



Sapphire Blue Publishing



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ENTER THE
DRAGONETTE
LAVREN

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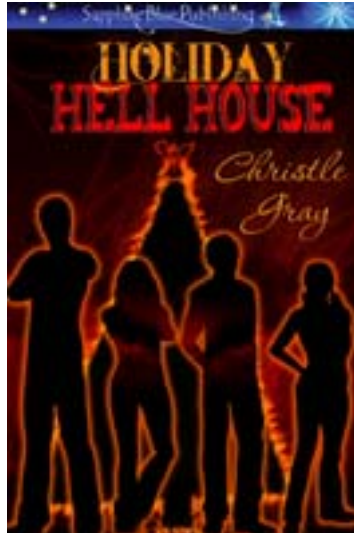
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Dedication:

First and foremost, I thank God for His endless blessings.

My heartfelt thanks to my parents, Elio and Baby, all my siblings, and my partner, Allen Tan.

For those who helped me make this dream come true—SBP and my wonderful editor, Ann, the ladies of GirlTalk, and the extraordinary Ria Pavia—hugs and kisses to all of you.

And last but not the least, for those who bought this book and liked it (hopefully you did)—your pleasure is my reward.

Chapter One

When I was sixteen, I had the emotional depth of a Paris Hilton song. Years and years from now, I know Paris' legend will live on and you will still understand what I mean. But I digress. Sixteen was pretty much an eventful year for me. Sixteen was the age I first fell in love. Sixteen was the age I witnessed my first murder, and sixteen was the age I turned Evren to continue living.

Pain greeted me when I returned to consciousness. I didn't need a mirror to know the truth...I was bruised and bleeding all over, and my ribs were broken. Every inch of my body screamed in agony, and I wished I'd had the chance to overdose myself with Vicodin. I'd have done anything just to make the pain go away. If that meant I'd die, it was a risk I was willing to take.

But someone didn't want me taking that risk. A pair of hands gripped my shoulders and began shaking me. Hard. Each and every shake intensified the pain until I was drowning in it.

I tried to make sense of what I was going through, but my mind could only recall bits and pieces of the past.

The explosion that had turned our car into a midnight pyre of twisted metal...

That first horrible sight of a killer's face—as if something inside me had been built to recognize evil, no matter what form it took—and the moment of

choking realization that there was nothing I could do as he threw me on the ground, battering my body with head-splitting blows and rib-cracking kicks...

The sound of my sister's screams as they dragged her away—

I forced my eyes open, a silent cry of protest emerging from my throat at the memories. This time, I welcomed the pain. It was better than reliving those moments. I couldn't think about them. Not now, not just yet.

Everything was blurry but I could discern a face—a guy's face—looking down at me. *911*, I wanted to tell him. *Don't bother waking me up. Just call 911. And hurry, please, because I'm kinda dying here.* But I couldn't say any of those words because I was too busy trying to keep myself sane in the course of my suffering.

"Are you awake, human?"

Was I dreaming?

"She's awake," a second voice confirmed.

Silence and then the other voice again—the one that belonged to the guy still shaking me like a party popper. "Human. Are you awake?"

"I'm awake, *alien*." Irritation gave me enough strength to snap at him. I didn't like the way he called me human. It sounded very insulting. Was that his tactful way of saying I was so flat chested he couldn't guess what my gender was? Or maybe he was delusional and he thought he was from outer space?

Idiot. I did my best to glare at him, deliberately focusing my every thought on staying mad at him. Anger pushed the past away. The pain also helped, every bone in my body blazed in agony with the merest move I made.

Someone chuckled in the background. "She's got you there."

I would have smiled if I weren't so busy finding a way to silence the echoes of my sister's endless screams inside my mind. The shaking had thankfully stopped, but the pain hadn't lessened. Not a bit. So this was how a human punching bag felt.

"Do you still want to live, human? Whatever it takes?" The question had a clinical tone to it.

Was he asking if I would accept some kind of surgery? “Yes, alien.” I badly wanted to roll my eyes. What kind of question was that? Of course, I wanted to be saved. Did I look in any way suicidal to him?

I squinted hard, but my gaze remained blurred by pain, and all I could concentrate on was his voice, cold and sharp, like a surgical needle.

“Then it is done. This was your choice. Remember.”

I didn’t bother wasting my effort answering. *Idiot.*

And then a roaring fire ate me alive and I screamed.

This time, I really screamed. But my screams abruptly died when I realized the golden fire enveloping my entire being didn’t hurt at all. I blinked several times, but the fire around me stayed, snarling and swirling across my skin but never causing me pain.

It burned away the film of pain that had obscured my gaze and through the dancing flames, I glimpsed the ragged outline of distant mountains, moonlight casting a glow on their peaks against the night’s dark landscape, the unmistakable scarecrow-like shadows of man-tall cactuses, and vast acres of desert land.

The fire slowly lifted me to my feet. What was this? Some painless version of hell? Maybe the Devil wanted me perfectly healthy before he started torturing me? But what had I done to have been sent to—

A vicious-looking creature loomed before me, and I screamed again, forgetting all thoughts about eternal damnation. The huge, unknown animal had a head about eight feet high—I had no problems imagining how easy it would be for Animal X to swallow me whole—and golden scales that glowed like sunlight, almost outshining the crescent moon behind its serpent-like shadow.

Its fierce forest green eyes arrested me on the spot. They were like magical emeralds, ones possessing an irresistible, almost hypnotic, charm. I could only stare back at the nightmarish being in horrified fascination. You know how tigers can be so dangerously beautiful, how their faces can mesmerize you even when you know they’re thinking about chewing you to death? That’s exactly how I felt about the powerful beast before me. This

beast...or whatever it was called...looked something like Godzilla but less horrendous and more attractive. If it were domesticated, I wouldn't have minded having a picture taken with the horrible fiend. *Oh, God.* I was definitely losing my mind if I thought monsters were the coolest thing next to Orlando Bloom.

"Are you scared, human?"

It was him. That voice...so he *was* an alien.

"Human, are you scared?"

"No." And I wasn't. Much.

"If you are, you will die."

That particular threat should have made me think twice but it didn't. If there was any truth to the memories in my mind, the memories that I was still unable to bury, then there wasn't anything to live for, was there? Not if everyone I loved was already gone.

"I told you I'm not." My voice was stronger now, containing more than a hint of annoyance. The fire made the pain inside me recede, allowing me to be more myself. I've never been a coward and I've never allowed anyone to intimidate me. That wasn't going to change now, not even while I was still weak as a baby.

A part of me wondered how this was all happening, but the rest of me ignored that pertinent question. It was a bad habit of mine.

"Then I will try to heal you."

The alien didn't give me a chance to answer. The fire around me swirled faster, seeming to have a life of its own. The flames spun around me with such speed that I had to close my eyes.

