



Windhandler

By

Georgia Tribell

Windhandler by Georgia Tribell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Windhandler

Copyright© 2008 Georgia Tribell

ISBN: 978-1-60088-233-3

Cover Artist: Simon Boxer

Editor: Barbara Louise

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Dedication

Thank you, Mom, for all the support, humor, strength, courage, and unconditional love you gave me. This one is for you, and you will always be missed.

May 22, 2507 AD

Hundreds of years after the population of Earth was decimated by a meteor, American survivors reclaimed the United States and divided it into thirteen colonies, or territories, as it was in the original birth of their nation. In this new world, people developed the ability to manipulate nature's elements. Some see this new capability as an asset. Others, however, see it as the work of the devil and believe society must be cleansed.

Chapter One

The rain fell so hard, Dustin Martinez's window-cleaner was of little use this morning. If he weren't due at an early meeting at the Special Powers Division headquarters, he would have rolled over and gone back to sleep when his alarm went off. Now, he wished he had.

He cursed as a large utility-glider cut in front of him, causing him to slam on his brakes and skid on the slick road. He started moving again and watched the crazy driver dart in and out of traffic as they approached the bridge spanning Lake Lanner.

The utility-glider cut in front of a student-transporter and hit the front of the transporter. The clipped vehicle lost air traction on the wet road and went into a slide, ramming into the utility-glider. The two vehicles crashed into the rail. The glider tilted toward the lake and appeared to hang in midair for several seconds before it fell into the dark, fatal meteor water below.

Dustin steered his glider to the side of the road and jumped out as the transporter came to a precarious stop half on, half off the bridge. Darting around cars, he ran toward the transporter as it tilted toward the black, murky liquid below. Screams filled the air, sending a chill up his spine.

Leaning over the rail, he held his hands out in front of him and used his powers to create a small whirlwind of air to keep the vehicle from sliding off. The wind tunnel touched the inky water and sucked up the deadly liquid.

Glancing back to the transporter, he noted that it was no longer descending toward the lake. But it also wasn't moving back toward the street.

It would take a much larger burst of air to get the vehicle back on solid ground, but he couldn't increase the size of the wind tunnel. If he did, the poisonous, black water would rain down on them all. Even the smallest amount of this inky liquid coming into contact with one's skin could kill. It wasn't worth the risk.

"Get the children off the transporter," Dustin yelled over his shoulder.

People stood frozen in place, though whether their shock was due to the horrible sight of the transporter full of children teetering on the edge of the bridge or his use of his powers, he didn't know. Either way, he couldn't do it all by himself. The student-transporter shuddered, and for a heart-stopping moment, he thought it would fall. Then, miraculously, it moved ever so slightly back onto the bridge.

"I've got it. Get the children off."

Dustin turned at the distinctively female voice. The woman was tall, but so thin she looked as if the strong wind would blow her right off the bridge. Rain plastered dark hair to her face.

"Are you sure you can hold it?" If she couldn't, the children would plunge to their deaths.

"Yes! Just hurry!"

He watched her as he reduced the whirlwind. At the same time, the woman increased her pull on the transporter to keep it nice and steady. This woman was one hell of a MetalShaper, but he didn't have time to ponder the fact as he ran to the back of the vehicle.

Opening the door, he jumped up on the bumper and yelled, "Everyone, move this way! We need the weight on this end."

He helped two of the older students off first and instructed them to gather the rest in a group away from the vehicle. He picked up a small girl in a pink dress and turned to drop her to the pavement. Thankfully, his action motivated other bystanders, and he was able to pass the child down safely. One by one, the children exited the student-transporter until only

he and the driver remained.

Dustin glanced over at the MetalShaper and noted the strain on her face. He looked back at the driver. "The children are off, come on. We need to hurry."

"My left leg and ankle are broken. I can't make it!"

Dustin moved toward the man. His weight in the almost empty transporter caused it to slip toward the water below.

"No! I can't hold it!" The woman's voice carried to him above the pounding rain.

He froze and backed up to the open door. "Can you get yourself into the aisle and lie down?"

"I think so." After several loud curses and slow movements, the man accomplished his task.

Dustin squatted down and created a small layer of wind that raised the man about two inches off the floor. Slowly, he forced the bottom layer of wind toward the driver as he pulled the top portion to himself, creating a conveyor belt effect.

"Can you hurry it up?" Fatigue and stress laced the woman's voice.

"I'm going as fast as I can," he called back.

"You need to move faster."

"Almost done." He sped up the airflow. It seemed to take forever for the man to reach him. The vehicle tilted, and he knew they were running out of time.

"Get off! Get out now!" The woman's voice sounded above the scream of emergency vehicles.

The transporter started a slow slide toward the water. The screech of metal against metal filled the air. Dustin grabbed the man under the armpits and jumped out backwards. He landed hard on the street with the driver beside him and watched as the transporter fell from the railing and plunged to the water below. It wasn't the best exit or landing he'd ever made, but it was one of the timeliest.

He looked over at the old man. "How are you?"

"I'm alive. So, I'm thinking I'm damn good. Thank you."

Dustin rolled to his feet as medics converged on the driver and cut

off their conversation. He understood how the man felt. Dustin knew he would be sore as hell tomorrow, but he wasn't complaining.

Turning, he scanned the area and spotted the children huddled together as two police officers spoke with them. He walked over to the group, knowing he'd need to give a statement. His stomach tightened in anticipation of talking to the woman who'd so boldly helped. It took a hell of a lot of courage to do what she had done.

As he approached, he surveyed the crowd again before he stopped beside the children. "The woman, the MetalShaper, where is she?"

One of the first two children off the student-transporter spoke up. "I was standing next to her when the transporter fell. When I looked back to thank her, she was gone."

Dustin turned and ran to the top of the bridge. He scanned both sides but couldn't see the woman. He cursed as he walked back the direction he'd come. He couldn't shake the sense of great disappointment in not meeting her.

Lexi Corbitt didn't stop walking until she'd put six blocks between her and the accident. Rain still fell in sheets as she walked up to the next solar-bus stop and waited. Her clothes were wet all the way to her skin, but she barely noticed. The only thing registering with her at the moment was the extreme fatigue swamping her body.

She changed solar-buses four times before getting off six blocks past her normal stop. Every block, she checked behind her to see if anyone who'd been at the scene of the accident was following her. She'd spent years on the run, looking over her shoulder to see if anyone noticed her not because she wanted to, but because she had to. Her life depended on remaining anonymous and staying off the media's radar.

The remaining distance to her apartment building wasn't far, but she was so exhausted from the energy she'd expended she could barely stand. She could deal with the discomfort, however, so long as her carefully built career and identity weren't jeopardized. It had taken her

years to reach this degree of financial and physical security, and she didn't know what she'd do if she had to start over.

When she finally reached the door to her building and entered the lobby, her legs felt as if there were fifty-pound weights tied to each, but she forced herself to cross the room to the lift. She was almost there when she heard her name being called. Turning, she watched the building manager approach.

"Morning, Ms. Corbitt, I'm so glad I caught you."

Lexi forced a smile. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Haywood, but I'm soaked. Can we talk later?"

"I'm afraid not. Your morning escapade is all over the news."

Damn, Lexi thought as she pasted a smile to her face. "It is? How? No news cameras were there."

"A bystander took a video with a Portable Communicator Device." The manager's voice was soft and caring.

So much for going unnoticed. Lexi ground her teeth and cursed the inventor of the PCD. Maybe Mrs. Haywood wanted to tell her what a great thing Lexi had done, but she wasn't counting on it. She shivered, reminding herself how very wet and cold she was. "What did you want?"

"The building rules state very clearly we don't rent to those with abilities above the acceptable normal levels."

Lexi sighed. From past experience, she knew this was only the start of the downward spiral her life was about to take. "I remember."

Mrs. Haywood held out a sheet of paper, and Lexi took it. "You have twenty-four hours to leave. After that, your access code will be changed."

"Twenty-four hours." She scanned the paper.

"If it were up to me, you wouldn't be leaving. You are a hero, my dear, but my hands are tied."

"Thank you." There wasn't anything else to say as Mrs. Haywood turned and walked away.

Lexi wadded up the sheet and shoved it into the pocket of her raincoat as she made her way to her apartment. Today was supposed to be a well-deserved day off, and all she wanted was to go downtown and

eat breakfast at a café before visiting the fine arts museum. Now, it looked like she would spend the day apartment hunting and packing instead.

If she'd driven instead of taking the public system, odds were she'd have avoided the wreck and she wouldn't be in this mess. Of course, then an entire transporter of children would have gone into Lake Lanner, killing all aboard. Moving wasn't such a big deal when she thought of it that way.

After showering and putting on warm clothes, she turned on her ViewScreen and was immediately assaulted with her image. She watched several minutes of the video and listened to the commentary before turning it off. She went to the kitchen and rummaged until she came up with a half eaten box of chocolates. Opening the box, she popped a piece into her mouth and started chewing. It wasn't even noon, but with the way her day had started, she figured she deserved the treat. Taking the box with her, she went to the kitchen table where her Household Computer was located. Putting another piece of chocolate into her mouth, she pulled up listings for apartment rentals and started her search.

The image of the WindHandler popped into her mind. His chiseled features, extraordinary powers, and self-confidence were amazing. She couldn't help but wonder if he was having as crappy a day as she was.

Chapter Two

Dustin watched the morning's events on the office ViewScreen one more time. The person who took the video hadn't started recording until after Dustin was on the transporter. Which was a good thing for him and his job. It wasn't good for the woman who'd helped save all those kids.

People with extra powers didn't advertise the fact on the evening news because the general population could be very cruel. More than once, the mob mentality overtook otherwise sane people, and they attacked those with extra powers. The thought of this woman being victimized caused an unnatural feeling of panic to flow through him.

"Have we managed to identify the woman yet? With her picture all over the news, it won't be long before they have a name."

Dustin's partner and friend, Grady O'Brien, looked up from his desk. "No. We ran her image through our face recognition program but nothing popped. Now, we're running it by other agencies."

"Alora, have you noticed how she's dressed?" Miranda, Grady's wife pointed to the screen.

Grady's sister, Alora, turned and studied the picture. "She's wearing Meteor Design clothing from head to toe."

"Which tells us what?" Dustin asked.

"Meteor Design is a local business, very exclusive. You can only buy items at the Meteor Design Studio and Store," Miranda said.

"You might be able to get an ID from the owner or a sales clerk," Alora added.

Dustin printed off the best image of the rain-soaked woman. "Where is the store located?"

Miranda scribbled the address on a sheet of paper and handed it to him.

He picked up the picture and stood. "I'm going to try to track her down."

"Let us know what you find out," Grady called as he turned back to his computer screen.

Dustin gave a noncommittal grunt as he walked out of the building. In his mind, he kept seeing the look on her face toward the end of their ordeal. The amount of energy required to do what she had done must have wiped her out. The few times he'd maxed his powers, the effort left him almost comatose for hours. He glanced up at the sky as he drove across town toward the upscale shopping district. It was still drizzling, and it was now well after noon.

All the solar slots outside the line of stores were full so he was forced to park over a block away. It started to rain in earnest when he was halfway to the store, only adding to his crappy day. Heads turned as he entered the upscale store. He was definitely out of his territory.

A smiling young woman approached. "The sporting goods store is next door."

Dustin smiled back as he smoothed his damp hair. "I know. I'm looking for the store owner."

"She's not here today. I'm her assistant. Maybe I can help you?"

Dustin pulled his badge and the picture from his pocket. He flashed the ID before holding the picture up. "I'm looking for this woman. Do you know her?"

The woman paled, swallowed, and glanced nervously around the store.

"This is a formal investigation." He added enough hardness to his voice to let the woman know he wasn't joking.

"Could we talk outside?"

"Sure." Dustin held the door, and the two of them stepped out under the small awning, just out of the rain.

"This is Lexi Corbitt. She's the owner of Meteor Designs. Is she hurt?"

"No, she's fine. This morning, she did a very brave thing. We have a few more questions we'd like to ask her."

"Oh, thank goodness. For a moment I thought something bad might have happened to her."

He didn't miss the slight note of panic in the woman's voice and understood immediately this woman considered Ms. Corbitt a friend. Or at least he hoped so. "Can you tell me how to contact her?"

"Yes, I can."

Dustin took down Lexi Corbitt's address and PCD number. He held the door for the assistant before heading back to his car through the rain. Ms. Corbitt's apartment was only a few blocks away. With any luck, he could make it there before the assistant called her and she had time to prepare for his visit.

His communicator blared a classic rock song, the signal that Grady was attempting to contact him. "Connect." The one word patched the call through the solar-glider's hands-free system. "Whatcha got for me?"

"We've ID'ed the woman. She's..."

"Lexi Corbitt," Dustin cut his partner off. "The owner of Meteor Design clothing company."

"Damn, you're good. We might actually keep you around a while longer. So, what high tech method did you use to get the information?"

Dustin gave a short chuckle. "I talked with one of her employees. And you?"

"Heard it on the news."

"Damn, we're good."

Grady laughed on the other end.

"I'm a block from her apartment. Figured I'd drop in and see if she's home." Dustin slowed on the wet street as he rounded a corner.

"You should know the story is now airing in all the colonies."

"Fuck." Things would have been tough enough for the lady if her identity had only been broadcast locally. Now, there wouldn't be a place she could go without being recognized.

"Yeah, that's what I said." Grady's tone went from carefree to serious. "Try to convince her to come back with you. We can put her up in a safe house until this blows over. I'm concerned about her safety."

Dustin gripped the steering bar at Grady's words and tried to ignore the tightening in the pit of his stomach. Pulling into a parking spot in front of Ms. Corbitt's building, he cut the engine. "I'm here. I'll see what I can do."

"Okay, keep us posted."

Dustin pocketed his PCD as he stepped out of the solar-glider. He'd had the same thought about bringing Ms. Corbitt in, but hearing Grady say the word brought reality home.

Once he reached the apartment door, he buzzed and waited. To his surprise, the occupant opened the door without first determining his identity over the intercom system. The woman before him was the same one in the picture, but she looked nothing like the drowned rat he'd seen earlier in the day. Long, auburn hair fell in waves around her shoulders, reminding him of pooled silk. Her emerald green eyes widened as recognition registered an instant before she slammed the door in his face.

"Damn," Dustin muttered. He rubbed his eyes as he pushed the intercom button again. If he hadn't been so distracted by her incredible good looks, he'd have stopped her from closing the door.

He jabbed the buzzer one more time. When it became obvious nothing was going to happen, he retrieved a slim leather packet from his hip pocket. Opening it, he pulled out a thin electronic strip before returning the rest to his pocket. Placing the strip across the access panel, he pressed down on the two red dots then stepped back.

The two red lights turned to green followed by an almost inaudible click of the lock releasing. He retrieved his badge from his pocket as he slowly pushed the door open. There wasn't a sound in the house as he closed the door behind him, and he wondered if Ms. Corbitt had vanished out a back exit. He walked down the short entryway and stepped into a large open living area.

She stood across the room with her back to a large window. Behind her, dark clouds whirled and lightning bolts struck the ground with

uncommon intensity. For a brief moment, he wondered if she controlled the weather because the look on her face was as deadly as the lightning.

"Who are you?"

Her words were short and curt and cut through the silence with enough force to stop him in his tracks. Her words carried no direct threat, but the lack of fear in her voice was enough reason to make him stop. Raising his badge, he kept his voice neutral. "I'm with the police."

The badge flew from his hand so fast he didn't have time reach for it. Holding up her hand, she snatched it from the air and studied it. He took a step forward but stopped when a knife rose from a floral arrangement and flew toward him.

"I'd stay where I was, Mr. Martinez." She closed the case to his badge. "You are not with the police, so why are you really here?"

"I'm with a government agency that's in charge of policing people with extraordinary powers."

"The name of this agency is?" Her tone oozed skepticism.

"Special Powers Division, SPD for short." Dustin sighed. He hated trying to explain his job to people. They never believed him.

"Never heard of them."

This time wasn't going to be any different. "Good, then you haven't been in trouble with the law before."

"And I still haven't done anything wrong. Now get out."

