it. A black wall was not much of a defense against incoming threats, but it did allow you to appear invisible in the Lower Level. Ryker needed a burst of energy, and the only person around he could get it from was Katlin.

He just couldn't understand why Murray would change his MO and hire this level of professional. It seemed out of character. Someone way up in Vector had to be devoting big time resources to the chase. Murray might not be running the operation at all. Ryker would have to work out that puzzle later. At the moment he needed help, and Katlin was the only one he could turn to for support.

He hoped she was strong enough. Ryker seldom came out from behind the walls he projected, so he had no idea of the scope of her ability. But she was a Screener, which meant she had some kind of training. It was time to find out what Katlin was made of. She seemed tough enough. She hadn't gone completely to pieces on him yet. True, she wasn't cooperating as much as he had hoped. She would have looked good in the black teddy, but still she hadn't looked too bad in his white T-shirt. The woman was really built and had curves on her that would make any man look twice, possessing a set of very long, slim legs that he made the most of ogling while she got ready for bed.

Ryker slowly raised his consciousness and opened his eyes.

He almost jumped out of his skin. Katlin was sitting on the bed with him. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack? What are you doing?"

Katlin, startled by his voice, scooted backward right off the bed. He heard her cry out in pain.

"Are you okay?" he asked, leaning over the bed.

She lay on the floor, sprawled out, her face red, and her expression hard to read. She opened her mouth, and he grimaced expecting her to start crying, but instead, a string of obscenities came flying out of her mouth.

Ryker reached his arm down and offered her his hand. "Yeah, you'll live. Nice mouth--that phrase is a new one on me."

“My brother Colin invented it.” She took his arm and grunted as he pulled her up, back onto the bed.

“He has quite an imagination,” Ryker laughed, “I didn’t think that was anatomically possible.”

Katlin looked a bit like a crazy woman--her hair was sticking up in all directions. He hadn’t realized she had so much red hair. She made herself comfortable next to him on the bed and brushed her hair out of her face, wrestling it back into a braid.

“I told you not to get close to me. I could’ve hurt you.”

She averted her eyes. “It was cold on the floor.”

Ryker suddenly became aware of the fact that he was only wearing a pair of gray boxer shorts and Katlin was inches from him, wearing nothing but a thin, white T-shirt. He could make out the voluptuous curves of her breasts against the thin material. Her long, bare legs wrapped over his.

He could reach out and grab her, pulling her into him. It had been a long time since he had felt that kind of desire rip through him, a long time since he had felt a female body against his. *Katlin is off limits*, he reminded himself. All he wanted or needed from her was the information in her head.

“We don’t have much time. I need your help.” He was angry with himself, and it showed in his voice. Katlin blinked at him in surprise and almost scooted off the bed again. He grabbed her arm before she lost her balance and pulled her closer. Their eyes were only inches from each other.

“What kind of help?” she whispered.

“I need to borrow your energy.”

“Borrow my energy?”

He realized that his hands had come to rest on her thighs. He pushed himself back until he was no longer touching her. “You’ve never done it before?”

She shook her head.

“We don’t have much time. Okay, here is a fast explanation. I need more energy. I can borrow your energy. We can’t combine energy, because then we would crash against each other and cause ourselves a great deal of pain, but I can siphon energy from you, with your permission. That way, the energy becomes a part of mine. Does that make sense?”

“Sort of.” Katlin eyebrows were drawn together in concentration. “What do I have to do?”

“Come lay down next to me,” he laughed at her expression. “No, I’m not going to ravage you. It’s just easier to do if we are physically touching, and it might take a while, so we have to get comfortable. A kink in your neck or an aching muscle can pull on your concentration and force you out of the Lower Level.”

He stretched out his hand and tried to purge any sexual thoughts he had. Katlin stared at him with suspicion written all over her face.

“We don’t have a lot of time here, Katlin, you either trust me or you don’t. But you’d better make up your mind fast. In a few minutes the Tracers will have a lock on your location.”

“I guess I’ll have to trust you.”

Ryker made himself as comfortable as possible on the bed. He lay down, stuffed

a pillow behind his head, and opened his arms inviting Katlin to join him. She settled herself down next to him. Her head rested on his chest, and he pushed away small curls that escaped her braid and tickled his nose and chin.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. I need you to match your breathing to mine. Relax, and lower any defensive walls you have. Just try not to concentrate on me as a person, just concentrate on my breathing.”

Ryker forced himself to relax. He took a few deep breaths. “Whatever happens, don’t panic. Anytime you find yourself focusing on me, try to divert your thoughts. Got it?”

“Got it. Ryker, have you done this before?”

“Sure, it’s a piece of cake.”

Ryker focused on his breathing. He could feel Katlin breathing in time with him. He could feel her body begin to relax against his. He slowly lowered his consciousness. The hardest part was going to be lowering his inner walls. Ryker never liked people getting too close. Even when he was guarding someone, he usually set up a perimeter wall to keep a slight distance between himself and his assignment. There was only one person he had ever allowed inside. Only one person he had ever trusted that much.

Ryker lowered his outer walls and encircled Katlin with brown energy. He could see her energy swirling around her body. He focused on her energy and drew it toward him. Light-blue energy pulled away from her and reached out toward him. A stream formed between the two bodies. Where light blue and brown met they swirled along side each other, until blue was slowly absorbed into brown.

Ryker siphoned off her energy and felt himself begin to re-energize. It was working, but it was taking too much time, and he needed more energy. He would have to go deeper.

Ryker whispered into Katlin’s mind, “Stay calm.” He gathered himself and pushed into her energy. He felt her begin to resist. A shot of pain ran up his arm. “Katlin, relax! Focus on something else.” He could feel her take deeper breaths, and he started matching her breathing. The pain in his arm subsided, and he pushed on.

Ryker went in farther, following paths of energy determined to find a bigger pool of energy to draw on. As he rode waves of blue light, he realized that the streams of energy branched off from a main source. He made his way up the stream, intent on finding the source, when he bounced against a wall.

It was an energy wall, but that was impossible. He was capable of detecting any kind of defense wall, any wall except a black wall. He pushed ahead and smacked into it again. How could she be projecting a wall that he couldn’t detect? It just didn’t make sense. There was no way a person could create a black wall this far inside themselves. He gathered his power around himself and pushed against the wall. It didn’t budge. Time was running out, he needed to get through this wall and find a bigger source of energy. Any minute the Tracers would have their location.

Ryker gathered himself again and pushed, he felt the wall give just a little. He pushed harder, but the wall stayed intact. Ryker was running out of choices. He had to get through the wall—he needed more energy. Ryker considered his options, but he kept coming back to the same solution. He would have to release his inner demons, his anger and hatred.

He spent so much of his time making sure they never surfaced, tucking them far enough away that they didn't interfere with his life or his energy. It had taken years but he had finally learned to control them. They no longer raged throughout his body unchecked, but he was running out of time, and at this point, he didn't see any other choice. How he would fight them back into place was something he would worry about later. Right now, he needed to get through Katlin's inner wall.

Ryker felt physically ill as the anger and hatred rose up from the pit of his stomach. The rage flowed through him unencumbered. He felt the warmth they created as they flowed out giving his mind and body unimaginable strength. This was a dangerous game he was playing. He gathered anger around him, felt the power swell within him and pushed into the wall, tearing it down, shredding it into pieces.

The rage felt so good. The desire to destroy filled him. He could kill her right now. She had no walls left. She was defenseless, and it would take but one thought to destroy her mind and spirit. The desire was so strong to kill, he could feel the hatred pump through his heart, feel the anger crashing over him.

But Ryker was not a man ruled by his emotions, he was a man shaped by his will. He slowly beat back his demons like a lion tamer facing down a deadly cat. He whipped his will against the dark emotions, forcing them back one step at a time. He forced them back into the shadows. It would take more work to get them completely under control, but for now he was back in charge of his mind and his body.

Ryker had been so intent on his own inner struggle that he didn't realize what was happening around him. He found himself in the midst of an energy storm.

He barely had time to react as his mind leaped out of the way of a huge energy bolt. Dark blue energy shot out from massive light-blue storm clouds. He thought he was under attack from an outside source, but then he realized he was still inside of Katlin's energy. This was the force being contained behind her wall. He had never seen anything like it.

He could feel the Tracers closing in. He had run out of time. He grabbed as much energy as he could and threw his mind out of her energy and into the room. What kind of black wall to create? A bubble? No, it wouldn't be strong enough, especially against Tracers as skilled as these. He would have to create a black net. Ryker was still tapped into Katlin's energy, and he could feel it pulsating through him. It was almost too much energy to control, but Ryker had a lot of practice dealing with demons. He ignored the warning flashes going off in his head and concentrated instead on shaping the energy.

He started at one corner of the room and slowly built the first corner of the net. It would have to cover all four walls, the ceiling and the floor. He was not about to take any chances. He meticulously drew the energy out one line at a time. The hardest part was holding the visual of the net in his mind as he created it. It took a lot of power and pinpoint control. Ryker visualized a tightly woven fishing net--he strung it across the room one corner at a time until the room was completely enclosed, and he was exhausted. He barely had enough left in him to raise his consciousness. He broke off his connection with Katlin and opened his eyes.

An ashtray slammed into Ryker's forehead. In one fluid motion, he rolled off the bed, and crouched on the floor with his gun drawn. He could hear thuds and crashes as things flew across the room slamming into walls.

“Katlin, wake up!”

Katlin was sitting up on the bed, hands on either side of her head. She rocked violently back and forth, her face an expression of pain. Her eyes were open, but she seemed unaware of her surroundings. At the sound of her name, her mouth opened as if to scream, but no sound came out. She was still in the Lower Level.

Ryker stood up and started toward her. He ducked as a lamp flew across the room toward his head, smashing into the wall behind him. He dove onto the bed and grabbed Katlin by the shoulders. It was a mistake to touch her, the moment his hands made contact with her skin there was an explosion of color in his head, and he found himself thrown across the room. Katlin was no longer in control of her energy.

Ryker rolled quickly to his left, barely avoiding the table as it slid along the floor. He had to do something and fast. Katlin was broadcasting massive levels of energy out, and he didn't know if his black net was strong enough to contain her. The net had been created to absorb energy from outside, not withhold energy from within. It would keep the Tracers from finding them, but only if he could keep her from shattering it. He had to get Katlin out of the Lower Level before the Tracers detected them or someone got hurt. And since everything in the room aimed itself at his head, he seemed to be the one in immediate danger.

He didn't relish what he was about to do. As a chair came rocketing across the room, he realized he had little choice. He stood up and made a dash across the room. The chair smashed into his legs, and he staggered, but somehow he kept his balance. He made it across the room to the bed. Ryker looked into Katlin's face and noticed for the first time a tiny sprinkle of freckles across her nose. I've no choice, he told himself. He closed his eyes, swung his fist and knocked her out cold.

Ryker sighed in relief as the projectiles flying around the room all dropped to the floor. A flash of panic struck Ryker--what if he had hit her too hard? She was still breathing, and her pulse was still steady, but he only relaxed when he dropped to the Lower Level and felt her strong presence filling the room.

While he was on the Lower Level, he received a horrible shock--his carefully built net had a jagged hole, and Katlin's presence shone through like a beacon for all to see. Whether he fixed the hole or not, anyone looking for them now had a perfect fix on their location. They had to get moving. Fast.

Chapter Seven

The desert rolled by, displaying peaceful, pre-dawn beauty. The road was almost empty. Ryker had only seen one car since he left Tonopah an hour ago. He was not fooled, somewhere behind him an unknown number of wolves were on his trail--and they were closing in.

Katlin slept peacefully in the back seat, her powerful presence making ripples that any Talent would be able to see for miles. It had been a conscious choice to drop his walls and let her ring out for anyone to track, but he was starting to doubt the impulse. He had no idea how many were following, and the idea of taking on all comers was starting to sound foolhardy.

Whether or not it had been a good idea, he was committed--they knew where he and Katlin were, and they were coming.

Ryker spotted a likely road branching off of the main drag and turned off. Almost immediately, the road turned from pavement to dirt. Yet another trail became visible behind them as dust rose into the sky.

Ryker kept driving until he found a wide spot in which to turn around. Facing the car back up the road, he turned the engine off. He looked over at Katlin's unconscious body and took a moment to question his plan and the reasons for it. If the Tracer team that was sent to find Katlin failed, Vector would send someone higher up the chain of command to make the capture.

Katlin was in no danger--as long as Ryker kept winning these battles. A cold shiver went up his spine as he stepped out of the car and walked into the darkness.

He stopped a moment and listened to sound of the small brook running beside the road. He walked slowly toward the sound and barely missed falling twenty feet to the bottom of a wash. He smiled as a plan formed in his mind.

Walking along the road, he found what he was looking for--the road made a sharp turn to follow the ravine, creating a dangerous drop for the unwary. He continued on the road until he found a spot of dense brush to hide himself in and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. Within a few moments, a set of headlights approached. A quick mental scan confirmed his suspicion that the men in the vehicle were Talents and that, thankfully, there were only two. He made a quick check to make sure his walls were holding. Though, with the noise Katlin was making, it was unlikely that they would even be looking for him.

Soon a black SUV roared past the spot where he was hiding. The driver seemed a little over-eager, and the vehicle was moving at a fairly good clip despite the darkness. Ryker focused a stunning mental blow at the driver.

The truck wove erratically, bouncing from one side of the road to the other. Suddenly the headlights vanished, and the taillight tilted at a crazy angle, quickly disappearing with the sound of breaking trees and twisting metal. The engine sputtered to a stop, but the lights could still be seen reflecting up from the bottom of the wash.

Ryker didn't waste any time surveying his handiwork, instead he ran back to the car. He needed to get the away from this spot before the Tracer team recovered enough to be a threat.

Over the mile or two back to the highway, Ryker considered his options. Along the highway were several turns he could make toward California, where they could disappear among the millions of turns and towns. There was safety in crowds. Or perhaps he should continue on to Reno as he'd planned. He stopped on the end of the road to consider.

If he headed toward the dense population of Los Angeles, they might be able to get lost for a while--but eventually they would be found. If they continued north to Reno, Vector would track them down almost immediately--but the long-standing mob truce tied Vector's hands just as much as anyone else. If they did make a move, they would have to keep it quiet enough that the mob bosses who took their R and R in Reno wouldn't get wise. In Reno, he could control the conflict--and maybe even draw out someone high enough in the organization to give him the answers he had been craving.

He looked into the back seat at Katlin's sleeping form. Guilt for using her as bait threatened to overwhelm him--but this was as much to her benefit as it was his. At least, he hoped it was.

With grim resolve, Ryker turned north onto the highway.

* * * *

"What do you mean you can't find them?" The Boss slammed down his fist on the desk.

"Sorry, Boss, the Tracers said they thought they found a trail to follow, but then it disappeared." Creepers took a step toward the door. The Boss had a terrible temper.

"Where did they spot them?"

"In Nevada."

"Damn. Do I have to take care of everything myself!"

Creepers took another step. Two more steps, and he would be out the door.

"Creepers, where do you think you're going?"

"Nowhere, Boss." Creepers stood at attention. So much for a quick exit.

"Pack my bags."

"Going on a trip, Boss?" Creepers asked hopefully.

"Yes, I am." The Boss picked up the phone and started to dial.

"You know where they're going?"

"Of course, I do. There is only one place they could run to that would offer any safety at all--Reno. The old bosses needed a place where they could go to retire, where they weren't in anyone else's territory, and where they didn't have to enforce any territory of their own. If you hit someone in Reno, you immediately were a target for all the bosses. Making a deal with the mob was Vector's first mistake. We had the power to take over their operations entirely--instead, we traded our independence for their protection. Things have changed, it's time to let the old thugs know who's in charge."

Creepers went out the door, a huge grin on his face. "Okay, Boss, don't worry, I'll get everything ready."

"And Creepers?"

"Yes, Boss?" Creepers stuck his head in the doorway.

“Don’t forget to pack your things.”

“My things, Boss?”

“Of course, you idiot. You’re coming with me.”

* * * *

Katlin’s head was throbbing. She tried opening her eyes, but they were sealed shut. She gently pried her right eye open and then her left. The room was too bright, and it felt as if her head was going to explode. She shaded her eyes with her hand and sat up. Where the hell was she? She yawned and immediately cried out in pain. Something was wrong with her chin. She touched her jaw and winced. What had happened to her? The last thing she remembered was lying next to Ryker.

She looked around the room and nothing looked familiar. She was in a different motel room, a very swank room by the looks of it. The room was big, housing two round queen beds covered in red velvet, and a sitting area. It looked kind of like a bordello with bright red wallpaper trimmed in gold and a small sofa done up entirely in zebra print.

And then there was the shower. How had she missed it? It was a huge circle of tile crowned by a large gold hoop suspended from the ceiling, encircled by a see-through curtain. *A shower in the middle of a room--now that’s not something you see everyday*, she thought as she gingerly got up from the bed and walked over to the window.

Pulling back the white drapes, she looked out onto the street. *Must be a large hotel*, she thought, staring down into the street. She had to be about twenty floors up. It looked to be late morning or afternoon. The street was lined with casinos and hotels. Katlin could just make out some kind of arch reaching from one side of the road to the other. It was hard to make out from the angle of the window. It was a sign, and she strained and crooked her neck trying to read the words across it. “Reno, the Biggest Little City.” Reno, another town she had never heard of.

Katlin looked down and realized she was only clothed in a yellow tank top and her underwear. No way could she leave the room dressed as she was, but she searched thoroughly and found no sign of Ryker’s duffel bag. The closet and the drawers were all empty. She could call down to the front desk, but who would she ask for? She didn’t know Ryker’s last name, and it didn’t seem a smart thing to have his name blared across the hotel, especially when they were on the run and hiding out. She found the remote control and switched on the TV. All she could do was sit, wait and plot her revenge.

* * * *

Katlin had been fuming for hours, and the minute Ryker walked in the door, she threw a pillow at his head and stormed across the room.

“What the hell do you mean, leaving me dressed like this, stranded in a hotel room?” She stopped in front of him and poked him in the chest with her finger. “I have no idea where I am.” She poked him again. “Where the hell is Reno?” She slammed her fist into his chest. “I had no idea where you were.”

Ryker caught her fist in his hand an inch from his chest and grinned at her. “I missed you, too.”

Damn he was strong. And he looked good. He hadn’t shaved, and he had a thin layer of stubble on his face.

Ryker held up the bag he was carrying. “Truce--I brought food.”

“What did you bring?” Katlin asked, trying not to sound too interested.

“Fettuccini Alfredo and garlic bread.”

“I bet you forgot desert.”

“What do you want to bet?” Ryker looked down at her bare legs. His eyes sparkled with amusement and something else that she found unsettling.

“Aren’t you hungry?” he asked as he pushed past her and headed for the table. “I had errands to run, and I wanted to make sure you stayed put.” He laughed at her as she picked up the nearest lamp. “Put down the lamp--I came back as fast as I could.”

Katlin reluctantly put it down. She stood with her hand on her hips and stomped her foot. “Ryker, if you don’t tell me right now what we’re doing here, I’m going to scream my head off.”

“Calm down. We have a lot to talk about. You haven’t had anything to eat for eight hours.” Ryker pulled out to-go containers and arranged them on the table. When he opened them, the smell of food was more than Katlin could resist. She was starving. Ryker sat down and started eating. He waved her over.

She stood her ground. “I’m not eating in this outfit.”

“I bought some clothes for you downstairs in one of the shops. They said they would have them sent up to the room within the hour. Until then, there’s nothing else for you to wear.”

“Give me your shirt.”

“What?”

“Your shirt. Give it to me.”

“Okay.” Ryker stood up and started unbuttoning his white collared shirt. He stripped it off slowly and held it out. “If you want it come get it.”

Katlin walked over and stood in front of him. She made a grab for the shirt. He lifted it out of reach.

“Give me your shirt,” she demanded.

He laughed and handed it to her.

She couldn’t concentrate on what she was saying. She hadn’t seen him half dressed in a fully lit room before. He was built. *You could cut cheese on that stomach.* She felt flush. Hot. Way too hot. *Come on, Katlin, buck up. You’ve seen half-naked men before.* Man, he had great biceps.

“Are you okay?” Ryker’s face filled with concern.

“What?”

“Do you feel light-headed? How does your jaw feel?”

“Feels like I was kicked by a horse.” She put his shirt on and buttoned it.

She sat down at the table and sighed with pleasure as she stuffed a fork full of creamy noodles into her mouth. It wasn’t until her third mouthful that she realized Ryker was being very quiet.

“What happened to me?”

“I knocked you out.”

“What?” Katlin choked on her food. Ryker got up and walked behind her, thumping her soundly on the back. He walked into the bathroom and returned with a glass of water.

“Drink this. Are you all right?”

She gratefully took the water and drank it down. Her eyes were full of tears from

coughing. "Stop asking me that! I'm fine. Did you just say you hit me?"

"I had no choice--you were out of control."

"What happened in the motel room?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" he said as he passed her a piece of garlic bread.

"Lying in your arms."

He gave her a grin.

She felt herself blushing and looked down at her food as she answered. "The Tracers were coming, and you needed help."

"Yeah, I ran out of steam and needed more power to create a black net."

She started to ask a question, but he interrupted her.

"Let me get through this. A black net absorbs energy, makes you virtually invisible in the Lower Level. The Tracers were close, and I needed a lot of power. When I tried to get more power, I came across one of your internal walls."

"I lowered all my walls before you started."

"Not this one. It was deep inside, impossible to detect. I had to get past it. I was running out of time. I blew it apart, and all hell broke loose."

"Blew it apart? Ryker, I don't have any internal walls."

"I wasn't mistaken. This was a strong wall, probably impenetrable to anyone else."

"But you got through it?" He couldn't be right. She didn't have that kind of power. She didn't know what kind of game he was playing, but she wished he would knock it off so she could concentrate on her food.

"I'm stronger than most people."

She took a sip of water and stared at him suspiciously. "What do you mean 'all hell broke loose'?"

"Katlin, what do you know about your powers?"

She took a bite of the garlic bread. It was heavenly. "I'm just strong enough to pass the Screeners requirements."

"You're a lot stronger than that."

She stopped eating and stared at him in disbelief. "No, you're wrong. Ryker, I've been tested. My brother Colin is the one with more than one Talent."

"And your parents?"

She looked embarrassed. "My dad was a Rogue."

"A Rogue?"

"You know someone who has more than one strong Talent, or maybe a Talent that doesn't work like everyone else's. They are always a lot stronger than a normal Talent. My dad was one of the first Rogues ever discovered. It was especially disturbing for the program, because he wasn't one of the test subjects, he was a researcher. You may have heard of him--Emerson Campbell." Katlin didn't often tell people she was the daughter of a Rogue. She had learned long ago that they were always disappointed when they found out she hadn't inherited any of his power.

"Your father was Emerson Campbell?" He looked shocked.

"Yes. And no, I didn't inherit any of his power. My brother did inherit multiple Talents, and he is much stronger than I am. But Colin's power is nowhere near my

father's level." She would never forget the look of disappointment on her father's face the day Katlin and her brother were tested.

"So now we know where you get the power from, but that still doesn't explain the wall holding it back."

"Ryker, I don't have much power. I'm an average Screener." She took another bite of fettuccine. "Sure, with hard work I can learn to control what I have." Hadn't her father told her that often enough? *"So you don't have my power, Katie. You can still be the best at whatever you do with a lot of hard work."* She could still hear his voice repeating that phrase. She'd heard it over and over again throughout her childhood.

"Katlin, when I broke your wall apart, I found myself in an energy storm."

She had been so caught up in thoughts of her father that she hadn't been following what he was saying. "What? A storm?"

"Yes, your energy. Katlin I've never seen that kind of strength. Not even in Boxers. I don't know what kind of abilities you have, but you're telekinetic."

"Impossible!" She could not believe it. It couldn't be true.

"You were throwing tables and chairs across the room like they were matchsticks. God knows what the motel manager thought we were doing in the room. I had to throw money at him to make sure he didn't press charges, it looked like we trashed the room."

"Are you sure it was me?"

"Yes."

"How can that be?" Katlin sat stunned and confused. Could it be true? Could she really have the one thing she had spent her whole life wishing for? Could she really have the level of power and Talent her father had possessed?

"We have to figure out how to get you in control of that power. Right now, you can't go into the Lower Level. You're a danger to yourself and everyone around you, because you've got absolutely no control." He leaned over and grabbed another container from his bag. "Don't worry about it now. Enjoy the food. We'll start working on it later." He opened the container, and inside sat two big pieces of New York style cheesecake. "Do you like cheesecake?"

Katlin took one look at the cheesecake and made a grab for it. "I love cheesecake. Ryker, I forgive you for punching me in the jaw." She took a big spoonful of cheesecake and stuffed it in her mouth. "But I still owe you for leaving me stranded in the room," she mumbled, sighing with contentment.

* * * *

Her clothes had finally arrived. She had spent a while pawing through them before she took her bath. She couldn't fault Ryker's taste. She now had in her possession a pair of jeans, two pretty blue cotton collared shirts, three cotton sundresses and a short, black dress that Katlin couldn't wait to find an excuse to wear. The dress had black beads sewn into the top, spaghetti straps and a skirt that flared when she twirled. He had bought her a pair of delicate black sandals, a pair of high heels, and some new running shoes. The running shoes were top of the line, much nicer than the ones she had at home.

Excusing herself after dinner, she grabbed some pamphlets with information about Reno from the bedside table and headed for a hot bath. It felt good to relax, to wind down. She wasn't sure how long they were staying, but she planned to enjoy every

minute of it.

Katlin was in heaven. She was full of cheesecake, and she had run herself a hot bath. She let out a long sigh as she lowered herself down into the water, rested her head against the tub and closed her eyes. She tried to force out everything that was going on around her and concentrate on the warm water and relaxation.

She soaked in the tub for over an hour. When she finally got out, she lathered her skin with moisturizer, courtesy of the hotel. Wrapping herself in a big, fluffy white towel, she headed out the bathroom door.

He was taking a shower. She stopped, frozen in her tracks. The shower curtain was transparent, and she watched him stretch and slowly rub soap over his body. The hot water ran down his body in tiny rivulets.

His body was in profile, and her eyes started at his strong neck and slowly moved down, taking in every inch of him. His biceps bulged as he adjusted the showerhead, and Katlin felt her chest tighten. She felt flushed and raised her hands to her face. Her cheeks felt warm under her fingers. Ryker, unaware that he was under observation, turned and gave Katlin a view of his back. He had broad shoulders and a strong back, tapering down into a narrow waist. And below that waist....

Katlin retraced her steps into the bathroom. She quietly closed the door, and with somewhat weak knees, she sat down hard on the side of the tub. Katlin was suddenly hungry again. But this time not for food. One phrase kept resounding over and over in her head. *I want.*

She stayed in the bathroom another fifteen minutes. She peeped out the door and saw Ryker sitting on the bed, pulling on a pair of black shoes. It was safe to come out. She averted her eyes, embarrassed to look at him, and darted over to the bed.

“Are we going out tonight? What should I wear?”

“There are a bunch of shows on at different casinos. I figured I could give you a tour of the casinos. We could find a show or two to watch, then get a drink, and maybe, a late snack before coming back.” He finished tying his shoe and stood up.

“Isn’t that a little reckless?” she asked.

“Not really, we have a good lead on them, and they’re going to have to hire a new Tracer after that jolt we gave the last pair--and Reno is a safe zone. Reno is a town that seems to attract people who are trained in defensive tactics. Maybe it has something to do with the town’s past. Mob hit men used to live here. The mob was based out of Las Vegas, but rumors are that the hit men all lived quiet lives in Reno until they were called in for a hit. Then they would hop a plane to Vegas, kill someone and hop a plane back home. All I know is, there are a lot of people walking around this place broadcasting loud, defensive walls. It makes it easier for us to blend in.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“Yes, a very good thing. But I need to scout the town out while I have the chance. You’re welcome to stay here, if you prefer.”

“Not on your life!”

Ryker was wearing gray, tailored pants and a soft gray shirt with a high round collar. He was definitely not dressed casually. He watched her fidget over the clothes a few moments. “Yes, wear the fancy black dress.”

She gave him a dazzling smile, snatched the dress off the bed and ran back to the

bathroom. "I won't be that long. I just have to arrange my hair."

"That's what all women say." Ryker spoke out to an empty room as he sat on the bed, grabbed the TV remote and started channel surfing.

* * * *

He had to admit it, she was worth the wait. She looked stunning. She had arranged her hair up, allowing a few long curls to fall loose around her face and down the back of her neck. When Ryker bought the clothes, he had instructed the saleswoman to include any female toiletries she deemed essential. Makeup was a mystery to Ryker, but whatever Katlin had done, he completely approved. Her eyes looked bigger, and a deeper green. Her lips were covered in a shiny red that made him realize for the first time that her bottom lip was fuller than the top. He wondered what it would be like to take that bottom lip between his teeth and gently bite it.

He realized he was standing there staring at her and looking like an idiot. He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts.

"What do you think?" she asked, twirling around in a circle. Her knee-length skirt flared high, revealing her shapely legs.

His eyes stayed riveted on her legs. "Nice. You look nice."

He was annoyed with his body's reaction. It had been too long since he'd been with a woman, and at this point, any woman would give him the same reaction, he rationalized. He took control of his desire, burying it deep inside. "Come on, let's get out of here." He stalked past her and out the door.

* * * *

They started out at their hotel, and before the night was over, they had walked up and down the strip, weaving in and out of casinos. Katlin loved the bright lights, the people shouting in excitement when they won or cursing the gods when they lost. She was even getting used to the noise. Ryker seemed to know his way around the strip. They sat drinking wine while they watched a local band play at one casino, then moved on to another casino and caught a comedian's show.

It was one o'clock in the morning. Katlin should've been exhausted but instead, she felt wired. They walked along the strip. The night was chilly, and Ryker took off his leather jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"There's a place I like to go, late at night. It's a bit of a walk from here, so if you're game, I'll hail a cab."

"I'm not tired yet."

"Great," he said as he waved down a taxi.

* * * *

As they rode in the cab down the street, she realized she was very comfortable in Ryker's company. He was a fun date. He had shown her all the sights while listening to her ramble on about her family and her job. Now, as they sat next to each other in quiet camaraderie, she found herself wondering what it would be like to be in a relationship with a man like Ryker. He was smart, funny and incredibly sexy, but there was a darker side to him that she didn't understand. Sometimes when he looked at her, he seemed so distant, so disinterested. Other times, he just seemed angry. She often wondered what he was thinking.

They stopped in front of a restaurant called Mandeles.

“Are they open this late?” Katlin asked as Ryker helped her out of the cab.

“This is Reno, a lot of places are open twenty-four hours. The restaurant is closed, but the bar is open.”

The bar was empty, with the exception of the bartender. He stood, dressed in a white uniform and red bow tie, behind a long, polished mahogany bar.

The lighting was dim, but Katlin could make out a dozen high-backed booths covered in red velvet. The booths should’ve looked gaudy, but they didn’t. The whole room had a classy feel to it. It was a room that invited intimate conversation over drinks.

The bartender called out from behind the bar. “The usual?”

“Yeah, and a white wine for the lady.”

“Do you come here a lot?” asked Katlin as she followed Ryker across the room.

“No, he’s just an incredible bartender. I come here about once a year, and he always remembers what I drink.”

He picked a booth in the very back of the bar. Katlin slid in next to him and sighed.

“Are you sure you’re not tired?”

She tried to stifle a yawn. “No, not really.” She laughed as she yawned again.

“Okay, maybe a little bit.”

The bartender brought over their drinks.

Katlin stared at the tall glass and its contents of bright orange with a hint of red.

“What is that?”

“A tequila sunrise, made of Tequila, grenadine and orange juice. Ever have one?”