The fire bathed my skin. I could feel the tips touching my body, filling me, merging with my blood. It was like taking a hot shower that could also clean the veins, the muscles, and the bones under my skin, cleansing and irrevocably changing me at the same time. My throat clogged as the blazing sensations urged me to just...let go. The inferno engulfing me played a seductive tune, and every beat tempted me to lose myself in the wordless,

earthly music. The heat inside me intensified, the pressure building and building until I finally lost control of everything I was, of everything I was thinking or feeling. My whole being exploded, lightning streaks of heat splintering out each and every pore in my body. I closed my eyes, savoring every heavenly sensation.

"You are Evren now."

The fire lovingly circled me one last time before it disappeared bit by bit, the cool night air slowly invading my skin. My body became heavy, and I felt myself falling and falling. But I didn't crash. There was an invisible force of heat around me, making sure I landed on the ground gently and helping me lean back to rest. I opened my eyes and this time, everything was amazingly vivid, as if the whole world had been polished and varnished from top to bottom.

The beast was gone, and in its place stood a guy about my age. He was tall and lean, but there was a quiet strength in him, the kind not honed in a gym. He was dressed entirely in black and his skin was darkly tanned, like he had lived under the sun throughout his life. His cheeks were sharp and high, and his lips were almost too red. If he didn't look so harsh, I would have said those lips were kissable. He was beautiful. Not gorgeous or cute, but beautiful.

With the almost-barren landscape of the desert behind him and the fading glow of the moonlight, he looked like an assassin straight out of the action movies Dad loved to watch. He also had the same pair of forest green eyes I had seen in the creature, and I stared at him in wonder. *"Alien?"*

Someone choked in the background, and I absently noticed another tall guy standing beside the one I was speaking to. I looked back at the green-eyed man. *"Alien? Wh-what happened back there?"*

His mouth tightened at the "Alien" bit but he didn't answer. He crouched down instead, and with his vivid green eyes now at the same level with mine, I found myself even more entranced. Almost scarily so.

“How do you feel?” Green Eyes scanned me from head to toe. He still hadn’t told me his name and since he seemed to take offense with *Alien*, Green Eyes was the next best thing. Not that I’d call him that to his face.

“Does anything hurt?” His voice had the same doctor-like quality from earlier. Did he ever smile? And why did I even care? Shouldn’t I be worrying about—I lurched up, or tried to, gasping when everything came back to me—all the ugly memories, every devastating second of them.

The memory of my sister’s screams deafened me, and now, I remembered the last time I had seen my parents, death granting them eternal masks of terror and helplessness.

“*Mom. Dad. Davie.*” I turned to look at him. “*Where are they?*” I didn’t mean to scream but the tightening of my stomach told me there were things I had forgotten and needed to recall. Another part of me wanted to deny the truth. Because even if the guy with me didn’t answer, that part of me already knew what he would say.

Regret touched his gaze as he spoke. “Your parents are dead.”

A pitiful cry pierced the stillness of the night, the sound rushing out of my throat. I began to sob. Tears never helped change things, but they had been my best friends throughout the years. They made me feel better, and I used them shamelessly for comfort, regardless of what anyone else thought.

I curled myself into a ball, ignoring the hardness of the ground and the rough edges of the boulder pillowing my head. All I could feel was the numbing grief of knowing that Mom and Dad were gone. They’d gone on a trip they could never come back from.

My eyes scanned the seemingly infinite sea of sun-baked land before me. Could their dead bodies still be out there? I closed my eyes briefly, unable to bear the thought that their bodies were lying out there, abandoned.

“Your parents’ remains have been taken away.” Green Eyes had followed my gaze. *He must be a doctor. Or he is studying to be one. How else could he be so perceptive of my thoughts?*

"I am sorry for your loss." His hand almost came close to touching mine before it was quickly withdrawn, as if he had suddenly found physical contact dangerous.

I coped with my parents' deaths by burying the thought deep inside me. I couldn't bear even contemplating how life would be without them. "My sister?"

"Alive."

My head snapped up. "You're sure?" Maybe...maybe my memories were wrong. Maybe nothing had happened to her and we'd be together again.

Green Eyes nodded. "She's safe for now."

"For now?" I echoed, my voice rising at the end. "What do you mean *for now*?" If something happened to Davie, I wouldn't be able to take it. I couldn't lose them all in one night.

He shook his head. "This is not the time for such discussions. We need to go somewhere safe."

I nodded eagerly. "Yes, please, take me home. Or better yet, take me to where my sister is or—" The last sight I had of my parents forcing itself into the forefront of my mind. My voice dulled. "—wherever my parents are now."

"No." If he thought that the softness and gentleness of his voice would make the word easier to hear, he was wrong. Supremely wrong.

"I want to go home. I want to go to my sister." My voice radiated both petulance and determination. Davie once told me I was probably the only one who could do that, manage to sound spoiled and mature at the same time. Fresh tears spilled from my eyes. *Davie. My baby sister.* At least she was alive.

"If you go to her, you put her in more danger."

His words rendered me speechless for a moment. "Why would I endanger my own sister?" A nasty suspicion entered my mind and I tensed. With my entire family possibly murdered, there was no one I could be sure to trust, was there? "How do I know you're not making this all up?"

"What would I gain from lying?"

My mouth opened and closed. I looked at him, really looked at him this time, forcing myself to see the guy behind the beauty. I tried to see if there was deceit, a hint of evil, anything that would prove he was lying. I could be perspicacious if I wanted to. Davie taught me that word when I needed an adjective starting with the letter *P* to describe myself for English class. It meant being a good judge of character—and I could be that if I could just manage to make myself see even the things I didn't want to see.

I searched his eyes for lies but found none. All I could see was impatience.

He wasn't lying. For now, I had to believe that. I drew in a shaky breath. I would really put my sister in danger if I went to her. I looked away and studied my surroundings while gathering my thoughts. I didn't want to give the guy a chance to guess what I was thinking. He didn't seem to be the evil sort, but I wasn't willing to trust him completely just yet.

Strips of clouds had moved in to blot out the moonlight, and while the stars dotting the sky were pretty, they were not enough to make everything around me crystal clear. But even so, I could still see everything in vivid detail. Either I suddenly had the best human vision in the world or something was seriously wrong.

I quelled the spurt of panic inside me. *Nothing is seriously wrong, Deli. You're just imagining things.* I don't like inconvenient truths. Knowing and understanding inconvenient truths hurt too much. I didn't care about whatever Al Gore would think. Sometimes, ignorance was a blessing. I had to face facts, but surely, there was something I could ask that wouldn't make me hurt more?

"Why didn't you take me to a hospital?" There. That was a sensible question, wasn't it? Davie would be proud of me.

"You were too far gone for a mere doctor to save you."