His wallet flew across the room directly at him. He snapped it out of the air when it reached him and dropped it into his pocket. The knife moved closer to him, but Dustin held his ground. He forced his gaze away from the weapon and to the woman. Wavy auburn hair framed her face and stark green eyes silently dared him to move.

He met her gaze and stood his ground. "I'm not here to arrest you, but we do need to talk."

"Forgive me, Mr. Martinez, but I'm not in the mood for chit-chat today. Call on me again tomorrow evening after seven, and I should be in a better frame of mind."

He spread his hands out in front of him in a sympathetic, non-threatening gesture. "I'm sure you're pretty much brain-fried at this point."

The few times I've been forced to push my powers to their limit, I was near comatose for hours."

She arched one perfect eyebrow at him. "You are assuming I stressed my powers. Maybe I did, maybe I didn't."

Dustin dropped his hands and studied her. "Look. I'm not here to debate the level of your gift. I came to check on you and let you know we can provide protection if you need it."

"Pro...protection?"

The one word faltered on her lips as the knife clattered to the floor. He went to step on the weapon, only to have it slide across the floor away from him. A few feet from the woman, the knife lifted off the ground and floated to her. She wrapped her hand around the handle then turned her gaze back to him.

"Impressive."

She shrugged as if it was nothing. "Why do you think I need security?"

"First hand experience has taught me how harsh the world can be for those of us with unique gifts. SPD can give you a safe place to stay until this blows over."

"I'm well aware how cruel others can be, Mr. Martinez, but I'm not about to put myself in the position of being a lab rat for some secret government agency. Thanks for the offer, but no, I'd rather go it alone. Please close the door on your way out."

The determined look in her eyes and the set of her jaw told Dustin this meeting was over. Normally, he would have dropped the subject and walked away, but he couldn't shake the feeling he was missing something here. He glanced around the room and, for the first time noticed the boxes. "Moving?"

Her reply was a silent stare and another arched eyebrow.

"Fine. Do you mind if I download my contact information to your PCD?"

Her eyes took on a steely glint, and he knew she was irritated with him, but damn, she was stubborn beyond belief.

"Go ahead. It's there on the table behind you."

He pulled his from his pocket, jabbed at a few buttons then pointed the infrared beam at hers. It was then he noticed the custom paint job on her device. Why would anyone paint flowers on a PCD when black was a perfectly good color?

His handheld beeped when the transfer completed. He pocketed his communicator as he turned back to the very frosty Ms. Corbitt. "Call me if you need anything."

"I'll move you to the top of my contact list."

Her words dripped with sarcasm, causing him to grind his teeth in frustration. He opened the door then turned back to her.

"I noticed your ViewScreen was off, so I'm guessing you don't know your story has traveled across all the colonies."

He had the privilege of seeing her jaw drop seconds before he closed the door and walked away from the most frustrating woman he'd ever met.

Lexi leaned against the large picture window and watched Mr. Martinez leave her building and cross the parking lot to his vehicle. He was tall enough that even at five-nine, she was forced to look him in the eyes. His eyes were a dreamy, dark brown that reminded her of melted chocolate. His hair was short and dark as coal, sending an urge through her to touch it. He reached his solar-glider and turned back in her direction.

Her breath caught, and for several seconds, she was sure he looked right at her. She felt as if she'd been stripped bare, and he could see her deepest, darkest secret. Finally, he turned back to his vehicle and disappeared into it. His solar-glider made a left at the far corner, and as it did, she rested her cheek against the cool glass.

Her head pounded as if a million meteor rocks pinged around inside it. She was amazed she'd managed to remain upright while he was here and hadn't embarrassed herself by falling to the floor. Her body ached with exhaustion. She forced herself to move, making her way to the

sofa where she collapsed. Switching on her ViewScreen, she watched long enough to verify what Mr. Martinez told her.

Turning it off, she forced herself to stand. She didn't have much time to get packed and moving. Since the news had made her whereabouts known to the world, she couldn't stay here tonight. After walking across the room, she picked up her PCD and glanced down at the screen. Mr. Martinez's contact information glared back at her.

She saved the information, cleared the screen, and cursed her bad luck. For the first time in years, she'd received a phone number from a guy who wasn't a total dweeb, and she wasn't even going to get to use it.

The day just kept going from bad to worse.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Lexi stood outside the nondescript, gray building and double-checked the information Mr. Martinez had given her. This was the address, but there wasn't any sign or advertisement to mark the business entrance. Opening the door, she entered a bleak, sterile waiting area.

The receptionist took her personal information and verified it with a palm scan. The man told her to wait as he made a call.

Lexi took a seat on an old, uncomfortable chair. She hoped Mr. Martinez didn't keep her long. She'd only managed to catch a couple of hours of sleep last night, and she was starting to feel it. Not to mention, stopping here wasn't one of her brightest moves. She should have spent the night putting as much distance between her and this town as she could. Instead, she'd circled the city in her old solar-glider, never staying in one location for more than an hour.

Rubbing her temples, she prayed she had made the right decision. Trust wasn't something that came naturally to her any longer; it had been beaten out of her years ago. All night long, she'd heard her grandmother telling her there were people she could trust if she'd only open her eyes and look around. She didn't know whether her eyes were finally open or whether the pure fear running through her was making her feel this way or whether the sincerity in Mr. Martinez's voice had drawn her here. Whatever the reason, she prayed she was doing the right thing because she was sure her life hinged on this decision.

The door to the inner office opened, and she stood as Dustin Martinez walked out. His dark brown eyes connected with hers. If the chair hadn't been behind her, she'd have stepped back from him. Unfortunately, she was forced to hold her ground as he closed the distance until he was no more than a foot away. The circles under his eyes and the lines around them suggested he'd gotten no more sleep than she.

"Good morning, Mr. Martinez."

He took in her appearance. Lexi knew he didn't miss the fact that she was still in the same clothes she'd worn yesterday. The intensity of his gaze unnerved her, but she forced herself not to fidget like she wanted.

His gaze returned to her eyes. "I didn't think there was a chance in hell I'd ever see you here."

"If I had half a brain I wouldn't be here. Or maybe I like playing with fire."

He ran a hand through his short-cropped black hair, and the urge to run her fingers through it made her palms itch. She closed one hand into a fist and rubbed her eyes with the other. Sleep deprivation was starting to induce strange thoughts. He wasn't the type she normally found attractive. Despite this, she couldn't help but wonder what his body looked like under those stylish, pressed clothes.

"Look, Ms. Corbitt, I don't know what changed your mind, but yesterday you made it perfectly clear you had no desire to talk."

"I know exactly what I said. But after a long, sleepless night, I changed my mind."

Without speaking, he turned and opened the door to the inner office area, then motioned her through.

She reached into her pocket. "I didn't come here for a long discussion. I need to hit the road, but wanted to give you this before I left."

She held out her hand and dropped a data-chip into his. He studied it for a minute then pinned her with cold eyes. "I don't have time for games, Ms. Corbitt."

"This isn't a game, this is very important. It's taken me fifteen years to gather all the information on that chip. I'm only asking for you to take

five minutes to review it. You should find it very interesting. If you don't, then toss it."

He released the door and closed the space between them until she was forced to tilt her head up to look him in the eyes. He was close enough now she could feel his body heat and smell the subtle, spicy cologne he wore.

"Why don't we look at this together? Then you can leave after we're done talking."

The hard look in his eyes and his menacing tone caused her to sidestep toward the entrance. This wasn't the same man who'd visited her apartment yesterday or even the same one who'd only minutes ago walked out those doors. She retreated closer to the outer doors. "I don't expect you to understand, but I can't."

She turned and walked out while she still could. The bright sunshine blinded her as she exited the building and made her way toward her secondhand solar-glider parked at the curb. Stopping beside the vehicle, she dug in her purse for her sunshades, but her hands were so shaky she dropped them to the ground. Muttering a curse, she squatted to retrieve them.

There was a sharp crack followed by the window of her glider door shattering into million flying pieces. Lexi screamed and fell back on her butt as a hole appeared in the door where her head had just been. Terrified she stood and ran.

The door to the building behind her flew open as Dustin stepped out holding a pistol in one hand. "Lexi! Get down."

She dropped to the ground as a bullet hit the wall next to him and sent a spray of clay and concrete into the air. She looked up and watched Dustin move away from the doorway and into the street.

There was a roar behind her, and when she turned, all she could see was a wall of dust and debris blocking their view down the road.

"Lexi! Get inside. Now."

She pushed herself up and ran for the safety of the building, but before she even reached the door, Dustin was behind her, hurrying her along. He reached around her, opened the door, and shoved her inside.

They weren't even through the door when he started barking orders to others in the office. A second later, large metal shutters rolled down over the windows.

Emergency lights blinked in the small reception area, lending everyone and everything a yellow tint. Panic ensued as people started pouring in from the back room. She needed to leave this place as quickly as possible. As pandemonium filled the air, she casually made her way through the door and into the inner office. People rushed around, talking and yelling. She used the confusion to find the back exit and headed toward it.

Dustin stepped into the office area and looked around the large open workspace. He was looking for her, and she knew it.

"Lexi. Stop, we need to talk!" Dustin shouted above the clamor.

She swung around to him. "I've got to go. If I stay in this town, I'm dead."

Chapter Four

God, she was more beautiful than he remembered from yesterday. Her hair was tousled and her face flushed, almost as if she'd just made love. It was more alluring than the cover girl look, in his opinion. He walked toward her, and she stiffened visibly.

"I can't let you leave."

She arched one elegant eyebrow at him. "And you can't stop me."

She stepped back so fast from him her heel slipped on the tile floor. He reached for her, but she slapped his hand away and continued to put space between them.

"Don't touch me. God, I'm so stupid. I should have driven out of town last night instead of coming here."

Her eyes were wide with fear. It wasn't the response he'd expected at all. He held his hands up, palms facing her and assumed a non-threatening stance. "No one here is going to hurt you. If you'll let me explain—"

"Explain what?" Her alarm-filled voice cut him off. "That you're going to lock me up and rid me of my evil ways? I'm not going to let that happen."

She moved her arm across her body, and in a flash, a metal desk chair flew through the air at him. Dustin put his hands together then opened them, forcing the air away from his body and sending the chair careening in the opposite direction. It crashed to the floor on the opposite side of the room. By the time Dustin turned his attention back to Lexi, she

had reached the back door and was opening it.

"No!" He held a hand out in front of him and shot a column of air across the room strong enough to pull the door from her hands. It slammed shut with enough force to rattle the windows.

She turned back to him, and he saw the raw fear in her eyes. "Lexi, you've got to believe me when I say we're not going to harm you."

"It's not a chance I'm willing to take."

The next thing Dustin knew, he hit the ground to avoid a flying desk. Off to his right, he saw Grady and Dominick Hodge heading his way. He scrambled to his feet. He had to stop her before someone—mainly her—got injured. He concentrated until he created a small funnel of air around her. Ten seconds later, she hit the floor.

Dustin moved beside her, knelt, and checked to see that she was fine before he picked her up and took her to one of the conference room couches.

"Is she dead?"

He looked over to see Grady standing in the doorway. "No, but she's going to have one hell of a headache when she wakes."

"I'm thinking she's going to be madder than a rattlesnake, too. From what I heard of your conversation, she's not extremely trusting, and what you did won't help that matter at all." Grady propped a hip on the conference table.

Dustin stood and glared over at his friend. "I couldn't very well let her walk outside before the area was secured."

Grady's eyes turned hard. "Most importantly, you couldn't let her walk out before we were able to question her. Security and secrecy is our top priority."

"I'm perfectly aware of what needs to be done, Grady." He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice but failed miserably.

Grady's eyes narrowed. "Good, because I want to know who she brought to our front door and why."

Dustin glanced over at the unconscious woman and wondered if his first impression was incorrect. His gut told him he wasn't wrong. "I'll find out, but until we know different, we're going to treat her like a

victim, not a suspect.”

Before Grady could respond, there was a knock at the conference room door. Both men turned as their team’s medic walked into the room holding a handful of papers.

Hodge, one of the team’s new members, had a military background. Although the quiet, self-sufficient Hodge wasn’t generally a person to socialize, he and Dustin had found a common interest in woodworking, and the two men had become friends.

“What have you got?” Dustin asked even though he wasn’t certain he wanted to know.

Hodge looked over at Dustin then turned to Grady to hand him the papers. “When Ms. Corbitt came in, Sanchez took a palm scan and started the general background check on her.”

Dustin stood and moved to stand beside Grady so he could see the pages. He was sure he wouldn’t like what he was about to learn. “And?”

“Lexi Corbitt isn’t her real name. We don’t know what it is, but her identity was bought. She paid good money for it, I will say that.”

Dustin scanned the pages as Grady flipped through the stack. His stomach tightened as each page was turned. “What gave her away?”

“Her identity held together well through her college days and high school, which is about as far back as most people ever check. We don’t stop there, though, and it’s the holes in her childhood that flagged us. Lexi Corbitt never attended any of the elementary or middle schools listed. There are also no doctor records for a child named Lexi Corbitt in or around the areas of those schools when she would have been attending them.”

Grady flipped over the last piece of paper and turned to Dustin. “You still think she’s an innocent victim?”

Dustin didn’t respond to Grady’s question but watched as the other two men walked out of the conference room, closing the door behind them. He pulled a chair next to the prone woman and took a seat. He reached out and brushed a strand of hair out of her face, resisting the urge to brush his fingers along the smooth skin of her cheek. Lexi stirred as he leaned back in his chair and waited for her to wake up. As he sat there, he

wondered why he felt like he'd been kicked in the gut by an angry mule.

Lexi tried to open her eyes, but it felt like they were going to pop out of her head. Finally, after several attempts, she managed to get them open. The dark brown eyes of Mr. Martinez stared back at her.

"What did you do to me?" she demanded.

"I created a small wind vortex around you and removed the air. Once you passed out, I carried you here."

Her stomach rolled as her head continued to pound. "Why didn't you let me leave?"

Any warmth she might have imagined in his eyes vanished as he leaned back in his chair and nailed her with a hard cold glare. "Maybe because in less than twenty-four hours of talking with you, you bring an army to our front door and try to destroy us."

She narrowed her eyes. "I didn't bring anyone here. You weren't even outside when they started shooting at me. Maybe it's you who set a trap for me."

He studied her for several seconds "Who are you?"

Panic rushed through her body, but she held his gaze without blinking. "Lexi Corbitt."

Picking up a stack of papers, he tossed them on the couch beside her. She pushed herself to a seated position and forced herself to not give into the pounding in her head. She scanned the pages then looked up at him. "I don't understand."

"Damn, you are good. Guess you've practiced this innocent routine enough that by now, it's second nature." His words were as icy and hard as his eyes.

She decided to change the subject. She glanced down at her watch, wondering how long she'd been out of it. "Where's my jewelry?"

"You mean your weapons, don't you?"

Lexi raised an eyebrow. He didn't have a clue how strong her powers were. "No, I meant my jewelry. I don't need anything close to make a weapon."

There was a commotion in the large open office area, and Dustin turned to see what was happening. "Your powers are impressive."

The floating metal items in the office fell as she broke concentration. "That was nothing more than a parlor trick."

Dustin turned back to her, and once again she was amazed at how this man seemed to see into her, past all the barriers she'd created over the years. His square jaw was pronounced, and the lines around his chocolate brown eyes gave the impression of inner strength that went deeper than most would ever see.

"Could you have picked up the transporter and moved it to solid ground yesterday?"

There was enough seriousness to his voice that let her know he wasn't playing games, but at the same time, there was unmistakable admiration. The sternness she could handle easily; the esteem left her feeling unsure. "Not without doing serious bodily injury to the children. I'd really like a lawyer now."

"You don't need a lawyer. You're not under arrest."

"I don't believe you. I've heard the rumors about a secret government agency that snatches people away in the middle of the night."

Dustin ran a hand down in face. "I work for a little known government agency. Like I told you yesterday, we are charged with apprehending people with above normal powers who have stepped outside the law. There are more people like us out there than you think, Lexi, and most live normal, boring lives. But some let the power go to their heads. Those are the people we go after, not the law-abiding citizens."