“No, I couldn’t stomach it. I got drunk on tequila once in college.”

He laughed. “I’m having a hard time picturing you as a wild, party animal.”

She batted her eyelashes at him. “I had my moments.” Katlin took a sip of her wine. “When did you know you had Talent?”

“When I turned twenty. How about you?”

“My father was a Rogue. He had me tested when I was eleven. Colin was tested when he was fourteen.”

“It must have been nice having other people in the family with ability.”

“Don’t your mother and father have Talents?” she asked.

“No, it skipped a generation. There were rumors in the family about my grandfather, but no one knew for sure if they were true. That was, until I started showing signs.”

“It must have been hard, I mean, growing up like that.”

“I survived. What I can’t imagine is having a Rogue for a father. They aren’t that many people around with that much power and multiple Talents. He must have been sought after.”

“He could have had any job he wanted, but instead of using his abilities, he chose to stay in research.”

“Not much money in research.”

“Dad was never interested in money. He usually had his head stuck in a book, working out some problem he was solving in the lab.” Her fingers wrapped around the glass, and she stared down at its contents. “He was a great man, but sometimes I wish he had just been a normal dad. There was a tremendous amount of pressure on us to live up

to his abilities.” Suddenly she realized she didn’t want to think about her father or her family. She wanted to instead concentrate on the good-looking man seated at her side. A man whose eyes had turned almost smoky gray in the candlelight. A question that had been on her mind lately popped out of her mouth before she could stop it. “Are you married?”

He choked on his drink. “What?”

It was apparently the last thing he had expected her to ask, by the expression on his face.

“Married? You know--a wife, kids, a dog, and maybe, a house in the suburbs.” She gave him her best innocent look.

“I have a dog.” He was starting to look annoyed.

“Are you otherwise attached? Ryker, are you a man of action like James Bond, with a girl at every port?” She smiled at him sweetly. She knew she was pushing his buttons and making him angry, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself.

“No.” His voice was low.

“So, you could say you’re available?”

The anger left his face and instead he looked sad. “I’m not looking for a relationship.”

She felt her heart lurch in her chest. He looked suddenly very human and lonely. She reached out and put her hand over his. “Why not?”

He shook off her hand and finished his drink in one long gulp. “Enough questions.” He waved over the bartender. “Another round.”

* * * *

They’d both had too much to drink. Katlin was not much of a drinker and four glasses of wine was enough to make her very tipsy. Ryker had had six tequila sunrises. She wouldn’t have known he was drunk, except he kept whistling and smiling at her. They hailed a taxi, and somehow, made it back to the hotel in one piece.

Ryker opened the door, and Katlin stumbled into the room.

“I’m beat,” she said as she pulled pins out of her hair. Her hair fell around her shoulders and down her back in a cascade of curls. She could barely keep her eyes open. The bed looked so inviting, she wanted to lay her head on the pillow and go to sleep. But she had to get out of her dress first. She fumbled with the zipper on the side.

“I can’t get this off.” Her words were slightly slurred.

She felt Ryker behind her. She leaned back and rested against him. He felt solid. His hands slowly encircled her waist. She giggled, thinking that at any moment, he might spin her around and kiss her, but instead, he leaned over and pulled down her zipper.

“Thanks,” she said, stepping away from him.

Didn’t the man desire her? Katlin couldn’t understand it. She had never had a problem attracting men. Her first week working as a Screener, she had turned down four offers for dinner and one offer for a quickie in the supply room. Did the man have ice in his veins?

She didn’t know why she did it--she wasn’t usually that brazen, but she was slightly drunk and mad that he didn’t seem to be interested in her. She stripped off her dress, first one shoulder, then the other, until it dropped to the floor around her feet. Stepping out of the dress, she faced Ryker wearing only a lacy black bra, black

underwear, black stockings and a black garter belt with a pink rose on the front. Katlin stood and stretched, reaching under her hair and raising it up. She gave him her best seductive smile. "I'm not really that tired."

Ryker stood completely still, staring at her, an odd expression on his face she couldn't read.

"Well, Ryker, are you tired?"

Without saying a word, he turned and walked out the door.

"Veins full of ice!" she yelled into an empty room. She stumbled onto the bed and fell fast asleep.

Chapter Eight

Ryker was trying to wake her up. Katlin just snuggled deeper under the covers. It was too early, and she was too hung-over. Her stomach was doing flip-flops, and her head felt like it might explode. Ryker, in a final act of desperation, yanked all her covers off and dragged her bodily from the bed. She sat on the floor in nothing but her underwear and swore at him. He ignored her and walked across the room and into the bathroom. Minutes later, he emerged with a glass of water and three aspirins. She took them from his hands, cursing him before she swallowed aspirins. He gave her a wide grin and walked over to the window.

She finally got tired of sitting on the floor. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and crawled into the bathroom. She was beyond hung-over, and even after a shower and changing into a pair of jeans and a clean shirt, she felt awful.

Ryker was not in a sympathetic mood. The minute she walked out of the bathroom, he demanded, "We need to start working on controlling your power."

"I think I'm going to die."

"You'll live."

"Ryker, I need coffee!"

"You need to get control of your powers."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Come over here and stand in front of me."

She walked over and stood in front of him, trying to suppress an urge to take a swing at him. "Okay, now what?"

"Turn around." He placed his hands on either side of her shoulders. "Now, close your eyes and concentrate."

She tried to focus on her breathing, but her temples were pounding. "I can't do this!"

"Try it again!" Ryker demanded.

"I'm tired, and I can't do it."

"Look, concentrate. Relax. It's not working, because you don't trust me." Ryker was standing only inches from her, and she could feel the heat of his breath against her neck.

"'You don't trust me,' says the man who plans to keep me alive just long enough to get the info out of my head. What are you planning to do with the money, anyway, Ryker?" Katlin scowled at him. "Buy a boat? Go on vacation?"

"Do you want to try this or not?"

Katlin was hungry, hung-over and still pissed at him for rejecting her last night. "It's too early in the morning, my head hurts, and I haven't had my coffee yet!"

"Room service is bringing up breakfast, but until then, let's try something else. Turn around."

"Why?" She stood with her arms crossed, a stubborn expression on her face.

“You fall backward, and I’ll catch you.”

“You’ve got to be joking.” She was still having trouble opening both eyes in the bright light.

“No, it’s a way to get someone to trust you.”

She reluctantly turned her back on him. “You promise you won’t drop me?”

“Swear on my mother’s grave.”

She looked over her shoulder. “Is your mother dead?”

He smiled. “No.”

“You are not helping me trust you.” She scowled at him.

“Sorry. Are you ready?”

Katlin wished her head didn’t feel three times its normal size. “You’re sure you’re going to catch me?”

“Yes.”

Katlin started falling backward. There was a loud bang at the door. Ryker started to catch her, but the bang distracted him, and they both ended up in a tangle on the floor. He twisted her body mid-air and cushioned her fall.

“Who do you think that is?” Katlin asked. She was lying on top of him, suddenly fully alert.

“Probably our breakfast.”

Another knock and a woman’s voice rang out. “Housekeeping!” When there was no answer, they could hear her key in the lock. But the safety lock stopped her from entering. Realizing someone was still in the room and didn’t want housekeeping, the maid’s cart rumbled away making its way down the hall.

Katlin was still lying on top of him. Her eyes went to his lips. She couldn’t help herself this time, her hand went to his face, and she brushed her fingertips across them. She looked down at him, and she could see her desire mirrored in his eyes.

“Damn.” Ryker swore under his breath as he grabbed a handful of her hair and forced her head down, pressing his lips into hers.

Katlin felt the fire. It spread across her mouth and traveled down the length of her body. Ryker suddenly grabbed her tight and rolled. She found herself below him, the weight of his body crushing hers. He raised himself up slightly. She could breathe again, but as she looked into his eyes, she grabbed his face with both hands and pulled him back.

He kissed her harder, pulling her closer, holding her tighter. Her arms went automatically around his neck.

She felt the heat of his hand through her clothes as it moved up her body, slowly making its way along her leg until his fingers reached under her shirt and caressed her stomach.

She felt a jolt of energy where his skin touched hers. His touch seemed to set her skin on fire. His hand blazed a trail along her rib cage. One finger suddenly brushed across her breast and caused the breath to catch in the back of her throat. A voice in her head was warning her to stop. She didn’t really know this man. His intentions toward her were far from noble. He didn’t care about anything but the information she had crammed somewhere in her head. Once he got what he wanted, he would be rid of her, handing her over to whatever stranger offered the highest price. What the hell was she

doing?

His fingers rubbed across the fabric of her bra tantalizing her nipples, and her body seemed to take on a mind of its own. She felt herself arching up, and a moan escaped her lips.

God, who cared? It felt so good.

He unbuttoned her shirt. His lips gently skimmed her throat as he undid another button, exposing more of her skin. His lips trailed slowly after his fingers.

She no longer cared what she was doing. Forget reason. Forget sense. Her mind and body were now only focused on pleasure. And he was definitely delivering.

Her shirt was now completely undone, and Ryker stopped for a moment and looked at her as if asking for permission. The only thing Katlin wanted at the moment was to feel more of his body against her naked skin. She felt flushed, feverish. She pushed her hands under his shirt. Her fingers skimmed across his chest, and she felt him tremble.

He smiled and ran his hand down her throat. He lowered his head and started kissing her bare shoulder. Not taking his lips from her body, he pulled the strap of her bra down, exposing her breast.

She felt suddenly vulnerable. She couldn't do this. Make love to a stranger. She was lying on the floor of a hotel room half naked, with a man who admitted he didn't want a relationship. She had to stop it now.

His tongue slowly coaxed her tiny pink bud until it went rock hard under his skillful mouth. She gasped, and pure heat shot through her whole body.

A lamp suddenly flew across the room and smashed against the wall.

"What the...?" Ryker's head shot up.

"Don't stop." Her voice came out breathless.

"The lamp?"

"I don't care," she said, grabbing his head and pulling his mouth back against hers.

He pushed away from her. "We shouldn't be doing this. You're not in control of your energy, and when you start to lose focus ... it's too dangerous. Katlin, you just smashed a lamp."

She was having trouble concentrating on what he was saying. Her fingers reached out, she wanted him close to her, touching her.

Ryker looked at her and his eyes narrowed. "We can't do this." His voice was husky, still tinted with desire. She started to reach out to him again, but he moved away from her.

Someone started pounding on the door.

"Has to be room service with breakfast," he told her as he ran his hand through his hair. His eyes wouldn't meet hers.

Katlin pulled her bra-strap back onto her shoulder. She sat on the floor, her heart pounding wildly and watched him answer the door. She buttoned her shirt and straightened her hair, and tried for the life of her to figure out what had just happened. Why had he turned away from her?

* * * *

Katlin sat on the bed, fuming while Ryker walked around acting like nothing had

happened. Room service brought in breakfast, and Ryker spread it out on the table, sat down and started eating.

He had to do some fast talking to explain the broken lamp. Of course, he blamed it on her, saying she had lost her balance and knocked it off the table. The bastard. She glared at him all the while the maid cleaned up.

Ryker didn't seem to notice. He just ignored her and concentrated on his food. Katlin tried to get him to talk to her, but after three attempts, she gave up on conversation, and they ate their breakfast in an uncomfortable silence.

She had lost control and allowed a man basically a stranger to seduce her. She had all but thrown herself on him like some oversexed teenager. Katlin was embarrassed and mortified, and was having problems looking at him in the eye. Instead she spent most of the meal with her eyes glued on her food.

The rest of Katlin's day was spent watching TV. Ryker had made a beeline for the door as soon as breakfast was over. He muttered something about running errands and being back late as the door slammed shut.

Whatever mysterious errands he was on, they took all day and most of the night. He came through the door around midnight. Katlin peeked at the clock before turning over and pretending to be asleep. She hadn't been able to get to sleep. Every time her mind drifted, she had visions of Ryker standing in the shower, his body gleaming with water. She could not seem to purge his image from her mind.

* * * *

It had been twenty-four hours since they had been rolling around on the floor, and still this morning, Ryker didn't seem to be having any problem ignoring her. Katlin sat watching his back as he talked on the phone. She had a strong desire to pick something up and throw it at his head. Maybe then he would actually look at her, instead of looking through her.

"I can't believe it!" Ryker slammed down the receiver.

She wondered if he realized how sexy he looked when he got annoyed. "What?"

He paced the floor. "He can't be here for another two days."

At least he was talking to her. "Who?" Katlin's eyes followed him as he went back and forth across the room. He reminded her of one of those big lions at the zoo, pacing restlessly in its cage.

"A friend of mine, David. The guy who got me in this mess." He turned and scowled at her.

"Don't glare at me. I've no idea what you're talking about." Her only desire was to keep the conversation going, so she asked the first question that came to mind.

"What's keeping your friend from coming right away?"

"He didn't say."

"You're telling me we're stuck here for two more days?"

"Yeah."

"What the hell will we do for two days?" A few suggestions suddenly popped into Katlin's mind--Ryker towering over her as she lay across cool white sheets, his hands running across her naked body. Ryker's soapy hands skimming up and down her body in the shower. The images ran through her mind, and desire coursed through her body. She forced the images away and took a moment to compose herself before she

answered. "Sit by the pool and drink margaritas?" she finally suggested. She was shocked to realize her mouth was dry, and her hands were still trembling. No man had ever affected her in this way before.

He gave her a bland look. "We're not on vacation."

"It's been a long time since I went on a vacation. Don't be a spoilsport." She tried to keep her voice level. It was bad enough she couldn't seem to control her emotions around him, no way did she want Ryker to realize what was going on inside her.

"We could spend the time working on your newfound power. It would be better if we did it someplace where there aren't any lamps to smash."

At least he has the decency to look uncomfortable at the comment. Maybe his veins weren't completely made of ice.

Ryker got up and started pacing again. "We can get some sandwiches and a cooler and head out into the desert. It's probably the best place to practice."

"The desert--you mean with snakes and scorpions running around?"

He smiled at her. "I promise I'll protect you."

"Very funny." She did not like the idea of going out in the middle of nowhere, especially a nowhere full of creepy crawlies. It was true she had spent her early years living in Vegas, but she was a city girl and very seldom had she ever ventured out into the desert, except on occasional outings with her parents "What do I need to take? I mean, to survive out there?"

"This time of year, just a couple of bottles of water, a hat and some suntan lotion. Wear your jeans and a long-sleeved shirt."

"Gee, just how I wanted to spend my day."

"Don't look so crushed. Why don't we compromise? We can go to Pyramid Lake. It's a weekday, so the back side of the lake should be deserted. You can take your bathing suit and go swimming."

"Is it a nice lake? Does it have a beach?" she asked.

He laughed, "A great beach, but not where we're going. Think of a big hole with water stuck in the middle of the desert."

"Oh, that sounds lovely," she answered sarcastically.

"If you don't like the idea, we could forget the lake and just find a piece of desert to practice on."

She would take the lake. Anything was better than being cooped up in the room all day. "No, the lake sounds good. I'll have to buy a bathing suit downstairs."

He looked at his watch. "We can get one on our way out of town. Get your stuff together, and let's get going."

Chapter Nine

This was not Katlin's idea of a lake. A lake was supposed to be full of blue, sparkling water, surrounded by shady trees and a white, sandy beach. Ryker hadn't been kidding. Pyramid Lake was set out in the middle of nowhere, and it looked like someone had decided to dig a big hole and fill it with water. But there were sloping mountains on one side of the lake, a lake of green water that stretched for twenty miles. On the eastern shore, she spotted a grouping of ancient-looking pointy rocks, and scattered all around the lake, were big boulders with streaks of tan and gold. It was beautiful in a brown, desert sort of way, she thought as she held on to the door handle.

She was getting tired of being jostled around in her seat. At some point during his mysterious errands, Ryker had traded in the green Cutlass for a red pick-up truck. They had been driving for half an hour, which was fine until they turned onto the dirt roads. Roads littered with rocks and bumps. Twice Katlin had bounced so hard in her seat, she flew up and hit her head on the ceiling of the cab. She rubbed her head and glared at him, "Ryker, you couldn't find a truck with seat belts?"

"It does have seat belts."

She pulled on hers and tried to get it to reach all the way to its interlocking counter part. It didn't reach. "I mean ones that actually work."

"What, you don't like old trucks?"

"They're swell," she said, rubbing the top of her head.

Ryker pulled the truck up to the edge of the lake and turned and smiled at her. "We are here."

There was no one around. The desert foliage was sparse, just stretches of dirt littered occasionally with yellow straw. She assumed it was some type of grass. Every few feet there grew a gray, spiky bush. She had forgotten how empty the Nevada desert was. It was nothing like the deserts in her current home state of Arizona. There were no cacti, no heavy underbrush and not a desert tree in sight.

"I forget--what do you call this?" Katlin asked, kicking at one of the gray spikes. It looked more like a weed than a bush.

"Those are sagebrush."

"Great beach, Ryker. If I want to lie out, I can what? Put my towel straight on the dirt, between the sagebrush and the boulder?"

Ryker pulled down the tailgate of the truck. "Or you can lie on the truck bed."

"Gee, both those choices sound really attractive." Sitting in the room, ordering room service and watching TV sounded pretty good right now.

"We should work on your control first. I don't know why, but it's easier to manipulate energy on an empty stomach." He walked over and grabbed her hand. "Are you ready to give it another try?"

She tried to ignore the tingling sensation where his skin met hers. "Let's get this over with."

Katlin didn't want to admit she was nervous. She couldn't fathom how she could have more power than she was aware of. It didn't make any sense. Katlin believed Ryker when he told her about the energy. She couldn't come up with a scenario where he would benefit from lying about it, but at the same time, she couldn't imagine having the kind of power her father had. Her father struggled every day with his abilities. Being a Rogue meant that you were always different. Even within the subculture, you were an outsider. It also meant you were a person constantly fighting to keep your ability under strict control. A Rogue didn't have the option of a good, old-fashioned temper tantrum. Not without someone around them getting seriously injured.

"Like we were trying last time. Turn around, and I'll put my hands on your shoulders." He spun her around, his hands coming to rest lightly on her shoulders. "I'll set up a defensive wall around the two of us. Then you slowly lower your consciousness. Hopefully my wall will give you that edge you need to rein in the energy so you can try to take charge of it. Try to get it to bend to your will." Ryker took a couple of deep breaths. He gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. "Katlin, relax. There is no one that you can hurt out here."

"Except you."

"You can't hurt me as long as our energy is interlaced. As long as I'm in contact with you, I'll be fine."

"Can't we do this another day?" she asked. She didn't know if it was because his hands were on her, or she was just nervous, but her stomach was doing flip-flops.

"Why? Do you think it will get any easier, waiting?" he whispered in her ear.

Her heart beat faster. "No, we might as well do it now." She looked down at her feet. "What about scorpions?"

"What about them?"

"I'm standing on dirt here, next to rocks. How do I know one won't crawl up my leg?"

She thought she heard him mumble something that sounded like "city girl" as he started kicking small stones away from her feet.

"There how's that? Not a stone near you. I promise to keep half an eye open for scorpions running toward your legs."

She could tell by his voice that he was laughing at her. "Shut up. It's not funny. I'm not crazy because I don't want to stand in the middle of the desert. What about snakes? Do you think there are any snakes around?"

"If there were we would hear them rattle."

"Rattle?" She spun around. "Can't we do this up on the bed of the pickup truck?"

"Katlin, if a scorpion can crawl up a rock, it can certainly crawl up the side of a pickup truck." He spun her back around. "Stop complaining and concentrate. Stalling is just going to make you more nervous and piss me off. Now wait until I tell you I'm ready. Then lower your mind. Remember to try and stay in control."

She tried to concentrate. Deep breaths, she kept repeating to herself. Relax, come on, relax. When she reached the point where she was no longer focusing on her surroundings, she heard Ryker whisper, "Now."

Katlin took a deep breath and lowered her mind.

* * * *

Ryker thought he was prepared for the force of her energy, but he wasn't. An energy storm exploded out, hitting his wall in full fury, and the impact almost knocked him physically on his back. His wall held, barely. He could see it in his mind, beginning to crack under the force of her power. He gathered himself and pushed out, forcing her energy back and repairing the wall. She was stronger than he remembered, stronger than anyone he had ever come across.

She might be the daughter of a Rogue, he thought trying to repair another spider web of cracks that appeared, but it was not in his own blood to back away from a challenge.

As the strain of maintaining the wall increased, sweat poured down from his forehead. He felt a small flow of energy come up from the earth into his legs. In desperation, he drew on the energy in the earth, shaping it with his will, pushing it out into his wall. It took all his concentration to manage the huge stream of power. He seldom used the flow from the earth, the energy was too hard to contain or wield, but he didn't have much of a choice. More small cracks appeared, even as he reinforced the existing ones. He had to maintain his wall. The power moved through his limbs, projecting out from his fingertips. His body became frozen in place as he sucked in the power from the earth and pushed it out with all his might into his wall. He couldn't keep this up--he was starting to feel the strain as his arms tingled, and his thoughts became unfocused.

A large crack formed at the top and slowly opened up. Ryker called on himself to answer the challenge. He was a man who faced down any opponent. He would and could conquer any challenge. Failure was not something he allowed himself to consider. He felt his blood warm to the cry of battle, and a renewed burst of energy flew out. Ryker's wall held firm.

* * * *

Katlin was lost in her mind. She was in the middle of a vicious wind of blue energy whipping around her, throwing her back every time she tried to stand. Ryker had told her she had to learn how to control her power, but she realized he was insane. It was impossible. There was no way she could control this kind of power. Nothing in her training covered this.

Katlin decided to raise herself out of the Lower Level, when she heard Ryker shouting over the wind. "Focus, control. Get control!"

She wanted to ignore him, wanted desperately to turn her back on the whole thing and raise her mind. So what if she was never able to lower her consciousness? Lots of people walked around everyday without any special abilities. She would have to quit her job as a Screener, but again who would care? Katlin could get a job doing something that didn't need any special Talent. She could become a regular person, living a regular life. The need to flee was so strong in her. All she had to do was turn and run. It would be easy, it would be smart, but she couldn't do it.

Her father had hated quitters, and he'd tried to teach her to always face her fears and challenges straight on. Her father would expect her to be strong. Tears streamed down her face. She missed her father so much. She'd never imagined how much it would hurt to lose him. Sometimes she could still hear his voice in her mind. Hear him

going on and on about his research, or screaming encouragements from the sideline as she ran a race.

She could almost see his face and imagine his voice telling her what he always did when she came to him, worried he would be disappointed in her because she had failed at something. Somehow he always knew before she walked through the front door. He always had a glass of milk poured and a plate of chocolate chip cookies set on the table. He would pat her back as she ate and tell her, “Katie, I’m always proud of you. You tried your best. That’s all anyone can do.”

Maybe she couldn’t do this, maybe she would fail miserably, but at least she had to give it her best try.

Determined, she made her way to her feet. Fighting against the wind as it swirled around her, she realized she’d been running since her father died. Running from her family, running from her future, and now, she was running for her life. She raised her arms up, her hair whipping viciously against her face. She screamed into the storm, “I’m Katlin Ann Campbell, and I’m not running anymore!”

Chapter Ten

Colin wasn't sure that Katlin was even in the area, but after hunting through map after map, he finally came across Tonopah, Nevada. He'd been driving for two days straight when he finally reached the outskirts of Tonopah. Too exhausted to continue, he'd found the closest hotel and slept for twelve hours straight. When he woke up he spent a precious few hours walking around the town trying to get a feel for Katlin.

Working with the Sight was always hit or miss. It was like trying to hold sand in your hand. The tighter your grip, the more sand was forced through your fingers. All Colin could do was try to relax and concentrate on his sister. He finally decided she'd left town. He didn't believe she would head back toward Vegas, so he took off in the opposite direction down the highway. Colin forced himself to drive on autopilot, trying to get his gut to lead him in the direction she had taken. He drove forever through the empty desert, until he found himself in Reno.

Now that he was here, he was at a loss what to do next. He drove up and down the strip five or six times hoping to get a flash of intuition, anything to help him pinpoint her location, but no such luck. Finally he gave up and found a place to park his car. Maybe he would have better luck on foot. He started walking up and down the rows of casinos and hotels, in and out of each and every establishment.

Reno's strip didn't even compare to Vegas. In Vegas, you had ten miles of road lined with monster casinos and hotels, each possessing a sign that, when lit by hundreds--maybe thousands--of light bulbs, could be seen for miles. Reno's strip was only two miles long. The casinos were crammed in, one after another, along the street. It had a different feel from Vegas. In Vegas, the air sizzled with excitement--everything seemed bigger than life. Reno was older, tired.

Colin walked down the sidewalk, trying to ignore the feeling of desperation and panic that rose from the pit of his stomach. What would he do if he couldn't find her? What if she had already left and was back on the road? Colin forced himself to stay calm. He had to find her. He refused to accept any other scenario.

Suddenly Colin's surroundings blurred, and he lost his balance. That's how it always happened with him, the visions would come on fast and furious, taking him by surprise. His arm flailed out, and he touched metal. *It must be a lamppost*, he thought as he grabbed it and pulled himself against it to keep from falling. He barely had time to press his cheek against the cool metal before the visions began.

Colin tried to concentrate on each image as it flashed across his mind, a black and white picture capturing one moment in time. It could be something that happened in the past or something that would happen in the future. He knew from experience that he wouldn't be able to make sense of them until later when he had time to sit down and examine each one. He would have to sort through them, trying to seek answers, like putting pieces of a puzzle together. Seldom did he have a vision that had enough clarity that he could figure out its meaning without careful scrutiny. He had trained himself over

the years to concentrate and log the details for later retrieval.

Suddenly an image stood clear in his mind--of Katlin sitting in a booth across from a man. Colin recognized the man from Katlin's dream. It was the man he had knocked out in Katlin's dream, the man whom Katlin was traveling with. Colin had barely enough time to make out each detail before the next image flashed across his mind. Now he saw a motel room. Katlin sat on the floor, her back against the wall, a gun in her hand. And then there was another vision of Katlin running, her clothes torn, blood covering her blouse.

Colin's blood went cold as fear shot through his body. What if she had been injured? Colin had always been able to feel Katlin's pain. The time she broke her arm, his had throbbed in sympathy, and when she fell and broke her front tooth, he had almost passed out from the agony. Colin decided there was no way Katlin could've been injured severely, or he would have felt it.

Before he had time to blink the vision was gone, replaced with yet another. Katlin now stood in the desert, surrounded by a storm of flashing lights, her arms both raised toward the sky. It didn't look like any lightning storm he had ever seen before.

And another blur of white and black and then a vision of Katlin's body bent over a man lying in the street. Blood covered the man's hair and pooled out onto the pavement.

As suddenly as they had started, the visions stopped, and Colin came to and found himself surrounded by a crowd of curious bystanders. They were watching him, probably wondering why the redheaded man was clutching the lamppost.

"Dizzy spell," he mumbled as he quickly walked away.

He needed to find a quiet place to sit down and go over the images. The only thing he was certain of was that Katlin was close by. He felt it in his gut. After he went over the visions, he would just have to keep walking up and down the strip until his radar hit. Eventually, he would be able to track her down, and when he did, he had a list of questions he was going to demand that she answer. First, who was this man she was traveling across the country with? And second, what in blazes was going on?

* * * *

Katlin had finally gained control of the storm. It was an unbelievable feeling to move her arms and feel the lightning and energy move with her. Tiny sparks of blue light streamed down her arms, shooting out of her fingertips. She was suddenly surrounded by gentle breezes as the squall raged around her.

She stood in the center of the gale, the eye of the storm, no longer afraid of the clouds of energy swirling around her. They belonged to her, and she controlled them like the moon controlled the ocean's tides. She twirled around and watched the sprinkles of lights twirl with her. Laughing out loud, she watched lights of blue streaked across the sky. She lifted her hands, and lightning followed her as power streamed out of her hands and filled the air around her. The air was full of electricity. It buzzed gently against her skin, and small tendrils of her hair rose up, static electricity, just like when she was a kid, and her brother held her down and rubbed a balloon against head.

The storm was wild and beautiful. And it was all hers. She was finally in control of it, but she wanted more, to feel more power. She wanted to see bigger sparks of light dance around her. Bracing herself she raised her arms and forced her mind out, calling

for more energy. It shot into her from the sky, filling her body and warming her blood. Her storm expanded, blue clouds grew larger, and wide streaks of dark blue lightning lit the sky. The energy was intoxicating, and she felt drunk with power and joy. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck at her feet. It was white, not blue. The world around her spun out of control, and she fell.

* * * *

Ryker barely had time to react. Suddenly Katlin's energy was growing, pushing hard against his wall. The wall was going to break. He quickly expanded it. As long as her storm stayed within his wall, she would have an easier time trying to control it, but the strain of keeping her power in check was starting to show.

A tingling sensation ran down his legs, his thoughts became slightly fogged--both were signs of low energy. He didn't know if Katlin was having any success controlling the storm, he couldn't take his focus off his wall long enough to check. All he could do was maintain the wall and hope that she got control so he didn't have to knock her unconscious again. It was not an experience he wanted to repeat.

His thoughts drifted again. If he wanted to keep the wall intact he had little choice but to get angry. It didn't take much to evoke the anger, as it was not far from the surface this time. All he needed to do was picture his wife Carolyn's too-pale face twisted in pain as she lay dying in the street. The rage grew, and the anger fueled his body. It was so much easier controlling his energy and calling on more when he used the rage. It always cut like a sharp knife through his body, sharpening his thoughts, keeping all other emotions at a distance. He saw the world so much more clearly when he was in full rage. He felt invincible, stronger, faster and capable of dealing with any crisis.

And with the great power came a loss of humanity. He didn't care, he didn't love--those two emotions could not share the same space with the anger and hate. It made Ryker dangerous, a weapon capable of inflicting pain on the people around him. Not just those who deserved it, but also those who didn't. He would never consciously inflict pain on the people closest to him, but he had learned the hard way, that in this mode, he was not always capable of controlling himself and his actions.

And there had been a time when he hadn't cared about anyone. He used the power the negative emotions brought, his inner demons, to do his job. He stopped caring about people entirely and isolated himself. His work became his life. He pushed away all his family and friends, spent every moment allowing the hate and anger to flow through his veins unchecked.

He'd been heading down a road to self-destruction when he had met Carolyn. She had changed everything for him, and he had forced his demons back, kept them at bay for her. And after she was gone, he'd let them run loose throughout his body, unable to control himself, until one day he had made up his mind to put them back under lock and key, because he finally realized that was what Carolyn would have wanted. The power of her love affected him even though she was no longer beside him.

It had been a struggle, finding his balance again, one he almost didn't win. But he was stubborn and determined, and there were very few things he couldn't accomplish once he set his mind to it. He had allowed himself once again to feel compassion, he allowed himself to feel humanity, but he would not allow himself ever again to love. Once was enough. Once was too much. He was never going to go through that again.

He kept expanding his wall as the energy storm grew more powerful. Katlin must be in control of the storm, because it was still growing. But he suddenly realized her storm was not the only storm raging. Outside the Lower Level, he could see clouds gathering. Dark gray storm clouds covered the lake and lightning flashed in the sky. Katlin's storm kept growing until it hit the storm above, and when it did, there was a loud clap of thunder and a huge bolt of lightning struck down from the sky only a few feet from where they stood.

Katlin suddenly collapsed, and Ryker moved fast, but not fast enough to stop her fall. She hit the ground hard, and he felt a moment of panic as he knelt over her body and placed his head on her chest. Relief washed over him as he heard her heart beating strongly. He allowed himself to breathe again as he gently placed her head in his lap.

Rain poured down from the clouds, and Ryker leaned over Katlin, trying to shelter her body from the storm. He told himself he did it because he needed the information in her head. He told himself he was right in lying to her about his reason for taking the Halster job. He told himself he didn't care what happened to her, but he knew somewhere down deep that he was a liar.