I frowned, reluctantly recalling the bizarre fire ritual I had undergone. "Which makes you...what? A super, mega witch doctor?"

A choking sound to my left drew my attention, and I remembered then that we weren't alone. The other stranger stood a short distance away, dark-haired, and wearing a black cashmere sweater over a ruby red polo shirt and a nice pair of designer jeans. If not for the streaks of soot on his face and arms and the holes and tears in his clothes, I'd wonder what he was doing here in the middle of nowhere when he was better off posing for a fashion shoot.

The pair of them looked too much alike not to be related. Brothers probably. But the similarities seemed to end there. The other guy was less intimidating, gazing at me curiously.

"Hi." His voice was playful.

I welcomed the tone. I instinctively knew he was like me, the type to keep things casual and free from complications. "Hi."

"My name is Dyvian." He actually blew me a kiss.

I smiled. Here I was, lying on the ground, recovering from being swallowed—but not burned—by a fire-breathing monster, and some time before that from an accident that I still didn't want to dwell on, and now I was making new friends like it was the first day of school.

"Deli," I told him.

He quirked a brow. "Deli?"

My cheeks heated. "Like, short for *Delilah*."

He burst into laughter. "Delilah?" He laughed again. "Where's your Samson?"

It was the same old joke. I kept on hoping people wouldn't know about that particular story in the Bible, but there was no such luck for me. And they said we Americans weren't so religious. Ha. I wished.

I scowled. "Just call me Deli and forget about it." I normally didn't admit that Deli was short for anything, but Dyvian had caught me in a vulnerable moment.

"Delilah," he teased.

I glared up at him. "You're one to laugh when your name sounds like *deviant*."

"It doesn't bother me though." Then he added, "Delilah."

Aargh. I looked back at Green Eyes, hoping he'd be in a better mood to talk. He answered with an expressionless stare. I sighed. Which of them was the lesser of two evils? Dyvian was fun but annoying. This guy, Mr. Impassive, was silent but disconcerting. But both of them were nice to look at, at least.

I almost jumped in my skin when Green Eyes spoke. "You need to come home with us."

"I don't even know your name."

He blinked, as if my words had surprised him.

Idiot. I almost rolled my eyes. I looked back at him and was startled at being the recipient of his glare.

"It doesn't matter."

What was he so angry about? And what did he mean it didn't matter? God, what an idiot he was.

"Now, will you come home with us or not?"

"Not if you're acting like that, I won't," I snapped back.

"*You—*" Green Eyes glared again but his mouth flattened into another tight line, as if he didn't trust himself to speak.

"We're just not completely safe here, Delilah," Dyvian intruded softly. "We'll tell you in time but please, trust us. We need to leave soon."

"I truly can't go home? Or see Davie?" It wasn't really a question, but I wanted to hear him confirm it nonetheless.

Dyvian nodded.

"I'm going to be safe with you?"

Another nod.

I took a good hard look at them. In any other situation, to meekly go home with a pair of strangers was the height of foolishness. But I trusted my instincts, and they told me that I was safe—maybe even safest—if I went with them.

"Then...yes. And...thanks for offering me a safe place to stay." A thousand more questions raced in my mind but I pushed them away. I knew

there wasn't any point ignoring life's inconvenient truths. They could only get worse and worse until they stared back at you in overwhelming quantities. But for now, I just wanted a break from them. *Tomorrow*, I promised myself silently. *Tomorrow, I'll face the truth.*

Besides, I was getting sleepy.

"You're tired," Green Eyes bit out.

"Yeah, so?" I could barely keep my eyes open as Dyvian helped me to my feet. I hoped their home, wherever and whatever it was, was nearby. I was dying to surrender to sleep so I could forget about everything and enjoy a few hours of blissful ignorance.

"I'll carry you on the way home." He reached for me.

My eyes shot wide open and I pushed his hands away. "No. There's no need—" I stumbled, feeling woozy all of a sudden. Well, okay, there was, but I didn't want to risk him thinking I'd eaten one pound of chocolates too many. Which I had and which really meant I should avoid being carried.

"Trust me." Dyvian's voice was dry. "He won't think you're heavy."

"You. Go away." He was fast becoming the annoying little brother I used to dream of having. I guessed that really meant you should be careful of what you wish for.

Dyvian laughed. "I like her, Lucian. I'm glad you saved her."

Lucian. So that was his name. It suited him somehow. *Lucian Green Eyes Alien.* I smiled. Nice ring to it.

"*Very funny,*" a voice growled from somewhere inside my head, startling me.

"Is something wrong?" Lucian crossed his arms.

Imagination, I decided, brought about by my injuries and exhaustion. I shook my head. "Thank you for saving me."

I wasn't expecting him to answer—he didn't seem the type to say, "you're welcome"—but he did. "You deserved to be saved." And without warning, he scooped me up in his arms with seemingly effortless ease, pulling me close to

him. My head rested against his heart, and I listened to it, expecting his heartbeat to accelerate at the added exertion of carrying me.

But it didn't. His heartbeat remained steady. *Physically fit.* I liked that in a guy. Someone laughed inside my head, but I chalked that up to my injury-induced hallucinations as well.

In his arms, I could see more of our surroundings. Night was slowly giving way to dawn, and now the brownish hues of the mountains I had glimpsed earlier had turned bright red in the light. I could make out the figure of a professional climber wearing a blue-and-white striped shirt. A few miles away, I espied a pebble-gilded oasis with the gleaming surface of a silver mirror. *How can I see all these things so clearly?* But again, I pushed the question aside.

"Close your eyes." There it was again. I hadn't been imagining the voice inside my head. It also sounded unmistakably like Lucian's. *Tomorrow,* I promised myself again. Lucian's voice in my head would be question number two I'd ponder.

Then Lucian started to move, so fast I could almost imagine his very speed was creating a trail of wind behind us. I opened my eyes and immediately wished I hadn't.

How could I be at eye-level with treetops?

I looked down almost reluctantly and this time, I closed my eyes, shutting reality out. That did it. I just couldn't possibly be looking down on trees and mountains. We couldn't be flying. That was impossible. I had a concussion. That was it. *Tomorrow,* I'd wake up and all this would be a dream. Yes, that was it.

"Rest. I will keep you safe."

Yes, the voice is right. I just have to rest.

I snuggled closer. Lucian stiffened. I ignored it. Too bad for him, I'm good at ignoring lots of things. Dyvian chuckled somewhere to my left, and I ignored that, too. *Tomorrow,* I promised myself. *Tomorrow, I'll force myself to handle reality.*

Chapter Two

My nightmares used to have something to do with ugly prom dresses, failing in Trig, or having Dad hear me talk about the S-word. But now, I wake up screaming because of hissing monsters, the look of fear—frozen by death—on my parents' faces, and a pair of forest green eyes.