Lexi liked the sound of her name coming from him. Deep inside, the feelings she'd suppressed years ago threatened to unravel. She took a deep breath and wondered if any of what he said could be true as old bitterness bubbled up. "Wonderful. The police protect us all against general crimes, and SPD rids the world of Super Powers gone mad. Who protects us against those wanting to purify the world of our kind?"

She stood, not giving him a chance to speak. "I'll tell you—no one. In the real world, it's survival of the fittest or the smartest or the strongest. That's how it is, Mr. Martinez. Not all of us are fortunate enough to have people in our lives who accept us as we are. Now, since I'm apparently

not under arrest, I'll be leaving."

Dustin stood and blocked her path to the room's only exit. Emotions rolled through him like waves preceding a storm, and he didn't begin to understand why he felt this way. The entire time they were talking, he was torn between pulling Lexi Corbitt into his arms to comfort her or grabbing her by the arms and shaking her until her teeth rattled. Both fantasies ended with her telling him this was all some misunderstanding that could easily be cleared up. Then he pulled her into his arms and kissed her senseless.

He sighed, because there was nothing simple about the woman glaring at him. He was equally certain the reason for her false identity wasn't straightforward.

"You aren't leaving." The words came out calmly despite the emotions churning inside of him.

"You just told me I wasn't under arrest."

"True, but I didn't say you were free to leave. We're holding you for the next seventy-two hours."

Her face turned twenty shades of red as anger filled her. "You—"

"Can do it, and we are. Now, why don't you have a seat and tell me who you really are?"

Lexi glared at him, and he swore he felt the air heat between them. She turned, pulled out a chair from the conference table, and lowered herself to it. She stared straight ahead and didn't acknowledge him in any way, shape, form, or fashion.

"It's going to be a very long seventy-two hours if you don't talk." His tone carried all the frustration he felt.

She continued to ignore him like a pro.

He ground his teeth before speaking. "Fine, if you need anything or decide you want to talk, open the door. I'll be at my desk."

He would prefer she did anything other than give him the silent treatment. He took a deep, steadying breath as he turned and opened the door.

"If you keep me here that long, they'll be waiting for me when I leave."

He turned and for the first time saw a hint of fear in her eyes.
“What makes you think they aren’t already waiting?”

“True, but the more time they have, the better organized they’ll get.”

She wasn’t dumb, and he was certain she’d been at this a while.

“Agreed, but maybe if you told us who *they* are, we could help you.”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me. Even if you did, you’d soon realize there’s nothing you could do.”

“Give us a chance, Lexi.”

“No.”

He wanted to scream at her, but he knew that approach would do no good. “Then, give me one.”

“You don’t get it.” She said as her eyes filled with years of sadness.
“No one can save me, Dustin, not even you.”

Chapter Five

Dustin stepped out of his Personal Flash Unit, dropped his briefcase, kicked off his shoes, and released the breath he'd been holding. One day travel by PFU would no doubt be as common as travel by solar-gliders, but the technology was still too new for his comfort, and he avoided it when he could.

He was mentally fried, beyond the ability to make the simplest of decisions. He was ninety-percent sure his mental state was the reason he couldn't come up with a good argument against having Lexi Corbitt stay the night at his place or against using the damn PFU.

He rubbed his eyes as he waited for her to come through the unit. Grady was on the other end programming the location, so there was no fear of the very stubborn lady flashing to some unknown location. The unit in his living room powered up, and two seconds later, Lexi appeared. She grabbed the edge of the PFU to steady herself then stepped into the room.

She didn't say a word as she walked around the area. Hours ago, she removed the pins holding her tousled hair. Now, the thick mass of auburn curls cascaded down her back, enhancing the curves of her body. The way she carried herself spoke of the sensuality buried deep inside her. She was the type of woman a man would consider himself lucky to wake up next to in the morning. And God help him, he wanted to be lucky.

She turned and smiled. "Your house is magnificent."

He'd swear his heart stopped when she looked at him. "Thanks. I

bought it two years ago and immediately gutted the place. The inside remodeling was finished a couple of months ago. I decided to take six months off before tackling the outside."

"You did all of this yourself?"

He closed the distance between them until he was close enough to pick up the scent that was hers alone. "I'm really good with my hands."

He watched as color flooded her face, and she narrowed her eyes at him. He could tell she was trying to figure out how to respond when the Household Computer beeped to indicate an incoming call. Retrieving the communication panel from the end table, he answered. "Hey, Alora."

"Hey there, stud muffin. I picked up the bags Ms. Corbitt requested from her glider, and I'm about to flash them to you."

"Go ahead and send them." He heard the flash unit in his kitchen activate. Lexi turned and headed in that direction.

"We also moved her vehicle to the downtown warehouse, so it should be safe. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, we'll be fine."

Alora gave a very unladylike snort. "I doubt that, but beep me if you need me, stud."

Dustin looked up as Alora signed off. Lexi stood there holding her case and watching him. She held herself straight, her expression unreadable. He wondered what she was thinking.

"I'd like a shower, if you wouldn't mind."

"Top of the stairs, first room on the right is the guest room. There's a connecting bath. If you don't find everything you need, let me know. Don't try going out a window or door, the alarm system is on."

She gave him a cold look before turning and disappearing up the stairs without uttering a word. He put the communication panel back in its charger before heading into the kitchen. He wanted a drink, something strong and stiff that would knock him on his ass and dull his thought process. Instead, he got Lexi's lingering scent, a raging hard-on, and a glass of tea.

Lexi woke with a start. For several moments, she couldn't remember where she was. Pushing up, she looked around the room and assured herself she was safe. She was in Dustin's house, and if she knew anything, it was that she was safe here. She should know, considering she'd waited until he was in the shower to open the back door. Sure enough, the alarm system blared, and it had only taken him ten seconds to descend the stairs holding a gun in one hand and a towel around his hips with the other.

She was safe from physical harm, but she wasn't so sure plain old-fashioned lust wouldn't do her in.

Stretching, she looked around the dark room. Apparently, her bad dreams followed her no matter where she went. Night terrors weren't unfamiliar to her; she'd been plagued by them for the last fifteen years. Tonight's dream took a new twist, though. For the first time in one of her many nightmares, she died.

Sleep wasn't about to return anytime soon. Plus, she was starving since she'd skipped supper. Of course, that was her own fault, because after the shower she had hidden in her room. If she wasn't such a stubborn person and had eaten when Dustin offered, she wouldn't be sneaking around at midnight looking for food.

Opening the door, she stepped out into the dark hallway and made her way to the kitchen. The first floor was as quiet and dim as the second. Dustin obviously didn't have problems sleeping, even after fending off gunfire. She opened the refrigerator and looked in.

The shock of what had happened today at the SPD office was still enough to make her shake. The urge to bolt and run was ingrained deep in her, but God, she was so tired of looking over her shoulder. Not to mention, she didn't want the pain of recreating her life in another colony. She was certain neither Dustin nor any of his team had looked at the information she'd given him yesterday.

Grabbing an apple, she closed the door and bit into the crunchy fruit while she considered what options were available to her.

"Having problems sleeping?"

Lexi screamed, and the apple flew from her hand as she spun around. Putting a hand over her heart, she gulped in air. "You scared the hell out of me. I thought you were asleep."

He didn't say a word as he retrieved the apple from the ground, rinsed it off, and handed it to her. She took the offering, and as she did, his fingers came into contact with hers. For a moment, she thought she witnessed sparks flying. The sexual pull must be a one-way thing, though. He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms over his bare chest, looking completely unfazed. Lexi blinked a couple of times to clear the outrageous thoughts running through her mind. Lack of sleep was rattling her brain.

"I was, but you made enough noise to wake the dead."

"Sorry, I tried to be quiet, but the floor squeaked with every step I took."

"That's one of the drawbacks to this old house. It moans and groans all the time. I stripped layers of varnish and wax from the flooring and refinished it all myself. It was a bitch, but it was worth it."

She glanced down at the floor, which reflected the moonlight like a mirror. As she looked back up, she couldn't help but notice the way Dustin's pajama bottoms rode low on his hips or the killer six-pack that defined his stomach.

"The floors are remarkable." She only needed to take a step forward, and she'd be close enough to run a hand over his chest, down his flat stomach to the edge of his bottoms. Her body heated, and she made a fist with her empty hand, hoping the urge would pass. If not, she needed to make a hasty retreat.

"I'd better get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a long day of driving." She started forward but stopped when Dustin moved to block her path.

"Who said you could leave tomorrow?" All friendliness disappeared from his voice and body language. The hardcore government agent was back.

She arched an eyebrow at him. "I did. It's crazy keeping me here. I'm not going to talk."

She saw the surprise in his eyes at her equally hard tone, but really, did he think she was a pushover? The man had no idea how much she hated being ordered around. She tilted her head up and met his cold gaze.

"Damn it, Lexi. You need to stay under wraps for a while."

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm never going to let anyone direct my life again except me."

He moved close enough to block the moonlight. "Is that so?"

"Yes," her breath caught in her throat and she wondered how his lips would feel.

"Never is a long time, Sugar."

His body heat and scent wrapped around her, drawing her to him like a bee to sweet honey. She knew the moment he leaned toward her, because his body tightened in anticipation of his lips touching hers.

Raising the apple, she took a bite and chewed. "Yes, it is a long time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going back to bed."

Dustin didn't breathe until he heard the top stair squeak and her door close. Slowly, he let out his breath and wondered what he'd done so wrong in life to have been thrown into this hell pit. After grabbing a beer from the refrigerator, he made his way to the living room. Turning on the plasma-screen, he settled on the couch for a long night of boring shows and torturous thoughts.

Footsteps running across the upstairs floor followed by the slamming of a door pulled Dustin from the restless sleep he'd fallen into. He picked up his gun and stood at the same time. A quick visual of the room reassured him he was alone. Another check of the HC monitor verified his home's security had not been breached. Even knowing this, he released the safety on his weapon as he crept up the stairs.

He stopped outside the guestroom door and listened. No sounds reached him, but that didn't mean there weren't a dozen people in there waiting for him to walk in. Not bothering to knock, he turned the handle. To his surprise, it was unlocked.

Slowly, he opened the door until it was flat against the wall, ensuring no one was behind it. Early morning light drifted in around the shades, giving him enough illumination to see that the bed was empty. Half the contents of an open suitcase spilled across the floor. Crossing the room, he stepped over two pairs of shoes and moved another pair out of the way so he could open the closet. Flipping on the light, he verified what he already thought—no one was hiding in it.

He turned and moved toward the closed bathroom door. Light seeped out around it with a glow like a scene out of a science fiction movie. Again, he didn't knock, but turned the handle. Unlike last time, the door didn't open. He listened for a few seconds then rapped lightly.

"What?" Lexi's voice was soft and shaky.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

Dustin ground his teeth. The one-word answers were getting them nowhere. "I need you to open the door."

"No."

He ran a hand down his face. It was too early in the morning for this kind of game. "Lexi, I need to see that you are okay and alone in there. If you don't open this door in two seconds, then I will."

"Okay, okay." Her exasperated voice drifted to him.

He heard her moving around and the sound of water running. Then, the door opened. He strode into the bathroom, did a quick search, and again came up empty-handed. When he turned to her, she was seated on the edge of the tub, elbows on knees and her head in her hands. He didn't need to see her face to know she'd been crying. He was equally certain she didn't want to talk about it.

He reached out to place a comforting hand on her shoulder, but then stepped back. "I'm going to go make coffee. Would you like some?"

She raised her head and gaped at him, as though she wasn't accustomed to people being nice to her. "Coffee would be nice. Thank you."

"It'll be ready in ten minutes." Backing out of the room, he turned and sprinted downstairs to the kitchen.

Anger coursed through his veins, so hot and molten his hands shook as he prepared the java-brewer. He had an almost uncontrollable urge to find the person who'd made her cry and pound the crap out of them. Stepping back, he watched the dark liquid flow into the clear carafe and wondered what the hell had gotten into him.

The sound of Lexi's bare feet entering the room pulled him from his thoughts. He turned and spotted her standing in the doorway. She looked as though she might bolt back upstairs and barricade herself into her room at any moment.

He motioned for her to sit at the table. "How do you take your coffee?"

"Black."

He poured the coffee and then watched as she surveyed the sunset gold-colored room. The exterior of the cabinets were original to the house, while inside was hidden the latest in modern kitchen storage. It'd taken him hours of scraping, sanding, and refinishing to make them beautiful again. The space was big enough for two people to work comfortably without stepping on each other.

Opposite the kitchen was a small dining area with a large picture window looking out into the back yard. His mother called the room quaint. He wondered what Lexi thought of it.

Carrying the mugs to the table, he took the chair opposite her and pushed a cup across the space to her. He watched as she sipped the hot liquid. "Looks like you slept as badly as I did."

Large green eyes met his. "Actually, I slept better last night than I have in years."

"You're joking." He couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

She pushed a strand of dark red hair behind an ear. "No, I haven't slept an entire night in years."

"Boy, we have totally different views on the definition of a good night's sleep."

"I'm sure we have different opinions on lots of other things."

"I'm sure we do." He studied her face, and even though he didn't know her well, he was sure she was coming to some important decision.

"You know, there are many reasons for changing one's identity." She looked him square in the eyes as she spoke.

"True. Fraud, identity theft, and running from the law are all reasons for changing your identity."

"Protection is another."

He arched an eyebrow at her. "True, but you're not in the witness program."

"No, I'm not, and if I was, I'd be dead by now." Her words dripped with scorn.

"You have very little faith in the government, sweetheart."

She took a deep breath. "I have zero faith in the government and even less in people."

He put his hand over his heart. "Direct hit, I'm going down for the count."

Lexi's eyes lit up. She laughed out loud, and her face transformed into that of an angel. He caught the fact he was staring at her only moments before she composed herself.

He hated to break the spell that seemed to hang over them this morning, but knew he didn't have a choice. "Where is this conversation headed?"

The lingering laughter fled from her eyes, replaced by the haunted look that seemed to follow her. "I need you to understand how big a step this is for me. I've never told anyone my story."

He retrieved the coffee carafe and refilled their cups before taking his place back at the table. She wasn't looking at him any longer. Instead, she stared off into space.

Someone on her past had put fear into her. He could see it in her body language. At times, he could almost smell it. He just prayed one day he got to repay that person. "Someone screwed you over good, didn't they?"

She took a sip of coffee and nodded. "Yeah, they did. When you were listing the reasons for changing ones name, you left off the most basic."

"I did? What would that be?"

She looked back to him with troubled eyes. "To stay alive."

Chapter Six

Lexi clutched the coffee cup in her hand like a lifeline. She watched as Dustin studied her face and tried to decide whether she was yanking his chain or not. She'd spent a good part of the night coming to this decision. Of course, there wasn't a lot of choice to it. Escaping town without notice was obviously out the window, and going back to live with Reverend Fairchild and his group of psycho followers was not going to happen in this lifetime.

"I'm guessing you're finally ready to talk?"

He was all business now. She could see it in his posture and hear it in his authoritative tone. She was putting a lot of faith in a man she'd only just met, but for the first time in fifteen years, she felt she'd found someone she could trust.

"Yes, but if you want your team to hear it, I'd rather tell it one time. If you don't mind?"

"Fine by me. Let's get cleaned up then we'll flash to the office."

"Okay. And you'll need to bring the data-disk I gave you yesterday."

An hour later, Lexi looked around at the faces gathered in the small conference room and wondered if she'd lost her sanity.

"We're going to record this conversation, Ms. Corbitt. It'll allow us

to review your story without having to ask you the same question over and over,” Grady O’Brien said as he turned on the voice recorder. “Any time you’re ready, you can start.”

She turned to Dustin, who sat to her right, and knew panic showed in her eyes. He looked back at her with such confidence that, for the first time in years, she thought maybe—just maybe—an end to this nightmare was close. She gave him a shaky smile before turning back to the group.

“My father is an anti-power extremist. My mother didn’t have any powers, but she failed to tell my father there were a few MetalShapers in her family line. He was horrified and ashamed of me when I came into my powers at the age of thirteen. Two weeks later, my mother committed suicide.”

“You don’t think it was suicide, though?” Miranda O’Brien asked from her spot beside her husband.