* * * *

Someone was throwing tiny pebbles of sand at her face. It took Katlin a moment to realize she was no longer standing, and that it wasn't sand, but water splashing against her skin. She opened her eyes, and Ryker's face hovered over her.

"Finally you're awake."

"What's going on?" She realized she was lying in the dirt, her head resting in his lap. "Did you hit me again?"

"No, you passed out. It just happened, and I didn't have time to break your fall. How does your head feel?"

"Good. It's my ankle that hurts." She sat up and winced as pain shot up her leg.

"You must have twisted it when you fell. But your head feels, okay?" His hands went through her hair, feeling her scalp for bumps.

She swatted his hands away. "Nothing is wrong with my head. It's my ankle that's killing me."

"Let me help you." He stood and reached down, slowly pulling her to her feet. She wobbled before putting all her weight on one foot.

Ryker lowered himself and wrapped her arm around his shoulder. "Can you put weight on it?"

"Ouch! Yes, but it hurts."

"Can you wiggle your toes?" he asked.

"Yes."

"It's probably not broken. You just sprained it. Take the weight off it and lean against me. I'll get you back to the hotel and see if they have a doctor who makes house calls."

She realized for the first time that she was soaked. The rain had been drizzling before, but it started falling harder. "It's raining."

"Yeah, I think your energy attracted a storm."

She looked over at the lake--there were huge storm clouds covering it. The lake's water had turned dark, almost black. Waves skimmed across its surface. "I don't think I

want to go swimming now.”

He laughed. “How about a hot bath and some cold ice for your ankle when we get back?”

“That sounds good.”

He helped her over to the bed of the truck. “Here, sit on the tailgate. I keep a bag with some emergency things in whatever vehicle I’m driving around. I think I have some bandages we can use to wrap your ankle up, to keep the swelling down until we can get ice on it.”

She wiped her wet hair back off her face. Her clothes were soaked and clinging to her skin. Ryker came back with the bandages and started wrapping her ankle. A big bolt of lightning struck down about a hundred feet away.

“It’s lightning again. We better get inside the truck.”

He helped her to her feet and supported her weight while she hobbled to the passenger’s seat. He carefully lowered her in. She sat in the seat, water dripping down her face--she was beyond drenched. She leaned forward and squeezed out as much water as possible from her hair onto the floor mat.

Ryker got in and shook his head back and forth sending water splashing across the cab.

Katlin put up her hands, trying to protect herself from the spray of water. “Hey, I’m wet enough.”

He gave her a sheepish grin. “Sorry.” He put the key in the ignition and started the truck. Almost immediately the engine made a coughing noise and went silent. He tried again. The same coughing noise and the engine went dead again.

Katlin turned and asked, “What is it?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to take a look.” As he opened the truck door a flash of lightning raced across the sky, and seconds later, thunder boomed overhead.

She grabbed his arm as he started to get out of the truck. “You can’t go out now. You’re wet, and standing on the ground, you’ll attract the lightning.”

“You’re probably right. I guess we have to wait out the storm.” He got back in and shut the door.

She started to shiver.

“Cold?” he asked.

“A little bit.”

“It would probably help if you got out of the wet clothes.”

“And into what?” she asked as she tried to wring water from her hair.

“I might have a towel or rag in here somewhere, but even if I don’t, there’s a better chance of drying off without all those wet clothes on.” Ryker searched around in the back of the cab and under the seats.

Katlin shivered again and looked at her long-sleeved shirt. It was plastered against her skin. She took it off and twisted it, trying to wring out the water, but it wasn’t just damp, it was soaked through. She spread it out on the dashboard while her teeth chattered. She still had on the wet jeans and white T-shirt. For a moment, she felt self-conscious, but she decided that was silly, Ryker had already seen her half naked. She wrestled herself out of her jeans and didn’t bother trying to wring them out she just threw them on the floor of the truck. She grabbed the bottom of her white T-shirt and pulled it

off.

Sitting in her bra and underwear, she tried to fill her mind with warm thoughts. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself sitting in front of a fireplace. It wasn't working--she was cold. The only way she was going to get warm was to take off everything wet. She looked down at her damp white bra, and before she could really consider what she was about to do, she undid it and hung it from the door handle. She pulled her knees up into her chest and wrapped her arms around her knees.

"I couldn't find a towel, but I found a couple of clean rags you can use to dry yourself off." Ryker turned, his hand stopping in mid air, and stared at her.

She stared back at him. "What's wrong? You told me to get undressed."

"I didn't think you would take me literally." He cleared his throat. "Nothing wrong. Here, use this to dry off." He turned his head away and stared out the window.

She dried off as much as she could and wrapped her arms around herself again.

"You can turn around, all the naughty parts are covered. I don't know why you're acting so strange--it's pretty obvious that you don't want...."

Before she could finish, he lifted up his shirt and pulled it off. He reached over and pulled her into his arms. She looked at him, her eyes wide, her expression one of surprise.

He whispered. "You said you were cold. Body heat is the best way to get warm--they taught us that in the Boy Scouts."

Suddenly his eyes turned dark gray, and his expression was unreadable, but almost savage. For a moment she felt fear. He was too close.

He closed his eyes, then opened them again and put his face inches from hers. "God help me, I want you."

Before she could reply he kissed her. The kiss was demanding, intoxicating. Her body shivered with delight as his tongue found hers. She felt the warmth begin to spread from her stomach, down her body, until it became a deeper heat. A sudden fire and moistness pulsed between her legs. She had never wanted anyone this much. She had never felt this kind of desire before.

Her body melted against his as she opened herself up to him. She no longer cared what happened to her. If using her meant he would take the away the aching--she wanted him to use her until nothing was left.

"Please," she wasn't sure what she was begging for, she just knew she needed him. She could feel his erection against her body. Her hand reached out and slowly unbuttoned his jeans. At her touch, his body became still, his eyes watching her.

She moved until she positioned herself over his full throbbing erection. She eased herself slowly down. His breathing became ragged as she raised herself again and slowly lowered herself.

His hand reached out, and she gasped as his mouth captured a nipple between his teeth. For a moment, she forgot how to breathe as his mouth caressed and tortured the hardened peak. An unbelievable wetness and heat shot through her.

He stopped and looked again into her eyes. "I want to be deeper inside you."

She nodded her head in agreement. She was no longer worried about what might happen next. All she cared about was having him inside her.

He lifted her and lowered her across the seat and then lowered himself over her.

Slowly, he eased himself just barely inside her. She sucked in a sharp breath as his swollen staff slid inside, but instead of going deeper, he pulled out and then slid in again, just barely. He was teasing her. She couldn't take it.

She wanted, needed him. Her mind searched for the words, but there were none. She was no longer a thinking creature.

"Harder," she pleaded.

A cry of pleasure tore from her lips as he drove into her. He thrust deep inside, once, then twice. Each time, her body rocked to meet him. She arched her hips wildly, and he held her down as she bucked beneath him.

Deeper he went. Plunging over and over again, as the orgasm built inside her, rumbling through her body, until her nails dug into his back as she screamed out his name. Her body trembled as one hard shudder of electricity ran through her. But he didn't stop. He kept going. She screamed out again as she came harder this time. And this time, he joined her. She felt his body quiver as he collapsed onto of her.

Multiple orgasms. Something that until now she had only read about in books. Really, she didn't know what to say. What was there to say? Thanks for rocking my world?

Minutes passed and she felt self-conscious. "You're crushing me," she said.

He rearranged himself until her body lay on top of his. Her head rested on his chest, and she realized her breathing matched his. It had been a long time since she had felt this relaxed. His fingers brushed against her hair.

"It's stopped raining," he said.

When she didn't answer, he laughed. "You know as much as I enjoy feeling you against me, my shoulder is going numb. It's a bit cramped in here."

She sat up and smiled at him. "Sorry."

He reached and caressed her cheek. "I'm not. I'm just suggesting we take this indoors. There's a very comfortable queen-sized bed in our room."

"Hmm," she answered, closing her eyes and enjoying the feel of his fingers against her skin.

"And the room even has heat and room service."

She opened her eyes and smiled down at him. "Now you're talking."

Chapter Eleven

She had been sleeping when he left. His meeting with David wasn't until 2:00 a.m., and it was only 10:00 p.m. Katlin had fallen asleep an hour ago, and he decided to let her sleep while he went down to the store and bought some chocolate.

He couldn't believe he had been talked into buying a women's magazine and a romance book. A romance book with a yummy guy on the cover, she had told him. He had almost put the book and the magazine back twice, but he had felt sorry for her and guilty.

He felt like a bastard. He was using her as bait, but she had no clue. She just assumed everything he told her was the truth. Yes, Reno was a safe zone, but Ryker knew that when the powers that be at Vector found out they had been spotted anywhere in Nevada territory, they would assume Ryker and Katlin had made for Reno. It's what anyone in their position would do. And he was counting on the fact that the bad guys were not far off his trail. Katlin would be the lure that would finally bring his ordeal to an end. He had been waiting too long, trying so hard to find the answers. Someone high up in Vector wanted her badly enough to risk exposure, and that was the break he had been waiting for. All of his evidence pointed to one man being in charge, and that man owed Ryker a debt he intended to collect. Katlin had been dropped into his lap, and she was a key he was more than willing to use. No matter how hard it was becoming. Katlin. Her image immediately came into his mind, and he had to stop himself from smiling. Get a grip, buddy. There are more important things here to deal with than your libido. That's all there was between them. Sex. He refused to think in any other terms. God, the sex had been incredible. He could still taste her skin. No, it was just desire and sex. It had been too long since he had been with anyone, and that's why his body was reacting to her. Even thinking of her now, asleep in bed, he felt himself starting to get hard. Stop it. It was just lust. He didn't have feelings for her. Didn't have feelings for anyone. And to make sure that stayed true, he had to steel his heart. He had to use Katlin for bait. What other choice was there?

If he was going to use her as bait, he needed to get her healthy again. Her ankle was better. She could now put some weight on it, but she was still hobbling around the room. She had done everything the doctor had told her without complaining. She had put ice and heat on it, even though the first time he put the ice bag down on her ankle, she had had tears in her eyes. Ice packs were something that you had to get used to. The first couple of times you used them, the pain was almost worse than the pain of the injury.

He had a lot of experience with injuries in his line of work. He'd watched her try to be brave and not complaining, even though her ankle was really bothering her. She was tired of watching TV, and he was tired of watching Lifetime movies, and when she begged him after dinner to go down and get her something to read and a big bar of chocolate, he had agreed. The woman had a major sweet tooth and a passion for stories where everyone either cried or died. Never had he been forced to watch so many chick

movies. Now he knew why he had avoided chick flicks in the past.

Tonight he would meet with David. Together they would devise the best way to dangle their prey and set the trap. God, how could he do it? How could he go through with his plan to use her like that? He told himself that she wouldn't be in any danger. That he would be there to make sure she was safe. That her life was worth risking to bring down Vector. But he knew it was all a bunch of bullshit. Rationalizing wasn't going to make it any easier or less wrong. There was no way he could let this opportunity slip through his fingers. Not when he was this close.

So far, except for Tonopah, there had been no sign of a tail. He couldn't handle Vector alone. He had to make sure they didn't find her until he was ready. If his trap then failed, he would bundle Katlin up and take her to his cabin in Tahoe. There he would keep her hidden and protected, until he could find a way to flush out the wolves again. They would never find him there. Until he wanted them to. Tahoe was a big place. It was easy to get lost in the woods if you wanted to. He'd spent the last year and a half making it as difficult as possible for people to find him. To ensure there were no surprise visits from anyone from his past.

He used his key and opened the door, walking into the room as quietly as possible, not wanting to wake her up. She had fallen asleep without the painkillers. He put the magazines on the bed and took off his jacket and realized her bed was empty. Moving quickly across the room, he opened the bathroom door--it was empty, too.

Where the hell was Katlin? She knew she wasn't supposed to go anywhere without him, especially without telling him where she was going. Minutes ticked by as he debated whether or not to stay in the room and wait to see if she showed. Why had she left the room, especially since she had to hobble? Even if she'd woken and found herself alone, she'd have assumed he'd be back sooner or later. He decided to go look for her. Maybe she had gone down to the shops looking for him, and he'd missed her.

He searched around the shops for her and then got worried. Where was she? He made a sweep of the main casino floor. She hadn't shown any great interest in gambling. He couldn't imagine she would hobble down here to put her money into a machine. *I'm going to wring her neck when I find her*, he thought as he stalked again across the casino floor.

* * * *

Katlin was waiting at a train station--steam from the trains rising like a fog surrounding her. She watched the coachmen as they struggled to get her trunks off the train, piling them on the station floor.

She looked down at the fox fur surrounding her shoulders and blew on it, running her hands over the fur, fluffing it up. Her hand went to her short hair, patting it down. The steam always wreaked havoc on her hair. Her hair would have to wait until she got to the hotel to freshen up.

She tapped her foot impatiently and scanned the crowd. Where was Nick? He was late. He was supposed to be here to meet her at the train station. She hoped he hadn't lost track of time drinking stingers in the hotel bar. If he didn't come soon, she'd have to call for her car. A tap at her shoulder made her twirl around, a big smile on her face, and instead of her husband, she found herself standing in front of a redheaded man. He was dressed in a cream-colored tweed suit.

"Katie, don't you ever dream in anything but mysteries? What about a nice sci-fi story, or a knights at the round table and dragon sort of thing?"

"Pardon me?"

"I've been looking for you everywhere."

"Do I know you?"

He grabbed her arm and marched her down the station platform. "Look, I don't have time for all this playacting. I'm running low on energy, and I'm tired." He sighed and stopped. "Okay, it's me, your brother. This is a dream. Got it?"

Maybe he was an escaped lunatic. Whoever he was, she wasn't going any farther with him. She looked over and noticed a policeman standing nearby. She opened her mouth to shout, and Colin covered it and dragged her behind a pillar. "Katie, come on, snap out of it. I don't have time for this." He poked his finger into her chest, "You, Katlin Campbell." He thumped his chest, "Me, Colin Campbell."

She laughed out loud. "Colin what are you doing here?"

"Looking all over Reno for you. Tell me what hotel you're in. I know you're somewhere on the strip. Tell me which one, and I'll meet you in fifteen minutes in the lobby."

"But what about Ryker? He'll be mad if I leave without telling him where I'm going."

"Screw Ryker! I want to see you face to face, alone, in fifteen minutes."

* * * *

Ryker spotted her in the main lobby. She was next to the registration desk, and she was with a man. Ryker could only see his back, but he could see the man holding on to Katlin's arm as she tried to pull away. That was all Ryker needed to see. He strode across the floor, intent on knocking down whoever was currently holding Katlin.

The man, as if warned, suddenly turned and saw Ryker coming toward them. He shoved Katlin behind him. The man stood his ground. His stance was balanced, his body athletic, and the expression on his face showed that he was ready to do battle.

Ryker got close enough and was about to lunge at the guy, when Katlin peeked over the man's shoulders.

"Both of you stop it, right this instant!"

Ryker glared at her, waiting for an explanation.

"Ryker, this is my brother, Colin. Colin, this is Ryker."

Her brother? How had he found them, and why didn't he look surprised at the introduction? Ryker had a feeling this man knew who he was, and from the expression on his face, they weren't about to become bosom buddies. Colin never took his eyes off Ryker as he offered his hand. "Thanks for keeping her alive."

Ryker smiled. The thanks was said in a very sarcastic tone, one that implied that, rather than saving her life, Ryker was somehow responsible for getting her into the mess to start with. He couldn't blame the man. If he had a sister, he wouldn't want her left unattended with someone like himself.

He stretched out his hand and grasped Colin's. "No problem. Glad to be of service."

Colin's grip tightened. This guy is no pushover, Ryker thought as he put some muscle into his grasp. The two of them stood there each trying to squeeze the other into

submission.

Katlin hobbled around Colin, until she was facing both of them. “Knock it off already!”

Neither one let go of their grip.

“You guys are causing a scene,” she whispered.

Ryker let his hand fall. He grinned at Colin as he shook the blood back into his numb fingers. Colin was also shaking his fingers as he grinned back at Ryker.

Katlin turned from one to the other and then said in an exasperated voice, “Men!”

* * * *

Katlin was happy to have her brother with her, but she wished he would stop acting over-protective. He hadn’t budged from her side the whole night. He refused to get his own room and had insisted on staying in their room. He planned to sleep on the couch.

He hadn’t commented when he saw they shared a room together. He had taken in the two separate beds and then took one look at the shower, turned and watched Katlin’s face get beet red and refused to leave. She hoped he spent a miserable time on the couch—it was too small for his frame, and he would have to twist himself into a pretzel to lie on it, but if he was going to stay, she wasn’t going to make it easy on him by offering him half her bed.

Colin knew something was going on between Ryker and his sister. If he did, it wasn’t because of anything Ryker was doing. Ryker had gone back to ignoring her. She was the one who kept casting sly looks in his direction. Colin had caught her doing it a couple of times, each time frowning at her. She’d just glared at him.

Who was he to dictate who she slept with? She had never butted her nose into his love life. Colin had always been that way, even when she was young--refusing to let any of his very cute friends ask her out. Colin always interrogated every date she brought home. Dad had thought it was funny. But she wasn’t a young girl anymore, she was a grown adult, and she’d enough of Colin’s meddling.

It was almost time for Ryker to leave to meet with his friend. She watched Ryker as he checked his gun and looked at his watch for the tenth time in the last hour. She wished she could go with him. He might have let her, if her brother hadn’t shown up. Now that he had someone to leave her with, someone to protect her while he was gone, she knew there was no way Ryker was going to let her go with him.

Ryker walked over and handed Katlin the gun she’d used before.

Colin cried out from across the room. “Is that really necessary?”

Ryker didn’t bother turning around. “Yes.” He showed her the safety switch again and made sure she was clear on how to use it, before he headed out the door.

He stopped at the door. “When I come back, before I come in the room, I’ll knock three times.” He looked at Katlin. “Three times, got it? You don’t hear that knock, and someone uses the key to come in, then you take cover and get ready to use the weapon.”

“What if it’s the cleaning lady?” Colin’s voice was heavy with sarcasm.

Ryker gave him a cold stare. “I made arrangements so that no one from the hotel staff comes to the room. If someone is coming through the door, and it’s not me....”

“Got it. Ryker, you be careful.”

He gave Katlin a smile. "I will. Take care of your brother."

As he closed the door, Colin mumbled, "Who does he think he is, 007?"

Katlin carefully placed the gun on the nightstand. She gave her brother a glare. "Leave him alone. He knows what he's doing."

Colin exploded out of his chair. "And what the hell is he doing? Dragging you across the country, trying to get you killed?"

"He's keeping me alive."

"Think about it Katie. Why is he keeping you alive? Not because he cares anything about you. He just wants the information you have. You're nothing to him."

"Shut up! You don't know anything about him!"

"I'm not blind--I can see the way you look at him. You're infatuated with him Katie. It's nothing but a schoolgirl crush. Wake up--he isn't some knight on a white horse. That man's dangerous, and the sooner you get away from him the better."

"I'm not a schoolgirl! And I don't know what kind of feelings I have for him."

Colin snorted.

"And no matter what I feel for him, it's none of your business."

"Damn straight, it's my business. You're my sister!"

"And I'm a grown woman who can make her own decisions. Stop trying to act like my father."

"If he was around, what do you think he would say about you and Ryker? What do you think he would say about this whole situation?"

"He isn't here, and I can take care of myself."

"Like hell you can!"

"I'm staying with Ryker, and that's all there is to it."

Colin changed his tone, and the anger left his voice. "Come on, Katie, we can leave right now. Go out the door and head for the cops."

"I told you what he said about the cops."

"And you believe him?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"What about McDonald, then? Dad worked with his father. McDonald has become a very important man in the last couple of years. You know he owns the company I work for. I've met the man, Katie. He is one of the few Talents we know who moves in powerful circles. He has to know someone who could help out."

"Is he still alive?" She owed McDonald a lot.

"Of course, didn't you read the papers? No, you were probably too busy playing spin the bottle with Ryker."

Before she could reply, he continued, "Two people from the meeting were killed, including McDonald's lawyer. Another five bystanders were killed, and there were a dozen people sent to the hospital with minor injuries."

When she didn't respond, Colin crossed the room to sit next to her. "Katie, this isn't a game. People have died. You could be next. We need to get you out of here."

She shook off his hand and stood up. "Colin, what makes you so sure that I would be better off without Ryker?" she demanded. "Did you have a vision? What did you see?"

"I saw you leaning over a man. A man who was lying on the ground covered in

blood.”

“It was Halster.”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t see a face.” Colin’s voice took on a persuasive tone.

“What if it was Ryker? Katie, if he gets killed, you’re left defenseless.”

“It wasn’t him.” She refused to believe it. No, it couldn’t be Ryker. He couldn’t get hurt. He was too good at his job. “Your visions have been wrong before.”

“They have, but why take the chance? Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving!” She looked at him, her face full of stubbornness. “I’m not talking about this anymore. I’m staying with Ryker. If you want to leave, you can go. I’m staying with him!” As she shouted, a picture came off the wall and slammed against the door.

“What the hell was that?”

“Me.”

“What do you mean you?” he asked her, his brows drawn together.

She tried to keep her voice calm. “I did it.”

“Katie, you aren’t telekinetic.”

“I am now.” She looked at him and realized it would take more than just her word to convince him.

“We were both tested, and you’re not telekinetic.”

Katlin clasped her hands tightly together in her lap and focused her breathing. She took a deep breath, felt the air fill her lungs and then slowly expand out. After the third breath, she gathered her power around her and pushed her mind across the room. Her mind slammed hard against Colin’s defense wall. She took a moment to gather herself, and then she pushed gently, and then with more determination, until she felt the wall begin to give. She found herself encircled in a haze of purple, and she raised her hand and broke free. Physically she still sat on the bed, but in her mind, she was standing right behind her brothers left shoulder. She whispered into his mind. “Really? Well, then, explain this.”

She threw a chair at Colin. It hurled itself into the air, flying across the room. Colin dove off the bed and onto the floor. Katlin couldn’t help it--she burst out laughing.

“That wasn’t funny.” Colin raised his head cautiously over the bed.

“You deserved it for not believing me.” She refused to feel guilty. Their whole life he’d never believed a word she said, unless he’d had the proof in front of him.

Colin got up and stood staring at the broken chair. “I can’t understand it. How is it possible that you’ve been telekinetic all these years, and no one picked up on it?”

“Ryker said he found an invisible wall deep inside my mind.”

“A wall? But that’s not possible.”

“Not possible? Like it’s not possible for me to throw a chair across the room at you?”

“Point taken.” He leaned over and picked up a piece of the chair, turning it over in his hands. He spun around and demanded, “Lower your walls!”

Her voice and expression become suddenly somber. “You don’t want me to do that.”

“Yes, I do. Come on, I want to see this new power of yours.”

“Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She lowered her walls, and Colin was

thrown across the room and against the wall.

"My God!" He sat against the wall rubbing his neck and stared at her as though she had grown two heads.

Could she help it if he never listened to her? The idiot. "It's your own fault. You should have believed me."

"Where did all that come from?" he asked as he got to his feet. "Behind the wall?"

She just shrugged her shoulders. She was as baffled by her new powers as he was.

He leaned against the wall and ran his hand through his hair. "I wonder who put it there?"

"What do you mean?"

"You'd have been too young to construct that type of wall yourself, which leaves us with one other possibility."

"Dad put the wall up?" She had never even considered the possibility.

"Right, but why?" he asked as he paced from one end of the room to the other. He stopped and turned toward her, a big grin on his face.

"I know that grin--what angle just occurred to you?"

"No angle--I just wondered if I have a wall like that somewhere inside of me."

She laughed out loud. "That's the Colin I love and adore, I come to you with my problems, and all you can think about is whether you might have access to additional powers."

He grinned back at her. "Do you blame me? If you weren't telekinetic, and you can throw chairs around, imagine what I might be capable of."

"You always wanted to be Superman. Remember when you used to tie Mom's bathrobe around your neck and run around the house?" She couldn't help herself snickering at the image of him flying around the house yelling, "Up, up and away!"

"I was seven at the time."

"You were eleven-years-old," she corrected him. "I also remember when you decided to jump off the garage roof, and you almost broke your neck."

"Good thing I landed in Mom's rose bushes."

"You really think Dad put up my wall?"

"It's the only answer that makes sense." He started pacing again. "Now we have to figure out why he'd do it and not tell us about it."

"The whole thing is crazy."

Colin turned and looked at her. "What does Ryker think about the situation?"

"He doesn't know what to think."

"So you refuse to leave lover boy?"

"Don't call him lover boy."

Colin's grin widened. "You're staying glued to Prince Charming's side?" At her expression, he raised his hands up as if to surrender. "Hey, I'm behind you a hundred percent, but if you're staying with him, then so am I."

Chapter Twelve

Ryker turned his headlights off and made his way down the dirt road. There was a full moon, and he could see the outline of the desert around him. He had been down this road so many times, he could drive it with his eyes closed.

He drove his car around the winding road until he was at the top of the hill, then parked and got out. There was a great view of the city from here. He'd always liked being in the desert alone, feeling the emptiness surrounding him, but the emptiness was an illusion. At night the desert was alive with small creatures that came out of hiding as soon as the sun went down. Rodents, lizards, coyotes and foxes were just a few of the critters that roamed the desert at night. Ryker watched the stars and enjoyed a few moments of peace before he heard a car engine. As he watched the car lights approach, his body tensed until he saw the headlights blink on and off four times. It was David, and he was late as usual.

The car pulled up, and a small, muscle-bound man got out of the car and walked over to Ryker.

"Still alive?" He grinned.

"No thanks to you." Ryker grasped the other man's hand.

The man thumped Ryker heartily on the back. "I'm sorry for all the trouble--next time I won't bother you."

Ryker pulled away from the man and laughed at him. "Yes, you will."

The other man chuckled. "You're right, I will."

Ryker walked over and sat on a boulder. "Is everything set?"

David sat down beside Ryker, shoving him over to make room on the boulder. "Yeah, but I'm still not sure about this. I've hired enough free-lance Talents to change the earth's orbit--but still, the thought of taking on the Vector's best thugs seems more than a little foolhardy."

"We have to. If we prove too hard a target for the hired goons, then we might just get a member of management. Just cutting off a limb won't kill the beast--we need to go for something vital."

"I'm worried about my own limbs. I don't have all those special Talents like you do. If this plan blows up, I can't do much to help."

Ryker had wide shoulders, and he was having difficulty getting comfortable on the boulder with David taking so much space. Ryker suddenly shifted his body, forcing David off the rock and onto the ground. "Learning humility awful late in life, aren't you?"

David groaned out loud as he fell on top of a sagebrush. "Nah, I know as well as you do that Talents die just like a normal guy like me if you put enough bullets in them, or that Talent bodyguards wouldn't use guns at all, but we don't want to let the organization think they can just throw more guns at the problem. They need to think that only more powerful Talents can handle the problem."

Ryker chuckled and offered David his hand. "Appeal to the arrogance of all us Talents? That's the theory I'm working from, and I am betting that no one is more arrogant than the head of the organization. The rumor is that he is the most powerful Talent of the generation."

David grunted and made it to his feet. "That's what my Big Brother contacts seem to think, but it seems that Katlin's father gets almost as many votes. I was never able to find out just what he was capable of--but it doesn't much matter now that he's a corpse."

"I'm surprised that the Institute still talks to you--hell, I'm surprised that the CIA lets you live at all!"

"Well ... I still work for them from time to time, when it suits me--it turns out that finding the head of Vector is just as important to them as it is to you."

Ryker gave this revelation the consideration it deserved, before continuing--David was working for the government watchdogs? But then he remembered--David had been his friend long before he had parted ways with the agency in charge of shepherding--or perhaps controlling is a better word, the Talent community. David had been, in fact, Ryker's controller back when he had a legit life providing security for Talents and those who did business with them. David had been there when Carolyn had died. David had even quit his cushy government job to stand by his side against those who had killed her. David did not deserve doubt.

"Any word yet on who's the top man at Vector?" Ryker asked.

"I don't think even Big Brother knows. I'm only trusted so far, but I get a feeling of anxiety from the big wigs, and that means they don't yet have a target to hit."

"What do you know about him?"

"Nothing. But Halster was apparently brought in by the group to manage the Lodge. The fact that they are willing to go after his information this far means that it has to lead to the top. Halster ran one of Vector's businesses--a Lodge that provides a halfway house for Talents slipping from the official radar. What the poor bastards don't realize is that they are merely moving from government control to Vector's. Whoever runs Vector has stayed behind the scenes, a front man called Creepers does most of the dirty work."

"So why were they after Halster?"

"Blackmail--Halster thought he had enough on Vector to get his legitimate life back."

Ryker grunted. "He might well have. Vector seemed more than willing to kill him for it, and more than that, they are still looking for the information after Halster himself is long dead."

"To our benefit, if not the girl's. What are you going to do now?" asked David as they walked back to his car.

"What would you do?"

"Go check out the Lodge, see if I could find some clue about what Halster had on Vector."

"My thoughts exactly."

David smiled wide. "So I understand your current assignment is a beautiful redhead?"

“Who told you that?” Ryker demanded.

David chuckled. “I have my sources. Is she really good-looking?”

“Yeah, she’s attractive,” Ryker said, his voice cautious.

“And her body? Is she really built?” David asked, resting his arm against the hood of the car.

“I’m not talking about this.” Ryker felt a shot of desire run through him as he pictured Katlin with her green eyes sparkling with laughter, her red hair surrounding her head in a crown of curls. He was having a hard time trying to keep his emotions in check when it came to Katlin.

David watched Ryker’s face. “It’s true, you do have a thing for her.”

Ryker slammed his fist against the car. “No, I don’t have a thing for her!”

“Well, it’s about time. I know you’ve seen other women in the past couple of years. To be honest, my friend, you’ve always made sure they were not the type of women you’d ever consider getting serious with.”

“I wish everyone would stay out of my personal business.”

“We’re worried about you. It’s time you got back up on the horse. Time you found someone.”

“I’m not thinking about a relationship.” His life was complicated enough at the moment.

“That’s the best time for it to happen. Have you told Rebecca about her yet?”

“No. I haven’t told anyone about her. There’s nothing to tell.” Ryker was getting annoyed with all the questions.

“Are you sleeping with her?”

“None of your damn business!” Ryker growled.

David laughed and patted him on the back. “It’s more serious than I thought.”

“I have more important things to think about, like trying to keep the two of us alive.”

David’s voice became serious. “Why don’t you just take the information Halster dumped into her mind back out?”

“Because it’s possible it will end up being worthless.”

“If it’s worthless, why is Vector still chasing her?” David asked in disbelief.

“Because there is a slim chance that it might still be useable. You know the ability to carry information is a specialized Talent. No one but a Courier could even attempt to extract the information. Vector can’t take that chance, and I won’t risk compromising my bait unless I have to.”

David paused as if considering, and when he spoke again, it was with a somber tone, “Murray is dead. Drove his car off an overpass”

Ryker became still as the implications of David’s calm declaration sank in. From his tone, it was easy to see that the published explanation for Murray’s death was not true. But what did that imply? Murray had been one of the strongest Boxers he had ever met. He should have been able to defend himself against anything. But he was dead, and Ryker now found himself against the strongest enemy he had ever known. Ryker doubted that all of his carefully laid plans were up to that kind of power, and his doubt played across his face.

“I’m not worried. You’ve always been an especially lucky bastard. You take

care and watch your back.” David patted him on the shoulder and got into his car.

“I always do,” Ryker answered as he took one last look at the stars.

* * * *

“I said I don’t want any orange juice!” Katlin yelled at Colin from across the table.