“Wake up, Deli. Wake up.”

The voice lifted me past my subconscious, and I woke up reluctantly, a scream straining to escape from inside me. I was scared, thinking that when I opened my eyes I'd see the same images.

My sleep-blurred gaze slowly cleared. My muscles loosened up at the familiar sight of mahogany-paneled walls. I had glimpsed the same sight in my brief snatches of consciousness. But I could barely remember anything else about the time I had spent here. I didn't even know how long I had been here. All I could vaguely recall was burning up with fever and having the Chevalier brothers look after me.

A face stared down at me, and it took me seconds to realize who it was. *Dyvian*. Relief coursed through my body, and I sank deeper into my bed. I stretched a bit, feeling like I hadn't left the bed for ages.

The night lamp next to me cast shadows all over the place, alive and hungry. I turned away hurriedly and my head spun at the abrupt movement. I was a lot weaker than I realized. My gaze landed on the windows to my left. It

was dark outside, but there were no shadows at least, just empty blackness, which was fine by me.

“Are you okay?”

Tonight he had on a white undershirt with its collars folded on top of a silvery sweater. A pale gray knee-length overcoat, beige khakis accessorized by a white leather belt with a gleaming platinum buckle and black Italian leather shoes completed the look.

Dyvian looked better suited to attend a movie premier than to babysit a stranger his brother rescued. That stranger was, of course, me.

“What time is it?” My voice sounded scratchy to my ears. I pushed myself up carefully, not wanting the room to spin again. I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror across from my bed. My long black hair stood up in all directions. Huge circles made my brown eyes darker, and my skin had the pallor of an invalid.

He glanced at his watch, which I could see was glittering with diamonds even from my position. They were that huge. “Just a few minutes past midnight. Your fever broke earlier this morning.”

“H-how long have I been here?”

“Three nights. You’ve been unconscious most of that time.”

I bit my lip. “I’m so sorry you guys had to play nursemaid—”

“It was no bother.” He hesitated. “Are you okay now?”

I didn’t answer.

He winced. “Are the nightmares that bad?”

“Yes.” I didn’t have to elaborate. He had been there, too. Why could I forget so many things but not the ones I didn’t want to remember?

“I’m sorry, Delilah.”

“Maybe...we should talk about it?” I ventured slowly even as I dreaded his agreement. “I just think I wouldn’t dream too much if I understood things better.” I squeezed the pillow between my hands restlessly. “I just don’t understand.”

Dyvian hesitated before nodding. “All right.” He dragged the chair from the dressing table and sat, stretching out his long legs in front him. He squirmed, trying to make himself comfortable on a chair too small for his size.

His squirming made me smile, which was good because it made me forget what I kept reliving in my dreams, even if just for a little while.

When I saw that he was as comfortable as he could be, I began carefully, “This Evian thing—”

He made a face. “*Evren*, Delilah.” He sighed. “Why do you insist on calling us a bottle of water?”

“It’s Deli,” I corrected him.

He smiled and I knew he had done it to make me forget some more.

The subtle act of kindness threatened to release the tears I was trying to hold at bay. “Thanks,” I told him with a shaky smile. “I appreciate what you’ve done—”

“*Uh-oh*. No waterworks, please, *Deli*? I said it to make you laugh and not cry.”

His panicky expression made me laugh again. I willed my tears not to fall. I owed him that much.

Dyvian glanced at me warily. “Okay now?”

“As much as I can be.”

He sighed. “Shouldn’t we take a rain check on this? I don’t think—”

“I *need* to hear it. I need to know the truth, Dyvian.” I glanced down at the pillow I was wringing with my bare hands. I forced myself to let go and smoothed the creases away, using the time to relax myself. “You told me the other night that you knew something about my family.”

“In a way.”

“How?”

“To answer that, I’ll have to tell you a little about us first.” He paused. “About what you’ve become.”

I tried not to cringe. I could still remember the monstrous entity that had bathed me with its fire. Would I be *that* ugly?

"*It's not that ugly,*" a Lucian-like voice protested inside my head. It was the same voice I had heard the night of my rescue, just moments before I had succumbed to fever and exhaustion. I was afraid it was a sign of insanity. I hadn't told Dyvian, much less Lucian, about it. If I was crazy, it was a secret I was determined to keep—maybe even from myself—for the rest of my life.

"Deli?" Dyvian frowned.

I blinked. "Sorry. I was remembering what, uh, you guys really look like."

He smirked. "What *we* look like."

"Whatever," I snapped, but I was smiling. When I wasn't so bothered by my nightmares and I wasn't feeling so weak, I could always count on Dyvian to make me laugh with our arguments. I liked him a lot. He reminded me of myself and that certainly wasn't a bad thing.

"Do you want me to finish or what?"

"I'm keeping quiet."

"Good. Now, the first thing you have to know about Evren is our soul."

"Thank God," I blurted out. "I mean, I'm just happy that we still have them. I was scared that we didn't like—" I frowned. "That's what you're going to say, right? We do still have souls, don't we?"

Dyvian's face was grim. "No, Deli. We don't."

My heart jumped to my throat. *Soulless?* Tears filled my eyes. *I'm going to hell. I'm one of the damned—*

"Just joking," he retracted hastily when my tears trailed down my cheeks. "We have them, Deli."

"*Dyvian.*" I wiped the silly tears away, relieved all the same that I still had a soul.

"I'm sorry." But his grin implied otherwise and his next words confirmed it. "But you're just too irresistibly fun to tease, Deli." He rolled his eyes. "How could you even think we didn't have souls? Humans aren't the only creatures of God."

"I know that, but we're...*different.*"

He smiled gently. "We may not be entirely human, but we do descend from them." He wagged a finger. "Now, will you let me continue without any more interruptions?"

I crossed my heart.

"Good girl. Listen carefully because I'm going to tell you the most important thing to know about Evren." He stopped talking, as if waiting for me to interrupt him. I didn't.

His eyes twinkled. "Evren, Deli, have dragons for their souls."

I waited for the punch line, but when he only looked at me with expectant silence, my eyes widened in disbelief. "You have got to be joking, right?"

The twinkle in his eyes became more pronounced. "Nope."

"*Dragons.*" The mere idea strangled my voice. "I should have known..." I banged my head with my fist in chagrin. "Ugly beast, fire-breathing powers, *sheesh*...how could it be anything but?" Davie always did say I had appalling deductive skills.

"Obviously, they aren't mythical creatures like most people think. They're real. They're ancient. Pure dragons no longer exist, of course, but a part of them resides in us, and it is their blood that allows us to have certain qualities humans don't possess."

My mind was busy retracing the past, reanalyzing what I had seen and experienced. "Oh, my God. Th-that monster. It was Lucian, wasn't it?" Those forest green eyes were unmistakable.