“I don’t know. My father was beyond reason. My mother tried to save the family but she was never a strong person. Their marriage was over, and even at thirteen, I understood what was happening. I do know my father wouldn’t have stopped my mother from killing herself.”

She could feel Dustin studying her and didn’t dare look at him for fear of breaking into tears. Instead, she plunged ahead. “Over the next three years, my father sent me to a variety of private boarding schools, hoping I would learn to control my powers and my attitude. Well, I learned to manage my powers quite well, but never my mindset. To say I was a handful is putting it mildly. When I was sixteen, I decided to rearrange the large heavy metal statues that decorated the school grounds. The headmaster didn’t like finding them in his office the next morning. By noon, I was once again shipped home.”

She stopped to catch her breath before telling the truly difficult part of the story. Her hands started to shake where they rested on the table. Hoping no one else noticed, she started to put her hands in her lap, only to have Dustin take her right hand in his and give it a reassuring squeeze.

“You’re freezing.”

She turned to him and saw the concern in his eyes. “It’s only nerves. I’ll be okay.”

He gave her a small smile. "I never doubted that. Why don't you finish?"

He didn't release her hand when she thought he would, and she didn't make any move to let go of his. She took a deep breath and continued. "Father sent me the next day to Reverend Fairchild's Fundamentalist School of the Saved. What a joke. It wasn't a school. It was a prison where the primary goal was to strip us of our un-Godly powers."

Everyone in the room stared at her, their features etched with unspoken repulsion. She could see the questions they wanted to ask written on their faces, but at the same time, they didn't want to hear the answers.

Alora finally broached the topic. "You can't take away someone's powers."

"No, you can't. But you can torture a young child long and hard enough to convince them to never use their powers again. Then, while you are inflicting unbelievable pain on the child, you brainwash them into believing they are being saved. Once saved, the pain will stop, and they will enjoy the same heavenly afterlife as everyone else who has no powers. Unlike those of us with powers, who are considered unsaved and going straight to Hell."

"You saw this?" Grady asked.

"I lived at the school for four weeks before I managed to escape. We were all forced to watch the punishment of others. For many of the younger kids, all it took was watching what could happen to them to convince them to give up the use of their powers. The older children weren't so easy to sway. They were the ones who usually received punishment. Over the course of a week, one girl, a WaterDancer, was held underwater each day until she drowned. They would then pull her out and resuscitate her. It took seven days before she converted to their way of thinking."

The gasps were audible, but Lexi kept going. Afraid if she stopped she wouldn't start again, she closed her eyes and plunged ahead.

"There was a fifteen year old boy, a FireStarter, who they tied down to a table. For five days straight, they placed a red hot sheet of metal

to the bottom of his feet. I can still hear his screams and smell his burning flesh."

"Did he convert?" Miranda's voice was a barely a whisper, but it carried through the quiet room.

"No. He died."

The sound of a toppling chair drew Dustin's attention to the far end of the table. Alora ran for the conference room door, her face as white as a ghost's. Dominik Hodge followed her. Dustin would have stopped to ponder that if he weren't so worried about the woman next to him. Her skin was clammy and pale, her teeth chattered, and her breathing was shallow.

Dustin wanted nothing more than to flash them both back to his place, put her in a tub of hot water to warm her up, and then tuck her safely in bed. She'd been through enough, but the questions had to be asked, either now or later. "Are you sure he died?"

She turned to him, and for the first time, a tear escaped and ran down her cheek. "Very sure. Rick Nelson, Reverend Fairchild's right hand man, took four of the older students out into the woods. The four of us dug the boy's grave and put him in it while Nelson watched."

He felt her start to pull her hand away but he refused to let go. "They made you bury the boy?"

"Yes, and the memories still haunt me. The data-disk I gave you yesterday details everything I've told you. It lists the names of people who were there when I was, and what has happened to them since."

"Good, we'll review the data. It should help a lot. Why didn't you take this to the local officials?" Dustin couldn't imagine not reporting such abuse.

"Fairchild has people everywhere, in all branches of government at both the local and national levels. The information wouldn't have made it very far, and I wouldn't have lived very long. I'm hoping I made the right decision by telling you."

He could tell she was worried about her choice. "You've come to the right place, Lexi. What happened with you? Did the brainwashing not work? Is that why you think Reverend Fairchild is the one after you?"

Lexi took a shaky breath and slowly released it. "I'm his one failure. He didn't manage to convert me, and I snuck out in the middle of the night. Alive. Plus, I know where the bodies are buried."

Dustin rubbed his eyes. "This is hard to digest. We're going to need some time to sort it all out."

Lexi jerked her hand out of his as she pushed back her chair and stood. Dustin did the same and wondered where she thought she was going because he wasn't about to let her out of his sight.

"This is why I've never gone to anyone with what I know. Why should anyone take my word over the honorable Reverend Fairchild's? After all, he's the pillar of morality, and I'm just a clothes designer who's often criticized for her over-the-top ideas."

"Lexi, we never said we didn't believe you. We are going to check it out, but you have to give us time."

"Time is the one thing I don't have."

She turned away, and that one move sent his temper right off the chart. He reached out and wrapped his fingers around her upper arm. He turned her around to face him because he wasn't finished with this conversation. Before he could find the right words, the door between the office and reception areas exploded with enough force to send people flying through the air.

People screamed as smoke and debris engulfed the room. Diving for cover under the conference table, he pulled Lexi down with him and rolled his body on top of hers. There was no time to create a protective shield using his powers, and even if there were, he might make matters worse for those on the other side of it. He pulled his PCD from his pocket and entered the direct line number for their headquarters. After verifying his authorization code, he declared a breach to their office security and requested immediate assistance on all levels.

No more than ten seconds after the initial explosion, the room filled with an unnatural silence. Then, the cries for help started. The woman under him hadn't made a sound or moved since he'd landed on top of her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She pushed at his chest.

He rolled off her. "Grady?"

"Miranda and I are good."

Everyone in the room escaped the blast with only minor cuts and scrapes. They all made it out from under the table about the same time and stood. The glass on the upper half of the conference room walls was missing, and beyond that, their office area was virtually destroyed.

"Alora!" Grady yelled his sister's name.

Dustin turned to his friend, "Go find her and Hodge. I'll coordinate medical and rescue."

Grady and Miranda ran out the conference room door and into the confusion. Dustin took Lexi's hand in his and started barking orders to those closest to him. As soon as the rescue effort was underway, he turned to the woman next to him. Anger, fear, and betrayal flowed through his veins. All of this tied to her. He simply didn't know how. His emotions must have been etched across his face, because she flinched when she looked at him and tried to step back.

Wrapping a hand around her upper arm, he pulled her to him. Looking down, he could see fear dancing through her eyes. Good, he thought, because at the moment he was feeling damn dangerous.

"You have two choices. Stick to me like wallpaper to a wall, or I'll flash you straight to our central headquarters and have them put you in solitary until you expire from loneliness. Which is it?"

She didn't blink. "Where do we start?"

Lexi picked up the tray of sandwiches, finger foods, and drinks she'd fixed and carried it into the living room. Dustin still sat in the same chair, staring off into space like he'd been doing for the last hour. It was dark now, and neither of them had eaten since breakfast.

She placed the tray on the table between the two lounge chairs and picked up half a sandwich. Taking a bite, she chewed. It tasted and felt like eating sawdust. "Try some, it's really good."

"Not hungry." Dustin growled the words.

"I know you aren't, but you need to eat. We both do." She placed half a sandwich on a plate and held it out to him. "Come on, give it a try."

He didn't even turn to look at her as she held the plate out to him. Her heart ached for him. "I'm so..."

He moved so fast, it startled her, and the plate slipped from her fingers. Before she even heard the saucer hit the floor and shatter, he was standing over her. Placing one hand on each arm of the chair, he leaned down, pinning her in place. Rage circled in the air around him. She wondered if he even realized he was emitting small power surges.

"I don't want to hear your words of sympathy, Lexi. I lost four people today. On top of that, I had to tell one mother, a fiancé, two spouses, and a seven year old boy that a loved one wouldn't ever be coming home."

Fury swirled through his dark brown eyes. Maybe she should stay someplace else tonight. Then his gaze dipped to her lips, and when he looked back at her, the anger was gone. He leaned closer, and his warm breath tickled her face. He didn't say a thing as he bowed his head and touched his lips to hers.

She knew she should turn away even as a moan escaped her parted lips. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, and her body came alive at his blatant invitation. She wanted this man on a level that went beyond anything she'd ever felt before.

But not like this.

Turning her head, she broke the kiss.

Dustin stepped back and ran a hand over his face. "I'm sorry, that shouldn't have happened."

She prayed he was too tired or too distracted to realize the effect he had on her. "It's okay. What I was going to say, before we got off course, was how glad I was to hear Alora and Dominik were found safe."

"We all were." He didn't move a muscle as he continued to look at her.

"Dustin, are you okay?" The question seemed to pull him out of his current state, because he stepped back and the tiny surges of power stopped circling around them.

He shook his head. "Yeah, it's been a..."

"Very bad day," she finished for him when he ran out of steam.

He looked around his living room as though he hadn't seen it in a month of Sundays. "I'm beyond tired. If you don't mind, I'm going to try and get some sleep."

"I don't. Are you sure you won't eat something?"

He didn't look well at all and that worried her.

"Thanks for the effort. I just cannot eat anything right now. Night." He turned and headed toward the stairs.

She didn't bother to respond to him. She was sure he wouldn't remember she hadn't. As he disappeared up the stairs, she pondered her overpowering urge to comfort him. For the last fifteen years, she'd lived on her own and hadn't formed an attachment to anyone. She kept the few who tried to be her friends at arm's length. She'd never been willing to risk again the hurt that came with betrayal. She'd learned that painful lesson years ago. So, why had she so willingly spilled her guts to this group of strangers today?

Because they're like you.

She picked up the tray of uneaten food and walked into the kitchen. Automatically, she put things away and cleaned up the broken dish as she considered her thoughts. Since coming into her powers, she'd never been around people who considered her normal. Today had been different. For the first time in her life, she used her extraordinary gift, and people didn't stare at her in horror or run from her in fear. No, she worked beside people who used their equally strong powers to help others. She'd watched an IceShaper create ice out of thin air to use for medical reasons. Grady had used his FireStarter ability to weld and secure two support beams that threatened the rescue efforts.

The most remarkable person, though, had been Dustin. He'd awed her with the strength his powers when he moved a large, heavy section of a collapsed wall out of the way, then brought tears to her eyes when he used the same talent to gently blow tiny glass shards from the open wound of a coworker. She'd seen many sides of Dustin Martinez, and each and every one of them fascinated her.

A smile played across her lips as she remembered how good it felt to not hide her true nature. The feeling of happiness quickly passed when she remembered the four who'd lost their lives today. The weight of those deaths added to the burden she already carried, and she wondered how much a human could possibly endure.

Switching off the light, she headed toward the room she'd stayed in the night before. She knew she wasn't going to sleep much, but there was a small ViewScreen, and with any luck, there would be something interesting enough to occupy her mind for a few hours.

The door to Dustin's bedroom swung open silently, and Lexi stood motionless in the hall. She didn't want to wake him, but she knew she needed to. Knocking and calling out his name hadn't worked, so apparently she would have to shake him. She crossed the space between the door and bed, not bothering to be quiet about it, hoping the noise would rouse him. It didn't.

Stopping next to the bed, her gaze traveled over his exposed body. Apparently, the man liked to sleep naked and thankfully—or maybe not—he slept on his stomach. Light from the hall drifted in, allowing her to see the expanse of his shoulders, the play of muscles across them and his upper arms. The way his back narrowed to a trim waist and a fine, firm butt. Even in the dim light, she could make out the muscles that defined his long legs. He wasn't bodybuilder buff, but there wasn't anything soft about him, either. He shifted in his sleep, pulling Lexi away from the fine picture in front of her and back to the task at hand.

"Dustin." She touched his warm, smooth shoulder at the same time she said his name. Faster than a cobra strike, his hand reached out, wrapped around her upper arm, and pulled her onto the bed with him. Before she even had time to squeak, he pinned her under his body with his right arm across her throat and a gun pointed at her left temple. She couldn't breathe and was too scared to fight, so she lay perfectly still.

Dustin blinked, then leaned down close to her neck and took a

deep breath. "Lexi?"

Her name was barely a whisper on his lips, and she liked the way it sounded. "Yes, it's me."

In one smooth move, he slid off her and onto his side, propped on an elbow. By the time she turned her head to him, the gun was out of sight. He ran his free hand across her neck where his arm only seconds ago had restricted her breathing. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. I do think you scared a few years off my life though." She inhaled, and the spicy scent of his cologne filled her lungs, branding her memory with a fragrance she would always remember as his.

He brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. "I'm not used to having people stay over, and the few who do know not to wake me."

"It would have been nice to have been told this yesterday."

His hand moved so his fingers wrapped around the back of her neck, and his thumb grazed the side of her jaw. "True, but then you wouldn't be in bed with me, would you?"

"No." The word came out breathy even to her ears. His eyes dropped to her mouth, and she knew he was going to kiss her again. Her breath caught as he lowered his mouth; she needed to tell him why she'd come in here. But words failed her when his warm, soft lips touched hers.

He didn't move to hold her or stroke her or climb on top of her like she truly wanted. Instead, he kissed, nibbled, and licked her mouth until she was ready to beg for more.

Slowly, as if he didn't want to pull away, he broke the kiss. "Why are you in my room?"

His voice was husky, and his erection pressed against her thigh. She blinked a couple of times and forced herself to think. She sat straight up.

"My PCD. Do you see it?" She searched through the rumpled sheet but didn't find it. When she was sure it wasn't in the bed, she stood up and searched the floor. She remembered dropping it when he pulled her onto the bed.

"I'm guessing you didn't come in here to jump me."

She was glad the dim light hid the heat infusing her face. "No, I

didn't." She dropped to the floor. "I received a message I thought you should see."

She spotted the device under the bed. Lying on her stomach, she stretched for it, and her fingers barely made contact. Clutching the PCD in one hand, she scooted back out. As she did, her shirt caught on the frame and rode up. She tried to dislodge the top, but she couldn't reach it and wiggling did nothing.

"Hold still."

She felt Dustin's hand on her back and froze as fear raced through her body. Her heart pounded faster as he traced one of many scars that crisscrossed her back, causing unwelcome images to flash through her mind.

"The evil inside you doesn't want to leave, Lexi." Reverend Fairchild hissed in condemnation as he walked around her cowering, naked sixteen-year-old body. He ran the fingers of one hand across the scars from previous sessions to remove the sin that lived inside her. The cane in his other hand snaked across her body as he moved. "It's my job to rid your body of this wickedness."

He raised his arm high, and the cane fell across her back with enough force her body moved a good three feet across the floor. He raised his arm again —

Chapter Seven

Lexi's scream echoed through the silent house like a laser blast, causing Dustin's heart to skip a beat. The fabric of her shirt gave way as he pulled her out from under the bed, not giving a damn if he shredded the top. Once she was free, she curled into a fetal position.

Standing, he reached for his slacks and pulled them on. As he knelt beside her, his foot kicked her PCD. He picked it up and tabbed through the messages. Two carried today's date. He checked the time stamps and opened the first one. It must have been the one that brought her to his room.

*Lost sheep must return to their flock.
It's time for you to come home.*

That was creepy. He hit the forward button, and the second message flashed before his eyes.

*Sinners can run.
Sinners can hide.
In the end, they will die.*

He remembered what she'd told them this morning, and it had all seemed so impossible. Looking over at her, he knew she wasn't faking this. She was reliving some terror in her past. The ridges he'd felt on her

back were scars. His stomach turned at the pain she must have endured. He forced his mind away from that line of thought. It would do neither of them any good.

Slowly, he scooted closer to her, and in a voice one would use for a scared child, he started talking. "Lexi, it's Dustin. You're in my house. You're safe."

After he'd repeated himself several times, she relaxed enough to uncurl and push herself to a sitting position. She looked around as though she were lost. "I'm s-sorry." She wrapped her arms around her knees and started to shake.

Dustin reached out and touched her hands. "God, you're freezing." Standing, he picked her up and placed her on the bed. "Lie down so I can cover you up."