“But it’s good for you.” Colin poured her a glass and handed it to her.

“I don’t care if it’s good for me, I don’t want any.”

“Just drink it!”

“No! Stop acting like my Mom.”

“God, you’re the most stubborn person!”

“I’m stubborn, and what are you? Oh, that’s right, I forgot--you’re a saint.”

Katlin couldn’t seem to stop bickering with him. Every comment Colin aimed toward her was thick with veiled sarcasm, and she found herself transported back in time to her childhood, fighting with him as she had when she was a teenager. She tried to remember she was a rational adult, but every time Colin told her to do something, she wanted to stick her tongue out at him and give him the raspberry.

Turning her body away from her brother, she munched on a bagel and eyed Ryker. He sat on the bed reading a newspaper and sipping orange juice, seemingly unaware of the verbal barbs being tossed back and forth by brother and sister across the room. She wasn’t buying his act--she’d noticed him raise his eyebrows in amusement a few times, and she’d heard him quietly chuckle when she threatened to brain Colin with the telephone.

Even as she told herself for the fifth time she was an adult, and Colin couldn’t get to her, she had to fight the urge to turn and singsong, “I’m rubber and you’re glue,” at him. Maybe she wasn’t as mature as she liked to think. It wasn’t entirely her fault--her brother had overnight become an overprotective, overbearing, pain in the ass.

It probably had a lot to do with the dangerous man sitting on the bed who she couldn’t keep from glancing at every five minutes. Every time she looked in Ryker’s direction, she could feel her brother’s eyes on her. She turned and caught him scowling at her again. Without thinking she flipped him off, and she heard Ryker laugh out loud.

“Keep this up, and I’ll have to separate the two of you.” He got up and poured himself another glass of OJ.

She tried to ignore Colin, and instead, concentrated on spreading a thick layer of cream cheese on her bagel. She had taken about all she could of Colin’s “Father Knows Best” impersonation. If he corrected her one more time, gave her one more piece of advice, she would have no choice but to murder him in cold blood. Cheered up by the thought of bashing Colin over the head with the big crystal lamp on the nightstand, she turned and blew her brother a kiss.

He scowled at her, his face filling with suspicion as he watched her and surveyed the room, his eyes coming to rest on the lamp. The problem with Colin was that he knew her too well.

Ryker had been polite to her brother, answering all his questions with an enormous amount of patience. If only she could be that cool-headed around Colin.

“What’s your plan of attack?” Colin asked Ryker as he added another packet of sugar to his coffee.

“We’re going to pack up everything and head to Lake Tahoe,” Ryker answered.

“What’s in Tahoe? A safe house? Reinforcements?”

“Both.”

“When are we leaving?” Katlin was tired of being cooped up in the same room with Colin.

“Tonight,” Ryker answered, a smile on his lips as though he could read her thoughts.

It didn’t get dark until six, which meant she would be stuck in the room, bickering with her brother, for another ten hours. She would go insane! She needed some kind of distraction. She had to get out of the room. “Can we spend the day outside? How about going for a walk along the Strip?” she suggested.

Ryker laughed out loud again. “Yeah, why don’t we go shopping and sightseeing along the main strip?”

“Give me a second to change into comfortable shoes.” Katlin scrambled out of her chair and across the room to the closet.

Ryker crossed his arms and glared at her. “I was joking!”

“I have to get out of this room!” She could be just as stubborn as he could.

“Even if it kills you?” he growled.

“Yes, besides I thought you said Reno was safe?”

“Nowhere is completely safe.”

“I’m going. Come on, Colin.” she said over her shoulder as she headed toward the door. “Ryker, you can tie me up or come along.”

* * * *

It was a beautiful day, blue skies scattered with a few fluffy white clouds. The shops along the street were filled with tourist merchandise. Katlin bought a T-shirt for Colin that said “Mustang Ranch.” She chuckled over the image of Colin trying to explain to their mom what kind of Ranch it was. Prostitution and gambling were legal in Nevada--but not with Mom.

As they walked, Ryker told them about Lake Tahoe. She learned that half of the lake was in Nevada, and the other half of the lake was in California. Ryker’s cabin was located on the North Shore, a place in California that prohibited gambling. If you drove just minutes across the border to the Nevada side, you would find yourself surrounded by casinos and grand hotels.

Skiing Heavenly Valley in the winter and sailing on the lake in the summer--she could tell he loved the place by the way he talked about the clear, blue water of the lake and the mountains surrounding the lake, the Sierras. Majestic snow-capped mountains covered in a carpet of pine trees.

Colin seemed interested enough in the conversation that he forgot for the moment to be sarcastic. “And what about the fishing?”

“You can catch rainbow trout about this size.” Ryker stretched his hands a foot apart.

“And you live right on the edge of the lake?” Colin asked, his voice filled with excitement. The one thing Colin loved to do more than anything was fish. Katlin remembered summer fishing trips up in the mountains. She didn’t mind fishing, but she could never get used to gutting fish. A shudder went through her as she pictured her

hands full of fish guts. She preferred picking her fish up at the market, all skinned and neatly packed in plastic.

“Yeah, I have a dock in the back of the cabin, and you can fish off it.”

They walked until they hit a gray concrete bridge straddling a river.

“This is the Truckee River,” he announced as they all peered over the bridge and into the small stream of water.

“Not much of a river,” Colin complained.

Ryker laughed, “The size of the river all depends on how much rain we get during the year, and how much snow falls during the winter.”

Katlin watched as two ducks tried to maneuver themselves through the shallow water and around boulders. “Must have been a rotten winter.”

“It was. There are paths running down both sides of the river,” Ryker said, pointing toward the trees lining the river. “When I stay in town, I like to run along the river.” Ryker turned and pointed behind him. “And over there used to be the Mapes Casino. I loved that old building. They tore it down years ago and built apartments.”

“If I didn’t have a sprained ankle, we could go for a run before we left.” Katlin looked down at her ankle. It was better today--she could put her full weight on it--but it was still sore.

“Too bad. I need to run, I haven’t hit the road in days,” Colin sighed.

Ryker patted Colin on the shoulder. “Not to worry, there are plenty of trails up in the mountains.”

Katlin turned and watched the two of them being civil to each other and smiled.

Katlin suddenly stood frozen in place. Something was wrong. She could feel it in the very center of her bones. Ryker and Colin kept walking, unaware that she had stopped. She heard the squeal of tires and instinctively turned as a van pulled beside her. The side door opened, and someone jumped out to make a grab for her. She turned to run, forgetting about her ankle. She only made it a few feet before she fell to the ground, calling out in pain.

* * * *

Ryker heard her scream. He turned and watched Tony grab Katlin around the waist, carrying her toward the van. Ryker’s body moved even as his mind took in the scene, even before he consciously told himself to move. He ran dead out, watching Katlin fight for her life, using her hands, elbows and teeth. Nothing seemed to faze Tony. He kept a strong grasp on her as he picked her up and prepared to throw her through the open doors.

The trap was being sprung, but it was up to Ryker to determine on whom. He quickly focused on David and sent a burst message for help before diving into the fray.

Where the hell did they come from? And how did they get this close without Ryker sensing it? They had Katlin, and once she got in the van, she was dead, the thought pounded in Ryker’s head. He pushed aside all thoughts of her, he couldn’t afford to feel emotion or panic now--if he did it would get them both killed. He forced himself to ignore Katlin and focus only on Tony as he aimed himself and flew through the air, tackling the man from behind.

Katlin was sent flying across the sidewalk as both men rolled in a twisted mass of arms and legs onto the pavement. Ryker untangled himself from Tony, rolling to the left

into a somersault, before coming gracefully to his feet. He reached for his gun, but Tony, as if reading Ryker's thoughts, grabbed his arm, and they struggled for the weapon. The gun skidded across the pavement and through the railing of the bridge, plunging down into the water.

"I always wondered who was stronger. I guess we're about to find out," Tony said as he smiled and crouched into a fighting stance.

"And I always hoped we would never have to find out, my friend." Ryker slowed his breathing as he gathered power around himself. Huge waves of brown energy crashed against waves of yellow. He gathered his power again and risked a mental look around expecting to find re-enforcements, but instead he suddenly found a barrier cutting him off from both aid and attack. The wall was unlike anything he had ever seen--the outside world might not even exist all. On the Lower Level, a glittering black wall was the end of their world. The sheer power required to raise such a wall, let alone hold it, boggled the mind.

What the hell was going on? No help would be coming from outside. No way had his burst message made it through that! All of his carefully laid plans crumbled, and all he could do was focus on the threat in front of him--Tony.

* * * *

Katlin lay on the pavement. She felt bruised and battered. She heard a cry of outrage and turned and watched Colin rush toward the two men fighting only a few feet from her.

A huge monster of a man stepped out of the van. "Keep on Ryker, I'll stop this one!"

She watched the monster close his eyes and bring his fingers up to his temples. Colin suddenly cried out, his hands flying to his head as he staggered face first into the ground.

Dear God, Colin's dead. The thought forced Katlin to her feet. She started toward her brother when she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She turned slowly and watched as Ryker and a dark-haired man she recognized from the alley faced off, standing ten feet from each other, each still and motionless. Their struggle on the Lower Level sent waves and eddies of power splashing off in every direction, making her feel seasick.

Feet apart, she took a moment to prepare herself for what she was about to do. She dropped her consciousness and was thrown back by a wave of power. She sat on the ground, shaking her head and trying to clear her thoughts. They were fighting, throwing energy against each other, but it was as though they were doing it behind a mist. She had never seen the likes of it before and had no idea how to force herself through it. Ryker was a bodyguard, trained to fend off attacks, she had to trust him to do his job and keep his butt in one piece.

Raising her mind, Katlin started toward her brother again, but this time she made it to his side. He was barely breathing, but at least he was alive. She couldn't control the sob of relief that erupted from inside of her. Her eyes followed the sudden movement to her left. Ryker and man had given up fighting on the Lower Level and were now going at it physically. Ryker took a hit to the chin and fell backward. He rose to his feet slowly, making a great show of being dazed, before flashing into movement. One

minute, he was standing there looking dazed and confused--the next, he moved so quickly she couldn't follow him. He dove down into his enemy's legs, sending the two men crashing to the pavement. They wrestled on the ground until Ryker arched up and threw the man through the air. He landed hard on the pavement. Ryker got up and started toward him again, when a loud noise boomed close by. Katlin watched in horror as Ryker grabbed his shoulder and fell back.

It was the redheaded monster. He had a gun, and he was walking toward Ryker, who was now lying on the ground bleeding. The man shot again, this time barely missing Ryker's right leg. Katlin looked on as the man advanced toward Ryker, his gun drawn, and she knew without any doubt that he was planning to shoot again, and this time he was going to make it permanent. Ryker was about to die.

Katlin acted more out of desperation than instinct. She dropped her consciousness and reached out to the sky to draw in power for the fight, but she was immediately blocked by an unexpected resistance. Between her and the sky was a thick resistance that shocked her out of the Lower Level. She lowered her mind again. Her storm was raging on, whipping around her. She took control of it, but realized she didn't have enough energy--she needed more power, and she focused her need and anger into a spear of thought. The wall flexed and strained against her--but in the end, her will was stronger and a great frayed hole appeared in the dome. Katlin watched as her storm expanded out. Lightning flashed from her fingertips. She could see the man advancing on Ryker, coming to stand over him, his red defense walls glowing strong behind the mysterious block.

Never having done anything like this before, she prepared herself to mentally attack. She had surprise on her side. The man was so intent on killing Ryker, he had forgotten for the moment she was there.

She grabbed the lightning from the sky and threw it at man's retreating back. The man stopped moving, momentarily stunned, but his walls held. He turned and a huge tidal wave of red came crashing toward her. She threw up her arms expecting to be crushed under the carpet of red power, but suddenly the clouds that surrounded her lowered, creating a barrier. The wave crashed harmlessly against the clouds, like a wave of water hitting the side of a dam. Before the man could regain his strength, she raised more energy, drawing it down from the sky through the ever-expanding hole. White and blue swirled around her as she raised her arms and threw as much of the storm as she could toward the huge monster's wall. His wall wavered, but stayed intact. She grabbed the storm again, forcing down bolts of lightning and hit him again before he could recover. The man staggered to his knees and fell to the ground.

The storm had become too large for her to handle. It whipped around her--she struggled to contain it, but she was exhausted.

She fought for balance against the energy storm. With every ounce of will power she had left, she shut it down. She fell to her knees, her body shaking from the exertion, sweat pouring down her face.

A crowd had gathered around Colin, and Katlin could hear a woman on her cell phone calling for an ambulance. She crawled over to where Ryker lay motionless on the ground. There was blood pouring from his shoulder. She didn't know what to do. For a moment she was frozen in panic and horror. She carefully lifted his head into her lap and

brushed the hair from his eyes.

Suddenly someone started moaning. Her eyes went to the monster. He was still unconscious on the ground. But Tony was starting to come around, which meant the fight would start all over, and he would be coming after Ryker again. If they killed Ryker, she would be next and then they would go after her brother. She had to think fast. She had to act, had to move. She put Ryker's head gently on the sidewalk and stood up. She forced herself to her feet, commanding her body to ignore the pain and exhaustion as she hobbled over to the street and flagged down cars.

They rushed by, ignoring her. She looked desperately around for another form of escape when a Cadillac came to a halt a few feet in front of her.

Calling to the driver, "We need to get to a hospital!" she moved back over to Ryker and struggled to get him to his feet. Straining her muscles, she pulled and shoved trying to get his body upright, but he was too heavy, dead weight. Summoning the last dregs of her energy, she focused on her own body. Slowly a soft glow seeped out of her center and into her limbs, warming her. Warmth and confidence made her feel stronger and capable of any challenge.

Crouching next to Ryker, she searched for some way to grasp his long, powerful frame. She stuck one skinny arm under his knees and the other under his shoulder, both seemed completely inadequate to the task. To her surprise, when she straightened up Ryker came with her. Power flowed from her center, but the reservoir was limited she had to get him into the car.

"Open the door!"

The driver reached over the back seat and pulled the handle, his eyes wide with terror, and Katlin thankfully dropped Ryker on the seat. Ryker was safe. Now she had to get to her brother. The crowd around Colin was growing. She moved toward him, but then realized that the dark-haired man was directly in her path. A man who wanted to kill her was now on his knees pushing himself to his feet. If she risked going after Colin, Ryker might end up dead. And then it came to her--the man would follow her wherever she went. In the distance she could hear the approaching wail of sirens, and she could see the flash of emergency lights. The police were coming, and there were too many witnesses for them to load Colin into their van before the police arrived. Besides Colin wasn't the target, she was. The further she got away from her brother, the safer he would be. The driver was standing by the car. She had no choice, she told herself. She lowered her mind and gave him a mental push. The man fell hard to the ground. She had to leave, she had to keep Ryker safe. She made her way around the driver's side of the car and slipped behind the wheel.

* * * *

She drove as fast as dared. The last thing she needed was to get pulled over by a traffic cop. She checked in her rearview mirror at Ryker crumpled in the backseat, blood gushing out of the wound on his shoulder.

She had no choice, she told herself again--she had to leave Colin behind.

Ryker was bleeding too much. Katlin stopped the car and pulled over on the side of the road. She had to risk it. She climbed into the backseat and ripped her shirt, pressing the strips of material against the wound on his shoulder, pushing hard, hoping the pressure would stop the bleeding while she prayed over and over that Ryker would be

all right. Please, God, she begged, don't let him die. She realized she cared deeply for him, and she wondered if he would try to throttle her again when she told him she was falling for him.

She stripped another piece of material from her shrinking shirt and wrapped it around his shoulder trying to make a makeshift bandage. Why didn't she pay more attention to medical shows on TV? She had no idea what she was doing.

Ryker made her promise she would go straight to the cabin if anything happened. He made her memorize the directions. She'd promised if anything happened she would worry about her safety first and leave him behind, but she couldn't. Leaving him was never an option, and now, as he lay bleeding and unconscious in her arms, it was all up to her to protect him. She had to stay calm and think. She needed to get him to the cabin as quickly as possible.

Ryker had made it clear that going to a hospital for any injuries they incurred was out of the question. Walk into a hospital, put your name into a database, and as soon as you were in a computer, it was just a matter of time before someone tracked you down.

Ryker. She had become his lover with the full understanding that he didn't want more, didn't want any kind of strings attached. She would have agreed with whatever he said. All she wanted was to be close to him, to stay encircled in his arms.

Katlin secretly hoped eventually she would be able to wear him down, convince him that there were more possibilities between them than just the physical, but as he sat bleeding in her arms, she wondered if she would have the chance. She covered her face with her hands, unable to control heart-wrenching sobs. She forced herself to stop crying.

She angrily wiped away the tears, leaned over Ryker. "Come on, you stubborn bastard, stay alive. Don't leave me now."

Chapter Thirteen

The ride took forty-five minutes, but it felt like an eternity. Katlin sat, feeling helpless, behind the wheel as she barreled up the mountain roads. She had stopped twice and tore more strips from her top and wrapped them around Ryker's shoulder wound as best she could. The bleeding slowed down, but didn't stop. She put her hand on his neck feeling for a pulse, and to her relief, his heart was still beating. There was nothing more to do, but pray and try not to think about each precious moment that passed.

Looking out the window, she could make out the shapes of mountains in the dark. As she peered over the steering wheel, she could see huge pine trees lining the road in the headlights. She checked her watch. It shouldn't be much longer. Ryker had told her to stay on the main road that looped around the lake until she passed through the tunnel. Then she was to take the second street on the left. She had done that ten minutes ago, which meant a few more minutes, and she should be there. She took a left, then a right and pulled onto a dark street.

"Where's the street light? How the heck am I supposed to find the address?" she muttered to herself. Katlin opened her window and stuck her head out, straining her eyes, trying to see the house numbers in the dark. The street ended in a cul-de-sac, with only one house standing at the very middle of the circle. The car headlights showed the house was set off the road about fifty feet. It looked huge from the outside, three stories high, made entirely of stripped logs and built against an outcropping of rocks. It was the only house on the street without any lights on so it had to be Ryker's cabin. When he told her a cabin, she had envisioned a small, one or two-bedroom shack. This place was definitely not a shack.

"I think this is it," she turned her head and announced their arrival to Ryker as she pulled into the driveway. She scooted out of the car. Ryker was dead weight at the moment, and the adrenaline that had helped her get him into the car was long out of her system. She felt exhausted. Looking up the rocky dirt path to the porch, she wanted to burst into tears. There was no way she could get him up there on her own. She went around the door of the car, put her hands under Ryker's shoulders and tried to lift him. His legs would drag the entire way, but she might be able to drag him.

It was awkward and difficult trying to keep his body supported as she made their way carefully up the path in the dark. Katlin tried shifting the weight back and forth from one hand to another, her shoulders aching under the weight. Twice she fell, his body weight trapping her to the sidewalk. After each fall, it felt almost impossible to get back to her feet, but from somewhere, she gathered the strength to get up and keep moving. She almost lost her grip on him several times, but she held on long enough to make it up the two flights of steps and over to the front door.

I have to get inside, she thought as she lowered his torso to the ground. She found the security panel next to the door, and typed in the code he had made her repeat back to him a dozen times. She opened the door. It was pitch black. She made her way inside,

stumbling against a piece of furniture and knocking something to the floor. She cringed at the sound of breaking glass. She found a light switch and blinked as the bright lights turned on overhead.

Her arms felt like lead, but she couldn't just leave him in the entranceway. She rolled him onto an oriental rug and grabbed one end of it. The rug slid easily along the wooden floor. She dragged him through the house--the entranceway opened up at the end into a hallway, and she had a choice of going left or right. She turned left and walked down a long hallway lined on both sides with bookshelves. A small room branched off on the right, and she stopped and poked her head into the doorway, but there didn't seem to be anything in the room that she could put Ryker down on. No way could she keep this up. She was now exhausted. She collapsed next to him and gently placed his head into her lap.

Suddenly his eyes opened. "What happened?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

She bent her head and brushed her fingers across his lips. "You've been shot in the shoulder."

"What? What happened--where are we?" His eyes looked unfocused.

"Ryker can you understand me? You've been shot, and we're at your cabin." She tried to keep from panicking as she watched him trying to understand what she was saying.

"Concussion, I must have a concussion." He moved his head back and forth taking in his surroundings. "My cabin? We're at my cabin?"

"Yes."

"In fridge. In lettuce holder, black book. Call the number. Number under pest control. Leave a message. Tell them what happened. Tell them I need help...."

Katlin didn't wait for him to finish, she lifted his head from her lap, and with renewed strength ran down the hallway.

Where was the damn kitchen? She wasted precious time opening doors as she went, turning on lights, trying to make her way through the maze of rooms in the monster house. Finally at the end of the hall, she stumbled into it. She almost cried out for joy when she spotted the fridge.

She pulled out plastic drawers until she found the container with the black book. She grabbed the book, clutching it to her chest, and searched the kitchen for a phone. Spotting one on the wall next to the glass door, she thumbed through the book until she found the pest control number. Her hands were shaking so badly, she had to dial the number twice.

Voice mail picked up and Katlin took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. Her message was short and to the point. Ryker was injured, had been shot, was bleeding and they were at his cabin. She hung up the phone and looked around trying to figure out what do next. She wanted to lay her head down and sleep. She was running out of adrenaline, and her body was starting to slow down. Her limbs felt heavy, as if she were moving underwater. A soft groan sounded down the hall. Ryker was coming to again.

She made her way back to him. "I called your friends. They should be here soon."

She watched him struggle to focus his thoughts. "Days." He said as he tried to

lift himself up. His arm gave out from beneath him, and he fell back onto the ground.

“What?” She leaned closer trying to understand what he was saying.

“Might not be here for days.” His voice came out stronger this time, and he looked straight into her eyes for the first time since he woke.

“But I left the message.”

He tried to put his hand to his head, but winced in pain. She watched him struggle to get the words out. “They don’t check every day.”

She leaned back onto her knees and felt herself begin to panic. “What are we supposed to do?”

Ryker pointed an unsteady hand down hall. “Stairs. By kitchen. Room on the right, under bed. The blue bag. Get it. Has medical supplies.”

“But I don’t know anything about first aid.” What did he expect her to do, clean the wound herself? She wished now she had joined the Girl Scouts when she was a kid. At least she might have learned some basic first aid.

He took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze. “I’ll walk you through everything.”

Suddenly terrified she scooted away, shaking her head. “Ryker, I’m not good with that kind of stuff. As a kid I would almost faint at the sight of blood.”

“Don’t worry, we’re going to clean out the wound and bind it until my friends come. Did you tell them I was injured?” His voice sounded stronger, and he was starting to talk in full sentences again. She watched his brows furrow as he concentrated on her answer.

“Yes, I left a message you were shot.”

Exhaustion was showing in his eyes as he licked his lips before he answered.

“They’ll bring a doctor.”

“Why can’t we go to the hospital?”

“Too dangerous. Easy to track us once we’re there. They have to report gunshot wounds to police.”

“What if your friends take too long?”

He managed a weak smile. “I won’t die. Lost some blood, have a concussion. I promise I won’t die, Katlin.”

“How did you get a concussion? Did you hit your head when you fell?” She leaned forward, running fingers down his cheek. He looked pale. Far too pale.

“No, I was laid into on the Lower Level. He mentally banged me around.”

She smiled at him as she bent down and placed her lips gently against his. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

She headed back down the hall and up the stairs, into another hallway, this one shorter. There was only one door down each side. She opened the one on the right and found herself in Ryker’s bedroom.

The walls were painted dove gray. She noticed on the wall one of her favorite Michael Parkes posters, done in creams, of a cat sitting at an open window watching the on coming storm. It hung next to his computer in the far corner.

The bed was a four-poster of wrought iron, and she got down on her hands and knees to search for the bag. She found it and got to her feet, ready to leave the room when she noticed the photo on his nightstand. Ryker stood with his arms encircling a

gorgeous blonde woman. They were both smiling into the camera, and Katlin realized she had never seen Ryker's face so relaxed and unguarded. His face was full of an emotion she had never seen him show before--love.

She felt a sudden desire to sit down, her knees felt weak, and she fell down hard onto the bed. Ryker was in love with the woman in the photo. Who was she? Was she someone from his past, or someone he was currently seeing? Katlin's hand trembled as she picked up the bag she'd dropped. She took a deep breath and stood up. None of this mattered at the moment. The important thing was getting Ryker patched up and back on his feet. She had to focus on getting him well. When he was feeling better, she would worry about cornering him and getting him to admit he had feelings for her. Katlin walked with a determined step out the door.

When she reached his side, she made an effort to keep her voice sounding light and casual. "I found the bag."

"Good, go into the kitchen and boil some water. There're clean white cotton dishtowels someone gave me in there somewhere."

Was it the blonde in the photo? Katlin wanted to ask, but instead, she kept her mouth shut and rummaged through the kitchen until she found a big steel pot. She filled it with water and placed it on the stovetop. She found the dishtowels in the very back of the cupboard next to the fridge.

She dragged Ryker slowly into the kitchen. This time she had to stop every few minutes to gather her strength. She was beyond exhausted. She found a pillow and placed it carefully under his head.

Katlin waited until the water started boiling, then she carried it over to the table next to him.

"Good. Set it down. Now you're going to take the towels and soak them in water. Then use them to start cleaning out the wound." Ryker struggled to sit up.

Katlin reached over and helped him get comfortable, his back against the wall. She unwound the blood-soaked strips from his shoulder, and she tried not to think about the horrific gash below as she peeled off the material. She took a white cloth and gently cleaned off the wound. "Ryker, talk to me about something."

"About what?" He winced as she pressed into the wound.

"Sorry. Anything to keep my mind off the blood." Katlin grabbed another cloth and dropped the one soaked in red on the floor.

"Want me to tell you about my cabin?"

"This isn't a cabin, it's a mansion."

His chuckle turned into a grimace as she started working on the center of the wound. "I worked hard, so I could afford a place like this."

She smiled at him, trying to be as gentle as possible. "Bodyguard pay must be a heck of a lot better than what they pay Screeners. Maybe I should change my line of work."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. "You don't hear about many Screeners getting killed."

"Is your work really that dangerous?" she asked.

"Yes." His voice suddenly sounded sad.

She decided to change the subject. She didn't want to think about how close

Ryker had just come to a body bag. "You were telling me about your cabin."

"Right." He grunted in pain. "Off to the main entrance is a game room."

"I saw that, the room with the pool table and bar." She tried not to cringe as she dipped the cloth into the hot water and swished it around, trying to wash off as much blood as she could.

"Yeah, if you went in the opposite direction down the hallway, you would find a living room, formal dining room and a guest room."

"Very impressive. What's down at the bottom of the circular staircase?" She tried to concentrate on his voice as the wound oozed.

"A family room with a small kitchen on one end. I've a big-screen TV down there. And two more guest rooms and a storage room."

She threw down the cloth and wiped the sweat from her forehead. "Swank. Now what do I do?"

"Get the scissors out of the kit."

"Scissors?" She did not want to be involved with anything that called for scissors.

"Yeah, you're going to snip any muscle threads that are hanging down."

She started to get up. "God, I can't do that!"

He grabbed her with his good arm and pulled her back down. "Yes, you can."

No, I can't, she thought to herself as she gazed into his eyes. But what choice did she have? She had to do whatever it took to help him. She found the scissors, grasping them in both hands, and she closed her eyes. She repeated over and over to herself, *I can do this*. She opened her eyes, found a thread of muscle inside the wound hanging down. She grabbed it before she could think about it and snipped it off. She made a gagging noise. "God, I can't!"

"Calm down, try not to think about it. Katlin, you have to do this quickly so we can put a pressure bandage on the wound. It's already starting to bleed again."

She handed him a cloth, and he wiped away the blood trailing down his arm while she went back to using the scissors.

She tried to keep her thoughts away from what she was doing. "Have any bodyguards you have known been killed?"

"My wife and my brother-in-law."

"What?" The scissors stopped in midair.

"Good, you're done. Now we're going to pack the wound with a lot of clean cotton, and I'll show you how to apply a pressure bandage."

She watched him and tried to copy what he was doing. "Your wife died?"

"Katlin, I don't want to talk any more about it." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "I need a glass of water so I can take some antibiotics. I have to keep the wound from getting infected."

When she didn't move, he pushed her gently away from him. "I need some water, then I can close my eyes for a little while. You'll have to wake me up in about an hour. I have a mild concussion, but if you can't wake me up, then we are in serious trouble. If you can't wake me up, or I start to vomit, we have no choice--you'll have to take me straight to the hospital. If that happens, you take me into the hospital emergency entrance, then leave as fast as you can." He grabbed her arm and pulled her down so he

could look into her eyes. “You should’ve left me in Reno. You could’ve been killed trying to save me.” His grip tightened on her arm, his face filling with anger, and she cried out in pain. “If you have to take me to the hospital, this time you leave me there and get out before they catch you. Do you understand me?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “Yes, I understand you.”

He looked into her face, his anger vanished, and he fell back against the wall. “You might have to change the bandage if the wound keeps bleeding. Do you think you can do it on your own?”

“Yes.”

“There isn’t any food in the fridge, but there should be canned goods and other things you can eat in the cupboards. Look in my room in the big black dresser for some clean T-shirts. You look exhausted. Don’t try to move me. Just let me lie here on the floor, I will be fine, just cover me with a blanket. Get one from my room.”

She helped him move off the wall and settled him onto the floor. She put his head on a pillow and covered him with a blanket and then watched him until his breathing deepened and evened out. She sat back on the floor and wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked herself back and forth. She lowered her forehead against her knees and squeezed her eyes shut. Ryker was alive, and for the moment, they were both safe. The tears streamed down her face as she rocked back and forth. The same thought kept echoing through her head--Ryker is alive, and I’m in love with him.

Chapter Fourteen

Katlin found and put on a long, blue T-shirt from the bottom of his dresser drawer. It hung down almost to her knees. She sat on the kitchen counter, her feet swinging in time to a tune she quietly hummed as she ate noodles. She was too wired to go to sleep. She made herself a pot of hot tea. The kitchen was amazing. It was spacious. Large windows adorned three walls. The fourth wall was covered with a brick fireplace that reached up to the ceiling, with a love seat, an overstuffed, striped chair and a coffee table set in a semicircle around the base. The kitchen itself was shaped into an L. Two long counter tops projected out into the room, and in the middle of the counter tops sat a large tiled island. A dozen copper pots of all sizes hung above the island.

She sipped her tea as she watched Ryker sleep. It was a sound sleep that made her go over and check on him often. Every time she leaned over him, her heart would pound with fear until she found a pulse or noticed his chest falling and rising. He had barely opened his eyes when she gave him the pills, and she was worried about him lapsing into a coma. Every few hours she shook him gently awake, asking him a dozen questions, which he answered in a groggy, but lucid voice.

The bandage on his shoulder soaked through twice, and each time she went to change it, she had to psych herself up before she could deal with the wounds and the blood. She decided she was definitely not cut out for any job in the medical field.

By three in the morning, the adrenaline and fear that had kept her functioning until now, suddenly left her system, and her body crashed. One minute she was wired, the next she could barely keep her eyes open, but she was determined to stay awake so she could keep an eye on his bandage. She finished the noodles and jumped down from the counter. It was time to explore the house.

He had a sunken living room. Two steps into the room, she had to step down into an area filled with a long, white leather couch. There were all kinds of magazines on the coffee table, Katlin fell back into the comfortable overstuffed cushions and spent an hour reading *Architectural Digest*.

Running her hands across the walnut dining-room table, she admired the china cabinet that stretched from one side of the room to the other. She was tempted to go down the circular staircase and explore the sublevel, but she was afraid if she did, she wouldn't be able to hear Ryker if he needed her, so instead, she went through the bookshelves in the hallway. Pulling out books at random, she found some of her favorites among his collection of mysteries, sci-fi and espionage books. She was jealous of the leather-bound book of Robert Frost poems and drooled over his hardback collection of Nero Wolfe mysteries.