Dyvian wagged his finger again. "Uh-uh. I wouldn't call him that to his face if I were you, but yes, that *was* him."

"You can turn like that, too?"

"All three of us—" he looked at me pointedly, "—can turn like that."

"But I don't want to turn like that," I wailed before I could stop myself. "No offense, Dyvian, but it's kinda icky, having scales and all that." I glanced down at my hands, realizing in horror that my very lovely normal hands could turn into claws any moment.

“Tough.” He sounded more amused than sympathetic. “But that’s exactly what you are now.”

His words only made me cherish my hands all the more. Life was so cruel. My hands weren’t meant to be ugly. But the truth seemed even worse. It was supposed to set me free from my nightmares, not add to them.

I grimaced. “What else do I have to know about being Evren?”

He wagged his finger again. “I’m not finished about the soul bit yet. An Evren’s soul is slightly different from a human’s. It’s a separate entity, you see.”

“Separate entity?” I echoed. “Does this mean someone, no, *something* else is living inside me?” I felt violated all of a sudden.

Dyvian shifted in his seat, looking slightly apologetic. “Something like that, yes. When Lucian made you Evren, he had to change your soul, too. I guess you could say he woke it up. An Evren’s soul is the source of its power. It will give you the ability to fly, turn invisible, breathe fire, live on heat, and things like that.”

My head started to spin again. This was too much to take in. It just proved that inconvenient truths were best left buried. “Fly,” I parroted hoarsely. That meant I hadn’t imagined flying in Lucian’s arms.

“And turn invisible...” Dyvian’s tone was gleeful.

I didn’t even want to think about that.

“Breathe fire, live on heat—”

“Excuse me?” I wasn’t sure what he meant with his last words. *Live on heat? Did he mean live in heat?*

He laughed. “I’m not talking about *that*. Evren mainly subsist on heat, Deli. We live on it. Some food makes us stronger, but we can live without it. We can live without just about anything except heat. Do you understand me now?”

“Oh.” I brightened as another thought occurred to me. “Then this means we don’t have to drink blood, right?”

“*Deli*.” He roared with laughter. “We’re Evren, not vampires.”

“It was a perfectly sensible assumption. I mean, monsters are monsters and—will you stop laughing?”

The doorknob rattled and a strange bout of shyness grabbed hold of me as Lucian took a step inside the room. “I heard some noise—” He stopped on the threshold when he saw Dyvian almost doubled over laughing. No doubt, the sight puzzled him, but with his typical I-don’t-do-emotions-because-I’m-not-human aloofness, he simply raised a brow. “Are you all right, Deli?”

A memory...or a vision—Lucian watching over me as I slept—struck my mind.

I turned my head away from Lucian, feeling more self-conscious. Surely, that couldn’t be real? It was probably my mind playing tricks on me.

Lucian didn’t seem to be the type to do that. He was just too indifferent...*and busy*. I was still trying to avoid his gaze. He looked like he had a million things to do, and my heart sort of squirmed, in a guilty way, at the thought of adding to his burdens.

“I’m fine.” I pointed at the still-laughing Dyvian. “But I don’t know about him.”

“You should hear what Deli thinks about us—”

“I wanted to learn about Evren.” I cut Dyvian off, not liking the thought of Lucian knowing how silly my assumptions were. “I was hoping that understanding what happened would make my nightmares go away.” The mere mention made me remember them, and I forgot about being annoyed at Dyvian as a fresh wave of pain washed over me. Another vision—my parents dead faces, inhumanly disfigured by a fiend lurking in my nightmares—slashed my mind, and I had the urge to throw up.

Why did I have to be alive when my parents were—

“What have you learned so far about Evren?” Lucian’s question penetrated my thoughts.

I shuddered, relieved at being given something else to think about. “W-we...” I took a deep breath to steady my voice. “We have dragons for our souls and we can turn...*you know*...if we, uhh, want to.” My chest slowly eased as

my mind focused on the less painful, albeit equally disturbing, topic of the Evren anatomy.

“So articulate,” Dyvian teased.

I glared at him even though I was secretly glad for his teasing. It helped push the images farther away. I needed a few moments to ready myself before facing the past again. “Stop showing off. I know some big words, too, you know.”

“Like what? Monstrous?”

“Here’s one for you. Ass—”

“Children,” Lucian scolded. But he was smiling just the tiniest bit, and there was something about him that made me automatically smile back. It was almost like I felt better just by seeing him smile, which was plain ridiculous.

“Feel better now, Deli?”

Dyvian smiled, too, and this time I burst into tears. They had done it again. “I’m really lucky you guys saved me,” I sobbed. I was a stranger to them. Why were they so nice, and why did they care so much that they did everything possible so I wouldn’t feel sad?

“Oh, damn,” Dyvian whispered in a panic-stricken tone. I would have laughed if I hadn’t been so busy crying. It was funny how grown men, even sophisticated ones like those two, could get so uncomfortable just because of tears.

Lucian drew closer and patted my head awkwardly. “It’s okay now. We’re here.”

His words only made me sob harder. “I know,” I wailed. “And that’s why I’m crying.”

“Right.” Dyvian was trying hard to look like he understood me.

I smiled in spite of my tears. “Don’t you see? I’m happy. I know I should be alone right now, but I’m not because I have you two.”

They gave me several minutes to compose myself, and I sniffed out the last of my tears. “Okay now?” Dyvian asked uncertainly after a while.

“Yes.” One last dab using the corner of my pillow erased the remaining traces of my tears.

Dyvian visibly hesitated. “Well—”

“I’m fine...and I still want to know what happened that night.”

Lucian clasped his hands behind his back. “What can you remember of that time?”

The memories came back swiftly, like they were always there, ready to ambush my thoughts. I swallowed. It hurt to relive those moments. It hurt to speak. But I forced myself to do both.

“We were just driving... Davie was sleeping. I was listening to...Ne-Yo. I had my iPod with me. My parents were in front, talking, laughing. They teased me about moving out of New York and asked me if I was okay with living in Nevada if Dad’s business deal would push through.”

My eyes flew open, and I stared at them in remembered horror. “Someone, something, had suddenly appeared before us, forcing my dad to swerve in the opposite direction.” I hugged my arms to myself, remembering what the man looked like. His eyes had glowed red, and there had been a feral quality to him that made me realize something bad was about to happen. He looked human, but he wasn’t. He couldn’t be, not when his evilness was almost like a breathing, salivating creature inside him. “I knew...” I gulped back the sobs. “Oh, God, but I knew just by looking at him that my father should have run him over. Just one look and my instincts had gone c-crazy...like they were telling me I had to do anything possible to kill him. B-but I was t-too late.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Lucian grated out.

“He was incredibly strong,” I whispered. Sweat drenched my skin. More excruciating images swept through my mind, so vivid I could almost smell the scent of fire mingling with the dry, cool air of the desert.