She did as he asked but never took her gaze off him as he straightened the covers. He wished he could read her mind, because he wasn't sure she knew where she was or who he was. When the blankets were back in place, he crawled on top of the covers and pulled her next to him, tucking the top of her head below his chin.

They stayed that way for several minutes before she spoke. "Why did you get on top?"

The sweet scent of jasmine filled him as he inhaled. He couldn't remember the last time he noticed the smell of a woman or the way it affected him. "You seemed stressed enough. I didn't want to add any more."

She moved away, and he forced himself to let go. She scooted to the head of the bed, resting her back against it, and wrapped her arms around her knees. He turned so he was propped on one elbow facing her. "I saw the messages. I'm guessing Reverend Fairchild sent them."

He watched the play of emotions across her face, and a knot formed in the pit of his stomach. "You don't have to tell me anything. I'll need to turn your communicator over to my tech group. If the origin of the message is traceable, they'll identify it."

She stretched one long, bare, incredibly sexy leg in front of him. He was trying very hard to ignore how she looked in the thin strapped top

and short pajama bottoms. But it would have taken a saint to not notice, and he wasn't a saint.

"Even if your people trace the message, I'd bet my business on it going back to Rick Nelson."

"Tell me more about Rick Nelson." He reached out and took her foot in his hand. He didn't even realize what he'd done until he saw the cautious look in her eyes.

"Rick Nelson is Fairchild's right hand monster. He does all the Reverend's dirty work."

She didn't tell him to stop, so he lightly massaged her foot. "What happened to you while you were at the Fundamentalist school? You made it sound like you made it out almost unscathed when discussing it yesterday."

She studied the wall opposite them for a few minutes. "I was there for four very long weeks. When you don't immediately see things the Reverend's way, the punishments start. At first, it was little things like withholding food, water, and sleep. When those retributions didn't work, they moved the *sinner*s to isolation chambers or staked them out in the elements or put them in a metal box in the middle of the summer. For those few these lessons didn't work on, drowning or fire tortures were used."

He wished with every fiber of his body that he could wipe away her terror, but he couldn't. As much as he didn't want to hear this story, he knew it must be told. "He didn't do any of those to you though, did he?"

"No, he took me out to the barn. Nelson was waiting for us. He's a big, burly man. Fairchild told me to strip, or Nelson would do it for me. I didn't want Nelson touching me, so I did it. I can still remember standing there trying to cover myself and listening to Fairchild lecture me as to how this was for my own good. Then the Reverend picked up a long cane pole and handed it to Nelson. Nelson smiled when he took it, and I knew then what was going to happen. I vomited before he even landed the first blow."

"God damned bastards." Dustin exploded off the bed to pace the

room. He felt like a wild beast was inside of him, clawing to get out. "I wish the son-of-a-bitches were here for me to whip them with a cane right now. I'd teach them a lesson or two about pain."

He glanced over at the bed and noticed the wide eyed distrustful expression on Lexi's face. He forced himself to go sit on the edge of the bed and calm down. He held out his hands, but there was no way he could hide how they were shaking. "I'm sorry, but it just infuriates me this could have happened. Hell, it might still be happening."

She scooted up behind him, pressing her front to his back and wrapping her arms around his waist. She propped her head on his right shoulder, and her breath fanned his neck. "The last week I was there, the good Reverend became increasingly irritated at my stubbornness. Twice a week, Nelson would dole out my punishment while Fairchild watched. The problem was, the more he disciplined me, the more I rebelled."

Her voice broke, and so did his heart. He couldn't imagine what she'd endured. "You don't have to finish the story."

"I don't know why, but I need you to hear my story, to understand what I've been through. Then, as soon as I can, I want to give a formal statement."

"Lexi..."

She kept talking, not giving him a chance to change her mind. "He has to be stopped, Dustin. To do that, you're going to need my help. And my testimony."

Dustin ran a hand down his face. How much more of this could he stand to hear before he lost his sanity? He moved so his back rested against the headboard. Pulling her up between his legs, he wrapped his arms around her and held tight. "Keep going."

"The final straw came when, in the middle of the night, I used my powers to move the Reverend's new and very expensive two-seater solar-glider into his large private pool. There was no question who did it, and the next night, I was dragged from my bed back out to the barn. I'd never seen Fairchild so angry, and I knew from the look in his eyes he was going to kill me. I fought and screamed so much, Nelson tied me to a pole. That night was the only time I know of that Fairchild dirtied his hands, but he

beat me himself. I don't know how long it lasted. There were times I lost consciousness from the pain, and when I would come to, he would still be hitting and screaming at me."

She stopped and wiped the tears from her face. "Finally, I passed out for good, and when I woke, I was in a heap on the floor. I heard the two men talking but didn't move for fear they would start over again. Fairchild told Nelson to leave me where I was, and if I was still alive the next night, they would give me another lesson. They left me then. I remember thinking it was a miracle I wasn't dead, and if I didn't do something, I wouldn't live through the next night.

"Somehow, I made it out of the barn and to the closest road. A local widow found me unconscious in a ditch and managed to get me into her car. She drove me all night to her cousin's house eight hours away. They never asked what happened to me, but they knew. Two weeks later, I was handed a transport ticket to the Connecticut Colony, six hundred account credits, and a new identity. That's the day my life truly started."

Dustin's heart pounded like a runaway solar-train as he studied the woman he held in his arms. She was strong yet fragile, sexy yet shy, but most of all the way she'd gone on with her life was simply amazing. "There is no way I can even begin to understand what you've gone through."

She laid her head on his chest. "I don't expect you to understand, but you listened and didn't think I was crazy or making up some outrageous story."

He swallowed the rage building inside of him. "I know you're telling the truth."

Lexi turned so she could see his eyes and knew when she looked into them that he meant what he said. Without thinking, she slipped a hand behind his neck and pulled him down so his lips almost touched hers.

"I want you," she whispered as she closed the distance between them.

Their mouths touched, and she felt Dustin's arms tighten around her as a shudder went through his body. The kiss was slow and tentative

at first. Then she turned, pressing her breasts against his strong chest, and opened her mouth to him. He groaned as he held her to him. Slowly, he maneuvered them so they rested flat on the bed with her on top. Her hips were cradled between his spread legs. The firmness of his erection left no doubt he wanted this as much as she did.

His hands roamed over her back and down across her butt as their tongues danced together. She rocked her hips against him and was pleased to feel his entire body jerk and stiffen at the movement. Little by little, he moved his fingers down between her thighs and spread her legs until they rested on the outside of his.

He rotated his hips against her, and her body quivered in anticipation of falling over that invisible edge. He moved a hand up under her top and cupped one breast. Her breath caught at the roughness of his palm slipping across the sensitive skin. It was her turn to groan as he rolled her nipple between his fingers, and her pleasure peaked even higher. She deepened the kiss, letting her body move of its own accord against Dustin, and her hands roam over his hard body. She prayed he would understand what she needed, because words were beyond her.

His other hand went to the band of her shorts. His fingers slipped inside, down across her bottom, and into the heated wetness pooling between them. Her body jerked when his hand kept moving, pushing her sensitive folds aside. Fire shot through her as he buried two fingers deep inside her, lifted his hips into her, and tweaked the nipple he held with the other hand.

She broke the kiss as she sat up, pulling her top off as she did. Leaning forward, she whispered, "Please, I need to feel your mouth on me."

His eyes darkened as he smiled up at her. Without breaking eye contact, he guided her to him. The feel of his warm, wet mouth was like a small taste of heaven, but she wanted all of it. She reached back to take her bottoms off. "Dustin, I need you in me."

He never stopped making love to her breasts as he helped her get her shorts off. She lifted her hips to give him room to loosen his pants, and only seconds later, he pressed gently into her. Explosion after explosion

went off through her body as he pushed all the way inside, leaving her breathless and wanting more.

"More, Dustin, please."

He mumbled some incomprehensible words as his hands moved to her hips and the pace increased. Breathly, unintelligible noises escaped her as he pushed them closer to the magic they both sought. When she didn't think she could take any more, he bit down on the nipple he'd been toying with, and she flew into a zillion pieces. Her body tightened around him, and she called out his name. His mouth released her, and she opened her eyes to see ecstasy cross his face when he went over that edge with her.

She laid her head down on his shoulder, intending to say something after she caught her breath, but her body relaxed, and it became difficult to keep her eyes open.

Dustin didn't move as he held the most incredible woman he'd ever been with against his chest until he was certain she was asleep. He wasn't sure what pleased him more: the fact she felt comfortable enough to abandon herself to passion in his arms or to drift off to sleep next to him. On a scale of one to ten, they were both a twelve in his book. Carefully, he moved her off him until she rested beside him. Reaching across her, he retrieved his PCD and dialed Grady's number.

When his friend answered, Dustin spoke softly. "Lexi wants to give a formal statement."

Grady's voice was rough from sleep. "We can meet at my house at seven. I've got some new information for you. I'll give it to you then."

"We'll be there." When Grady didn't respond for several seconds, Dustin grew impatient. "What?"

"She's there with you, isn't she?"

Dustin knew Grady was referring to Lexi being in bed with him, and for a second, Dustin considered playing dumb. "Don't start."

"We'll discuss this tomorrow."

Dustin didn't like the tone of his partner's voice. He also knew the only reason Grady wasn't talking about it now was because their conversations were monitored on the company communicators. "We'll see. Later."

He disconnected before Grady could get another word in. Placing the device back on the nightstand, Dustin pulled Lexi into his arms. He knew each and every rule he was breaking. Hell, he and Grady had written the policy manual for their organization, and Dustin could still recite it verbatim. Lexi shifted, tossing an arm across his chest and snuggling closer in her sleep.

Dustin looked down at the sleeping beauty in his arms. When they'd written that damn manual, he'd never thought a woman would be worth breaking all the rules for. He almost laughed at his own arrogance as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Eight

Dustin sat at the dining room table in Grady and Miranda's home and tried to look as if the story Lexi just finished telling the team hadn't gutted him. His jaw clenched so tight, he was surprised his teeth weren't cracking and popping. God, he'd thought this would be easier to hear the second time. It was almost funny how wrong he was.

The coffee in front of him was cold, but not nearly as cold as he felt. Obviously, the rest of the people in the room were as appalled as he was if the silence was any indication.

Grady shuffled the papers in front of him. "As hard as this must be for you, I need to ask you a few questions."

Lexi looked over at Dustin for reassurance and then back at Grady. "Okay."

"What's your real name?" Grady asked with pen in hand.

Lexi blinked a couple of times at the question as if she hadn't been expecting it. "Elizabeth Alexandria Corbitt Hart."

The room fell into another silence as they all digested the new information. Dominik found his voice first. "The Hart heiress?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely a whisper.

Dustin tamped down on the hurt and anger that ran through his veins at her response. He'd thought she was starting to trust him, but obviously he was wrong. He couldn't keep the disappointment from his voice. "You're one surprise after another. What else are you hiding from us, Elizabeth?"

Her eyes narrowed and he knew he'd touched a nerve. "I now go by Lexi Corbitt. I left Elizabeth Hart behind fifteen years ago. Lexi is the identity that has kept me alive all this time. I won't apologize for it, and I won't let you or anyone else make me feel guilty about my choices."

"You should have told us upfront you were such a high profile missing person. We would have put more security around you and been more cautious ourselves. If we had, our colleagues might still be alive. Have you thought of that?" The cold, heartless words were out of his mouth before Dustin could stop them. He knew he should have kept his mouth closed, but his resentment over the loss of his coworkers compounded by her lack of trust in him was too much.

Lexi leaned back. She couldn't have looked more shocked if he'd have slapped her, but she held his gaze. "I have. Why do you think I decided to tell you everything? I'll live with the guilt the rest of my life." She pushed her chair back and stood without breaking eye contact with him. "On the bright side, I'm sure Reverend Fairchild will ensure those days aren't many."

Lexi stalked out of the room without a backward glance. Miranda and Alora both gave him dirty looks before following her. Dustin rubbed his eyes before looking at the two men left at the table with him.

Grady gave a disgusted shake of the head before turning his attention back to the folder in front of him.

Dominik wasn't so kind. "What? Did you get up today and take an entire bottle of stupid pills?"

Dustin snarled at his friend. "I don't need this right now."

"And you think she does? I'm not sure you are the best person to be watching her at the moment."

Dustin lowered his voice and narrowed his eyes. "Let me guess. You'd be better at this moment."

Dominik's black eyes shimmered with anger in the early morning light. "Yeah, because at least I wouldn't be thinking with my—"

"Quiet. Both of you." Grady's words cut through the air, bringing a sudden end to the escalating argument.

Dustin watched as Grady passed the electronic data-pad across the

dining room table for them to look at. "I received this report late last night and didn't get around to looking at it until only minutes before all of you arrived. Unfortunately, it looks like Lexi was right on one account."

Grady's grave tone caused Dustin to frown. "And that would be?"

"The Reverend Fairchild has minions in all areas, including ours."

"Are you saying we've been compromised?"

"Yes. After the bombing, we started tracking down all employees. We couldn't get in contact with Simon, so Finch and Wilton went by his apartment last night. They found him dead. His employee identification was missing. We believe the intruders took the badge and used it to forge one. All of us assumed the temporary receptionist yesterday had security clearance. She didn't."

Dustin's stomach knotted. "You mean someone without clearance made it past our security?"

Grady looked Dustin in the eyes. "Yes. The security cameras caught her bringing the bomb in yesterday morning. She placed it on her desk. She was carrying it to the back room when she dropped it. It was made to detonate when the box was opened. Apparently, it ripped when it hit the ground."

Dominik's voice was rough when he spoke. "If she'd have gotten all the way into the office area, most likely more people would have died."

"Yeah," Grady replied. "Thank God she didn't, or the loss would have been much worse."

The three men fell silent, and Dustin was sure Dominik was as shocked to hear Simon was dead as Dustin was. They'd lost five co-workers in less than twenty-four hours. He wanted to drink until he couldn't remember anything and stay that way for a month, but there wasn't time.

Grady cleared his throat. "Finch called this morning before you arrived with an update. The bomb scene investigators found the part of the packaging that held the device intact."

Dominik looked up from the page he was studying. "Please tell me it produced a lead."

Grady's face showed no emotion. "The package was addressed to

Dustin.”

Dustin pushed down the feelings that threatened to paralyze him. This wasn’t the first time he’d been targeted by a low-life, and odds were it wouldn’t be the last. He could deal with it. As long as Lexi came out unscathed, he didn’t give a damn what happened to him. His stomach clenched, and his pulse sped up ever so slightly. He knew, without looking, she was behind him.

Turning, he saw her watching him with eyes that had seen way too much horror for one person. Until now, he had been capable of blocking a victim’s pain and detaching himself from the personal aspect of the crime, but all the self-defense mechanisms he normally used crumbled in this woman’s presence. God help him, but he was certain if anything happened to her, he would lose his sanity. She hadn’t moved, and he worried about what was going through her mind.

Dustin held out his hand. “Lexi, come have a seat. We’ll get something to eat.”

Lexi blinked, took a deep breath, and turned to Grady. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to request Mr. Hodge as my bodyguard.”

Her heart hammered so hard inside her chest, she was sure it was about to free itself. She could feel Dustin’s gaze boring into her and forced her eyes to stay away from him. If she were the fainting type, she would have embarrassed herself when she heard the bomb was meant for him, but she wasn’t. Instead, she did what she’d learned to do so well over the years—run.

There was no way she would escape from any of these three men, but she could put some distance between herself and Dustin. In just two days, this group of people had breached her emotional barriers unlike anyone in the last fifteen years. She needed someplace where she could regroup, and Dominik appeared to be the most level-headed one in the group.

“Why?” Grady asked as he studied her.

Lexi was positive Grady would protect her to his dying breath, but he also adored his wife. Oh, they were both extremely professional, but only a blind person could fail to see the looks they exchanged when they

thought no one was paying attention. Or the way they held hands under the table, comforting each other as Lexi told her story. She couldn't bring herself to do anything that might endanger either of them.

"If Mr. Martinez is being targeted by the Reverend, then he needs to concentrate on his own protection. Therefore, he can't totally focus on mine."