She picked up one of the Nero Wolfe books and headed back into the kitchen. Ryker was still asleep. She sat down in the chair and started reading. Dozing off somewhere halfway through the book, she was asleep until the sound of growling startled her awake. Her eyes sprang open, and she found herself face to face with a monster. It

was a Great Dane with hackles raised, enormous white teeth bared, and it growled at her, low and threatening. Katlin scrambled in the chair, trying to get away, but there was nowhere to go. She was trapped as the dog moved in closer.

"Down, Bruno!" a woman's voice commanded from across the room.

The dog continued to growl, but stopped moving forward.

Katlin stayed completely still to avoid doing anything to trigger the dog into attacking. Keeping the dog in sight, she shifted her glance over to the woman. It was the woman in the photo on Ryker's nightstand.

"Call him off," Katlin said, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Bruno, come!"

The dog stopped growling and trotted casually across the room, coming to sit by the blonde's legs. The woman placed her hand on the dog's head. "Good boy." A slight grin appeared on her face as she watched Katlin. "He wouldn't have attacked without my command."

"That's comforting." Katlin became conscious of the fact she was straddling the top of the chair, her T-shirt scrunched up all the way to her stomach exposing her underwear, the ones she had picked up at the hotel shop covered in a zebra pattern. It seemed like a fun idea at the time, underwear with animal patterns. Now Katlin felt like an idiot as she watched the woman's gaze take in her appearance.

Katlin's hand automatically went to her hair, trying to pat down the curly mass that was circling her head and falling into her eyes. "Who are you?" Katlin asked as she slipped back into the chair and tried to rearrange the T-shirt around her body.

"Rebecca," the woman answered. Her grin widened when she spotted the zebra-patterned underwear. Blond hair pulled into a ponytail, Rebecca was dressed in a pair of tight-fitting black jeans and a matching sweater that clung to her curves. Even from across the room, Katlin could see the woman had a terrific figure. Rebecca was a small woman, around five feet, four inches tall. Her curves tapered down into a tiny waist, supple hips and shapely legs.

Katlin gave up trying to tame her own hair. "You're one of Ryker's friends?"

"Yes, I'm one of his friends." Rebecca said it in a way that implied they were more than just friends.

Up close, the woman was stunning, with smoky-gray eyes under dark, thick lashes, perfect porcelain skin and cupid-doll lips. She was blonde, beautiful, petite, and polished. The exact opposite of Katlin--the Amazon with long legs, unruly red hair and skin sprinkled with freckles. Rebecca was everything Katlin had dreamed of being when she grew up, and beside her, Katlin felt like a gangly oaf.

Rebecca was not the only one in the room. There was a man leaning over Ryker.

Rebecca followed her glance, "He's a doctor."

"Is Ryker all right?" Katlin wanted to jump out of the chair and race across the room to check on him, but she didn't know who this woman was and what she meant to Ryker. The last thing she wanted to do was make a fool of herself in front of Ryker's what? Girlfriend? Lover?

"He's fine." Rebecca pursed her lips into a smile. "He's complaining about being a patient."

"That's a good sign." Katlin looked down at her outfit. "I don't have anything to

change into.”

“None of my stuff would fit you, but I can look down in the storeroom. There might be something down there that will fit. Ryker has had the occasional woman friend over. Maybe I’ll get lucky and find one of them was an absentminded Amazon.”

Katlin could feel her temper rising--the porcelain doll had claws. “And are you one of Ryker’s women friends?”

“That’s a question you’ll have to ask Ryker.” Rebecca spun around and walked away.

Katlin wanted to punch that smile off her face. She watched as Rebecca stopped in front of Ryker and bent down, giving him a kiss on the forehead. Ryker smiled up at Rebecca, and Katlin’s anger suddenly turned into something more akin to pain.

Katlin remembered the way he had looked at Rebecca in the photograph. There was more than lust in his eyes--there was a sense of possession. Her stomach knotted up, and she wished she had a place to crawl and hide, but there was no place to go. She was stuck dealing with the blonde. Getting up from her chair, Katlin unconsciously yanked down on the bottom of the shirt, trying to make it longer, as she crossed the room.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, trying to curb the sudden desire to touch him. He looked good. He was sitting up, and there was color in his cheeks.

“I feel great. I’m trying to convince this idiot to let me get up.” Ryker motioned to the older man sitting next to him, wearing a stethoscope around his neck. “How about it, Doc? Will I live?”

The doctor stood up and started laughing. “You’ll be fine. That shoulder will keep you out of commission for a while.” The doctor reached into a black bag and pulled out a bottle of pills. He handed them over to Ryker. “Take these for the pain as you need them. And try to duck next time. I’m tired of patching you up every time you get shot.”

“Okay, Doc, I promise not to get shot in the next twenty-four hours.” Ryker turned his attention to Katlin. “You look horrible. Did you get any sleep?”

She tried not to cringe at his words. *I must have bags the size of watermelons under my eyes*, she thought. *I would have to look my worst in front of Rebecca.*

Ryker’s eyes were filled with concern for her. That was something, she told herself. He had some feelings for her, didn’t he? “I slept for a couple of hours.”

“Go to bed right now. Rebecca is here, and she can take care of me while you get some sleep.”

Katlin looked over at Rebecca. Rebecca smiled back at her and put a possessive hand on Ryker’s shoulder. “Of course, I’ll take care of you. You have nothing to worry about, Katlin. He’s in safe hands.”

Katlin tried to produce a smile, but she couldn’t. “Where do you want me to sleep?” she asked.

Rebecca answered, “There’s a guest room next to Ryker’s room. I put clean sheets on the bed in there the other day.”

“Thanks.” Katlin forced herself to smile at the woman, who suddenly seemed to have her hands all over Ryker. She couldn’t stomach watching the two of them together anymore.

As Katlin walked down the hallway, she could hear Rebecca cooing from the other room. “Now, darling, let me help you up onto the couch. Here, lean on me. That a

boy. Now what can I make you to eat? How about some of your favorite chicken soup? I stocked the cupboard with a few cans last week.”

Katlin closed the door and fell into bed. Covering her head with a pillow, she tried to block out all thoughts of Rebecca and Ryker together, but she couldn’t. Images of the two of them touching and talking kept filling her mind.

It was dark when she lifted her head from the pillow. The clock on the bed stand blazed back “7:00” in neon red. She couldn’t believe she’d slept for twelve hours. Getting slowly out of bed, she stretched and noticed someone had left a pair of black jeans, a black turtleneck and a big, white fluffy towel on a nearby chair. Katlin stripped off her clothes, wrapped the towel securely around her and headed out the door, down the hall toward the bathroom. The sound of a door opening made her turn, and she found herself face to face with Rebecca.

“You’re finally awake,” Rebecca said softly as she closed Ryker’s door.

“Yes, I am. I take it you’re the one I thank for the clothes and towel?”

“I hope the clothes fit. I tried to guess your size, but I’m so used to shopping in the petite section.”

“That must be tough.” She was not about to stoop down to the woman’s level of cattiness. “Is there any news about my brother?”

“Ryker had me check around. Colin is in a hospital in Reno. He has a severe concussion, but other than that he’s fine. The doctors want to keep him there under observation for a few days. That’s not unusual in the case of severe head trauma.”

“When can I see him?” Katlin asked.

“As soon as he is ready to leave the hospital, we will have someone bring him here. I made some food. When you’re done with your shower, come into the kitchen.” Rebecca nodded her head toward the closed door and grinned smugly. “I’m getting Ryker a drink of water.”

Katlin didn’t want to hear anymore, so she turned on her heels and escaped into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Leaning against the door, Katlin forced herself to take a deep calming breath. *How can I survive being around Ryker and a woman he’s obviously involved with?* Katlin ran her hands through her hair. *Maybe I could stay locked away in the bathroom forever.* She reminded herself she wasn’t the type to run scared as she walked over to the shower and turned on the water.

As she waited for the water to warm up, she stared into the mirror. Deep, purple circles ran below each eye, and she looked pale. The twelve hours of sleep hadn’t been restful. Her dreams had turned into nightmares full of Rebecca and Ryker. Horrible images of them naked, their bodies entwined, making love.

She wished she could somehow stop herself from caring for Ryker, but she knew that was impossible. She was in love with him, and she had hoped he might love her back, but now, it seemed obvious that he and Rebecca were lovers. The image staring back at her from the mirror was a pitiful sight--pale face full of sadness, green eyes full of heartache. She touched the mirror, running her fingers over the smooth glass, and wished she could wipe away the sadness. And then it dawned on her. What if Rebecca noticed the sadness in her eyes and realized Katlin was in love with Ryker? It would be humiliating. She would have to make a point of acting nonchalant around Ryker. Rebecca might hold Ryker’s heart, but she would not get the satisfaction of watching

Katlin make a fool of herself over him.

She already treats me like an idiot and insults me every chance she gets, Katlin thought as she climbed in the shower and under the spray of hot water. No way I'm going to give her more ammunition to use against me.

* * * *

Katlin closed the bathroom door, and Rebecca walked down the hall, whistling a tune as she went.

"You're in a good mood." Ryker leaned against the island, trying to manage the teapot and a cup with one hand.

"What are you doing up?" Rebecca demanded as she rushed across the room and snuggled her body next to his. "Here, let me help you." Rebecca took the teapot out of his hands. "You should be lying down. Doctor's orders."

"I'm tired of lying around. Stop making a fuss, Rebecca."

She swatted at his hand. "Go sit down, right now. I'll make the tea."

He stepped away from her and collapsed into the closest chair. He didn't know why, but Rebecca had a way of making him feel skittish. Sometimes when she laughed or as he watched her move around the room, he would be reminded of Carolyn. The two looked similar enough they could be twins.

He watched Rebecca pour tea into a cup. "Did I hear two voices in the hallway?"

"Your assignment is up."

"She isn't my assignment."

Rebecca walked over and handed him a cup of tea. "Are you sleeping with her?"

"That's none of your business."

"You know, she's in love with you?"

"You're wrong." The thought of someone depending on him again was more than he could handle. He didn't want a commitment from anyone.

"Ryker, I know women, and I'm telling you this redhead looks at you and sees four kids and a white picket fence."

"Rebecca, I mean this with great respect and love--butt out!"

She laughed at him and settled herself on the loveseat. She played with her hair, flicking it back and forth. It might have been Carolyn eyeing him from across the room, playing with her hair as they sat around and talked long into the night. The memories were almost too painful for him to bear.

He sat staring at Rebecca, but he was not really seeing her, instead he saw his wife running down the beach on their honeymoon, his wife standing in the kitchen covered in flour as she cooked fifteen batches of cookies for a neighborhood bake sale. And then the image flashed of his wife lying on the ground as he watched her life slowly ebb away. Carolyn, the woman he had planned to spend the rest of his life with, the woman he had loved more than life itself. Carolyn--his wife. The woman whose death he replayed over and over each night in his dreams. If only he hadn't lost control. If he could go back and relive those last few minutes, change the way he'd handled the situation, Carolyn would still be alive. But there was no going back.

* * * *

Katlin finished her shower, made sure her hair was tidy, and put on the dark clothes. She straightened her shoulders as she walked down the hall. As she entered the

room, she tried to keep her eyes from going to Ryker, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She was drawn to him. No matter how hard she fought the urge, her eyes sought him out the minute she entered the room.

Ryker was sitting across from Rebecca, his face full of an emotion Katlin couldn't quite read.

"You're up and around?" Katlin tried to make her voice sound casual.

"Yeah, I feel much better. I like your get-up. You look good in black." His eyes slowly took in her appearance, caressing her body in a way that made the heat rise in her cheeks.

"Thanks."

Rebecca hopped up from her chair and went into the kitchen. Katlin's heart ached as she watched Rebecca moving comfortably about, opening drawers and cabinets. Rebecca looked perfectly at home in Ryker's kitchen.

"And besides, black is the best color for night work."

"Night work?" Katlin noticed his eyes were also following Rebecca's every move.

It was childish, but she maneuvered herself in front of him, blocking his view of Rebecca.

He smiled up at her. "How do you feel about going on a little information-gathering mission with me?"

"You don't plan to break into the Lodge tonight?" Rebecca stalked across the room making a beeline for Ryker and nudging Katlin out of the way with her shoulder as she passed. "You're in no condition to do anything but rest."

"Not tonight. You're right, I need a couple of days to recoup." Ryker ignored Rebecca and got carefully to his feet.

Katlin unconsciously took a few steps forward, intent on going to his side and helping him. *You aren't his girlfriend*, an inner voice reminded her. Katlin felt herself blush. She leaned over and picked up a magazine from the table and pretended to flip through it.

"You need more than a couple of days!" Rebecca's face was flushed with anger. She stood only inches from Ryker.

Katlin was interested to see what Ryker did next. She leafed through the magazine as she watched the couple fight. In Katlin's experience, you couldn't get Ryker to do anything he didn't want to do. Maybe his girlfriend would have better luck.

"In a couple of days I'm breaking into the Lodge where Halster worked. There might be some information that will help us figure out what's going on. Are you in or out?" he asked Rebecca, his voice a quiet growl.

Rebecca's cheeks turned a darker shade of red. "I tell you, you're not going!"

Ryker ignored her and addressed Katlin. "What do you want to eat? We have chicken soup and sandwiches."

"Ryker, do you hear me?" Rebecca demanded.

"Rebecca, sit down! I'm going, end of discussion. Are you coming with us?"

"No. Someone has to be around to bail you two out of jail. This is ridiculous!" Rebecca pointed at Katlin. "She's a novice. Some goodie two shoes who will be no help to you. And you! Never mind. Go get yourself killed. What do I care?" She glared at

Ryker before twirling around and stomping out of the room.

Katlin smiled at Ryker. "What kind of sandwiches do you have?"

Ryker laughed and pointed to the kitchen. "Ham and swiss. Rebecca made them. Hopefully she didn't add any rat poison. Ignore Rebecca. She has a bit of a temper."

She followed him into the kitchen. "Are you really going to break into the Lodge?" she asked as she helped herself to a sandwich.

"Yeah, with your help."

"She's right, you know. I've never done anything illegal in my life. I don't even speed."

"Don't worry. I plan to use you as a lookout. All you'll have to do is keep an eye out. If someone comes along, you let me know over the walkie-talkies."

"Walkie-talkies?" Her face lit up with excitement.

"For someone who has never done anything illegal, you're sure taking this whole break-in concept quite well."

"I'm a quick study." Katlin chuckled and took another bite of her sandwich.

Chapter Fifteen

Katlin found herself secretly agreeing with Rebecca. Ryker didn't seem physically up to the late-night excursion. It had been three days since his fight with Rebecca. For three days, Katlin had made herself scarce, spending most of the time in her room reading. Whenever she did venture out, she would run into Rebecca and Ryker screaming or glaring at each other from across the room. Actually, Katlin realized Rebecca was the one doing all of the screaming. Ryker never raised his voice. He just sat mute, a nonchalant expression on his face as Rebecca yelled at him.

Katlin had spent enough time with Ryker to realize when he was mad or annoyed. He had reached a whole new level of anger, one she had never seen before and was thankful it wasn't directed at her.

She kept telling herself that Rebecca had known Ryker longer than she had and maybe Rebecca knew what she was doing, but secretly she wondered if their relationship was on rocky ground.

Katlin wanted Ryker, but she didn't know if she wanted to win his heart by default. She had been brought up in a house full of honesty. Her father had made a point of instilling a very strong sense of social morality into both of his children. Katlin wanted Ryker, but the thought of trying to win him from Rebecca made her feel uncomfortable.

What she needed to do was stop worrying about Ryker and start getting her head focused on her first breaking and entering job.

Katlin opened the passenger door and got into the car. "Do we have far to drive?"

"The Lodge is on the other side of the lake. It shouldn't take us more than twenty minutes to get there."

Katlin rested her head back against the seat and tried to calm her pounding heart. Break-in. She was about to go break into a Lodge. The more she thought about it, the more thrilling the adventure sounded. Like playing out a part of an adventure movie, something she and Colin had done all the time for fun as kids. But this was not make-believe, and if she screwed up her lines, she could end up getting them both thrown into jail.

At the thought of jail, her heart started pounding faster, and the palms of her hands felt damp. Rubbing her hands against her jeans, she reminded herself not to panic. In the last seven days she had gotten into and out of some crazy situations. She was not the same woman who'd spent her weekends watching old movies and cleaning out the garage. This new Katlin Campbell was strong and capable of handling anything that came her way. At least, that's what she told herself as the car barreled down the windy mountain road.

* * * *

"Where are we?" she asked, trying to make out shapes in the dark. It was pitch black. She had forgotten how dark it could be without any visible city lights. A full

moon kept peeking in and out from behind the clouds.

"We have a short hike to the Lodge," Ryker said as he grabbed a small black bag out of the backseat and attached it to his belt. He was dressed entirely in black.

"Do you think you're up to hiking?" she asked watching him move his body slowly and painfully as he walked around the car.

He opened the trunk and took out a small flashlight. "Rebecca is enough of a nag. I don't need you on my back."

Katlin twirled around and tried to get her bearings. All she could make out in the dark were large pine trees. She looked up at the sky and wondered which direction was north. Now she regretted not paying attention to Colin that summer in middle school he'd decided he wanted to be a sea captain. His boring lecture on navigating by the stars might turn out to be important if she got separated from Ryker in the dark. "How far are we from the Lodge?" she asked as she reached up and traced the outline of the Big Dipper with her index finger.

"About a half mile from the Gondola." He started off into the woods. "Stay close--I don't want to lose you in the dark."

"Aye, aye, captain." She matched his slow pace. "You lead and I'll follow."

Ryker walked ahead of her, and she could tell by the way he moved he was in pain. She thought about asking him if he needed to take a break. He would think she was nagging. She kept her mouth shut and followed the tiny stream of light bobbing up and down the path.

They walked along in silence until suddenly a twinkle of lights appeared between the trees.

"Is that the Lodge? Is it open?" she asked, her voice full of panic and excitement.

"Yeah, but this time of year there aren't many guests."

"How are you going to break in?" Saying the words out loud made her heart skip a few beats. Her palms were no longer slightly damp, instead they were sweating, and her mouth had gone dry.

"Around the back there are fewer lights, and the security guard is lazy. He's supposed to walk the perimeter every hour, but according to Rebecca's surveillance reports, he usually just walks around the first and last hour of his shift."

"Do you have to pick the lock like they do on TV?" *And are there people in there with guns that will shoot us when they see us breaking in?* she wanted to ask, but she kept quiet. If it was too dangerous, Ryker wouldn't have brought her along. He had more than once put his life on the line to protect hers.

"No, I have the key, but I'll have to disarm the security alarm before I use it." He turned off the flashlight.

"How did you get your hands on a key?" *Stay cool, you can do this*, she chanted to herself, over and over again.

"Rebecca had dinner with the security guard a couple of nights ago."

He suddenly stopped and peered into her face. "Are you okay?"

His face was just inches from hers. "I'm a little nervous." She cleared her throat. "Okay, maybe a lot nervous." She moved forward. The ground below her was rocky, and she instinctively put her hand on his shoulder for balance. It felt so good to touch him. She could feel the heat of his body through his shirt.

Her mouth went dry again, but this time not from fear. A shot of desire went through her body. God, how easy it would be to peel off that shirt and run her hands across his naked chest. Stop it, Katlin, think of something else, she chastised herself. "I have this picture in my head of Rebecca having a candlelight dinner, tossing her hair and flirting with some sixty-year-old security guard named Bubba, whose main hobby is squirrel-hunting."

He quietly chuckled. "According to her, he was twenty with an incredible body. Though I doubt there'll be a second date. He took her to a fast food restaurant and forced her to pay for half the check."

The image of Rebecca eating hamburgers in her designer clothes made Katlin snicker.

"Come on," Ryker said, grabbing her hand and pulling her behind him. "I know you're new to this, but a basic rule of breaking and entering is not to let them hear you coming. That way they don't call the cops, and you don't go to jail."

She was so intent on trying to keep quiet that she forgot to watch her step, and her foot caught on a rock and sent her flying forward. Ryker spun around and caught her before she could fall. He pulled her into his arms.

"Another rule of breaking and entering--try not to break your own neck."

This time she couldn't help herself, it felt too good to be in his arms. She leaned her head against his shoulder. He smelled good. "This is the first time we've been alone in days."

"Yes, it is," his voice whispered into her ear as his hands started slowly moving up and down her back.

At his touch, she could feel the heat begin to spread through her body. Her hands wrapped around his neck, and she raised her face until it was just inches from his. She could feel the heat of his breath against her lips. "Have you known Rebecca a long time?" She felt his body tense, and he pushed her away.

"Yeah, I have. Try not to kill yourself. The terrain gets rougher the closer we get to the Lodge."

Why had she done that? Why had she asked him a question she knew would annoy him? Because she was in love with him, and deep down, a part of her was angry--angry that she had to watch him and Rebecca together, angry that he didn't seem to be consumed by any need for her as she was consumed with wanting him. Lately his image constantly filled her mind, and her body ached for his touch.

They made their way through the woods and to the back of the Lodge. They were only a few feet from the back door.

"I want you to find a spot to hide, somewhere where you can conceal yourself but still have an unobstructed view of the back of the Lodge. If you see anyone coming, then use the walkie-talkie and let me know. Now make sure...." Before he could finish, the sound of voices drifted nearby. He grabbed her and dragged her toward the door. He pulled out a small pair of pliers and opened the alarm box.

He handed her the flashlight. "Hold this and shine it on the box, so I can see what I'm doing."

The voices were getting closer. He worked fast, snipping wires as Katlin stood next to him, her body full of adrenaline, her hands shaking. They were going to be

caught. The voices were almost on top of them, and any minute someone was going to see them and call the police.

“Hurry,” she whispered.

“I am,” he said, concentrating on the contents of the box.

She watched him snip a few more wires before closing the box. He took out a key, turned it in the lock, and in one smooth motion, he opened the door and pulled her inside. As he slowly closed the door, she could see a small crowd of people round the corner.

“Okay, so much for you staying outside and out of trouble. Now that you’re here, try to watch where you’re going and be quiet.” Ryker headed down a dark hallway. She followed the tiny stream of light bobbing in front of her. The light suddenly disappeared.

“Ryker, where are you?” she whispered down the hallway.

“In here,” he answered.

She followed his voice and used her hands to feel her way around a door and into a room. He stood at a desk, opening drawers.

“What should I do?” she asked, trying to keep her heart from pounding right out of her chest.

“See if you can find anything in the filing cabinets.”

“What am I looking for?” She opened the cabinet and started thumbing through the files.

“Anything that looks out of place, anything suspicious.”

“How am I supposed to know if it looks suspicious?” she mumbled as she pulled out files. “It’s too dark to see anything.”

He walked over to the window and shut the drapes. “Turn on the light on the desk.”

“Won’t someone see it?” she asked making her way to the desk.

“This side of the Lodge is empty at night, but only the security guard knows no one should be in here, and his office is on the other side of the Lodge. He should be glued to the TV right now.”

The room was suddenly bathed in light, and she went back to the filing cabinets and continued her search. In the second drawer, she found a file labeled Campbell, Emerson. “What the heck?” Katlin pulled the thick file out of the drawer.

“Did you find something?” Ryker asked, taking the file from her hands and placing it on the desk. He opened it. Inside the folder lay a big white envelope and a dozen typed pages. He handed Katlin the envelope as he started to read the first pages out loud. “These look like surveillance reports. Halster was tailing your father.” He went through the reports pulling out pages at random. “November second, seven a.m.. Campbell left his house. One p.m. Campbell had sandwich at local restaurant.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Katlin opened the envelope and pulled out a stack of photos. “These are pictures of my dad!”

Ryker took a photo from her hand. “Do you recognize the man with him?”

“No, I’ve never seen him before. Why would anyone want to follow my father around?”

Ryker took the stack from her hand and started going through the photos. The first five showed Emerson Campbell sitting at a table with the unidentified man. “What

did you say he did for a living?"

"He was in research. He worked for a company researching Talents' abilities. They were trying to find ways to enhance individual performance."

"With drugs?"

"Not just drugs--mental exercises, and training techniques--similar to trying to get to an athlete's maximum athletic performance." She realized Ryker had an odd expression on his face. "What is it?"

"Nothing." He looked as if he was trying to make a decision. "Is there anyway your father could've worked for the Vector?"

"Never! My father would never be involved with a group like that."

He handed her another pile of pictures. This time the photos showed her father and Murray the man from the alley. They stood talking. Her father's face was relaxed, his body language open. It was as though he knew the man in front of him, and he was comfortable with him.

It wasn't possible. Her father could not have been mixed up with the crime organization. He had preached honesty to her all her life. How could he have hidden something like this from her? She wondered if their mother knew. What about Colin? If he knew, he might keep it to himself, trying to protect the rest of the family. Colin was like that. Katlin could imagine the stories he was currently feeding their mother about where they both were.

"It can't be true." Katlin sat down hard into the nearest chair.

Ryker studied the rest of the photos in the pile. "We need to take these photos back and see if we can identify the man with your father."

"You can't think my father is involved. You don't know him like I do. He would never have done anything illegal."

"I honestly don't know what I believe, but I think this could be the lead we've been looking for." He suddenly looked up from the photos. "Katlin, how did your father die?" When she didn't answer, he repeated the question. "What was the cause of your father's death?"

She rubbed her temples. Her head was starting to throb. "A heart attack. Why?"

"Did they do an autopsy?"

"No, of course not. It was obvious he had a heart attack. The sheriff called us and told us that he was found dead in his car by the side of the road."

"Why didn't the sheriff come and tell you in person?"

"Because it didn't happen close to home. Dad was traveling out of state on business." She could not understand why he was so interested in her father's death. She could talk about it now without getting emotional, but she tried not to think about it anymore. It still hurt too much to think about.

"Did you see your father's body after he died?"

Something about the way he asked the question made her stop what she was doing and look at him. "What do you mean, did I see his body? Where are you going with all these questions?" It suddenly dawned on her what all his questions were leading to.

"No, he wanted to be cremated."

He stuffed the photos back into the envelope. "I don't know what's going on, but I have a strong feeling your father has a lot to do with all this."

“How could he, he’s dead.”

“So is Halster.”

“Halster was murdered.” She realized he was suddenly very still. “Impossible. My dad died of natural causes.”

“You sure of that?”

“You can’t seriously think that someone had my Father killed.”

“At this point, I’m not sure what I think.”

“Ryker, you have to be nuts. My dad....”

Ryker looked at the door. “Did you hear that? Someone’s coming.”

“There’s no place to hide!” she hissed at him, as she grabbed the stack of papers and stuffed them back into the file. She hugged the file against her as she looked for a place to run.

“Under the desk. Close that top drawer, but be quiet,” he whispered as he turned off the light.

She was thrown into darkness. She felt her way to the filing cabinet and gently pushed the drawer shut. She didn’t know if she could make it across the room and under the desk in the dark. Ryker opened the drapes and moonlight came shining in through the windows, lighting up the room. Ryker was under the desk. Thank God, it was one of those huge old-fashioned desks. It would be a tight squeeze, but they both could fit under it. She bent down and squeezed herself next to him.

“I thought I saw a light coming from under the door,” a masculine voice said from the hallway.

“Ernie, you’re crazy. There’s no one around this side of the Lodge but us.”

Ryker grabbed Katlin and pulled her the rest of the way under the desk and into his lap. “Am I hurting you?” she whispered in his ear, was worried about his injured shoulder.

“No.” His voice caressed her ear. “The night janitors. Neither one of them should be here tonight.”

“Come on, Ernie, hurry up, will you? I hate to work on my day off. If that damn sink didn’t bust we wouldn’t have been called in.”

The door swung open, and she could hear someone walking into the room. “Hold your horses,” a voice said as the overhead light turned on.

All the man had to do was walk around the desk, and he would see them. Katlin stomped down on the sudden urge to flee out from the desk, out the door and back into the forest.

“I told you no one was in here. Come on, I want to get home.”

The door banged shut. “Okay, okay I must have imagined....” The voice faded down the hallway.

“Do you think it’s safe to leave?” Katlin asked, enjoying the feel of her body pressed against his.

“We should wait a few more minutes. Just to make sure they’re gone,” Ryker said as he nuzzled his lips against her neck.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

She couldn’t control the shiver of desire that ran down the length of her body. “I

don't think this is the time or place to...."

"To what?" he asked as his hands moved along the bare skin of her neck. "Shhh, remember we don't want to get caught," he said as he nuzzled her neck again. "Okay, I think it's safe." Ryker moved from under the desk. He helped her to her feet. He grabbed the file on the floor next to him and stood, picking up the envelope with the photos from the desk. "Keep looking, there might be more." He once again closed the blinds and turned on the desk lamp.

How could the man just turn it on and off like that? Her body hummed with electricity from his touch, and her mouth was dry from the thought of him taking her then and there on the floor in the office. For a moment, she had forgotten all about where they were, what they were there for. And worst of all, she had forgotten all about Rebecca. As his hands had caressed her skin, she had even for a moment forgotten her name. The truth was that he affected her in a way no man had before. But it was becoming very clear that he didn't feel the same way.

Katlin returned to her search with renewed interest and soon noticed a pattern within the cabinet of files. "There are folders in here for a lot of people, most of them are not as extensive as Dad's, but there are a lot of odd details in here. Many of the files include a name, but then the same people seem to check out with a completely different name. There is also a list of Talents, personality details and background information on each person. It looks like all of them seem to stay here for quite a while. In fact, it's hard to see how the Lodge has room for any regular guests."

Ryker looked up from the desk. Two well-worn ledgers lay open in front of him. "It doesn't look like they often do--almost all of their bills seem to be paid from the same off-shore account. The second ledger shows all of the payments from other sources. This is strange. Your father's name is in here, and it looks like he stayed for a few weeks and paid a little more than you would for an average stay at a hotel."

"How much more?" Katlin asked.

"Just over twenty-five thousands dollars."

"That can't be right. There must be some mistake."

"Not according to this. It says here that your father stayed at the Lodge a few weeks before his death."

"What the hell does all of this mean?" Katlin felt like her head was going to explode.

"If I had to guess, this is a halfway house for Vector employees. When they got in too much trouble, they could come here and get a nice brand-new identity. I've seen this sort of operation before."

Had her father faked his own death? It seemed impossibly out of character--her father had loved his wife and children with devotion. The grief of his death had taken a large toll on all of them. She refused believe that her father would have knowingly caused them that much pain. There had to be another explanation.

Ryker studied the ledgers again in depth and then stopped suddenly and looked up. "I think this was Halster's own set of books. What if Halster was running a halfway house for criminals for Vector, and it was such a sweet deal, Halster decided to bring in some of his own private clients?" Ryker closed the ledgers and added them to the pile. "I wish we could take all of this with us, but we would look a little conspicuous heading

out with an entire filing cabinet. Grab a few that look interesting, and let's get out of here."

He added her selections to the pile and looked around for a way to carry it all. In the corner, an overcoat was thrown carelessly over a chair. Retrieving it, he wrapped the files up and tied the whole thing up with the coat's belt. Placing the whole bundle in Katlin's arms, he returned the room to darkness.

He opened the door and looked down the hallway. "The coast is clear. Let's get out of here while we have the chance."

Before she could say anything, he stalked out the door. And she had no choice but to follow him down the dark hallway.

* * * *

They didn't talk on the ride back to his cabin. Rebecca greeted them at the door and demanded to know what they'd found.

Ryker explained about the photos, the files and the ledgers, his eyes never leaving Katlin, who was standing nearby watching the two of them.