“He grabbed hold of our car and he tossed it upside down like it was nothing.” My voice rose and the words tumbled out in a rush, as if I believed that saying them quickly enough could prevent the past from becoming true.

“And then the others came out of nowhere...three or four of them, maybe? They looked...*excited*, like they were having fun. *Oh, God, how could they feel like that?* Two of them dragged my parents away. I could hear them screaming. Davie was still stuck inside the car. The crash broke her leg somehow. I tried pulling her out of the car, but I kept falling, I was too dizzy. My hands were smeared with blood—”

“That’s enough.”

“We got out just before the car exploded. But someone had grabbed Davie, and I tried to get her back. She kept on screaming my name, and I tried...I really did try but I couldn’t go to her because someone kept hitting me and—”

“I said that’s enough, Deli.” Lucian’s hard voice snapped me out of my reverie.

Air swished out of my lungs. I hadn’t realized I had been holding my breath the whole time I was talking. My body slumped forward, and I would have fallen if Lucian hadn’t been there to catch me.

“It is enough,” I agreed tremulously. “Because the next thing I remember was you waking me up, asking me if I wanted to be saved.”

I expected Lucian to explain, but he remained silent, still holding me in his arms. It was Dyvian who spoke. “We had received news from other Evren about Zekans coming to our territory. We could only track them by their scent. When we finally caught up to them, it was too late.” Pained regret filled his voice. “I’m sorry, Deli, but there was nothing else we could do. Your parents were dead. Davie had already been taken away, and we were lucky to get ahold of your captor.”

“You killed him?”

“Yes.” Lucian spoke dispassionately, like it was something to be expected, and I instinctively knew he had been the one to kill the creature holding me captive.

I closed my eyes. “Good.” An odd sort of peace settled on me. I didn’t care if that made me bad. All I knew was how glad I was at least one of our attackers was dead.

I bit my lip. “Do you know why they were after us?”

Lucian shook his head. “Not yet.”

I nodded against his chest, knowing even without Lucian speaking that he meant to find out.

“They were Zekans, you said.” I recalled a bit drowsily. Lucian moved to tuck me in. I didn’t protest, but I forced myself to keep my eyes open. I didn’t want to go back to sleep until my mind was sufficiently clear about that night.

“They’re our ancient enemies,” Dyvian said softly. “We were created together. But while we descend from dragons, Zekans are born from snakes.”

“It fits,” I mumbled.

Dyvian smiled. “Yes, it does.”

“Are there many of us?” I held my breath.

“Evren, you mean?” Dyvian smirked.

“Yes.”

“Not really.” Dyvian’s voice became bleak. “Not as many as there are Zekans.” He bent down and placed a kiss on my forehead. “But it’s not your place to worry about that. Right now, all we want is for you to sleep well, okay? We can talk more about your scales tomorrow.”

I was too tired to make a face. “Whatever.” My voice was muffled slightly by the pillows as I turned to my side. Just when I thought I was alone, the sound of approaching footsteps tickled my ear, followed by another pair of lips pressing against my skin. It was a kiss on the cheek and my eyes flew open.

Lucian.

My cheek tingled as an almost painfully restless sensation zinged through my body. This was probably how being struck by lightning felt. Lucian had kissed me. It was both thrilling and heavenly, like God was reassuring me that life could still be okay.

“You will be safe with us.”

Instinctively, I reached out for his hand and squeezed it. He crouched down. “I know. I think I’m going to be happy, too. Thank you for taking me in. Thank you for saving my life.”

He nodded.

I wanted to laugh. I might not have known my reluctant rescuer for long, but it was something that I had expected him to do. He wasn’t just a man of few words. He was a guy who almost seemed to hate interacting with other people, and I could only count myself lucky that he hadn’t been feeling indifferent enough to leave me out that night to die.

I gazed at his face, exhaustion making me feel even more vulnerable to its beauty. It was a mushy thought, but I really did feel I could drown in his eyes, their lush green color reminding me of twin pools of endless summer.

So beautiful. I smiled sleepily at him. *No wonder I have this little crush on him.*

Lucian jumped to his feet so quickly he almost lost his balance. Surprised at the sudden movement, I sat up and gazed at him, disoriented and anxious. “What is it?” I stared at him, bemused about the color suffusing his face.

“Nothing,” he muttered, but he was glaring at me like I was the one who had made him red-faced. “Sleep tight.” He couldn’t seem to get out of the room fast enough and, though he closed the door gently behind him, something told me he was more in the mood to slam it shut.

Chapter Three

If I thought being Evren was glamorous, I'd obviously thought wrong. The most glamorous thing that could happen in Sanger was to occasionally catch a glimpse of a Ferrari or a limousine bearing prom queen hopefuls doing their best imitations of Girls Gone Wild along Highway 160.

It had been ten days since my rescue. I now lived with the two Chevalier brothers in their Tudor home in Sanger, Nevada, a small town with a population of no more than ten thousand. Its lone claim to popularity was having the less-traveled road to Death Valley, the lowest and hottest place in the country. If you wanted to enjoy your solitude on the way to DV, as the locals called it, then Sanger was the only way to go.

"I don't get it," I told Dyvian while wiping the sweat off my face. In just an hour, I think I'd sweated off a gallon of water just by watching Dyvian redesign the Chevaliers' backyard under Sanger's merciless sun. No one in America would understand the meaning of "hot" until they'd lived in Sanger.

Dyvian sighed. "There are a lot of things you don't seem to get."

If he thought I'd take that as an insult, he was quite wrong. I knew girls like me were usually typecast as pretty...and pretty dumb. While others would deny this even if it were true, I had no problem admitting I wasn't as smart as other people. I knew I wasn't stupid, but I knew I was no genius either, which was why I asked about anything that confused me.

Dyvian planted the shovel in the soil and leaned one arm on its handle. “What don’t you get this time?”

I waved my hand to encompass our surroundings—our very dreary surroundings. The great expanse of the Mojave Desert stretched out before us. It was a beautiful sight, but after a while, you tended to get bored with just how...well...natural and desolate it all was. For Sanger, Nevada, nightlife was all about eerily barking sand dunes, howling coyotes, cactuses with creepy shadows, and a frighteningly deep and isolated sense of silence.

It was bad enough living in a small town but the Chevalier brothers had to prove there was something worse by choosing to live on the outskirts, with the nearest point of civilization miles and miles away.

This was sooo not the life I planned on having, especially not when I could do cool things now like turn invisible and move like Catwoman without needing a costume. How could I even let Halle Berry know her throne was under threat when I was neck deep in nothing and trapped in Nowhere, Nevada?

I had to convince Lucian and Dyvian that they were driving me crazy with isolation.

I cleared my throat. “Why did you guys choose to live here, Dyv?”