Dominik pinned her with his bottomless black eyes. "If it were anyone other than Dustin, I'd say you had a valid reason for your concern. But Dustin happens to be the best in the business at keeping a witness alive. You would be in more danger if one of us took over."

Lexi looked over at Dustin, and he winked at her. She wanted to scream and stamp her feet. Instead, she ground her teeth and clenched her fists. "Well, guess I'm fortunate."

Dustin pulled out the chair next to him. "Come, have a seat. We need you to look at some pictures and see if you recognize any of these people."

She took the seat next to him. How he could be so cool about all of this? Her insides couldn't be any jumpier if an earthquake hit. Leaning over, she studied the picture Dustin placed in front of her as the three men talked and the other two women came back into the room.

"The woman in this picture is Nancy Cambridge. She's about five years younger than me. Nancy was at Reverend Fairchild's school the same time I was. She was one of the few students there who would talk to me. Why do you have her picture?"

Dustin reached over and put his fingers on the picture next to hers. He was so close, she could feel his body heat and smell the spicy scent that was all his. His closeness comforted her, but his next words chilled her to the bone. "She's the one who carried the bomb into the office yesterday."

Lexi's head swam, and for one terrifying moment, she thought she would pass out. But then anger took over, because no matter how horrible Nancy's act had been, the blame lay squarely in Reverend Fairchild's lap. "What can I do to help stop this monster?"

Dustin reached out and took her hand in his. This time when she looked into his eyes, there wasn't even a small glimpse of the carefree man

she knew he could be. This side of Dustin Martinez was hard as granite and colder than the North Atlantic waters. He was ready to do business... deadly business. "I've got a plan, but it's risky."

Lexi wondered what it would be like to have friends who wouldn't turn their backs when the going got rough. Of course, to have friends, one had to be a friend, and she would be the first to admit she wasn't the friendliest person around.

Dustin moved his thumb across the back of her hand in a gentle caress. The touch sent warmth spreading through her body, and it took her a moment to recognize the feeling for what it was—contentment. It was strange to have this feeling now, when her life was anything but orderly and safe, but she didn't care. For the first time in years, she felt hopeful that one day she might have a real life.

She looked back at their hands and marveled at how wonderful it felt to be connected to someone. Dustin started talking, and she focused on his words and what needed to be done, because this connection wasn't going to be short-lived if she had anything to say about it.

The sun was low as Lexi paced the floor inside the old warehouse SPD used for training purposes. After Dustin told them his plan for exposing Fairchild, the team spent a few hours refining the details. Now, they were ready to put the plan in motion, but Lexi worried this was all being done too fast. The others seemed to take it in stride, as though it were an everyday event. She, on the other hand, was a bundle of nerves.

Through the window, she watched as a solar-glider pulled up, and Grady stepped out. He walked around the car, opening the door for Miranda, and then the pair strolled toward the warehouse hand in hand. . As the couple entered the building, the PFU activated and out stepped Alora. Three seconds later, Dominik exited the same unit.

Watching the two women approach, Lexi experienced an odd sense of dislocation. If she hadn't known who they were, she'd have thought them carbon copies of herself. After leaving the meeting, she and Dustin

had dropped by her store where Lexi spoke with her manager then grabbed some needed items. Now, all three women were dressed in identical, Meteor Design Outdoor Wear and chunky mountain boots. The other two women wore matching wigs and colored contacts to complete their disguises.

All three women had the same basic build and size, with only an inch or two difference in their heights. Under close inspection, neither would pass for Lexi, but from a distance it would be hard to tell the three of them apart. Seeing Alora and Miranda brought home the cold, hard reality of what they were about to attempt, and anxiety settled in Lexi's gut like a meteor rock.

She moved closer to Dustin. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea. What if one of them gets hurt?"

He turned and looked her in the eyes. "This is our job, Lexi. It's what we do."

"How can you take this so lightly?" She winced at her words.

He reached out with one hand and gently ran a thumb over her lips. His eyes darkened, and his breath caught in his lungs at the touch, just as hers did. She knew he was remembering every stroke and kiss they'd shared in the hours before dawn. "Do you really think of me as so shallow?"

Her face heated, because her words *were* unfair. She'd worked beside him after the bomb blast and knew exactly how deep each injury and death reached inside of him. "No, you aren't superficial. I just don't see how all of you can be nonchalant about this when something so bad has happened."

He captured her chin and tilted her head back so he could study her face. "We're not nearly as unconcerned as we appear. But this is our job, and it's what we've all trained for. The job has also taught all of us to enjoy life, one moment at a time. It's all any of us can do."

The corners of his lips turned up as he leaned closer to her. "I plan on packing a lifetime of living into the time we have together, and right now, I think we'd both enjoy this."

His lips brushed across hers so softly, she might have thought it

never happened if it weren't for her racing pulse and the way her toes curled in her climbing boots. When she looked back at him, there was a distinctively devilish gleam in his eye. "I'm warning you, I plan on enjoying many more of these moments."

He pulled away and turned as the others reached them. Lexi couldn't help but notice the speculative looks in their eyes. "I'm glad the clothes I picked fit you."

The other two women commented on the outfits briefly before Dustin took over the conversation. "You've all memorized the information I gave you?"

Grady held out his hand, and all five of them placed the pieces of papers containing the information in his palm. The next second, the slips of paper burst into flames. Grady had told them they were not to store this data in their communicators or to leave it written down where someone could find it.

When the paper was nothing but ashes, Dustin started to speak. "Each couple needs to remember who goes first. That person will need to enter the activation code for the next location. I've hacked into each of the PFU's and embedded the needed program into them. Once the flash starts, there's only a total of five seconds for a two person trip, so you'll have to move fast. If something happens to one of you..." Dustin paused as if the thought hurt deeply, "...then you'll need to use the secondary code."

"What's the secondary code for?" Dominik asked from where he stood next to Alora.

"The secondary code will automatically reroute you to the closest SPD office."

Alora raised one eyebrow. "So, the second code is only if we are injured."

"Or if you are being followed and need a safe place to pop into, so make sure you use the correct code. We'll regroup tomorrow at our final destination. Hopefully, all the different sightings of Lexi will confuse the Reverend and his followers," Dustin continued as he studied the group. "Everybody armed?"

Lexi watched in amazement as each of them pulled their weapons and verified they were working. Now she knew why Miranda and Alora had insisted on the safari style outfits with matching jackets.

"Well, I feel underdressed," Lexi quipped, hoping the small joke would alleviate some of her anxiety.

Alora looked up at her. "If you know how to use one, I can get you one from the weapons room."

Lexi held up her hands. "No, thanks. I'd only either hurt myself or Dustin."

Everyone laughed.

Dustin looked over at Grady and Miranda. "You two first."

Miranda and Grady walked over to the PFU. Miranda gave Grady a quick kiss before stepping into the unit. Miranda punched in the code and disappeared.

Lexi's gut clenched as Grady stepped into the unit and followed his wife to some unknown location. He was the only one who knew where each couple was headed and when. The plan was to have Lexi appear and disappear in and out of the different colonies, being seen in several places at the same time. They hoped this would keep Fairchild's lackeys off-balance so they wouldn't realize Lexi and Dustin's true destination. None of the SPD people here would admit it, but having their office security breached by the Reverend's followers had unnerved them all. She'd seen it in the looks they exchanged when they thought she wasn't paying attention.

Alora and Dominik walked to the PFU and exchanged a few words before Dominik activated the unit. Alora followed right behind him, giving a little wave as she transported out. Lexi knew better than to ask Dustin where the couples were going; he wouldn't tell her. He'd already made it perfectly clear that the fewer people who knew who was going where, the better.

The warehouse suddenly felt very large and empty with the others gone. "I'm worried about them."

"So am I, but I'm also very concerned about you." His voice was rough.

Lexi spun to look at him. His eyes were filled with worry, concern and something else she couldn't quite make out. "Dustin—"

He cut off her words. "You've got to go first. I need to make sure no one can follow any of us from here. Get in and activate our first code."

Lexi walked to the device with Dustin right behind her. She turned and rose up to give him a quick kiss before stepping into the PFU. She entered their first destination code and looked back up. "See you on the flip side."

Chapter Nine

The trip lasted less than two seconds, leaving Lexi lightheaded when she stepped out of the unit. A moment later, there was a buzzing sound, and Dustin appeared. When he stepped out of the PFU, she noticed the gun he carried in his hand.

"Uncle Dustin, Uncle Dustin." From the far side of the building, a small bundle of energy emerged from the dim light.

Dustin slipped the weapon back under his jacket before squatting down and catching the child in his arms. He picked the boy up and swung him around in a big, silly circle. They were both laughing when he stopped.

"Where's your dad?" Dustin asked.

The boy pointed, and Lexi turned to see a man silhouetted in a doorway. The three of them walked around solar-gliders in various states of assembly toward the unmoving figure who waited for them. She listened as the boy and Dustin talked about fishing, cars, school, and lizards. The patience she heard in Dustin's voice made her smile.

Their small group stopped when they reached the man, and it was then she recognized the child's father as Colin Bradford. At one time, Colin had been a top solar-racer, but he'd retired a few years back. She didn't say anything as Dustin handed over the child, and took a set of keys from the man.

Outside, they got into a very nice sports-glider, and Dustin pulled out of the parking lot. For thirty minutes, they drove without saying a

word before the silence got to her.

"Have you known Colin Bradford long?"

"No." His hands clenched and unclenched on the steering wheel.

"We became friends after his wife and son were kidnapped."

"I remember seeing the story all over the news when it happened. If I remember correctly, Colin's wife didn't survive."

"She didn't."

Lexi turned to look at Dustin. "How sad for the little boy."

"Yes, it was."

The tension in Dustin's voice was also visible in the way his hands clenched the steering wheel. When it became obvious he wasn't going to say anymore, she faced forward again and watched the world fly by.

Forty-five minutes later, they pulled off the main highway onto a smaller country road.

"Where are we going?"

"Colin owns a fishing cabin up here that's very secluded. We'll be staying the night there."

They turned again and rolled down a dirt drive lined with trees and brush. In the dark, no one would ever know the path was there if they weren't looking for it. Dustin pulled the vehicle to a stop in front of a dark house.

"Stay here while I check the place out."

He exited the glider and disappeared into the house. A light flicked on inside, followed by a couple more. After several minutes, Dustin walked out and motioned for her to follow. She stepped into a large open room which contained the living, dining and kitchen areas.

To the left were three doors. Dustin pointed to them. "The middle door is the bath. The room to the right is the one we'll be using. Colin stocked the place, so there's food in the kitchen. I suggest grabbing a bite and then hitting the bed. Tomorrow is going to be another very long day."

He headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I need to check out our surroundings in case we need to make a fast exit. I won't be far from the house, and this shouldn't take more than

an hour.”

The door closed behind him, and she was alone for the first time in two days. It felt strange. She’d spent so many years alone that being around someone constantly for two days straight should be driving her bonkers. It didn’t, though, and that had her worried.

She walked to the kitchen and made sandwiches for the both of them. How would she ever go back to her solitary life? she wondered as she carried her food to the table.

She took a bite and considered why this bothered her so much. Of course, if a miracle occurred, and she survived the next few days, she wouldn’t have to live in such solitude. She’d be free to make friends, go to movies, and all the other things most people took for granted. So why wasn’t she happier about living a more normal life?

Finishing her meal, she cleaned up her mess and went to the small bath. Colin was kind enough to leave basic supplies on the cabinet for them. After taking a quick shower and brushing her teeth, she wrapped the large towel around her body and walked out into the main room. Her heart squeezed inside her chest as she looked to where Dustin sat eating.

He smiled. “Thanks for the sandwich. After I finish, I’ll grab a quick shower before coming to bed.”

“Okay,” was all she managed to get out before she opened the bedroom door and all but ran inside. Closing the door behind her, she leaned against it and knew what was bothering her. Life after this meant life without Dustin, and that was already impossible to imagine.

Lexi awoke some hours later. It took her several minutes to remember where she was. She sat up and pushed the hair out of her eyes as she looked around the room and listened. The only sound she heard was that of nature, and she couldn’t make out where Dustin was. She knew where he wasn’t, though, and that was in bed with her.

Pushing back the cover, she stood and walked into the main room. The door to the bathroom was open, so she doubted he was in there. She

went to the second bedroom door and opened it. This room contained two sets of bunk beds. All four were empty. Closing the door behind her, she looked around the large open area one more time. There wasn't anyplace for him to hide, so either he'd vanished into thin air or he'd gone outside.

The night air was cool as she stepped out into it, pulling the door shut behind her. For several seconds, she stood still as the sounds of the night filled the air and the scent of pine filled her lungs. A glance around let her know Dustin wasn't on this side of the house. Turning, she followed the porch as it wrapped around to the back.

Dustin stood at the handrail in only his low-ride jeans, staring out at the moonlight reflecting off the glassy surface of the water. His hands were spread wide as he leaned slightly forward, accentuating the well-defined muscles of his arms and back.

She couldn't help but think what a contrast of emotions he was. His smile came easily, but he held his feelings close to his heart. He also took his job very seriously, because he could go from smiling to all business in the blink of an eye. The only time she'd seen him show real emotion was when they'd made love. Even then, by the next morning, he was back to being all business. Then again, she wasn't sure she could judge him. It wasn't like she was being her normal self, either.

She should go back to bed and not get involved any deeper, she thought, but her feet started moving anyway. When she reached him, she pressed her lips to the center of his back before wrapping her arms around him and resting her cheek against the spot she'd kissed. No, she certainly wasn't being her typical withdrawn self. The tension in his body was so strong, she could feel the air stirring about him.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "Go back to bed." His voice was rough and tight.

She kissed his back again. "Why? So you can stand out here alone and brood?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

He stood there barely breathing for so long, she wondered if he was going to speak or not.

"I led the team that rescued Colin's wife and son. The boy was two at the time. The kidnappers had no intention of letting either of them go alive. We got to them in time to save little Bradley."

She tightened her arms about his waist. "Was his mother dead by the time you reached them?"

"No. It might have been easier if she had been, though. We solar-lifted her to the nearest medical facility. She lived long enough to see her husband and son back together. She—" His voice broke. "She called me her hero."

The last few words came out in a whisper as though it hurt him to say them. Lexi sucked in her breath as tears burned her eyes. Loosening her grip, she ducked under his arm and wedged herself between his body and the handrail. She laid her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around him. He let go of the railing and wrapped her in his embrace.

He kissed the top of her head before resting his chin on it. "How could she call me that?"

She leaned back so she could see his eyes. Reaching up with one hand, she placed it gently against his cheek. "I can't think of anything worse than dying and not knowing your child is safe with the people who love him. You gave her that peace. In her eyes, you were her hero."

Dustin looked down into her eyes, and the old pain melted away. This woman was soft and warm in his arms, yet she had the strength of forged steel. Every time he thought she couldn't surprise him again, she did. The hand she rested against his chest moved, and he felt the shock wave of sexual tension he'd lived with since seeing her at his office flow through his body like a typhoon across the ocean.

Her body tensed as he lowered his mouth toward hers. The smell of her was intoxicating, better than the finest aged whiskey. Her sharp intake of air sent a rush of masculine pride through him that took him by surprise. He wasn't used to the need to be close to one specific woman or to the intense need to claim her.

He hesitated before capturing her mouth with his. There was something different about this woman and this moment. He knew if his lips touched hers now, his life would never be the same. Did he dare cross

into the unknown?

Her hand brushed across his bare chest, and she leaned into him. Her heat scorched his body as her scent wrapped around him, drawing him in, calling to him on a level he never knew existed.

He lowered his mouth to hers. He had no choice but to follow his heart down a path he never considered taking. The softness of her lips, the subtlety of her body, the way she gave herself up to him was like a five-course meal to a starving man. Her hands grazed across his body, leaving a trail of fire as she wrapped them around his neck.