"I'm going to bed. I have a headache, and I'm exhausted," Katlin announced as she walked toward the stairway.

He wanted to stop her and talk to her, but he didn't know what he should say. He could tell by the way she watched him and Rebecca, she thought they were involved. He wanted to tell her it wasn't true. But if he was honest with himself, he would have to admit he'd never really stopped to consider what feelings he had for his sister-in-law. Rebecca was a close friend, and he cared for her. Rebecca reminded him so much of her sister. But did his affection for her go deeper than friendship? Katlin obviously thought so.

Rebecca had shown up on his doorstep after Carolyn's death. Full of grief and barely able to function, he had tried to turn her away. He yelled at her that he wanted to be left alone, but she had ignored him and pushed her way into the cabin. She had taken one look at the mess, dirty clothes strewn across the furniture, papers lying all over the floor and the empty liquor bottles scattered everywhere, and refused to leave.

He had leaned on her in the same way he had leaned on his wife. Having her close was like having a bit of Carolyn around. The way she looked, her mannerisms, the way she talked, all reminded him of Carolyn. For a moment, he could pretend Carolyn wasn't dead. But Rebecca was not Carolyn.

He considered Rebecca a friend and companion. Didn't he? He liked having her around, liked watching her move around his house. What were his feelings for his sister-in-law? He found her attractive, but how could he not? She was the spitting image of her sister, his wife. At times he found himself looking at her and feeling the same desire he had for Carolyn, but he had never acted on those feelings. When it came to Rebecca, his feelings and emotions were too muddled together with the feelings he had for his wife. How could he be sure that the attraction he felt toward Rebecca was real, and not an echo of what he had felt for her sister?

Katlin? What did he feel for Katlin? He couldn't seem to keep his hands off her. Every time she entered a room, all he wanted to do was pull her body into his and have his way with her. He didn't want it to be more than the physical. He didn't think he was ready to care about someone so deeply that their absence destroyed him again.

Ryker watched Rebecca as she talked on the phone. She was beautiful. As though she felt his eyes on her, she turned and looked at him, a slow smile spreading across her lips, and he found himself automatically answering with a grin of his own. And then he realized that was what Katlin saw between the two of them. She saw Ryker responding to Rebecca as though she was Carolyn. He slumped down into the nearest chair. Everything had gotten so complicated.

Rebecca finished her conversation and crossed the room. "What's wrong? Did you hurt yourself? I told you not to break into that damn Lodge." She playfully swung her arm and hit him his good shoulder. "You're an idiot!"

What feelings did he have for his sister-in-law? The question kept echoing through his head. Rebecca leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm glad you got back safely. I've grown accustomed to that ugly mug of yours."

"Friends again?" he asked.

"You know I can never stay mad at you forever. I'm sorry I've such a wretched temper."

"You're only sorry after that temper of yours cools off."

She laughed, "Of course, at the time I'm mad I want to knock you senseless. You realize you can be stubborn and unreasonable?"

"And I bet you think you're easy to get along with?"

"No, I know I'm a pain in the ass," she laughed.

"Most days," he agreed and then ducked when she took a playful swing at his head.

"Seriously Ryker, you know you can always count on me. Even when I want to throttle you, I'll always be there to help when you need it."

"I know." She even wore the same perfume as Carolyn. It drifted toward him as she leaned in, and he found himself wondering what it would be like to take her in his arms. What did he feel for her? Maybe it was time to find out. "Rebecca?"

"Yes," she answered leaning close again.

He pulled her body into his and kissed her.

* * * *

Katlin's head was throbbing. There was no way she was going to be able to sleep with this headache. She had already searched the room and the bathroom for a bottle of aspirin, but no luck.

Katlin had gone to bed rather abruptly. When they came through the door she could barely meet Rebecca's eyes. She heard Ryker telling Rebecca all about the papers and photos they found. She heard him ask Rebecca to start tracking down the unidentified man in the photo with her dad. She should've stayed and joined in on the conversation, but she couldn't bear it.

Katlin was rubbing her temples as she walked down the hall. Maybe she would find aspirin somewhere in one of the kitchen cupboards. It took her a moment to register the scene before her as she walked into the main room.

Ryker was kissing Rebecca.

Katlin couldn't tear her eyes away from the two of them.

Ryker was kissing Rebecca.

The pounding in her head turned into a full-blown migraine. She couldn't take

this anymore--couldn't stand here and watch him make love to another woman. It was all too much. Ryker didn't care about her. He might desire her, but that was as far as his feelings for her went. Katlin had been forced to watch him with Rebecca, his eyes filled with emotions that were deeper than anything he felt for her. He was in love with Rebecca, and there was no way Katlin could compete with the woman. She wasn't going to make a fool of herself trying to fight for him.

He loved Rebecca. Tears slid down Katlin's face. She could barely breathe. She turned to leave and knocked a small vase off an end table. As the sound echoed across the room, the two on the couch broke apart.

Katlin fled back to her room. Slamming the door, locking it behind her, she threw herself onto her bed. Tears streamed down her face. In the morning she would leave, she would find out where her brother was. Colin had been right--she should've gone to McDonald for help when this all started.

Someone was pounding on the door. She didn't want to talk to anyone. Didn't want any more conversation. Her head was killing her, and her heart was broken. She needed to be left alone.

She ignored the knocking as she pulled back the bed covers and crawled under. As she cried, the pounding at her temples increased. She lay on the bed sobbing wildly until exhaustion set in, and she fell asleep.

Visions filled her mind. They rushed across her eyes, too fast to make out, one image after another, a blur of colors melting together. She tried to make the images slow down. She wanted to see what they were, tried desperately to get them into focus, but they kept moving faster.

A loud noise woke her up. She felt groggy, and her head still throbbed, but she forced her eyes open, forced herself to sit up. Didn't they know she wanted to be left alone? She wanted solitude. All she needed was some rest and peace and quiet.

She fell back, her head pounding and closed her eyes. The visions came again as her mind drifted away, carried off in the swirl of colors.

Chapter Sixteen

He knew it was a mistake the moment his lips touched Rebecca's. Nothing. He didn't feel anything. He started to move away, but Rebecca pushed her body closer. The kiss grew more passionate, and still he felt nothing. He was considering how to extricate himself from her arms when he heard the sound of something breaking.

Katlin was standing on the stairs, trembling in anger. He called out her name as she turned and ran back up the stairs and out of sight. He started to push Rebecca aside, but she grabbed his arm.

"Let her go. It's better this way." Rebecca tried to pull him back onto the couch. "She was bound to find out about us sooner or later."

Ryker gently pried her fingers loose. "There's nothing between us."

"I know you have feelings for me. I've known it for a long time."

"I care for you, but I care for you as a friend."

"It's not true. You love me, I know you do," she said as she grabbed his arm again, trying to keep him close to her. "You love me."

"No, I don't." He pried her fingers loose a second time. "I was confused. Every time I looked at you, I saw your sister. I'm truly sorry. I honestly never meant to lead you on. I wasn't sure how I felt until right this moment." He got up from the loveseat. "I was in love with your sister, but I'm not in love with you. I'm sorry, I really am," he said as he turned and walked out of the room.

The bedroom door was locked when he reached it. He tried knocking on the door, calling out Katlin's name, but she refused to answer. He could hear her sobbing through the door.

He pounded his head against the door in frustration. He had really made a mess of things. What was he going to say to Katlin to explain the kiss?

* * * *

Katlin sat on the floor, crying. She heard knocking at the door.

"Katie, let me in--it's me, Colin."

"Colin!" she cried out, stumbling to the door, desperate to get to her brother. As he came through the door she threw herself into his arms.

"What is it?" he asked, holding her tight as she sobbed uncontrollably. Pushing her back, he looked into her face. "Are you all right?"

"No," she managed to get out.

"Calm down, and tell me what happened." He took her by the arm and started walking farther into the room. "What the hell?" He surveyed the room. It was completely empty. The walls, ceiling and floor were painted white. "Where's the mystery? Where are all the characters?"

"I don't know." Katlin answered as tears streamed down her face.

"Our whole life you've dreamed in adventures. I don't understand this. Katie, what's happened?"

"Ryker doesn't love me." As she said it, it was as if all the breath left her body. She slumped down onto the floor, and Colin was forced down with her.

"Katie. Come on, girl. Stay with me." Colin pulled her into his arms. He stroked her cheek as she talked. "It's okay, baby. You go ahead and cry. Get it out."

She cried, and he held her tight as her body shook against him. She stopped crying and looked at him. "Colin, I want to leave. You have to come get me. I can't stay here."

"I can't leave the hospital for another twenty-four hours."

"You have to come get me! I can't stay here another minute!" Her voice became hysterical.

"McDonald is here. I can have him come get you."

"McDonald is in Reno?" she asked.

"Yes, he found me at the hospital and has been trying to find you."

"Will he come and take me away from here?"

"Yes. Tell me where you are, and I'll have him come and get you. Then when I get out of the hospital, we can be together. I promise, we'll figure out a way to keep you safe."

"I'm in a cabin up at Lake Tahoe."

He held her body tight against his as she gave him directions. "McDonald will come for you as soon as he can." Colin wiped a tear from her face and got up, pulling her up with him. "I promise you'll be safe with him."

"Don't leave me. You can't leave me!" she cried hysterically as he pulled her toward the door.

"It's okay. I promise I'll have someone come for you. I knew that bastard was trouble the first time I laid eyes on him." He patted her cheek as he opened the door. "We'll be together before you know it." He pushed her gently away from him and closed the door.

She grabbed the doorknob. It didn't move. The doorknob was stuck. Suddenly someone started banging on the door. "Colin!" she screamed, "I can't get out." She could hear muffled voices through the door. Someone banged again, this time louder. Both hands on the doorknob, she tried to use her body to force it to turn. No luck, it didn't move. "Help me!" Her hands struck the door. "Can you hear me? I can't open it!"

Ryker's fist pounded against what was left of the wall and the jagged hole that had he had smashed through rained white dust into the room. "She won't wake up. What's wrong with her?" Ryker turned and growled at Rebecca, "Why won't she wake up?" he tried to keep his voice from showing the strain of retaining control.

"She must have seen something at the Lodge that triggered the images Halster left. Her brain is trying to make sense of them, but it's too much. Her senses are overloaded." Rebecca's normal impatience seemed to have given way to calm reassurance. "I'm going to have to extract the information."

"But she's unconscious. That's too dangerous!" Ryker's voice was full of panic.

"I don't have a choice." Rebecca placed her hands on Katlin's forehead and closed her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Ryker asked.

Rebecca cried out in pain. "I can't seem to...." She cried out again. "She's too strong for me. Ryker, I need your help breaking down her walls. No way I can get in there and get those images without more power."

"Can't we wait until she wakes up? There has to be something we can do. It's too dangerous going in and messing around with someone when they're sleeping."

"She's not really asleep anymore--more like catatonic. You've seen autistic kids on TV--they have so many stimuli they can't react to them all. It's touch and go whether she'll come out of it."

* * * *

Katlin was adrift in sea of memories-- too many were flashing by to make any sense of them. For an instant she was playing with Colin, making their own private world out of building blocks. The next second she was dancing with her mortifyingly geeky prom date. Her mother's voice soothed her to sleep in her crib and then she was playing basketball with the neighborhood kids. Faster and faster the memories flashed over her until they were just an unbroken chain of unrelated images from her past.

And then something strange happened--memories that were not her own mixed into the flow. In between memories she recognized she was shaking the hand of some stern looking men in expensive suits and then sitting in the back seat of a car telling the driver that she needed to stop to pee.

She noticed that she wasn't the only one watching this bizarre slide show. She recognized Ryker's strong presence moving up beside her and steadying her against the maelstrom. For a moment she steadied and found her balance, the flashing images slowed just a little, allowing Katlin to at least grasp where she was in time and space.

A new distress consumed her. At her side, Ryker watched her life flash by--all of her best and worst moments. For one hideous moment, she was fumbling in the dark with the awkward youth she had chosen to lose her virginity to. All of her secrets were there for Ryker to watch. The embarrassment gave way to mortification. Through it all, Ryker's calming, strong presence did not waver, but Katlin knew without a doubt that she would never be able to look him in the eye again.

Katlin became aware of another presence, an energy that at first she could not identify. It occurred to her that it had to be Rebecca, but it did not seem like the Rebecca she knew at all. In the Lower Level Rebecca felt warm and comforting, trustworthy and compassionate. In a way, that was the worst blow of all.

Rebecca slowly took control of the flow. Rather than random flashing, it became a steady search for something. It flashed forward to her arrival at the cabin and then worked steadily backward. Katlin's mortification intensified as Rebecca watched her relationship with Ryker develop in reverse. She felt Ryker's shock as she watched him in the shower. And then they arrived at the explosion. Again she felt the pain of Halster's invasion into her mind. Once again the pace picked up, this time Katlin was not the subject as Halster's life flashed before them. Within seconds the pace accelerated so much that no images stayed long enough to register. Katlin felt them lifting from her mind until she finally felt free of the constant pressure on her mind. A pressure that she had not even been aware was there until it was gone.

Finally exhausted, but lighter, she drifted off into true sleep.

* * * *

Katlin couldn't open her eyes. Her whole body felt heavy and numb. She tried to sit up, but none of her limbs would cooperate. She was paralyzed. Voices were talking off in the distance. She focused all her attention on the voices, trying to make out the words.

"I think she's starting to come to." It was Rebecca. "Ryker, talk to her--say something. We have to get her to wake up."

Ryker whispered in her ear. "Come on, Katlin, time to get up. You can do it, open your eyes."

Sleep, she needed to go back to sleep. She was tired and emotionally drained. If they would be quiet, she could drift quietly back into her dreams.

Katlin tried again to open her eyes, but nothing happened.

"I think I saw her eyelids move again. Katlin, open your eyes right now!"

She tried again, and this time her eyes opened, and she found herself staring up at Ryker.

"Okay, I'm going to help you. Don't move too fast. Use me for support." He pulled her gently to her feet.

"What happened?" As the words came out of her mouth, she cringed and grabbed her head. She had a monster hangover. "What was I doing on the floor?" she asked.

Ryker lowered her onto the bed. "That's where we found you when we finally broke in."

Katlin sat down on the edge of the bed. Her hands went to her temples trying to rub away the constant pounding that started up every time she talked. "What's going on?"

"Rebecca took the information out."

Katlin turned and stared at Rebecca. "What was stored in my head?"

Rebecca stood in the corner of the room. Her skin was pale, and she looked ill. "I don't know," she answered.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Katlin turned back to Ryker.

Ryker sat next to her on the bed. "Katlin, the whole process isn't as easy as it sounds. Information isn't stored in the brain in one big chunk. When new information is added, a little piece is stored here and a big piece somewhere else, in a system that has no logical order. The only links between the bits of data are the associations the brain builds as it is storing them. Bit A leads to bits B and C which leads to D, E and then F. You get the idea. In order to retrieve all of the information you must have A, the bit that all of the information is organized from. That's why Rebecca didn't try to retrieve the information earlier--because she didn't have the key. She could've spent days or weeks sorting through your memories without finding anything useful."

"The last thing I wanted to do is roam aimlessly through your head. But you forced the issue. I had no choice." Rebecca answered. Her voice sounded angry.

Ryker ignored her outburst and continued. "That's why we broke into the Lodge. I was hoping to find some clue. I figured if we were lucky we might stumble onto the key to the information."

"And did we find the key?" Katlin asked.

"We must have. But because you had no training as Courier you couldn't use it and retrieve the information. Instead you were lost in memories, yours and his," Ryker

answered.

"But if Rebecca went in and took the information out, I don't understand why she doesn't know what it is that everyone is after, the information that people are trying to kill me for."

Rebecca's face was pale. Her hand went to her head, and she closed her eyes. "You were holding a lot of scenes in your head. I have to work through each one, pulling it out and trying to make sense of it. It will take me a while, but I'll figure it out eventually."

"But she has the information, right? You don't need me anymore?" Katlin asked Ryker. She could finally escape--she could leave now and get back to her real life.

"Rebecca has the information, but that doesn't mean you're safe. You still need to be protected." Ryker placed his hand over hers. "How does your head feel?"

Katlin moved her hand from beneath his. "I'll be protected. McDonald is coming for me. I'm leaving."

"What do you mean, you're leaving? You aren't going anywhere," Ryker growled at her.

She ignored him and stood up. "Why should I stay? You have the information. What else do you need from me?"

"Let her go, Ryker, she won't be much use as bait now. This is our kind of operation," Rebecca said with a pleased smile.

"Vector will still come for her."

"Bait, what the hell, is that what all of this has been about! That's why you've helped me?" Katlin could feel the blood rushing to her head as the fear, helplessness and anger she had been holding in finally burst out.

"Rebecca, give us some privacy, please. I'll talk to you about this later." His dark expression threatened that it would not be a pleasant conversation.

Rebecca turned and left through the broken door, looking distinctly pleased with herself.

Katlin watched her go. "I'm leaving, and you can't change my mind." Katlin tried to keep her voice calm and reasonable.

Ryker grabbed her arm. His voice went low with anger. "You're staying here with me."

"Why? Are you hoping that they will kill me so you can catch them in the act? You're gonna have to find someone else to hang in the breeze with a target on their chest. I'm through being used! Now, let me go!" She tried to jerk her hand from his grip, but he was just too strong.

Katlin's last control over her anger slipped, "Let go of me, you bastard, or suffer the consequences."

Ryker only smiled a smug male smile, as if to say, "Go ahead and try, little girl."

Katlin snatched the glass vase off the bed side table, and with adrenalin-charged speed, smashed it over his head.

Ryker let go of her and stumbled back, a look of shock on his face. His hand went to his head to examine the damage just as the alarm clock struck him in the chest. "Katlin, stop!"

"Who the hell do you think you are--holding me against my will?" She grabbed a

framed picture and an oddly shaped wooden knickknack and threw them in quick succession. The picture missed, smashing against the wall behind him, but the block of wood hit his thigh with a satisfying thump. "No one tells me when I come or go. Not anymore."

"Calm down, I'm just trying to protect you." Ryker had regained his composure, and he easily dodged her next two projectiles.

"By kidnapping me?" Katlin moved to the dresser for more ammunition.

"We both know that's not what's going on here." He managed to catch the book she threw next, but in doing so, he left himself completely open to the reading lamp that immediately followed. It smashed against his back and painful shrapnel flew in every direction.

"I apparently don't know anything that is going on here--and I am thoroughly tired of it." She reached for the last object on the dresser, a small inlaid jewelry box.

Ryker suddenly sprang into action. He crossed the room faster than she would have thought possible. With one hand he grabbed the box, and with the other he gripped her arm. "Not this one," he said, in tone that let her know he meant it.

It must be hers. Even through her anger, she felt a sting of hurt and sadness. She let go of the jewelry box and shook off his grip.

Katlin saw red, any semblance of control faded away and without conscious thought she threw a barrage of projectiles at Ryker--without the unnecessary step of touching anything. Her anger made it possible for something that she had never yet been able to accomplish--her full power was available and bowing to her will.

Ryker's walls immediately raised to protect him, but the physical threat was not deterred. With a stern expression, Ryker stood against the flurry of curios. Some he slapped away with his hands, for others, he made small turns and moves so that they slipped by. Nothing landed with enough force to cause damage. Soon she ran out of things to throw.

Ryker was still standing, and Katlin's exasperation rose to new levels. Without the need for conscious thought, she sent a hammering blow of power at Ryker. His walls shredded away instantly, and his head snapped back as if he had been struck. For a moment, a look of shock and fear crossed his face. He slowly lowered his head, and he walked toward her with determined steps.

Her second shot struck him hard through his as yet un-recovered walls. For a second, she thought he was going to go down, his eyes lost their focus, and he stumbled a step to the right--but he collected himself again with obvious pain and closed the last two steps to stand in front of her.

Katlin stumbled back as Ryker gave her face a firm slap. His voice was pinched with pain and anger, "We both know you are more powerful than I am, but at least I don't turn my powers on my friends. If you want to go, go. I can't stop you. I won't be responsible for your safety if you leave."

"McDonald can protect me as well as you can, maybe better. I've made the arrangements for him to come and get me."

"What do you mean? When did you make the arrangements?" he demanded.

"I've been in constant contact mentally with my brother." She didn't expect him to answer. She wanted him out of the room. She needed to get as far away from him as

she could. "McDonald will be here shortly to pick me up. Now, if you'll excuse me, I would like to go splash some water on my face and freshen up before he comes."

Ryker turned without saying a word and walked out of the room. Katlin watched him leave with no small amount of guilt for the way she had treated him. *Damned if I'm going to apologize to the big jerk.*

* * * *

Ryker watched the car until it was out of sight. Katlin was gone. It was something he'd told himself over and over he wanted. Get the information and then get her out of his life. The information was all that he needed. It was what he wanted, but yet, as he stood there and watched the car drive off, his heart pounded loudly in his chest. He didn't need her. He didn't want her.

Then why was he unconsciously clenching both fists? Why did he have a strong urge to jump in his car and go after her? He forced himself to turn and walk into the house. He walked through the hallway, not really taking in his surroundings. He kept thinking of her face in the window as the car drove away. He would never see her again. It was what he wanted.

"Decided to redecorate?" asked a male voice from behind.

Ryker spun around and realized David was standing in the hallway. "What?"

David pointed down toward Ryker's right hand. "You just put your hand through the wall."

Ryker looked down at his hand. His knuckles were swollen and red. He looked up in shock at the hole in the plaster wall. He had punched a hole in the wall and hadn't even realized it. He needed a drink. "What do you want to drink?"

David looked down at his watch. "Considering it's ten o'clock in the morning, how about some iced tea?"

Ryker headed into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of tequila from the cupboard. He poured himself a shot.

"Bad day?" David asked as he opened the fridge.

"What are you doing here?" Ryker growled as he poured another shot and threw it back.

David poured himself a cup of iced tea. "I found some info on Katlin's father."

The last thing Ryker wanted to do was talk about Katlin. She was gone. She was out of his life for good. He wanted to purge her from his thoughts. Ryker grabbed the bottle and headed toward the loveseat. He fell back against the cushions and poured himself another drink.

David followed him and sat down in a chair facing him. "I thought you'd be interested to know what I found out. Her father didn't die of a heart attack." When Ryker didn't respond, David continued, "The official report says heart attack, but it was a car bomb."

The tequila bottle and shot glass slammed down onto the coffee table. "What?" Ryker demanded.

"I thought that would get your attention. It took a lot of digging and a few thousand, but I finally got a secretary in the sheriff's department to spill the whole story. All the reports were altered. Officially he died of a heart attack."

"That's not an easy thing to cover up."

"No, it would take a lot of power and money to get both the sheriff's office and the newspaper to cooperate."

"Vector." Ryker said as he got up and started pacing back and forth. How was he going to tell Katlin her father was killed? Her world had been set upside down when she suspected her father worked for Vector, and now he had to tell her they killed him.

David took another sip of his drink, his eyes following Ryker across the room. "That's not all."

"What else did you find out?"

"The unidentified man in the photo with Katlin's father--he was a journalist. His name was Peterson."

Ryker stopped pacing and stared at him. "A journalist? What was her father doing talking to a journalist?"

"Apparently spilling all he knew about the Organization."

"Why didn't you bring him with you?" Ryker demanded.

"He's disappeared."

"How long has he been missing?"

"He disappeared a year ago. The same time Katlin's father was killed. He must have realized they would be after him next and skipped out of town. No one has heard from him."

"No leads?" The man couldn't have vanished without a trace.

"None, it's like he disappeared into thin air. I went to his place, thinking I might find some of his notes about the story he was working on. The place looks like it's been done over a few times. If there was any info, someone found it and took it."

Ryker recognized the look on David's face. It was the same look David got when he was holding a winning hand at poker. "But you found something?"

David grinned at him. "He had a summer place. Not much more than a small fishing hut up in the mountains. His brother told me about it." David pulled out a briefcase. He spilled the contents onto the table. "Tapes, notes, and photos. It's all here."

"Have you looked it over?" Ryker leaned down and started sorting through the pile.

"The photos, yes, but the notes are done in some kind of shorthand. I haven't listened to the tapes yet. I've been on the road all night. You have a tape recorder around here some place, don't you?"

"I don't, but Rebecca does." Ryker leaned over and grabbed the phone off the side table. "Hey, David's here, he found the mystery man. A journalist. Yeah, some tapes and photos. Can you come over and bring your recorder?" He hung up and handed the phone back to David. "So Emerson decides to spill his guts to a reporter, but why?"

"Maybe he thought if he exposed them, he would be safe."

Ryker picked up the closest piece of paper. It was filled with chicken scratches, impossible to decipher. "No, he had to be smarter than that. He would know that the minute they realized he was the source they would kill him."

"It doesn't make much sense. How long was he working for them?" David asked.

"No way to know for sure, but if I had to guess, I would say he started before he was married. Before he had kids."

“What makes you think that?”

“Just a hunch. If he put up the wall in Katlin’s head, then he was concerned about her safety. If he was so concerned about his kids, I figure he wouldn’t be the type to get involved in this type of thing after they were born.” Ryker counted fifteen tapes. On each one someone had marked a date. The first tape had been made eighteen months ago.

David finished off his drink. “So he works for them for years and then decides out of the blue to expose them and get himself killed?”

“Doesn’t make much sense, does it?” Ryker answered.

“Not unless the man is a complete idiot.”

Ryker gathered up the photos. No, Katlin’s father was not an idiot. He was smart enough to hide Katlin’s Talents from the Organization. “So what makes him suddenly decide he needs to expose them?”

“Something must have happened that would endanger his life,” David said as he picked up a tape and started turning it over in his hands.

“I don’t buy it. Telling a reporter everything he knew would endanger his life.”

“So what would make him suddenly decide to spill?”

“What did he care about most?” Ryker asked.

“According to you, his kids. So something happens that puts his kids in danger. But I thought that’s why he put up that wall and hid Katlin’s powers.”

“Yeah, I figure he did that to keep her protected. Something else must have made him think they were in danger. We may never know what.” Ryker leaned over and grabbed the stack of photos. “Anyone in here you recognize?”

“There are some shots of Creepers and Tony.”

Ryker chuckled. “They’ll be thrilled to hear that.”

“And some other photos, but I don’t recognize anyone in them.”

Ryker flipped through each photo. Suddenly he stopped and stared at the image before him.

“What is it?” David asked.

“This photo--I know him.”

“Who is it?” Rebecca asked as she walked into the room. She glanced over Ryker’s shoulder and looked down into the photo “I know that man. I mean, I’ve seen his face before.” Rebecca suddenly grabbed her head and cried out in pain. She started shaking her head back and forth before falling hard onto the floor.

Ryker jumped over the loveseat and knelt down beside her. “What is it? What’s happening?” David asked.

Her eyes were open, but she seemed to be looking through him. “David, get a cloth from the kitchen. Wrap some ice in it.”

David got up off the couch and ran into the kitchen. “Is she okay?” he shouted as he emptied ice cubes into the sink.

“Yeah. This happened once before, when she had too many images in her mind and was trying to make sense of them.” Ryker turned her gently over and placed the ice on the back of her neck. “She’ll come out of it in a few minutes.”

The two men watched helplessly as Rebecca lay on the floor. She had shut her eyes, but her eyelids and body jerked every few seconds.

Ryker knew the images were flying across her mind. She was a powerful Courier.

She was capable of managing them eventually.

Her body suddenly went still.

“Is she all right?” David asked.

Rebecca said something, but her voice was inaudible, and her eyes were still closed.

Ryker leaned down and put his ear to her mouth.

“What is she saying?” David asked.

Ryker straightened up. “The photo is of Jonathan McDonald, Katlin’s Boss. Rebecca has pieced together the information. McDonald is the crime Boss. Katlin just rode off with the man who has been trying to kill her--the man who killed her father.”

An electric tingling shot up Ryker’s spine. “And that’s not our only problem, we have company. Outside, a dozen men.”

Chapter Seventeen

Katlin tried to force her thoughts away from Ryker. She wouldn't start crying in front of McDonald. Ryker--she was never going to see him again. Her eyes swelled with tears at the thought of him. She reached up and angrily brushed them away. *I'm an idiot for allowing myself to care for him. I should've kept my distance.* He told her he could never truly care for her and she ignored him. A part of her thought she could bring him around, change his mind but instead here she sat driving away from him. She would never see him again. The tears started sliding down her face, and this time she let them fall.

"Did...?" she cleared her throat and started again, "Did they say when they would release Colin?"

"Later today. Your brother is fine, Katlin." McDonald reached across and patted her hand. "I talked to him this morning myself. He sounds in high spirits."

"Colin never liked hospitals or doctors. I'm sure he can't wait to get out," she said, turning her head and looking out the window.

"Have you given thought to your future?" McDonald asked.

"My future?"

"Yes, you can't exactly go back to work at Tolmand."

"Why not? Rebecca extracted the information. She's a Courier and in possession of it now." The sooner she got back to her life the better. Enough chaos and adventure--she was ready for some peace and quiet.

"Safety reasons. You said they took the information out of your head, but it's still in there. Like a computer hard-drive, you can erase the information, but it's still stored in there somewhere. As long as it is, you're still a threat to someone."

"They'll keep coming after me?" she asked.

"They might, but even if they don't, are you willing to risk your life by ignoring the possibility people might be out to kill you?" McDonald patted her hand again. "We have to keep you safe."

How long would she have to stay on the run? If she couldn't go back to her old life and job, what would she do? "No, I guess not. If I don't go back to work at Tolmand, how would I live? I have to my pay bills."

"I own other companies that aren't so high profile." McDonald turned and smiled at her. "I've many interests besides software companies."

She turned and stared at him and wondered how she could've thought McDonald's smile sexy. It was not like Ryker's. Ryker's eyes lit up when he smiled. *Stop thinking about him*, she chastised herself.

"I could still work for you, but in a smaller company? What kind of work would I be doing? Screening?"

"If you like, but I think we could find something else for you to do with your newly acquired Talents." When she didn't answer he continued. "Don't worry, your

brother confided in me. He told me about your new power and abilities. I must say, I was very impressed. It sounds as though you may be as powerful as your father.”

As powerful as her father? She doubted she had that much ability. “I don’t really know. I’m still adjusting to the situation.”

McDonald’s voice was full of compassion. “I imagine it would be shocking to realize you had so much locked away for so long. Your father really did you a disservice by keeping your powers away from you.”

“He must have had his reasons.” Her father wouldn’t have done something that drastic unless he had a good reason. “Did you know my father?” Katlin asked. “I know he worked for you, but you never really mentioned whether or not you knew him personally.”

“Yes, I knew your father quite well,” McDonald answered. “Actually my father and your father grew up in the same neighborhood.”

“Really? Funny, my father never mentioned it.” In all the conversations she’d had with her father about his work, he’d never mentioned McDonald except in passing. She’d always had the impression that her father knew his boss, but never spent any time around him.

“That’s not surprising. I understand your father kept many things from you. Like his involvement in the Organization.”

“Colin told you about that?” She couldn’t believe Colin would go around telling people their father was a criminal.

McDonald chuckled at her reaction. “Of course, your brother and I have no secrets from each other.”

“I didn’t realize the two of you were so close.”

“We’ve known each other for years. He never mentioned it? He went to college with my kid brother. As you can see, our families have had a close bond for many years. That’s why I hired you to work for me. I want our families to continue working together. I think it’s time you move into a more prestigious role. Someone of your abilities shouldn’t be working as a Screener. We need to find a job for you that will better suit your abilities.”

“I don’t know yet all the ins and outs of my new abilities,” she answered, watching his profile.

“That’s all right. We can learn them together.” He suddenly pulled off the road and into a gas station.

“What are you doing?” Katlin asked.

“Just picking up an associate of mine. I hope you don’t mind. I asked him to wait for me here while I went to fetch you.”