“Because Evren thrive in heat and you can’t get anywhere hotter than this.”

“So you just need the heat, huh?” My mind almost burst with the possibilities that could bring. “I hear Hawaii’s hot.” I did my best to sound casual and not seem like I was already dreaming about a lifetime of strolling the beach and attending luaus. Davie would like living in Hawaii, too.

The thought of my younger sister depressed me. Dyvian told me Lucian had left town to find out about Davie’s present condition. I knew in my heart she wasn’t dead. I’d have felt it if she were.

But not being dead didn’t mean she wasn’t hurt, and I had sought Dyvian’s company to take my mind off my worries, even if it meant having to sweat it out helping Dyvian gift his beloved rock garden with a spring makeover.

Lucian said it was the only thing that could rouse Dyvian out of his lifetime dedication to idleness.

“Stop worrying about Davie.” Dyvian’s voice gently intruded on my thoughts.

I forced myself to quit frowning and smiled at him more brightly than usual. Dyvian was right. Worrying would get me nowhere. Davie was fine and until proven otherwise, I wouldn’t believe anything else. Head in the sand again? Definitely.

“So, what do you think? How about living in Hawaii instead?”

Dyvian shook his head. “We don’t like water.”

“What? Why not?”

“It’s not the natural habitat for Evren.” He took his shovel and started digging again.

I crouched down with a tired sigh and began scooping soil to fill the garden pots once more.

Water wasn’t the natural habitat for Evren? That was it? Did he think that explained everything? Whatever. I’d worry about that when I had to. But wait...I looked at Dyvian with suspicion. “That doesn’t mean we can’t take a bath, right?” Evren or no Evren, I wasn’t letting myself stink just because water wasn’t home sweet home for my new species.

Dyvian shot me an odd look. “You think the craziest things. I just said we don’t like water, not that we couldn’t stand it.”

“Just making sure.” My mind jumped to the next possible destination—any other place seemed better than Sanger. “What about California? It’s not an island, it can get ridiculously hot there, and it has access to Death Valley, too.” Dyvian hadn’t fully explained this bit to me, but I’d gathered that DV was an important place for Evren. It was like their Vatican City, but it could also have been their Big Apple, where everything important usually happened.

“Too crowded,” Dyvian dismissed while he went on shoveling. Although bare-chested and dirt-smudged, he still managed to look gorgeous and

fashionable in loose plaid trousers tucked into a pair of designer army boots with titanium-rimmed sunglasses perched on his nose.

But I didn't feel one iota of attraction for him at all, and that worried me because—

“Why are you asking about where we live?”

Lucian's unexpected appearance made me lose my balance, and I fell on my butt with a groan.

“Don't—” I lost my train of thought upon meeting his steady gaze. My heart fluttered—yes, damn it, fluttered. Who the heck knew hearts still fluttered?

Dyvian, like Lucian, was also tall, dark, and handsome. He was charming, albeit annoying at times, while Lucian was just plain disturbing. So why, why, why did my heart ignore the one who was my match in every way and insist on the one that was my exact opposite?

Lucian choked. Despite being dressed in his usual Spartan tandem of plain shirt and jeans, he still managed to carry it off like they were created by Armani. Did he favor plain dressing because he knew he was too handsome to need any kind of enhancement? If he did, he was right. Damn it.

Dyvian laughingly pulled me up. I brushed away the dirt clinging to the bottom of my jeans and resumed glaring at Lucian. “I told you to stop it with the whole silent sneaking thing.”

“*Deli*. I wasn't sneaking. You just don't pay attention. As always.”

Argh. “That's not the point and I don't like you anymore,” I snapped without thinking, incensed at the lack of apology.

Dyvian and Lucian stared at me in shock.

Then I realized what I had said. “It's—it's an expression. I use it all the time with my family and friends when they don't do what I want.”

“Ah.” Dyvian nodded understandingly.

“You really are spoiled, aren't you?”

I smiled at him sweetly. “Yes, and as a new addition to your family, you're obliged to spoil me, too.”

Dyvian pretended to cough so he could hide his laughter.

Lucian's shock was satisfying, short but sweet.

"I will not spoil you." Ice dripped from his words.

I blasted him with my best debutante smile, aiming to melt the ice with honey and sugar. I even batted my eyelashes, completely focused on annoying Lucian. It was that or let myself become aware of how my heart was still fluttering in his presence. Oh, God, his presence. Just his presence. What would I do if he started treating me nicely and not like someone he was forced to adopt?

I mentally shook my head and glanced back at Lucian, only to catch him looking at me intently, like he was listening to me—which was weird, of course, since I hadn't spoken a word. "Lucian?"

The pensive look on his face vanished and he lifted a brow. "What?"

"I'll make you spoil me if it's the last thing I do."

Dyvian feigned hurt. "If you do, Lucian, I'll be jealous. I'm your brother but you've never spoiled me." We exchanged conspiring smiles. Although the two of us tended to fight like cats and dogs, one thing we did bond over was annoying Lucian.

A hint of exasperation threaded Lucian's voice. "Stop uttering such nonsense, Dyvian." He turned to me with a frown. "You, too."

I shrugged. "It's not nonsense. It's fact."

"Keep talking like that and I won't tell you what I've found out about Davie."

"Is she okay? Where is she? Did you talk to her?" The questions poured out of me in a breathless rush. How could I have forgotten about Davie?

"*You know why,*" the Lucian-like voice inside my head teased.

My eyes flew to Lucian but he was busy telling Dyvian about his trip. I let out a silent sigh of relief. He wasn't reading my mind or speaking to me in it.

Dyvian told me mind reading wasn't an Evren power and it was high time I stopped worrying about it. If it were, Lucian should've freaked out by now. He'd have seen that most of my thoughts revolved around him—

“Deli?”

My shoulders jerked in surprise and I couldn’t quite meet his eyes.

“Yeah?”

“The thing about your sister—just don’t overreact, okay?”

Fear skittered along my spine and I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly cold despite the heat. Saying that would achieve exactly the opposite. Didn’t he know that?

A frown of frustration blighted Lucian’s forehead.

“What?” I asked blankly.

“I’m not used to doing this so cut me a bit of slack, okay?”

I blinked several times, confused. Dyvian seemed taken aback as well.

“But I didn’t say anything.”

He avoided my gaze and shifted on his feet. “I...I could see it in your eyes, you think I’m handling this badly.”

A curious look settled on Dyvian’s face but I didn’t bother wondering why. I was too appalled at Lucian’s conclusion. “No, no, I didn’t think that. I promise. You’ve done so much to help me and I’m really grateful for that.” I gave him a worried look. “But how is she?”

Lucian appeared to weigh his words. “She’s in the hospital.”

There was more. I could feel it.

“She’s in a coma.”

A whimper escaped my throat. *Oh, God, Davie.*

“But the doctors are convinced she’ll come around in time.”