Dustin groaned, deepened the kiss, and backed her against the porch railing. He didn't stop until their bodies were flush from chest to hips. His hands moved to the hem of her shirt, and he soon learned it was all she wore. Slowly, he traced her spine, savoring the little tremors that wracked her body. She moved her hips against him, and his body responded even when he thought it wasn't possible for him to become any harder.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, he held her close as he trailed a hand down her back across her firm rear end. She jerked as his fingers trailed down her crease to the back of her thigh. Lifting her leg, he guided it around his hip until her warm, wet center was pressed tightly against him. Ever so slowly, he moved his hand back to where her leg joined her hip, stopping only when his fingers touched the spot that made her quiver in his arms. His heart beat wildly as he drew his fingers through her wetness. It was mind-blowing to know he was capable of bringing her to such a level of passion.

She broke the kiss as her entire body tensed. "Dustin."

Her voice was husky, hiding none of the sexual tension he knew she was experiencing.

"What?"

"You know what?" Her hands moved downward toward the fly of his jeans.

He knew if she managed to free him, this would be over quickly, and he wasn't ready for a quick ending. Moving his hand, he guided one finger deep into her warmth. The sound she made was something

between a moan and a scream. Her hands gripped his biceps as he pulled the same finger almost out of her.

She whimpered as he waited a heartbeat before plunging it back in. Her breath caught, and her eyes glazed over. He smiled as he lowered his mouth to the soft spot below her ear. He kissed and teased the area until he felt her body start to move on its own.

Kissing his way to her ear, he whispered. "I want you, Lexi. More than I've ever wanted anyone."

She became restless in his arms, trying to get to his zipper, forcing him to pull her tightly against him again.

"Not yet," he cautioned

"Dustin, please."

The wetness on his hand and the lust he heard in her voice were almost his undoing. He pulled back enough so he could see her face. "I want to see you shatter into a million pieces under the moonlight."

She smiled as she pulled the shirt over her head. "Come here."

Placing her hands on his hips she guided him closer so they were pressed tighter together. Spreading her arms wide, she gripped the railing behind her. He caught her gaze, and she gave him a slight smile as she started to move. Before long, she closed her eyes and tipped her head back as sounds of pleasure filled the night air.

Moonlight turned her skin silver as it danced across her moving form. Carefully, he moved his fingers, slipping two inside her tight body and ripping a cry from her. He brushed the palm of his free hand over one hard nipple and watched as she lost herself to the moment.

He passed his palm over her nipple again, and her body tightened around his fingers. The sensual dance Lexi performed entranced him. She tilted her head back as her body tensed and arched. Finally, she shattered in the bright moonlight, and he knew what it was to hold perfection.

Catching her in his arms, he carried her to the wicker chaise behind them on the covered porch and laid her on it. She watched as he stripped out of his jeans, and he couldn't quite decipher the look in her eyes.

She held out her arms to him. "Come here."

Dustin covered her body with his as he buried himself deep inside

her. In that single moment of clarity, he knew the only place on this earth he wanted to be was wherever Lexi Corbitt was.

Chapter Ten

The sound of his PCD buzzing like a wild banshee jerked Dustin from the most peaceful sleep he'd ever experienced. He extracted himself from where Lexi slept draped across his body and reached for his jeans to remove the PCD from the pocket.

"Hello." His voice was a short, harsh whisper as he noticed the sun starting to rise across the lake.

"Someone broke into the shop last night, Dustin." Colin's voice was filled with concern.

Dustin felt as if a bucket of ice water had just been dumped over his head washing away the lingering bliss from the night before. He shook Lexi to wake her as he kept talking. "Did they get any usable information?"

"I don't think so, but they took the brain out of the transport unit."

"I'm guessing they're looking for where we transported from your location."

"Good thing you didn't go anywhere, but you still need to get moving."

"We'll be out of here in ten minutes." He disconnected and turned to prod Lexi into moving only to find her already getting dressed. "When you finish dressing, go to the kitchen and pack us some food. We won't stop unless we have to."

She pulled on her shirt and grabbed her shoes before heading out of the room. When she was gone, he finished dressing. Reaching for his

gun, he noticed a tremor in his hand. He clenched it into a fist to stop the movement and wondered why this case felt so different. Why *he* felt so different.

Uneasiness settled into the pit of his stomach like a meteor rock, and he knew it wouldn't be easy to dismiss. This case had already changed him, just like saving Bradley had done. He just wasn't ready to admit how deep the change went.

Holstering his gun, he walked through the house and gathered the few items they might need. Outside, he placed them in the glider. The door to the house closed, and he looked up to see Lexi carrying two large bags.

Going to meet her halfway, he took one of the bags. "Did you pack all the food in the house?"

She gave him a wary smile. "Almost. You didn't tell me how long to pack for." She handed him her bag after he'd stored his, then turned and ran back into the house, calling over her shoulder. "I need to get one more thing."

A minute later, Lexi reappeared carrying two large travel mugs of hot coffee. Bless her, he thought as she walked toward him. He took the cup from her, giving her a slow, sexy smile. He sipped the hot liquid and closed his eyes, savoring the moment. When he opened them again, he caught her studying him. The look on her face was so damn sweet, it almost ripped his heart out. He wanted her, and it wasn't just in a sexual way. No, he wanted to wake up next to her every day, hear her laugh at something silly he'd said, and most of all, he wanted to see her heavy with his child.

The last thought froze him in place. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe, and couldn't help but wonder where the hell that thought had come from.

"Dustin, are you okay?"

Her voice pulled him from the trance. "I'm fine."

The lie rolled off his tongue as he walked around and open her door. "Let's get moving."

Lexi studied the scenery as it flew past. They'd driven for four and a half hours in total silence. Her insides twisted and rolled because now she was certain where they were headed. Sweat broke out across her forehead, and her palms became clammy. "Pull over. Pull over now."

Dustin guided the solar-glider to the edge of the road. Before they had rolled to a complete stop, she opened the door and bailed out. She stood there, breathing in large amounts of the cool morning air. The driver's door opened, and a few seconds later, Dustin stood beside her.

"I can't go back there." She sounded pathetic and weak, but she couldn't help it. The thought of stepping back onto that property made her physically ill.

"Lexi—"

She cut him off "You haven't a clue what it was like. It was a total living hell."

"You're correct, I haven't a clue what it was like, and I wouldn't be asking you to do this if it weren't necessary. You are the strongest, most remarkable person I've ever had the privilege of knowing." His voice was soft but carried a note of admiration. "I won't make you go if you truly can't face being there again. I would never hurt you, never."

Those words stopped her mental and physical rambling more than a cold hard slap would have. "Don't you need my help and my testimony?"

His dark brown eyes were soft and warm and filled with a world of truth. He honestly wasn't going to make her do this, and yet there was no way she could let him down. After all, he thought she was remarkable. "Will you stay with me?"

He looked at her with an easy, soft smile that took her breath away. Reaching out, his fingers skimmed the side of her face as he put an errant strand of hair behind her ear. He held out his hand for her to take. "From here on out, it's you and me."

Her heart fluttered, and she tried not to take his words too seriously. But still, she wondered just how stupid she was for falling in

love with this very complex man. Taking a deep breath, she tried to rebuild the wall she normally kept around her heart and knew it was impossible now that he'd breached it. Instead of running like she would have only days ago, she did something she hadn't done in years. She placed her hand in his, along with her trust and faith.

Two hours later, Lexi stood beside their glider and watched as numerous law-enforcement people moved around the school grounds. She felt like a statue—cold, hard, and unmovable. Not to mention that a ton of marble seemed to sit on her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

Dustin walked toward her. People glanced at him then hastily stepped out of his path. The humor that normally made his eyes sparkle and put a quick, easy smile on his lips was gone, replaced by a look of solid determination that no one dared to cross. This was how he had been the day they saved the children and when someone tried to kill her outside his office. He was all business now, and God help the person who got in his way. She was sure he would rip them apart.

He reached her, and his hard, cold eyes connected with hers. The seriousness in his eyes softened as his expression changed to something she couldn't read. He reached out as if to touch her, but stopped. He then put both hands into his jeans pockets like an uncertain schoolboy. She wanted him to take her in his arms and hold her like he'd done the night before and tell her everything would be okay.

Instead, the softness left his eyes. "The children and staff have been separated and removed from the grounds. We need you to tell us what to search for and where to look. Are you up to it?"

For years, she'd dreamed of the moment she would put a stop to this hideous place and exact revenge for the lives destroyed here. The image of her victory was always followed by the bone deep doubt that she would be strong enough to do what needed to be done. Glancing over Dustin's shoulder, she caught sight of Miranda, Grady, Alora, and Dominik.

She looked back into Dustin's eyes and knew she could do this. In her dreams, she'd always faced this moment alone. Today, though, she wasn't alone. She had friends and the man she loved to help her.

"Let's go."

His eyes softened as the corners of his lips turned up in the smallest of smiles. Then, in front of his team, he held out his hand for her to take. Her heart all but stopped at this simple, yet poignant gesture from this very proud man. She put her hand in his, and as she did, he gave her a little tug to get her moving. She gripped his hand tight as they crossed the large green lawn and entered the barn.

Dustin stood next to Lexi with his hand resting protectively on the small of her back as she described the terror that had occurred here years ago. His jaw clenched. Every nerve ending in his body felt as if it'd been stripped raw and set on fire as he listened. His team stood to the side as a forensics expert from the local SPD office searched the large space and the local officials heard this story for the first time. The looks on these agents' faces assured him they were as horrified by the tale as he was. She finished, and the room fell into an awkward silence.

He stepped up behind her, close enough her shoulder brushed across his chest. "You've done great. How about we take a break before you take us into the woods?"

She turned to look at him. Her eyes were bright and full of determination. "I'd prefer to keep going."

God, her strength humbled him. "Let's go."

For the next thirty minutes, the group followed her through the trees. Her path wasn't direct and several times she retraced her steps, forcing the group to trail behind like cows being led to water. Finally, she stopped, dropped to her knees, and looked up at an old forked tree.

She ran her hand over the ground. "This is it."

Dustin started to go to her when one of the two men behind him spoke. "I don't believe a word she says."

The second man gave a low snort. "Neither do I, but she has a fine butt. I'd have followed it all day without complaining. I swear I'm going to have wet dreams for a month just thinking about what I could do to

her.”

Dustin’s eyebrows snapped together as he turned to face the pair. He wanted to rip the second man’s heart out of his chest and feed it to him. Apparently, his face revealed his anger, because both men took a step away from him. He didn’t say a word as he moved his left hand slightly and formed a small but powerful air-ball which he directed at the ground about a foot in front of the second man. The air-ball shot from his hand, hit the ground, and ricocheted off the hard-packed dirt. There was a low thump as the air-ball connected with the man’s crotch followed by a sharp scream as he fell to the ground.

Dustin looked at the man’s buddy. “Get him out of here, and don’t either of you come back.”

The first man helped the other to his feet, and the two of them made their way back toward the church encampment. When the pair disappeared, he turned his gaze to the rest of the group. Everyone returned to work. Well, almost everyone. Miranda and Alora laughed outright, while Dominik shook his head and Grady raised one eyebrow.

“Was that really necessary?”

He spun around at the sound of Lexi’s voice directly behind him. “It was.”

She studied him for several seconds, as if trying to decide what she should say. “Can we go someplace else? I really don’t want to watch them dig.”

“Let me check with Grady first, then we’ll be on our way. Why don’t you go talk with Alora and Miranda? This won’t take long.”

He watched Lexi until she was safely ensconced with the two other women before heading to where Grady and Dominik stood. “If you two have everything under control, I’m going to get Lexi away from here.”

“We’ll make sure everything is taken care of. We stopped at the local hotel back in town and acquired rooms for the night. Why don’t you two head back there?” Grady gave a shake of his head. “I never thought I’d see you besotted.”

“I am not.” The words came out hard and fast, even as his chest constricted and his palm became clammy.

Dominik dug into his pocket. "Only the guilty protest so quickly."

Grady smiled as he rocked back on his heels. "I think you're on to something there, Dominik."

"I do believe I am," Dominik answered with a grin.

"Give me the bloody key," Dustin ground out between his teeth as he held out his hand.

Dominik handed over the key. Dustin turned on his heel and stormed back to where Lexi stood. Grady and Dominik's laughter followed him. Dustin didn't want to think about what his two friends had said, because he feared it might be too close to the truth, and that scared the hell out of him.

Dustin crawled into bed and pulled Lexi into his arms. Her body was still warm from their recent round of lovemaking. She curled up next to him, her head on his shoulder. The scent of them filled the air.

After leaving the church compound, they'd returned here and rested until the others arrived. Then, all six of them went out for dinner. They decided they would all stay the night at the hotel. The other four would return to the office early in the morning, while Dustin and Lexi would go back to the scene and make sure no other information was needed before heading back home.

Lexi stretched next to him like a lazy cat, distracting him from his thoughts. Slowly, her body relaxed, and her breathing became deep and steady. He was glad at least one of them was resting, because he knew he wouldn't.

Today had been a partial success. They'd gotten the warrants to search the church grounds and office. Thanks to Lexi, they would have enough evidence to send Reverend Fairchild and Rick Nelson to the Death Dome. The problem was, they still had to find the two men, and that was turning out to be a dangerous game of cat and mouse.

Chapter Eleven

Several days later, Dustin used his key to let both him and Lexi into the Meteor Designs store. She was climbing the wall, wanting to return to work after so many days away, but there was no way he would allow her out of his sight to roam around the store in the middle of the day. This after-hour's trip with extra security was a compromise. It was eight at night, and he, Lexi, and two other agents—Briana Guthrie and Mac Davison—stood outside her shop while the others remained at the office following up on leads to nowhere.

The lack of progress worried him. No matter how hard they looked or how many places they searched, they came up empty-handed. It seemed the Reverend's followers were a large and loyal group. They'd come close a couple of times, but so far the two men managed to elude SPD agents.

Dustin opened the door, switched on the light, and scanned the store as the others stepped inside. Briana and Mac moved toward the far end of the store where the dressing rooms were located.

Lexi scooted by him. "I'm going to my office."

"Wait for me." He followed her past shoe displays and clothing racks.

She stopped by the closed door to the back rooms and turned to him. "Nobody knew we were coming here. Heavens, we didn't know it until twenty minutes ago ourselves. There is no way anyone is here waiting for us."

He wished he felt the same confidence and started to tell her so when the door behind her flew open. Dustin reached for his gun and grabbed for Lexi at the same time. He wasn't fast enough. Rick Nelson's fist connected with Lexi's chin, sending her to the ground.

Rage filled Dustin, but he couldn't let it distract him. If he did, none of them would make it out of this mess alive. Behind him, he heard another door open, followed by gunfire and the distinct sound of people screaming. He glanced over his shoulder in time to see both Briana and Mac go down as two unknown assailants turned toward him. He risked a quick glance at Lexi. She was dazed, but not unconscious, thank God.

Dustin turned back to Nelson. The man aimed a gun at Lexi's head, Dustin raised his own weapon and pointed it at Nelson's heart. Forcing himself to put his fallen co-workers out of his mind, Dustin concentrated on Nelson and on getting himself and Lexi out of here "Lexi, can you get up?"

Slowly, she stood and, to his amazement, shook off the hit she'd taken.

"You okay?" he asked.

She wiped the side of her mouth with her hand. "I'm good."

Nelson smiled like a man who expected the world to do whatever he wanted and never ask why. "Elizabeth is our one and only failure. We cannot let her keep spreading her illness. The Reverend wants me to finish the job we started so long ago."

Nelson spoke with the self-assurance of a man who believes every word he utters, and that was the most terrifying fact of all. Dustin prayed he could rattle Nelson's confidence by taking control of the situation. "Lexi and I are leaving now."

He focused on Nelson and not on Lexi or the blood running from her lip. If it were only him and Nelson, Dustin would rip the man apart. But Nelson was strong, and he wasn't alone. Plus, Dustin wouldn't be able to concentrate on Lexi. That would leave her vulnerable, and he had no idea what Nelson's partners might do. "Come on, Lexi."

Rick Nelson laughed. "It has taken me fifteen years to find her. I'm not losing her again."

It has taken me a lifetime to find her and I'm not about to lose her, either.

Dustin used his free hand to push Lexi toward the front door. Once she was behind him, he raised his hands and created a wall of wind that nothing, not even bullets could penetrate. "Run!"