A big, redheaded man came walking around the corner and got into the backseat. A man she had seen before.

“Katlin, Creepers. Creepers, this is Katlin.”

“What is he doing here?” Katlin’s world turned on its head--what association did McDonald have with this monster? “This man is dangerous, he works for the men who were chasing me.”

McDonald seemed not to hear her comment “Creepers, I was just telling Katlin about all the opportunities that are now open to her.” McDonald turned in his seat and

stared at Katlin. "Creepers, what do you think? Is she as strong as her father?"

"She's stronger," Creepers answered.

"Excellent news. So, Katlin, how would you like to take over your father's old job?" McDonald asked.

Katlin struggled to adjust to the strange turn the conversation had taken. She needed to keep McDonald talking if she had any hope of discovering what was going on, "I don't know anything about research."

"Research was a side interest of your father's. His real job was quite different."

"Real job?"

"The work he did for me." McDonald started up the car and headed back onto the road. "He was very good at influencing people."

"I don't understand." And then she realized what had been nagging at her. She hadn't told Colin about their father's involvement in the crime organization. She wanted to wait until she could tell him face to face. "I never told Colin about my dad working for Vector."

"Oops, you caught me. You're right, I didn't find out from Colin." McDonald chuckled. "Did I forget to mention where my main source of income comes from? I thought you'd have guessed by now."

She couldn't believe it took her so long to figure it out. "You work for Vector?"

"Actually, I run it." The door lock sounded as she reached for the door handle.

"Now, you don't want to do anything rash."

"Are you going to kill me?" Katlin asked.

"That depends on you. I would rather have you work for me." He looked over at her. "Your father worked for us, your brother works for us. It's your turn to come into the Organization."

She told herself not to panic. She needed to try and get out of the car. "I don't believe it. Colin wouldn't do anything illegal."

"That's what you believed about your father. But you found out differently, didn't you?"

"I could never work for you." He moved toward her, and she scooted against the door.

"You're talking out of anger right now. Once you've had time to think it out, get used to the idea, you'll see it really is the best choice." He reached over and gently caressed her cheek with his fingers. "Katlin, Katlin, I have such grand plans for the two of us."

She slapped his hand away. "Don't touch me."

"I know you find me attractive." McDonald smiled at her.

She tried the door handle again. "If I did, I must have been out of my mind."

"I'd hoped once you settled into your new job the two of us could get better acquainted."

"You wanted to ask me out?" Her voice was tinged with disgust.

"Of course. Do you know how rare it is to find an attractive woman of your abilities and power?"

"Gee, that's sweet. Why don't you let me out of the car, and we can talk about going out sometime."

McDonald's voice became low and dangerous. "Your brother told me about the gentleman you've been keeping company with. How you can find a man like that attractive is beyond me." When she didn't answer he continued. "I know you think you have feelings for the man, but once he is out of the way, once you have a chance to spend some time with me, I think you'll change your mind."

"You're insane."

McDonald chuckled. "Men of vision are often called crazy."

"People will be looking for me."

"Who? Ryker, the man you just left? Face it Katlin, I'm your only chance at a life and security. Come work for us. I promise not to lay a hand on you until you ask me to."

"I'll never work for Vector!" she screamed at him.

"You're distraught. We'll give you some time to reconsider." He waved his hand and suddenly she felt a pinch at her shoulder. She looked down and watched as the needle pushed into her skin.

She looked over at McDonald. He was smiling at her. "Don't worry. It's something to calm you down and help you sleep."

Her eyes went blurry and then everything around her went black.

* * * *

Someone was shaking her. Forcing her eyes open, she realized she was being carried. Fuzzy red hair--Creepers was carrying her across a yard toward a house. She yelled out, and he let her own. She turned to fight but he twisted her arm behind her back, and she cried out in pain. He ignored her cry and yanked harder on her arm as he pushed her forward into the house. It was a dark inside. He shoved her into the closest room, and she could barely make out the outline of furniture. She yelled out again as her knee banged against a table.

"Bastard, let me go!" Katlin ducked down and twisted around, forcing him to let go of her arm. She took a swing at him. Creepers did a side step, and Katlin's arm came in contact with nothing but air. She lost her balance and fell to the floor.

"You should be more careful, my dear." McDonald said as he entered the room and turned on the light. "It's pointless trying to out muscle Creepers--he's one of the best in the business."

"You won't get away with this," she said as she started to crawl toward the door. Creepers grabbed a handful of her shirt and hoisted her to her feet.

Katlin reached out to the Lower Level with enough rage to level the cabin--and suffered the shock of her life. Where before she had felt more power than she knew what to do with, she now felt nothing. She couldn't feel the Lower Level at all.

"I've already gotten away with it. You are currently my prisoner. That little shot we gave you should keep you from causing any trouble with those remarkable new Talents of yours for a few more hours. And until I've decided what to do with you, I expect you to behave." McDonald turned to Creepers. "Take her down to the basement for now. I'm expecting company, and I don't want her trying to get his attention by making noise. The basement is sound-proofed."

Katlin grabbed the only weapon close to hand, a lamp sitting on a small table in the entry--and swung it at Creepers' head with all the rage and frustration in her. It struck

with a satisfying smash and ceramic shards flew in every direction. When the dust cleared, Creepers had retained his grasp on her shirt and was still on his feet. In fact, the only way she knew that she had hit him at all was the look of exasperation on his face and the slow trickle of blood down the side of his face.

“That was silly, now I am going to have to clean that up before company arrives.”

Creepers dragged her down a dark hallway. He pushed her through an open door, and she stumbled across the doorway. He tightened his grip and kept her from falling down the dozen stairs leading to the basement. Toward the bottom, Creepers released his grip on her shirt, placed his hand on her back and gave her a shove. She flew forward and tumbled down the remaining steps. Her body hit the concrete floor. Pain shot through her arms and legs. She pulled herself into a lotus position and tried to breath. Gingerly pressing her fingers against her rib cage, she decided her ribs were bruised, not broken.

Her mind was still in shock. McDonald was the man she’d been running from. She tried to keep herself calm. If Ryker was in this situation, he’d be looking for a way to escape. She needed to keep her wits about her if she was to free herself.

Come on use your brain. Think, damnit! Look for ways out of here, she told herself as she heard Creepers stomping down the stairs.

He stood over her and chuckled. “Still alive?”

“No thanks to you.” She thought about trying to kick him, but the thought of moving made her groan in pain.

Creepers bent down and lifted her to her feet. He spun Katlin around and twisted both of her hands behind her back, pulling her with him over to the wall as he grabbed a coil of rope off a work bench. He dragged her over to the railing, securing her hands against the wooden slats with a rope.

“You’re tying it too tight!” she yelled at him. The rope cut into her skin.

Creepers ignored her outburst and meticulously worked until he finished the last knot and jerked on the rope to make sure it was secure. By the time he was done, her hands had started to go numb from lack of circulation.

He took a moment to make a sweep of the room, moving everything close to her out of her reach. All light was cut off when he stomped up the stairs and closed the door. She slumped down onto the ground, trying to make herself comfortable, her arms hanging behind her at an odd angle.

* * * *

Creepers thought back over his career choices while he swept up the remains of the lamp. He was perhaps the most powerful Boxer of his generation, and here he was, working as a glorified secretary and maid. The only reason he didn’t quit was the distinct possibility that he wouldn’t survive to serve his three-week notice. Murray had been almost as strong as he was. Working for a Rogue sounded like more fun than it was.

It wasn’t like he had many other options--Boxers usually ended up working as hired muscle. The Talent wasn’t much use for anything else.

He dumped the last shattered pieces in the trash just as the doorbell rang. He sighed in resignation and moved to the door.

He swung the door open slowly and was greeted by the oddest sight he could have imagined. Standing on the stoop was a short, stocky man in what appeared to be a pastel

golfing outfit covered by a dark trench coat, flanked by two very large men in dark suits. The cold, aggressive expression on his face told Creepers that he understood the irony.

“Get out of my way, you idiot.”

Creepers snapped out of his reverie and returned to business, “Right this way, sir. Can I take your coat?” He couldn’t resist a small smile.

“No.”

Creepers had the distinct feeling he had just been added to some list. He led them into the study, resisting the temptation to open his mouth again.

McDonald sat in a comfortable chair, reading a thick leather-bound volume, his posture portraying absolute ease. Behind him, a warm fire roared in the fireplace. Creepers had worked for him long enough to know that his casual pose had been carefully staged.

McDonald gestured to the couch across from him, “How very nice to see you, Vince--come join me. Would you like a drink? Creepers will get you whatever you want.” The Boss did not rise to greet his guests.

Creepers grimaced in disgust.

Vince Bianchi stood in the center of the room, his color steadily rising. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“We’ve been working together for years, don’t you recognize me?” His feigned surprise seemed to annoy Vince even further.

“Don’t fuck with me, McDonald. You and I both know that no matter how many Talents you have, bullets still make you dead.”

“No need for threats--we’re all friends here. Sit down, and let’s talk about it.”

Vince took his time considering his options, but eventually he moved to the couch and sat down stiffly. His body guards took up positions against the wall and stood tensely. The one closest to Creepers gave him a threatening stare and reached up to adjust his shoulder holster. The bodyguard would never be able to do a good job of being intimidating --his eyes were to close together, and he just ended up looking like an angry weasel.

“What are you up to, McDonald? First you break one of the longest standing truces we have had by starting an operation in Reno, and then you order a hit without clearing it through me. No one can run unauthorized hits in my territory.

“Are you sure I can’t interest you in a cocktail?” When Vince didn’t answer, the Boss shrugged his shoulders and continued, “Fine. I think it’s time we renegotiated our little arrangement.”

“I don’t negotiate, I tell you how it’s gonna be, and that’s the way it is. You work for me, and I make the rules.”

“That’s the way it’s worked so far, but times change.”

Vince flicked his wrist at the thugs behind him, and in an instant, they both had pulled their guns and aimed them at the Boss. “The way I see it, nothing’s changed.”

McDonald did not seem surprised by the sudden escalation of hostilities--in fact, he seemed rather pleased. With slow drama, he mimicked Vince’s wrist gesture.

Creepers immediately sent a hammering wave of energy at the weasel. He spun around and stared at Creepers in shock and horror. The gun fell as if forgotten, and he put both hands to his head as if to keep it from coming apart. Creepers focused another

blow at him, and he dropped, dead or dying.

A shot rang out and echoed in the small room. Creepers spun around to face the second gunman, gathering himself for another strike. It wasn't needed. The second gunman was suddenly caught in a desperate struggle with his own gun. The bodyguard had both hands on the gun straining against it, trying to stop it as it turned toward his chest. The veins on his neck and head bulged with the strain, and the gun went off once and then twice, striking the wall, then a framed picture, raining glass on the floor.

Creepers winced. Another mess he would have to clean up.

The one-sided battle didn't last long. In seconds, the gun flew loose and smacked the second gunman across the head, sending him sprawling on the floor.

McDonald and Vince still sat in the same positions. McDonald did not show the least bit of strain, but the color had completely drained from Vince's face.

"I'm tired of taking orders from monkeys, from now on I give the orders. You can keep your little 'mob boss' title, but I give the orders. No more blathering about truces or about clearing my activities through you. From now on, I take orders from no one."

* * * *

Time passed, and she tried to wiggle her hands free of the rope. Her wrists were raw, the skin scraped off by the coarse fibers. They throbbed with pain, but she pushed the pain aside and tried again. She had to get free. If she refused to cooperate they would kill her. Kill her and anyone else who knew the information, which meant they would be going back for Ryker and Rebecca.

Why had she told McDonald that Rebecca had extracted the information? Because she'd assumed he was a good guy, and she'd left with him because she'd loved and trusted her brother. She still couldn't believe Colin would sell her out. How could Colin, the brother she'd loved and adored for so long hide that he was involved with these people? A part of her still refused to believe it was true.

She had to free herself and get to Ryker to warn him about McDonald.

The basement door opened.

Heavy footsteps--it had to be Creepers, the man was a monster. Someone started to work the ropes loose. Her hands were freed, and she got up and turned, only to find her face inches from the barrel of a gun. Creepers motioned her to go ahead of him up the stairs.

She considered throwing herself against him, forcing him off balance. Maybe if she was lucky, he would fall down the stairs, but she looked over her shoulders at his huge body mass. Even if she threw herself at him, she didn't think she would have enough force to make him move an inch. She walked slowly up the stairs, flexing her stiff muscles and trying once again to pull on her still absent powers. Before she could consider trying to attack, something hit the back of her head, and the world around her went pitch black.

* * * *

David and Rebecca sat in the dim afternoon light eating chips and making bets on when the assault on the house would come. David's money was on them waiting till dark. Rebecca thought that they would come in as soon as they worked out a plan.

"What are they doing now?"

Rebecca peeked out the window. "They are gathered around their cars looking at the house and waving their arms around."

"Any Talents?"

"No, Ryker says they are just hired muscle."

"How many?"

She peeked out the window again. "If I had to guess, eight."

"Ryker won't make a move until they split up. Do you want to speed things up a bit? Why should we give them time to make a plan?"

"We do need to track down Ryker's new girlfriend eventually. On the up side, if we sit here long enough, Vector may just kill her and save us some trouble."

"Rebecca, that's not very nice."

"Yeah, so?" Rebecca pushed the bowl of chips away. "Let's get on with this. Do you have any ideas, or do you just want to start shooting?"

"Nah, you never know how close to them Ryker is. Let's just be direct about it." Without any further discussion David walked to the front window and threw it open. His voice loud and clear on the cool evening air, "Hey, do you guys have any estimate on how long it's going to be before you come and try to kill us? Do I have time to take a nap?"

One of the thugs waved his hand and said something to the group, and they broke apart and headed for the trees. Soon there were only two men leaning on the car. After a moment, they straightened up and walked into the gathering dusk toward the house.

* * * *

Ryker squatted in the dark shadows behind a large tree, waiting for someone to pass by. The small ravine below him was the quickest path to get around behind the house. It would also be the most attractive route to city-slickers, as it offered the only clear path through the dark woods.

He was still shaking his head at David's ridiculous audacity when the first crackling of underbrush reached his ears. Two men slid ungracefully down the far side of the ravine, not more than fifteen yards away. Their dark clothing made them indistinct in the dim light, but their mumbled curses carried quite clearly.

"Fuckin' trees! I hate the fuckin' wilderness."

Another voice hissed "Cork it!" in an exaggerated stage whisper.

Ryker waited until they had walked a good ten feet past his position before he made his move. Gathering himself for a mental assault, he focused a stunning blast of brown energy at the rear-most man. The man fell to his knees.

Ryker moved quickly past him to club the first man with the butt of his gun. He returned to the rear man again and knocked him unconscious with another quick blow.

Reversing his gun in his hand, he took a moment to catch his breath and congratulate himself--two men down without a sound and without having to kill anyone.

A shot rang out, and Ryker heard the whistling of the bullet as it slipped by his ear. He immediately collapsed, as if hit. Ryker held his breath and waited for another shot. For an endless moment he waited, but it seemed his ploy had worked. An outline, highlighted by the dim light on the horizon, suddenly separated itself from the dark shadows. It seemed not all the hit team were bad woodsmen.

Ryker jerked his gun up and quickly squeezed off three shots dead center.

Always aim for central body mass. He did it out of habit and cursed himself as a loud grunt echoed across the night. The shadow tumbled to the bottom of the ravine. Crap, he hadn't meant to kill him. So much for doing this quietly. The advantage of surprise was now blown. Ryker jumped to his feet and ran down the ravine and toward the back of the house.

He arrived, nearly out of breath, to the sounds of gunfire ringing out from the house. If they hadn't breached the house, they would soon. Ryker raised his gun and fired several shots at the back of a retreating figure. His target fell from the stoop and onto the woodpile next to the door.

Ryker slowed as he approached the house and spoke through the back door quietly, "Four down out here."

"Two in here," came Rebecca's calm reply.

Ryker turned away from the rear door and slipped around the side of the house, moving from shadow to shadow. He turned the corner, and a huge blast rang out, knocking him from his feet. He lay on the ground, his body and head feeling as though he had just been kicked by a mule. What the hell was that? Rising to his feet, he took a quick inventory of his limbs and didn't seem any the worse for wear. He watched two men run as gunfire sounded through a huge jagged hole that used to be his front door. Sons-of-bitches had blasted a hole in his cabin!

Shots echoed again from within the house, and both of the running men went down in a hail of bullets. Ryker waited, gunned raised, for another moving target. The night was quiet, except for the ringing in his ears. "All clear," Ryker called out.

Suddenly the dark house was ablaze with lights, and a few moments later, David and Rebecca, both armed, appeared.

"We'll need some help cleaning up this mess," Ryker said, holstering his gun.

David surveyed the damage to the door, "It's not too bad, the logs are fine, we should be able to fix this up in no time."

"Not that mess, moron." Ryker gestured to the bodies at his feet. "I'm talking about the current carnage littered across my yard. We don't have time to deal with this. You'll have to call the powers that be."

David raised a skeptical eyebrow, "Are you sure? Unless we have a really good explanation for this, we all could end up locked up back at the Institute for the rest of our lives."

"Hopefully we will have something significant to tell them by the time they catch up with us. You can call them on the way. We've got an appointment with McDonald." Ryker didn't wait for a reply and moved quickly toward the garage.

* * * *

A voice kept calling out to her. It seemed so far away. She tried to focus on the voice. "Wake up! Can you hear me? Wake up, Katie!"

"Stop yelling at me. Is it time for school?" she asked. Her head hurt, and she felt groggy. "Come on, Colin, I always let you sleep an extra ten minutes. It's my turn to sleep in."

"Thank God, you're awake. Katie, open your eyes. Can you open your eyes?"

"I don't want to open my eyes, I want to go back to sleep. Stop being so mean, let me sleep another five minutes."

“Katie, wake up!”

“All right, be a brat. I’m getting up,” she said as she opened her eyes and pushed herself upright. It took her a few minutes to realize she wasn’t at home. “Where are we?” she asked. The room was dark, and the only light streamed in from a small window fifteen feet above.

“In a room on the third floor. McDonald calls it the Cell. Great sense of humor the man has. Did they tie your hands?”

“No.”

“Creepers was going to when he was interrupted. He probably thinks you’ll be unconscious for a while. We don’t have much time, Katie.”

She got to her feet, and swayed back and forth a couple times before she found her balance. Her hand went to the back of her head. She had a huge goose egg, and she flinched as she touched it. “Where are you?” She turned around, trying to figure out what direction his voice was coming from.

“They have me hogtied on the bed.”

She stumbled across the room until she found the bed.

“Do you think you can undo these knots?” he asked as he tried to roll over.

Feeling along the rope she found the first series of knots binding his legs. “I don’t know. You know I was never good with knots.”

“Hurry up. Come on, you can do it.”

Patiently she wiggled the rope until she felt a bit of slack. Her fingers went to work on the knots. “I thought you were in with them,” she said quietly.

“Not your fault. McDonald convinced me he was the best choice for keeping you safe. The man fooled both of us.”

“Colin, Dad worked for them.”

“I know. McDonald took great pleasure in telling me.”

“I don’t understand how he could work for them.”

“Maybe he didn’t have a choice. I don’t know why he did it, Katie, but I do know he did his best to protect us from them.” When she didn’t say anything he continued, “I know he loved us, and he would have done anything to keep us safe.”

“He also said you work for him.”

“Nah, I work in the same kind of research Dad did, but I work for a legal company, we sell all of our results to the government.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure, I thought McDonald was above board until today. You might want to do a little checking when you get back, just to be sure.”

“Ok, I’ll look into it--but I’m sure I would have seen it by now if something was going on.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Only a few hours. McDonald came to the hospital and told me he’d found a safe place for you to stay. I bought the whole line right up until the time Creepers hogtied me and carried me up here.”

“I’ve got it,” she cried out in excitement as the knot came loose. She unraveled the rope, and his feet were free.

“Help me sit up. It’ll make it easier for you to get to the ones around my hands.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“See that window up there?”

“The window up about fifteen feet? That small window? You’re insane. How are we supposed to get up there?”

“Not we, you. I can push the bed over, and we can pile up whatever furniture we can find. We’ll make a stack, and then I’ll push you up and you can go out the window.”

“Me? What about you?” she asked.

“I don’t think you’re strong enough to hold my weight, and I’m too big to get through the window. You have the best shot.”

“And once I get to the window? You said we’re on the third story.”

“That might be a problem.”

“Might be a problem?” She couldn’t help herself, she started laughing. “Colin, you’re nuttier than I am.”

His voice joined in her laughter. “Hurry up on those knots. Didn’t you learn anything all those times I tied you to the swing set?”

She finally got him loose, and they moved the bed as quietly as possible across the floor. They found a small dresser and a chair. Colin carefully piled one on top of the other and climbed up.

“Ready. Just like they do it in the circus.”

She grabbed his hand, and he helped steady her as she made her way up the dresser and onto the chair.

“Now what?” she asked, holding onto him to keep from falling down.

“Crawl up me.” He locked his hands together and put them in front of him. “Put your foot on my hands. Use my body to steady yourself and crawl up my body until you have both feet balanced on my shoulders.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Hurry up!”

“I’m hurrying.” She grunted as she pulled herself up, using his head to keep her balance. She started to lose her balance.

“Steady on!” Colin cried out.

She steadied herself and used the windowsill to pull herself up. She pushed the window open. “I don’t know if I’m going to fit through here.”

“I told you to stop eating all that junk food.”

“You’d clown at your own funeral.”

“If you don’t hurry up, it might be my funeral. Get your butt out the window and go get help.”

She pulled herself up and got her top half through the window. She looked down and realized she was about thirty feet in the air.

“Colin, how am I supposed to get down?”

“Look on the side of the wall--is there any type of lattice or pipe? Anything you can use to shimmy down?”

“There’s a trellis, but it doesn’t come up all the way to the window.”

“Is there anything you can use to get down to it?” he asked.

She wiggled herself almost all the way out the window and grabbed the storm gutter with one hand to keep from falling. “There’s a pipe that runs down by it, but I don’t know if it’ll hold my weight.”

“You have to risk it. We’re dead if you don’t get help.”

Never a fan of heights, she reached out for the pipe and tried desperately to forget she was hanging from a window. She grabbed the pipe with one hand and pulled herself toward it. It creaked under her weight as she wrapped her legs around its sides. Praying out loud, she hung on, her arm muscles quivering from the effort. The pipe didn’t fall. She slowly lowered herself, inching her body down the pipe until she was low enough she could reach the latticework.

The pipe didn’t go all the way to the ground. She didn’t want to let go of it, but she forced herself to reach out for the trellis. Balancing herself between the two, for a moment she thought for sure she would fall, but she managed to get her body onto the trellis. It shook with each step she took as she lowered herself. When her feet touched dirt she wanted to throw herself on the ground and kiss the earth.

She started down the rocky hill and made it a few feet from the house. She leaned against a tree and caught her breath.

“That was impressive,” a masculine voice said from a few inches behind her.

A scream rose up in her throat as a hand clamped down over her mouth. “Easy now, we don’t want to let them know you’re out.”

“Ryker!” she cried with joy as she spun around into his arms.

His lips came down on hers, and he kissed her hard. She pulled herself away, her voice breathless. “What are you doing here?”

“Saving you.”

“I was just coming to get you.”

“So I noticed.”

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“Run,” he said, grabbing her arm and pulling her into the forest. The house blazed with lights and voices shouted through the night.

* * * *

They ran without light through the dark forest. She followed Ryker’s back, running past a big boulder, making her way down a hill, sliding across rocky terrain. There was a full moon, and she could make out the shapes around her. They wove in and out of the huge pine trees, boulders and rock outcroppings. She sucked in the clean mountain air and tried to keep pace with him.

“Where are we going?” she asked as she closed the gap between them.

“We have to circle around. I left my car parked on the other side of the road toward the end of the driveway. We have to make it to the car. It’s our only way out of here.”

She could hear voices behind her. “How far away are they?”

“Hard to tell.” He stopped and checked his watch.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m dead reckoning. It’s not a watch, it’s a compass.” He pointed toward his left. “We have to go that way for a hundred yards and then turn left.”

“Where are we?” she asked trying to catch her breath on the thin mountain air.

“Not far from Echo Lake. We’re on the edge of Desolation Wilderness.”

“How did you find me?”

“He took you to his own house. All we had to do was look him up in the phone

book. He definitely isn't afraid of anyone."

"Where's Rebecca?" she asked, gulping in more air--this was a much higher elevation than she was used to. "I sent David and Rebecca off to create a diversion. Last time I saw David, he was running off into the woods on the other side of the house, screaming like a banshee and carrying two flashlights. God only knows what Rebecca is up to."

"That's why Creepers didn't tie me up. Before he had a chance to, McDonald must have sent him to investigate. Do you think they'll be okay?"

"They can take care of themselves. I'm more worried about our necks at the moment." Ryker turned his head and looked back toward the voices. They were getting closer. He grabbed her hand and started running again. "Whatever happens, keep running!"

She followed him through the trees. They climbed a long hill, and she thought her legs would give out, but she kept pushing herself, gulping mouthfuls of clear mountain air until she was finally at the top. She wanted to collapse onto the ground. She couldn't catch her breath. She had never run at this altitude before. Her lungs were burning.

Ryker's voice called out to her. "Keep going. We're almost there!"

Gulping in another mouthful of air, she tried to get enough oxygen as she followed his voice, tried to ignore her burning legs and the throbbing pain in her side.

They made their way slowly up another hill. Pushing against trees, she propelled herself toward the top. The hill grew steeper, and Katlin was forced to bend over, touching her hands to the ground, using them to keep her balance, as her feet slid on the carpet of pine needles. It was like trying to walk on ice.

She climbed for what seemed an eternity at almost a sixty-degree angle. Her thoughts narrowed. *Put one foot in front of the other. Come on, keep moving*, she chanted as she climbed.

She made it to the top. Standing on the pavement, she looked down an empty stretch of road. Ryker was ahead of her, moving quickly. She would lose sight of him if she didn't follow. She forced herself to move one foot forward, then the other. By the time the car came into view, she really was prepared to die--she couldn't breathe fast enough. She had to stop. She couldn't go any farther. Slowly she raised her arms over her head, as she forced herself to take slow breaths.

She looked over the edge. The road was cut into the side of the hill, the road's twists and turns following the contours of the mountain. They had run a mile, and where she now stood, the slope descended sharply to the dark trees below. At their backs the forest continued up a gentle valley toward the peak. The car sat on the sloping shoulder. No guardrail stood between it and the edge.

"Are you all right?" Ryker called out from the car. "Come on, hurry up! We have to get out of here!"

Katlin took a deep breath and moved toward the car. A hand came out of the darkness and grabbed her arm. She turned around and found herself staring at a man's chest. She looked up and into the smiling face of Creepers. He grabbed her by the arm.

"Let go of me!" she screamed as she twisted her body and tried to get loose. The man was strong, his grip never slackened as she fought. She tried to bite his hand, but he

backhanded her. The blow would have sent her flying through the air if he hadn't had a death grip on her arm. Her body was flung forward and then dropped onto the ground.

* * * *

Ryker watched Creepers hit Katlin across the head. His heart stopped as she fell to the ground. *Dear God, not again!* The anger rose and surged out. Creepers turned as the massive brown wave of power crashed over him. It was a mighty blast that would have killed a normal man. Creepers raised one arm and stumbled backward, pulling Katlin with him.

Ryker gathered more power, and in a fluid motion, he sent another wave and his body rocketing toward Creepers. The energy hit Creepers first, knocking him off balance and sending him sliding toward the edge of the road. Katlin slid with him, her body dragged across the dirt, her arm still held in Creeper's vise-like grip.

Ryker suddenly realized Creepers hadn't let go of Katlin. If he rammed his body into Creepers, he would send them both over the edge. Ryker flung his body desperately to the side, bending himself into a somersault, coming to rest on his feet at the very edge of the road. *I could've killed Katlin.* The thought screamed through his head. He had unleashed his anger, lost control and almost sent her over the edge with Creepers. How could he do it again? Act foolishly in anger, without thinking, losing all control?

Ryker didn't notice McDonald emerging from the tree line as he started toward Katlin. Ryker's whole mind and body were focused on getting Katlin away from Creepers and the edge of the road. When McDonald's power hit him, Ryker's brain suddenly felt as if it had been stuffed into a paper shredder. His hands went to his head as he fell to his knees, his last thought was of Katlin as he watched Creepers slide further over the ledge.

* * * *

Katlin realized she was being dragged across the ground. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. Her shoulder was being ripped out of its socket. If she didn't get free, he would pull them both over the side, send them into a free fall into the ravine a hundred feet below. No one could survive that fall.

She dug in her heels and tried to keep from moving forward. Her other hand grabbed onto his fingers and tried to pry them off. She used all her strength trying to loosen his grip. Just as Creepers body teetered on the edge, she pried one finger loose, then another. His fingers lifted, and her arm was finally free. She scrambled away from him as he fell over the side.

She crawled and peeked over the edge. Down the rocky face twenty feet, she could just make out his body. He lay motionless on a small ledge, barely big enough for his massive frame.

Katlin backed slowly away from the edge, rubbing her arm. She forced herself to her feet and turned looking for Ryker. He lay writhing on the ground. McDonald stood over him. McDonald was hurting him, pounding him to death with his mind.

She gathered herself and sent a wave of power surging toward McDonald. It crashed harmlessly against his defensive wall. Something about the wall was different. It seemed broader and higher. Another wave of power crashed harmlessly against it. The power McDonald was suddenly wielding was like nothing he had possessed before. In all the meetings and dealings with him, she had never seen this kind of strength. She

realized it had been hidden like hers. *McDonald is a Rogue*. He had somehow hid his power from the outside world. If it was true, then they were evenly matched and there was no way she could beat him or force him to stop hurting Ryker.

McDonald turned away from Ryker and faced her. "Enough of this! You aren't strong enough to break through my walls. Let's dispense with the dramatics."

"Leave Ryker alone!" she screamed at him as she looked around for help. The road was deserted.

"Katlin walk over to me, and we can leave this place. I don't want to hurt you."

"Yeah, right!" She needed a weapon.

"Katlin, I would never hurt you, you have to believe me. If you come with me now, I'll spare this man's life." McDonald turned and started toward Ryker.

She didn't believe for second that McDonald would let Ryker live. "Don't go near him!" she screamed as her eyes scanned around for something to arm herself. Suddenly Ryker's words echoed in her head, "You were throwing tables and chairs across the room like they were matchsticks."

I'm telekinetic. Anything I lift with my mind, I can turn into a weapon.

She reached out with her mind and grabbed a rock. It hurled toward McDonald's head. McDonald turned and raised his arms to deflect it. He cried out in pain as it smacked hard into his body. But that's all it did, smack into him, not hard enough to cause him serious pain. Maybe one small rock couldn't hurt him, but what about a bigger one? Katlin already had another flying toward him. This one struck him on the shoulder, and Katlin heard a sickening crunch. She swallowed her nausea at the sound of breaking bones. She aimed her next rock at his head in the hopes of ending the battle quickly, but to her surprise and horror it never hit its mark. Instead it slipped just inches over his head. Cursing her inaccuracy, she tried again. She missed and watched in horror as it missed by even a larger margin.

A slow, cruel smile spread over McDonald's face.

Katlin concentrated again and threw rock after rock at him. Not one came even close. McDonald seemed completely unconcerned by the hail of rocks. Despite the fact that his left arm hung uselessly at his side, no fear or pain was visible on his face.

"Well ... you are just full of wonderful surprises! You are much stronger than your father--and a telekinetic as well. Our children will be unstoppable."

"Children! You're insane! I'd never let you lay a hand on me, you bastard!"

"That's what you say now, but in time you'll change your mind. We were meant for each other. Can't you see that? If you would stop being so stubborn and realize what it would mean for the two of us to join forces. What will it take to make you see reason?"