The report of gunfire filled the air. Dustin ignored the sound as he backed toward the door. It wasn't until he felt a burning in his left arm that he realized a bullet made it through the wind. Shit, that had never happened before. He looked down to see a small dart sticking from his arm. His concentration broke as his vision blurred, and the wall distorted.

"Dustin!"

He felt Lexi's hands grab for him as he collapsed to the floor. He pushed her away with what energy he had left. "Go!"

"Not without you."

He tried to tell her it was too late for him, but he couldn't form the words. Lexi screamed. He knew Nelson had her, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. He heard Nelson giving orders to the two other men and tried to reach his communicator. Dustin needed to pass the information to Grady, but his body wouldn't respond to his commands. Sweat poured off of him, and he wondered what was in the dart, but he knew it didn't matter.

His breathing grew shallow as his heart slowed. An image of Lexi floated through his brain, and he forced his wandering mind to hang onto it. She smiled at him with a lifetime of love shining in her eyes. Too bad he wasn't smart enough to realize how he felt before it was too late. He felt his heart take a slow beat and knew he was going to die regretting he'd never told Lexi how he truly felt.

Grady's head snapped up from his research when the red lights indicating an agent with a medical emergency came on. Dominik was already running toward one of the flash units carrying his crash bag.

"Who's down?" Grady asked.

"Martinez!" Hodge called as he stepped into the unit.

"Hold, Hodge. You need backup and more gear." Grady reached for additional weapons and protective wear.

"No time, sir, his heart is about to stop," Hodge replied as he activated the unit.

"Fuck. Move it! And be careful!" Grady stepped into the transport unit and raised his gun. He watched team members do the same as he activated the preprogrammed destination. There was no way of knowing what they would face once they arrived, so they were always prepared for the worst. Losing a fellow agent and friend was as bad as it got.

Dustin didn't come slowly back to the world of the walking and talking. No, he was jerked back from the edge of eternity with brute force and no finesse. The headache was brutal, and his body felt like it had been dragged a couple of miles behind a freight-glider. Despite this, it was damn good to be alive.

He blinked and squinted against the light. Serious black eyes stared back at him.

"Hodge."

"How do you feel?" Hodge's tone was all business.

Dustin pushed himself to a sitting position with minimal help. "Couldn't be better. I owe you."

"Just don't do this again. I'd hate to have to find a new drinking buddy." Dominik bagged the dart.

"How are Mac and Brianna?" Even though he was terrified for Lexi, he needed to know how his team members were doing. They'd all already lost too many friends.

"Brianna took a bullet to the shoulder, and Mac was hit in the side. Both are being worked on and about to be transported to the hospital." Dominik gave this report without an ounce of emotion, but his eyes gave him away.

"Keep me posted."

Dominik responded with a slight nod of the head.

"What happened here?"

Dustin turned at the sound of Grady's deep voice. He studied Dustin with hard eyes, and Dustin considered sugarcoating the event, but Grady wouldn't be fooled. Dustin told them the chain of events all the way up to the moment he passed out. "What the hell was in that dart?"

"An extremely concentrated dose of Hydro-Nidean. It's used in hospitals to put people to sleep for surgery. If you weren't carrying the upgraded communicator with the life monitoring program, we'd have never made it to you in time. We also would have lost Mac. The upgrade saved two, maybe three, lives tonight." Hodge didn't meet Dustin's gaze as he packed his crash bag. "I'll take the dart back for analysis. It might reveal some useful information. You should get yourself to the clinic for a full body scan, but I guess I'm wasting my breath telling you that at the moment."

"I'll go in when I have the time."

Hodge walked away, mumbling under his breath about stubborn people.

"Let's get you off the floor."

Dustin looked up to see Grady's hand. He considered not taking the offer, but figured it'd be more embarrassing to fall flat on his face than to accept help. Once on his feet, he leaned against the wall for support. God, he felt like shit. He was equally sure it was nothing compared to what Lexi must be feeling.

Grady watched him with worried eyes. "Did you get any information from Nelson that might help us?"

Every word Nelson had uttered before Dustin passed out was etched in his brain forever. "Nelson mentioned that he needed to contact Adam Hordon immediately now that Lexi was with them."

Grady's mouth gaped open for a full three seconds. "You're telling me the leader of our ruling court is one of Fairchild's followers?"

"From what I heard, the Judge Superior is one of Fairchild's minions." Dustin flexed his hands trying to get them working again. The fallout from the involvement of their highest leader, Judge Superior Adam Hordon, wasn't something Dustin could bother with at the moment.

"Damn, this isn't good." Grady stated to no one in general before tuning back to Dustin and continuing. "Any idea where they took her?"

Dustin held Grady's gaze, knowing his colleague was trying to decide whether to make Dustin sit out the rest of the game. He'd be damned if he'd let that happen, though.

Pushing off the wall, he forced his body to stay upright and lied to his partner. "No, I don't. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm not feeling well."

He walked by Grady and through the door connecting the back room to the store. Grady hadn't bought his lie about not knowing where Lexi had been taken, and Dustin wasn't surprised. They'd known each other too long. But Grady was also wise enough not to interfere with whatever it was Dustin was about to do. He could feel his teammate's gaze on him as he crossed the space and entered the small but well-appointed bathroom. He closed the door firmly behind him, making sure it locked.

Glancing in the mirror, he realized why everyone was staring at him the way they were. He did very much resemble the walking dead, but that didn't matter at the moment. He knew exactly where Lexi was, but she didn't have a lot of time. It would take too long to follow the books and pull together an SPD task force to go in and get her. Tonight, he was doing this alone.

Reaching under his jacket, he removed his service weapon and placed it on the counter beside the sink. Next, he unclipped his badge from where it hung on his belt, placing it next to his gun. What he was about to do could land him in jail for a very long time. He didn't want any of his friends to suffer for his actions, so he'd best do this as a civilian.

He turned toward the concrete wall, raised his hands, and blew a column of air straight at it. The wall exploded sending debris flying into the adjacent alley.

Dustin stepped through the hole and into the night air before the dust started to settle. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his pants as he reached the corner and headed for the nearest paid PFU. He needed to make a quick stop by his place to re-arm himself, before dropping in on the Judge Superior.

For months, he'd wondered how Grady could have flashed into the middle of a known trap to save Miranda without a second thought.

Now he knew. It was called love.

Lexi sagged back to the floor, exhausted from trying to get her hands untied from behind her. Tears burned her eyes, and she squeezed them shut behind the blindfold. There was no way she was going to let these people see her tears, her fear, or her anger. She took a deep breath and forced herself to not think of Dustin, because if she did, she wouldn't last. The Reverend Fairchild and Rick Nelson had destroyed her life and the man she loved. Now, she was going to make them pay.

She was a powerful MetalShaper, maybe even the strongest around. What she wasn't good at was using her ability without her hands and eyes. Being tied and blindfolded wouldn't faze some people, and she wished she were one of them. Taking a deep breath, she pulled her thoughts inward. Instead of thinking about moving or bending a specific object, she let her powers flow from her in a small burst of energy. Nothing happened close to her, but she heard cursing come from some place farther away.

A smile spread across her face. Fairchild and Nelson were somewhere in this building, and if they thought she was going down without a fight, they were about to be surprised. Reaching out with her mind, she visualized her energy waves picking up items and tossing them with a strength she didn't know lived inside her. This time, a loud thump issued from the other side of the wall, followed by a muffled scream.

She pictured the next blast exploding from the inside out like an overfilled water balloon. This time she added more energy, allowing her power more freedom. Above her, she heard the distinctive sound of metal being bent and ripped apart. Outside her door, there was a large crash, and then the sound of people yelling and running. She heard her name and knew her time was almost out. This time she focused inward, digging deep for strength before sending out energy waves without a break

between blasts. The building groaned as pieces of it came apart. Even as pieces of the building started falling on her, Lexi didn't stop. These people would pay for all the pain they'd caused, and most of all, for hurting the man she loved.

Chapter Twelve

Dustin stood next to the solar-plane hanger door while people scurried around the space like roaches in a box. He'd been surprised at how easy it was to get so close to the Judge Superior's private hanger, but then again, with the way the building rattled, he shouldn't be. These people hadn't a clue with whom they were dealing, or the power she could wield.

For the first time since he'd walked out of the store and into the alley, he felt an inkling of hope. He'd come here intent on finding Fairchild and Nelson and then killing them slowly and painfully. Making them suffer for some of the agony they'd inflicted on innocent children, families, and most especially on Lexi.

Stepping into the dim light of the open-ended building, he walked toward what appeared to be the office. The only other place they could have secured Lexi in this building would have been on one of the many solar-jets, and by now she'd have ripped the thing apart.

Another wave of energy ripped through the room. The roof vibrated, making an awful, ripping noise. Dustin looked up to see a large section coming straight at him. Instantly, he formed a wind-tunnel and sent the sheet of metal flying toward the opposite wall. Behind him, people shouted to warn their allies of his presence. So much for finding Lexi without being spotted, he thought as he shot a column of air toward two approaching men, sending them flying.

The concrete floor vibrated under his feet as powerful energy

flowed through the building again. The engine from the solar-plane closest to him trembled before being ripped from its mountings. Dustin hit the floor as the large piece of machinery passed over his head like a rocket launched from a solar-fighter. He turned his head and watched as the piece flew across the work area before punching a hole through one of the metal support columns. The tall metal brace buckled as the outside wall of the building started to fall away.

God, he didn't have a lot of time. He stood and sprinted toward the closed door leading to the office. He didn't even bother to try to open the doors; instead, he hit them with a blast of air as he moved quickly through the maze of rooms.

A door flew open, and Dustin came face to face with Nelson. He opened fire on Dustin with the same dart gun he'd used earlier. This time, Dustin was ready and dove out of the way. As he rolled into an empty office, he formed bullet-sized balls of concentrated air and aimed them at Nelson. This was the first time he'd applied this technique any place other than the SPD practice range, and he was pleased to hear Nelson's cry of agony followed by silence.

Dustin rolled to his feet, retrieving his gun as he did. He held the weapon ready as he exited the room and walked to where Nelson lay immobile. After verifying that Nelson was dead, he stepped back into the hallway.

Outside the enclosed office, he could hear metal fall and collapse, punctuated by the screams of the injured and dying. Dustin raced down the corridor, throwing doors open one after another.

At the end of the hall, he turned right and froze. His heart dropped like a lead balloon to the bottom of his stomach. Fairchild was at the other end, heading toward the far exit. He pulled a stumbling Lexi along behind him.

Dustin moved quickly and quietly down the hall. He had to reach Lexi before the building fell down on them or Fairchild went crazy and finished them all off. The Reverend swung a gun in his left hand as he moved faster, and Lexi fell to her knees. It was then that Dustin realized her hands were tied behind her, and she was being led by a short cloth

tied around her neck. Fairchild turned to Lexi and twisted his hand in the cord. She gasped for air.

"Get your hands off her." Dustin raised his gun and pointed it at the man. If he had a clear shot, Fairchild would already be dead.

The Reverend looked up as he pointed the gun at Lexi's head. The man went ghost white at the sight of Dustin. "You can't be here. There is no way anyone could have survived the dart."

Lexi's head snapped around, and her eyes grew wide, but she didn't say a word. The building around them groaned like it was taking its last breath.

"I did. Guess miracles do still happen."

"It's not the work of God." Fairchild's slurred voice sent chills down Dustin's spine. "It's Satan. He lives in you. Like he lives in this one and all the others."

Snapping and tearing sounds erupted from the ceiling above them. Plaster and metal fell around them, sending dust clouds into the air.

Fairchild raised his gun as if he were oblivious to what was happening around them and pointed the weapon at Dustin.

Dustin dropped his gun as Fairchild fired and focused all his energy into creating a funnel of air. He sent the funnel plowing directly toward the Reverend. Fairchild's bullet ripped through Dustin's side, but he didn't let the pain or the blood soaking his shirt break his concentration. The shaft of air hit the man hard in the chest, sending him flying through the air like a rag doll. Fairchild's body hit the back wall hard and slid to the floor.

"Dustin! I'm too weak. I can't hold it."

He looked toward Lexi then followed her gaze up to where a large section of the building's heavy metal roof fell toward them. Dustin dove for her, landing on his injured side as he did. Pain narrowed his vision and threatened to engulf him in darkness, but he hadn't come this far for the one person who meant more than the world to him to die. He pulled Lexi to him and wrapped her in his arms to protect her as much as he could.

Drawing on the energy buried deep inside him, he formed a

tornado around them and prayed it would keep them safe. The wind whirled around them. Metal ripped, glass exploded, and the room went darker than midnight. Then the twister pushed upward and thrust the ceiling off them, sending the metal sheet flying away from them. Stars twinkled above as they always did. Tonight though, they seemed brighter. Or maybe he simply cherished seeing them more.

Lexi stirred. "You're bleeding, Dustin. We need to get you a doctor."

In the distance, he heard sirens and the thump-thump-thump of a fast approaching solar-lift. He sat up and untied her hands. "I'm fine, and from the sound of it, Grady and the others will be here soon."

Dustin took her hands in his and gently rubbed the marks from the bindings. "I love you, Lexi. I should have said it a lot sooner, but—"

His words were cut off as her lips touched his, and for a few precious seconds, they both forgot about the destruction around them. Lexi slowly broke the kiss, and when she pulled back, tears streaked her face.

Her voice caught as she spoke. "I thought you were dead."

"I should have been, but thanks to Dominik, I'm not." He wiped a tear from her cheek, and his chest tightened. "I wasn't sure about you."

"Apparently, the Reverend was delayed getting here and didn't want Nelson doing anything to me until he arrived."

His gut clenched at how close he'd come to losing her. "Lexi..."

"I love you, Dustin." Lexi spoke over him in a flurry of words. "And I want to get married. I know it's soon, but this feels so right, and I don't want to waste a minute by being apart."

Joy exploded inside of him as he smiled at her. "Only if you agree to move in with me tonight, because I don't want another night to go by without you in bed beside me."

Lexi's face broke into a wide grin. "I can't think of any place I'd rather be every night for the rest of my life."

Chapter Thirteen

Dustin climbed the stairs of his cluttered house and smiled to himself. Only a couple of weeks ago, this kind of mess would have driven him up the wall. Lexi promised to get them both organized as soon as possible, but honestly, he didn't give a damn if the house was ever clean and well-ordered again so long as Lexi was in it. He walked down the short hall and entered the master bedroom, stopping as he caught sight of the woman he loved.

He wondered if the feeling of being slammed by a solar-train running at full speed when he laid eyes on her would ever end. He rather hoped not.

Lexi sat propped against a mountain of pillows with a sketch pad in front of her and several more tossed across the bed. There was a pencil tucked behind her ear and one in her hand as she drew. He smiled when he saw her bite her bottom lip.

In the last week, he'd come to realize she only did this when she was totally focused on a task. Toeing off his shoes, he left them sitting in the doorway. He stripped out of his clothes as he crossed the room and added them to the items already littering the floor.

She still didn't look up as the bed dipped under his weight, but her hand continued to move as she spoke. "How was your day?"

"Long and lonely," he answered as he nibbled on her bare shoulder.

Her breath caught as his mouth made a slow path up her neck to

her ear. "What did the doctor say?"

He twirled his tongue around the edge of her ear. "He said I'm good as new, and we should get started on an early honeymoon."

She looked at him then, and he could see the mix of laughter and relief in her eyes even as she blushed. "He didn't say that."

Dustin took the sketch pad she was working on and dropped it to the floor beside all the others before shoving the remaining items off the bed. "I added the last part, but he did clear me to go back to work and to do anything and everything I wanted."

"Anything?" Lexi asked as she ran a hand over his chest.

"And everything," he answered as he pulled the woman he loved into his arms and kissed her passionately. As their lips touched, he knew that even after a lifetime with this woman, his need for her would not be fulfilled.

But between now and the end, he intended to give it his best shot.

The End

Author Bio

Prior to writing, Georgia earned a BA in Computer Information Systems. After college, she worked for many years at NASA before becoming a private consultant in the IT field and then finally landing a job with Enron. The Enron crisis was a turning point for her and redirected her focus to her dream of writing. Nowadays, Georgia spends her time pursuing her dreams and watching her children grow.