Suddenly one of the rocks she was hurtling at McDonald took an ugly and impossible bounce. It turned and shot directly toward her. Katlin was forced to dive to the ground to avoid taking a direct hit.

"You're not the only one capable of surprises," his cool condescension was like a dive into freezing water. For the first time, she realized he was really insane. And he wasn't going to stop until he got his way.

The anger that had sustained her was immediately gone, replaced with fear. Just a few feet away, Ryker lay unconscious--even if she gave up now and surrendered to

McDonald, Ryker might never wake up again. If he wasn't dead yet, McDonald would kill him, there was no way this insane, jealous lunatic would let Ryker live.

Grim determination forced her to her feet. There was no cavalry on its way. It was up to her alone to stop him. She turned once again to face McDonald and tumbled back a step in horror.

On the Lower Level, he had become a creature out of her nightmares. All around him was a rolling cloud of nothingness, its edges expanding and contracting in an eerie rhythm. His eyes were visible through the Void as a wicked purple glow, and in his right hand, a swirling ball of purple force threatened that his next move was coming. She blinked, and McDonald reappeared, in his right hand two steel balls did slow orbits above his palm.

"What are you?"

"I'm the future. Join me, and you can be a part of it."

"I'd rather die."

"Fine, my dear. Since you won't join me, then you can join your lover. Both of you can perish together. How romantic." He laughed and sent a tide of rippling pain at her.

It broke through her wall and knocked her off her feet. She tried to get up, but he sent another wave of energy at her, forcing her to cry out, grabbing her head in pain. Her walls raised, and she gathered all the energy she could as she watched another wall of purple come crashing toward her. She couldn't hold on much longer. He was stronger than anyone she had ever seen. A lot stronger than she was. In a matter of moments her wall would dissolve completely, and he would kill her with a single thought.

"I could kill you quickly if I wished, but instead, I think I will take my time. Perhaps you will see reason somewhere before the end. If not we will at least spend a pleasant few hours together. Excuse me for just a moment, this little ding you gave me is a little distracting." McDonald's shoulder began an odd shifting. Katlin could almost feel the grinding as the bones knitted back together.

Katlin watched the macabre show with dread, knowing that as soon as it was done, he was coming after her again. For just that one moment while he was distracted, she had a chance to do something. Was he really stronger? She was the daughter of Emerson Campbell--the most powerful Rogue of his time. She might not have the skill or knowledge of her own powers, but she did know how to draw power, and maybe she could draw enough to make a difference.

She reached up into the clear night sky. At first it seemed a lost cause, there were no clouds on the horizon or storms germinating. She cast her mind around as far as she could reach for the electric beginnings of any sort of weather. There was nothing.

In frustration she balled her fist and squared her shoulders. Failure was not an option. She deepened her breathing and forced herself to concentrate. If she couldn't find a storm, she would create one of her own. Was it even possible? She had never heard of anyone doing such a thing before, but she ignored the voice of doubt and forced it away. She needed a storm, needed it now, and if she couldn't grab energy from the sky, then she would grab it from whatever source was close at hand. And there was one incredibly powerful source currently glowing brightly in the Lower Level.

Blue energy reached out to purple. The shock as their energies collided nearly

forced her to her knees, but she fought to keep her balance. At her touch, his walls deepened and expanded. But she wasn't trying to go through his walls this time. She mentally grabbed and pulled. Blue energy and purple intertwined and swirled in the air between them. The mental effort forced a loud grunt from her lips and beads of perspiration slid down her forehead. She ignored everything and forced herself to pull harder. She could not and would not fail this time.

The power she drew from McDonald had severe consequences, it was tainted with his darkly evil stamp, and her body was physically rejecting it. A sharp pain formed in her stomach and a sudden wave of nausea threatened to overwhelm her. Every muscle in her body cramped with spasm. She kept up the steady pull until the pain became too much to bear. In desperation, she threw everything she gathered into the sky. Immediately the pain abated.

The air over their heads seemed to compress, and a slight mist formed in the sky. The mist morphed into a small cloud. A storm was forming, her storm. But would it make a difference?

McDonald's attention once more turned toward her, his dead, cold eyes drew hers as would a cobra's. His chilling smile returned, and he slowly turned his eyes toward the still spiraling orbs in his hand. The polished steel surfaces shot flashes of reflected moonlight in all directions with cold beauty. Without any warning, one broke away and shot toward her. It came so fast that her she was unable to dodge completely out of the way. Glancing blow sent stabbing pain through her upper arm and made her entire arm go numb. Before she had time to take stock of her pain, the next ball slammed into her outer thigh, nearly doubling her over with pain.

When the fog of pain finally left her eyes, he was again holding the steel in its deadly dance. This time, however, something was different--the balls now had a dark sheen. She hazarded a glance up into the sky and was greeted by the beautiful sight of rolling, dark blue storm clouds. She reached into the sky and received her first rush of power.

The balls again shot toward her, but this time she was ready. With a mental slap she knocked them to the side. McDonald immediately curved them back toward her at ever increasing speeds. Katlin sent them skipping away again and again, each time the effort became easier. The balls shifted into invisibility as a heavy rain fell.

McDonald's face became a grimace of effort as his expected easy victory became a hard fight. Katlin's confidence in her strength grew with her storm. With a surge of energy, she snatched the flying steel from his control. In an instant, they were spinning over her palm. With a dismissive flip, she tossed them over her shoulder.

McDonald's face was fixed in an expression of shock and anger, and on the Lower Level his aura of Void expanded toward her menacingly. Gone were the attempts to win her over, now his face and power were straining toward murder.

Katlin reached up and grabbed a hold of her storm. A rush of power surged through her, filling her to the brim and washing away the pain of her injuries. With a joy-filled laugh, she called a bolt of lightning down to smash it into McDonald's formidable defenses. He recoiled in shock and stumbled back several steps toward the edge of the road. With wide eyes, he scrambled to rebuild his walls from the tatters she had made.

Katlin caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of her eye and turned to see

Ryker crouching beside the car and behind McDonald. Ryker suddenly surged off of his knees and drove his shoulder into McDonald's side. McDonald toppled over the edge and fell screaming to the trees below.

"Are you okay?" Ryker asked as he grabbed her and pulled her body against his.

"I'm doing better than you are," she said as she rubbed her shoulder and leaned her head against his chest. "Is McDonald dead?"

"He couldn't have survived that fall. What about Creepers?"

"He fell onto a ledge, he's not moving. I don't know if he's alive."

He squeezed her tight.

Someone whistled, and they both turned and watched as David jogged down the street toward them.

"Late as usual," Ryker called out to David.

"Looks like I missed all the fun," David yelled back.

"Your head!" Katlin cried when he got close enough to see the blood dripping down from a thin wound reaching from one side of his forehead to the other.

David wiped away the blood with his sleeve. "It's not bad. Head injuries tend to bleed."

Ryker laughed. "You just don't want to ruin your shirt." He ripped a piece off his shirt and tossed it at David.

David caught it and wrapped it around his head. "It's my favorite shirt. Blood will wash out."

"Katlin, you go with David," he commanded.

"I'm not leaving you," she said, tightening her grip around his waist.

He pulled aside. "David will take you back to his cabin. It's close. I have some things I have to take of." He squeezed her tight. "Before you go I want to explain about Rebecca. When you saw me kissing Rebecca..."

Katlin interrupted him. "Do you love her?"

"No, I don't."

"But the two of you are involved?" she asked.

"Not like you mean."

"But the things she said, the photo in your room of the two of you."

"What photo? Rebecca wanted there to be more between us, but there isn't."

"The photo on your nightstand."

"The one of me and Carolyn?" he asked.

"It's not Rebecca? It's a photo of your wife?"

"They look alike. Didn't you know they were sisters?"

"No, I didn't." she said quietly. Ryker was not in love with Rebecca.

David called out. "I don't mean to interrupt, but I'm still bleeding here, folks."

Ryker gave her a gentle push toward David. "Go with him."

"What are you going to do?" Katlin demanded.

"I have to call the Institute. We have one dead body, possibly two. They'll need a crane to get Creepers off that ledge. They will have a lot of questions. I take it Colin is somewhere still in the house?"

"He's locked in a bedroom on the third floor."

"I'll go rescue him. Colin can back up my story."

“Do you want me to come back for you?” David asked as Ryker passed him the car keys.

“No, stay with her. I’ll find my way back to your place.”

“Are you going to tell them the truth?” she asked.

“Not all of it. Colin was held against his will, I came to free him, and the men attacked me. It was self-defense. I don’t want to drag you into all of this. If you leave now, I can search through McDonald’s house and then call Big Brother.” Ryker gently lifted her chin and gave her a kiss. “Now be a good girl and skedaddle.”

Chapter Eighteen

David turned on the radio. Rock and roll music filled the car. He started singing along to the music as he drove. Katlin watched him in amusement. The complete opposite of Ryker, David was loud, forever joking and full of laughter. She wondered how long they had been friends. He rolled down the window, and a blast of cold air sent Katlin shivering.

David looked over at her and rolled the window back up. "Sorry. I like to keep it cold when I drive at night--keeps me awake."

"Where are we going?" she asked, rubbing her arms to keep warm.

"To my cabin. But I'm afraid it might be a disappointment after Ryker's." David motioned to the back of the car. "I think I have an old, but clean sweater back there somewhere."

Katlin leaned over the seats and ran her hands along the backseat until she felt something soft. "What's wrong with Ryker's house?"

"We made a bit of a mess." He took his eyes off the road and gave her an apologetic grin. "The government is probably crawling all over the place."

"How is Ryker going to get himself out of this?" Katlin asked as she pulled on the sweater.

David turned off the radio. "He's been planning for this day for a long time, ever since he went underground. He's been collecting information and contacts inside Vector from the beginning. I don't know if he has enough to shut them down completely, but he certainly has enough to give the Institute a foothold inside the organization. It should be enough to get him back his legit life."

"What about you and Rebecca. What about me? What will they do to us?"

"There is no reason to think that the government knows anything about you. Ryker's never placed me in danger of losing my clearances--I used to work for Big Brother, and they still use me sometimes for special jobs. I just would occasionally feed Ryker any leads I came across."

"And Rebecca?"

"Ryker has done his best to keep her completely out of it--but she has managed to butt in a few times. I don't think she is on anybody's radar."

"She is in love with Ryker."

"Rebecca has always been the safe and familiar for Ryker, she looks and acts so much like Carolyn, but nothing has ever come of it, that I know of. It wouldn't be healthy, and I think Ryker knows it--even if Rebecca doesn't." He paused. "You really need to talk to Ryker about this stuff, it's kinda uncool to tell a friend's secrets if he isn't willing to tell them himself."

They passed the remainder of the trip in silence, giving Katlin time to consider. David was right, it was past-due time for her to have a real talk with Ryker.

* * * *

Ryker sat patiently in a small motel room while he waited for the representatives that the Institute had sent. He had given them quite a volume of information to sort through and figured it might take them some time.

He was surprised when it took less than an hour for an agent to come back into the room. "Good morning, Mr. Duncan, are you comfortable? Can I get you anything?"

Ryker shook his head no and prepared himself for the oncoming inquisition.

"Well, then, let's get right to business. My name is William Smock. I've skimmed the information you gave us, and it looks like the first real leads we have had against Vector. I've left it with the intelligence analyst on my team--we'll see what he can make of it." He sat down across from Ryker and pulled out a tape recorder from his briefcase. "Now, I would like to hear in your own words how you came by all this information."

"Before I get started, I would like to know what you intend to do with me."

"If the information you brought checks out, you have a significant item to trade. Before I decide what to do about it, I need to know a little more about the context. And a little more about you."

"Fine." Ryker paused for a moment to structure his thoughts. He could try to be coy and keep out all of his illegal activities over the last few years, but that would not explain how he managed to penetrate Vector. If he was to get his life back, he would have to gamble. He would have to tell the truth. "After the death of my wife, I became convinced that the only way to stop the violence was to take Vector down. I accepted jobs from sources I had refused up until then. Mostly they were the same kind of job I had always done--bodyguard, security and that sort of thing. The only difference was that I was now working for people who routinely break the law. I used these jobs to develop a list of 'people of interest,' people who were valuable enough to Vector to pay to keep them alive. I included the list in the stuff I gave you, along with whatever I could figure out about what they were up to."

Agent Smock reached into his briefcase and pulled out a file. "Is this when they started offering you more 'off the map' assignments?" Ryker nodded his head and waited as Smock opened his briefcase and took out a manila folder and continued, "You worked for a few minor mob bosses, helping with the protection rackets--not a particularly challenging assignment. All you really had to do was look tough and occasionally put a little pressure on somebody. As far as we can tell, you never rose above the middle level due to your emphatic refusal to take hit jobs. I guess it's easier to trust someone who is just as dirty as you are. Still, you developed quite an impressive map of the structure of the organization. I'm more interested in your contacts with the Talent wing of Vector."

Ryker was surprised by the thoroughness of his information. "My first job with actual Talents was with a recruitment team. I was working with a Tracer named Ivan. We would move into a town where there had been a report of a Talent or where there had been a long-term Talent presence. The Tracer would spend a few days canvassing the area and making a list of people to approach. Then we would make the rounds, shaking hands and winning new members for Vector. The most effective tool in this effort was paranoia--we would convince them that if they were found out by the government, they would be locked up in a research facility for the rest of their lives. They were already

scared to death by their newfound powers. My job was to protect the Tracer in case one of these prospects turned on him. In between recruiting trips, I would do security or muscle jobs.”

Smock once again reached into his briefcase and produced another file. “I see that you used this time to make an impressive list of the membership of the personnel of Vector, but I don’t see any indications that you were able to identify any of the management.”

Ryker nodded his agreement. “Exactly. I was close to giving up when I got a call. One of my legit contacts called me to let me know that a minor functionary in the organization was attempting to defect. Apparently he had something big enough that he was sure he could get the government to relocate him and give him a new life. Then they caught up with us in Las Vegas, all of the info was destroyed, and all I had left of my lead was an indistinct copy in the head of someone who had no Talent for Courier work.

“If we could pull it out of her head, it might not even give us any names to follow. There was no telling what would be left in her untrained mind. I would try to get it out, but first I had to keep her alive.

“Whatever I did, they were going to come after her. If I stuck with her, I might be able to protect her long enough to find out who was running things. I’m not proud of the choice to use her as bait, but at the time it seemed the best course of action for both of us.

“When McDonald finally showed himself, it became clear that he was too powerful to capture--I was forced to kill him.”

“You did all of this yourself? Including taking on a Rogue and a very powerful Boxer?” Agent Smock asked. He appeared skeptical, but not hostile.

“I might have had some help, but no one I would care to mention.”

Agent Smock leaned back in his chair and stared at Ryker for quite a while, obviously making some kind of decision. He stretched his hand out. “Our agency has always had a problem. We are in charge of keeping track of and regulating the use of Talents. The growth of emerging Talents has been out of our control since the seventies. Talents are getting stronger and more widely dispersed. To make things worse, we have been unable to attract many Talents into government service. We are out-gunned and out-smarted at every turn.” Smock reached down and pulled yet another file out of his bottomless briefcase “This is your psychological profile--I hope you don’t mind.”

“Since I don’t have much choice--why, not at all.”

Smock smiled slightly, “It says here, among other things, that you are a man who can be trusted. You are driven by a rather quaint sense of honor, you are loyal, and you are a patriot.”

“What does all of this have to do with anything?” Ryker growled.

“When you are about to offer someone a job this important, you do all the research you can.”

“A job? What kind of job?”

“You are the only person who has ever made any headway against Vector, and we are woefully lacking in results. We would like you to head a new section. Officially you would be part of the National Security Agency, but unofficially, you would head up enforcement for the Institute. You would recruit your own team and report directly to me. You would have access to the department’s significant conventional assets, and if

you can get enough Talents to rally to your banner, you will have a significant tool against regular criminals and criminal Talents.”

Ryker stared at Smock as if he had lost his mind.

“Oh, I assure you this is an honest offer. Don’t worry, you don’t have to answer right now. There aren’t any other candidates.” He passed Ryker a card, “Call me when you’ve thought it over, and maybe after you have had a chance to talk it over with your friends.” Smock put the file back in his briefcase and stood up from his chair.

“You’re just letting me go?”

“I’ve always found that the best way to earn someone’s trust is to trust them first.” With that, he turned and walked to the door. He paused at the door, “One more thing you should know. We didn’t find any bodies over the cliff. We found blood and footprints, but no bodies.” Without any further comment, he walked from the room.

* * * *

The cabin turned out to be one large room with an upstairs loft. It was small, but cozy. There was a king-sized bed in one corner of the room and a small kitchen in the other. A couch and a coffee table faced a brick fireplace.

“This is nice,” she said as she walked around the room.

“Nice but small,” He laughed, “I told you, that you’d be disappointed. No grand mansion for me.” David walked over to the fireplace and grabbed a log from the pile next to it. “Make yourself at home. I’m going to start a fire, and then I’m going to go fix you something to eat.”

“You don’t have to bother. I’m really not hungry.”

David started the fire. “You don’t think you are now, but after the night you had you need some nourishment. I’m not much of a cook. I hope soup and sandwiches are okay.”

“Sounds great.” Katlin made herself comfortable on the couch. “Do you think Ryker will be long?”

“If things go well, he should be here in a few of hours.” David handed her a blanket. “The place will warm as the fire gets going.”

She took the blanket, wrapped it around her body and rested her head on the cushion. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about what could happen if things didn’t go well.

* * * *

Someone was calling her name. She opened her eyes, and Ryker stood in front of her, a plate in one hand and a mug in the other.

“Where’s David?” she asked as she rubbed her eyes and sat up.

“He thought we might like some privacy.”

“Are we staying here tonight?”

Ryker handed her a plate. “Yeah, do you mind? Colin is back at my cabin. Rebecca is driving him nuts, trying to bandage all his scrapes and cuts.”

She laughed, “I hope she nags him to death.” The sandwich was huge. “I can’t eat all this.”

“Great, then give me half. I’m starved.” He grabbed half of her sandwich and sat down next to her on the couch. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore, but other than that, fine. How about you?”

“Good as new.”

“How did it go with Big Brother?”

He took a huge bite of the sandwich. “Better than I expected, but it was more than a little weird.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Katlin said in mock disapproval. “Weird how?”

“They offered me a job.” He passed her a large mug. “Here--David made you some soup, but I couldn’t find a bowl.”

She laughed and took the mug from him. “I guess I have to slurp it. A job doing what?”

He grinned at her. “Heading up a new Talent law enforcement department.” He watched her take a drink of the soup. “Do you plan on sharing the soup, too?”

“Sure.” she passed him the mug. “That’s sounds interesting, are you going to take it?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but it is tempting. I still need to talk to David and see what he thinks.”

Katlin looked around the room. “There doesn’t seem to be a TV in here.”

“Nope. David thinks a television rots your mind.” He finished off his sandwich. “Why, is there something on you want to watch?”

“I just wondered what we would do to entertain ourselves all night without any television.” She motioned over toward the table. “Looks like he has a box of checkers. You want to play checkers, Ryker?”

He laughed out loud and made a grab for her sandwich. “Finish eating and I’ll try to see if I can keep you entertained.”

“Ryker, I want you to tell me about Carolyn.”

The laughter left his eyes. “What do you want to know?”

“How did she die?” When he didn’t answer she continued, “I asked David about her. He told me she was shot.”

“Shot twice, once in the stomach.”

“I know you don’t want to talk about it, but if we are going to build something between us, I need to know about your past.”

“We were on assignment. Suddenly we were attacked by a team of assassins, high-end professionals. It was the last thing we were expecting.”

His voice faded off. She waited a few minutes, then asked, “There was a fight?”

“We were out-manned, out-gunned. And still we held our own. Until Carolyn was shot. It wasn’t fatal, but when I saw it happen I went berserk.” He turned to her, his eyes full of rage. “You understand. It was my fault I lost control.”

She laid her hand on his cheek. “It wasn’t your fault. It was her job.”

“It was my fault--I lost all reason, all sense. My anger took over, I blasted everyone and everything in my path. The assassins took off, ran down the street.”

“The bad guys took off...?” she asked, pushing her body closer into his.

“I went after them. I should have stayed with Carolyn, but instead I chased them down and killed them.” Ryker took a deep breath and continued, “While I was gone a second team of assassins waiting in the wings attacked.”

“Carolyn was....”

“Wounded and alone. She tried to use her powers to protect her assignments and herself, but the assassins were too powerful. By the time I got back, it was too late. She died in my arms.”

“But you can’t blame yourself.”

“If I stayed, I could have helped, kept her alive.”

“Even if you’d stayed, you were out numbered. Both of you would have been killed.”

“If I hadn’t lost control, if I hadn’t left....”

She grabbed his hand in hers. “You can’t go back and change the past. It happened, and now you have to find a way to live with it. You have to go on with your life.”

He grabbed her and pulled her body into his. “I will, if you promise to stay with me. I almost lost you tonight.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He pushed her away from him and looked her in the face. “Promise?”

“Yes, I promise,” she said as she leaned forward and kissed him. She felt her body begin to hum with sexual energy. She wanted this man, wanted to spend her life with him, and it would take an act of God to force her away from his side again.

His hands trailed down her arms, and she felt the heat of his touch. He deepened the kiss, and she felt fire burn through her limbs.

“You drive me crazy,” he said as he pulled his lips away from hers.

“I know the feeling,” she said her voice tinged with desire.

His hands went around her waist and pushed her back.

“What are you doing?” she protested. She wanted to feel his body against hers.

“Shhh, we have plenty of time,” he said as his hands traveled up her waist and glided across the material of her shirt. “We don’t have anywhere to go ... we have no one chasing after us. “

“But....” She couldn’t think straight as his fingers touched her. All she could think about was feeling him against her. “We can’t do this here.”

“Why not?” He suddenly stood, pulling her with him. One hand caressed her neck as the other slowly lifted her shirt. “I want to see your naked body.”

She grabbed her shirt and pulled it over her head.

“You still have clothes on.” His fingers pushed the straps of her bra off her shoulders. “Turn around,” he commanded.

She turned, and he undid her bra. She watched as it fell to the floor.

“I want to see all of you,” he said, coming up behind her, pressing his chest into her back. His hands snaked around her waist, and he kissed her neck as he unbuttoned her jeans. The jeans fell to the floor, and she stepped out of them. Her hands went down and grabbed the edges of her white cotton panties.

He gently slapped her hands away. “I want to undress you.”

His body slid down hers, his fingers grabbing the material and pulling it downward with him.

She started to turn around, and he stopped her. “No, not yet. I want to enjoy the feel of your skin.”

His hands worked their way from her hair down naked shoulders, across smooth

breasts. Sliding down a flattened stomach and stopping at quivering thighs. "Tell me what you want?" he whispered in her ear.

"I want you." She could barely get the words out, his fingers were distracting her.

"Tell me what you want me to do."

"I want you to let me take control."

He chuckled and took his hands off her. "So take control."

She turned and grabbed his shirt, pulling it off. Impatiently, she unbuttoned his pants and slid them to the floor. Her hands touched his chest, slid across his shoulders. She leaned into him and wrapped her leg around his, yelling out a karate shout as she tried to force his body off balance. He laughed and allowed his body to fall to the floor.

She landed on top of him. His hands started to grab for her, and she slapped them away. "Nope, it's my turn," she said as she grabbed both his arms and raised them over his head. She knew he could break her hold anytime he wanted, but he lay there and watched her, his blue eyes darkened with passion.

"Now you have me, what are you going to do with me?" he asked, his voice husky.

"I'm going to have my way with you," she whispered as her lips trailed across his chest.

She felt his body tremble, and she gently bit his shoulder. "I'm going to do all the things I've been fantasizing about doing since the first time I laid eyes on you." Her hands glided across his body as she rubbed her naked skin against him. "And then if you are still alive when I'm done, then you can have your way with me."

* * * *

She woke up to the smell of bacon. Ryker, wearing only a pair of jeans, stood at the stove cooking. She stretched, enjoying the comfort of the bed. Both exhausted from love making, Ryker had picked her up last night and carried her to the bed. She smiled as she remembered last night. She never felt so relaxed, so refreshed.

"I'm starved," she said as she wrapped the sheet around herself and walked over to stand behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and pushed her face against his back, rubbing her chin against his skin. She loved the feel of her skin against his.

"Careful or you're going to make me burn myself."

"Sorry," she laughed, moving away from him. "Wouldn't want to disturb the cook. What are you making?"

"Scrambled eggs, bacon and toast." He motioned toward the sink. "Coffee is ready." Ryker carried over a plate of eggs and bacon and set them down on the table. "David is going to bring over clothes for you later. But until then, I figured after breakfast you'd want to take a long, hot shower."

Katlin sat down and took a sip of coffee.

Ryker spooned half the eggs onto her plate.

"How much do you think I eat?"

He laughed and sat across from her. "Just want to make sure you keep up your strength. We have a long day of nothing planned."

"A long day of nothing? What better way to start a lazy day than a long, hot shower? Maybe we can take that shower together?"

His fork stopped in midair, and he stared at her, desire sparkling in his eyes.

“Hurry up and eat.”

* * * *

The afternoon wore on, and Katlin and Ryker spent the whole day in bed, making love. She felt lazy, relaxed and happier than she had ever been. All that mattered was that she was with the man she loved. So he didn't love her yet--she would wear him down, and she could be stubborn and determined. A knock at the door sent her scurrying under the covers. “Who do you think it is?”

“Don't worry, it's David,” Ryker laughed, “You stay under the covers, and I'll get the door.”

She listened to their voices, only making out about half of what they said. When the door shut, she peeked her head out from under the covers. “Is he gone?”

“The coast is clear.” Ryker was carrying an overnight bag and a white envelope. “You should get dressed. I told David we would clear out in a few hours so he could have his place back.”

Katlin hopped up from the bed and ran over to him, giving him a quick kiss as she grabbed the bag and headed toward the bathroom.

She came out dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt. She realized he was standing in the same place. He hadn't moved since she went in the bathroom, and his expression was serious. “What's wrong?” She walked over and touched his face, gently stroking his cheek.

“I found out something about your father's death.”

“Tell me.”

“Your father was killed.”

“How?”

“It was a car bomb. Vector had him killed because he was leaking information to the government.”

“The information that Halster had?” she asked.

“Yes. Somehow they figured out what he was up to and had him killed.”

“Vector had my father killed. You mean McDonald sent the order to have him killed.”

“Yes.”

“But that's not all?”

“No, there's something else.” He handed her a small white envelope. “I didn't know how to tell you before. I found some things of your father's in McDonald's safe.”

“What is it?” she asked as she turned it over and recognized her father's handwriting. “For My Children In the Event of My Death” was scrawled across the front of the envelope.

“I found some of your father's things, stock certificates and insurance information, along with business letters and this envelope.”

The seal on the letter had been opened. McDonald must have read it. She took out the letter and slowly read the contents.

My Darling Children, if you have found this letter I've failed, which means you're both in grave danger. Unbeknownst to your mother or anyone in the family I've been working for an organization involved with illegal activities.

I've been trying to extricate myself from them for years, but their hold over me is too great. Every time I try to leave, they threaten to harm both of you and your mother. I've no excuse for what I've done nor any explanation except to say that I was a young, foolish man who made some rash decisions without realizing the effect they would have on my life and my family. I never meant to put you or your mother in danger. I worked hard to make sure the people I dealt with never interfered with your lives. I hope you will some day be able to forgive my deception.

I tried desperately to keep you both safe, but as I grow older, I find I can't live this life anymore. I've made a decision to come forward with the information I know about the Organization. It's the only way I can try to untangle myself from the world of corruption I've sunk into.

Along with this letter, you'll find a key to a safety deposit box. In the box you'll find information that you must get to the authorities. I've spent years patiently gathering together evidence of their crimes and details of their plans for expansion. You will not be safe until this information is out of your hands. You must be extremely careful. Don't trust anyone but each other.

*I've done everything in my power to keep you all safe. I love you all very much.
Your loving Father, Emerson Campbell*

She looked into the empty envelope. "Where's the key?"

"It wasn't in the envelope, but I already knew it wouldn't be there."

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Rebecca has worked out most of what Halster gave to you. Halster ran the Lodge for the Organization. Whenever they needed to park someone or something without appearing in any databases, they sent them to the Lodge. The constant flow of traffic covered their comings and goings. Halster himself had been looking for a way out of the Organization for years, and when the package of documents came through his hotel, he saw his chance. He snatched the papers and headed for Vegas. He was carrying them when he died, the last time I saw them, they were burning steadily in the gutter."

"So all of the proof is gone?"

"Yes, all that is left is the information in Rebecca's head, and without corroboration, that isn't of much use."

"So everything my father did was in vain?"

"It wasn't in vain. He was trying to get out, trying to change his life. That has to count for something." He grabbed her and pulled her into his arms. "I'm truly sorry you had to find out about your father."

She rested her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I would rather know the truth. He made a mistake by getting involved with them, and he paid for that decision most of his life."

Ryker gently stroked her hair. "You don't hate him for what he did?"

"How can I hate him? He was my father. Whatever he did, I know he loved Colin and me. He tried to keep us safe. I wish you could've known him. He was a good man, down deep."

"Yeah, I wish I could have known him, then I could have asked him."

"Asked him what?" She sighed and closed her eyes enjoying the feel of his arms

around her. She could spend her whole life with her head on his chest, listening to the sound of his heart beating.

“Asked him for your hand in marriage.”

“What?” She pulled away and looked up into his eyes. He had a very serious look on his face.

“Katlin, will you marry me? I know I’ve been a fool. I know I kept pushing you away, trying to convince myself I wasn’t in love with you, but I do love you. It took almost losing you to make me realize how much I need you in my life.” He pulled a small box covered in black velvet out of his pocket. “Marry me,” he said as he knelt down on one knee and opened the box. Nestled inside was a beautiful two carat, heart-shaped diamond.

“And if I say no?” she asked, her eyes sparkling with laughter.

“Then I’ll hound you for the rest of your life until I wear you down and you say yes.”

“Of course, I’ll marry you.” She laughed out loud as she threw herself at him. He was unprepared for the physical assault and barely caught her, pulling her body against his. They fell with a loud crash to the floor. She lay on top of him, brushing the hair out of his eyes. “You have to get a haircut before the wedding ceremony.”

“This is the second time you have tried to seduce me on the floor. We really have to get out of the habit of making love on hard surfaces. What do you have against beds?”

She lowered her head and kissed him. “Nothing, but it feels so good lying against you. I don’t feel like getting up and finding one.” She squealed with laughter as he pulled her close and rolled both their bodies across the floor toward the king-sized bed in the corner.

Epilogue

It stopped raining. Emerson Campbell stood and watched the rays of sunlight poke their way through gray storm clouds. The storm was moving away, going south, carried by the dry winds of the desert. It was time for him to move on.

His children were both safe. McDonald and Halster were dead. The crime boss was dead. It should've been enough, but it wasn't. Vector lived on.

As far as the world was concerned, Emerson Campbell had died of a heart attack. The crime organization thought they had killed him with a car bombing, but it wasn't his body that had been burned beyond recognition. Instead one of his co-workers was dead because he had borrowed Emerson's car to run an errand.

One day, Emerson hoped to find a way to contact his family and tell them he was alive. For now they must continue to think he was dead--it was the only way they would be safe.

Emerson was a man who knew too much, a man with deadly enemies. Enemies who for the moment were off his trail, but someone might stumble on the fact he was alive. So once again, he was on the run, trying to keep one step ahead of the danger.

Emerson took one last look over his shoulder at the sunset as he got into his car. He drove along until the dirt road ended and the freeway began. Emerson turned his car south and decided to follow the storm.

THE END