I asked in a small voice, “There’s still more, isn’t there?” I could see it was true, the way he was looking at me.

“I can’t bring her to us because she’s being guarded by Zekans.”

“*Dear God.*” *Zekans.* Why were the ancient enemies of Evren guarding my little sister?

Dyvian muttered an expletive, earning him a scowl from Lucian. “Sorry. I just didn’t expect...after all, she’s *human.*”

That earned him another scowl—from me. “How many times do I have to say this? Being human isn’t that bad.” I knew I wasn’t human any longer, but my conscience obliged me to defend my previous species.

“It is,” Dyvian countered.

“Enough.” Lucian’s sharp command brought an effective end to the argument. “I wasn’t able to find out why. Their presence was unexpected and I had to leave to avoid detection.”

The sensible part of me approved of Lucian’s decision. If he had stayed, the Zekans could have noticed his scent. But another part of me cried out in protest. Davie could be in danger. He should’ve saved her.

“She’s in a coma, Deli,” Lucian told me quietly, as if hearing my thoughts. “Right now, she needs to stay in that hospital. And if the Zekans had wanted to kill her, you know she would have long been dead.”

I gave him a tired smile. “I’m sorry. I know you did the right thing. I’m just worried about her, you know?”

He nodded. “Zekans normally don’t give a damn about humans and the fact that they’re guarding her—that they’ve even taken the effort to take Davie to the hospital—” Lucian paused, a grim light hardening his eyes. “I think they’re hedging their bets. With you still missing, they may be thinking of using her to draw you out.”

“Then I have to go to Davie—”

“Even if it means risking her life?” Dyvian questioned softly. “She’s in a *coma*, Deli. Taking her out of the hospital could endanger her more than anything Zekans could do.”

His words made sense but it didn’t make me feel any better.

“I promise you, Deli, the moment she wakes up, I’ll bring her back to you.”

Tears pooled in my eyes at Lucian’s quiet assurance. “Thank you.” Staring at him, my heart had trouble containing the gratitude and relief inside me. I had to do something, anything to take my mind off my emotional state because if I didn’t, I might do something silly like throw myself in his arms.

Lucian's eyes widened but I didn't pay attention to that. I raised my chin and smiled at him. My voice wobbled a bit when I said, "See? I told you, you're going to spoil me."

I caught a glimpse of Lucian's face flushing with color before he stalked past me. "God, Deli, that was awesome," Dyvian hooted.

"What can I say?" I raised my voice just so Lucian could hear my next words. "I have him wrapped around my little finger."

The door leading back to the house slammed shut with a heavy thud. Dyvian and I collapsed with laughter.

Chapter Four

Sunlight streamed in through the kitchen windows. I still couldn't believe the golden rays touching my skin fed me as much power as the pancakes and orange juice I was having for breakfast. Who would have thought there were creatures able to live on solar energy? Honestly, being Evren so far was more weird than glorious.

"Dubai," I declared in my best tour guide voice. "It has a booming tourist economy, nice, hot weather and—oh, my God, is this desert I'm seeing?" I waved the brochure in front of me. Since Evren thrived on heat, I was hoping to persuade Lucian to move to Dubai on the merit of its unbelievably hot climate and its expanse of desert. Any city was better than the small-town features of Sanger, Nevada.

On my right—Lucian, wearing one of his countless shirt and jean combinations but still managing to look handsome on Chace Crawford levels—easily shelved my rejection by saying, "We're not going to move from Sanger, end of topic."

"Nice try though." Dyvian gave me a look of sham sympathy.

If they thought I'd give in just like that, they obviously didn't know me well enough.

"Just see what this has to say first." I handed Dyvian the brochure and watched him skim the information about Dubai. He had on a fringed cowboy

vest over a checkered long-sleeved shirt and faded jeans. His sense of fashion was, as usual, impressive.

Buried behind his copy of the Financial Times—honestly, he was carrying this I’m-a-business-hotshot charade a little too far—Lucian was already in his own version of heaven, computing the national debt and probably arriving at a hundred feasible solutions Obama would dearly love to get his hands on.

To capture Lucian’s attention, I let out a very loud groan. I groaned and groaned until Lucian slowly lowered his Financial Times. “Delilah.”

“Well, you’re not being fair.” A pair of forest green eyes bore through me, but I was upset enough not to feel thrilled at his good looks and fantastic pair of eyes. Well, at least not much, because they were truly fantastic.

“I can’t live like this.” It was shallow but true. It had only been three weeks since I got sort-of adopted by the Chevalier brothers but their hermit-like existence was literally driving me crazy. I loved being with people. I loved going out to parties, having gossip sessions, “night soirees” with my girls, and flirting with boys. But I wouldn’t get any of that if I was stuck in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

My current outfit consisted of a leopard-print dress with ruffled sleeves, sheer black stockings and matching stiletto boots. I even got away with a black cotton scarf because of the unusually balmy weather. All in all, I looked awesome, and in my old life, there would have been ten people by now who would have told me that.

But here in Sanger, all it got was a disinterested glance from Lucian and just another barb, albeit good-natured, from Dyvian. I’m not saying I’m an attention ho but I just liked being in the limelight once in a while. That wasn’t a totally bad thing, was it?

“I need a normal life,” I implored. “Can’t you understand that? Don’t you remember how it was before you turned Evren?”

“We were born Evren.”

Drat. And I actually spent an hour last night coming up with that oh-so-sensible argument. But I rallied on anyway. “Well, I wasn’t so please, please, please help me with this? It’s like I’m in prison.”

“As opposed to letting you go back to your old life and having you murdered in twenty-four hours?”

He had a point. I really hated it when Lucian made sense. Okay, fine, I hated it when everyone else but me made sense and it sucked big time that this kind of thing happened frequently.

I waved his words away in frustration. “Look. I’m going out of my mind here. I’m a people person, okay? I get it that you and Dyvian believe and practice in Tom-Hanks-Castaway mode, but it’s just not me, you know?” I pointed to my chest. “Deli just can’t be an island.”

Dyvian snorted in laughter.

“This is not something to laugh about.”

“But your last line *was* funny.”

“It was a proverb, you dolt.”

“It’s more like a metaphor, you ninny.”

“Enough.”

Dyvian and I automatically turned to Lucian. He was giving off head-of-the-family vibes, something he usually did when he was about to pull rank. Or age. Or IQ. Lucian *was* better than us in many aspects.

The pensive look on his face made my heart—here we go again—flutter. I’m not really sure why, but I’d always found deep-in-thought looks sexy. Oh, wait. I knew why. Maybe it had to do with the fact that I rarely saw it on my face? Never mind. Fact was, Lucian’s pensive stare was drowning me right this very moment in a tidal wave of attraction.

I quickly looked away and concentrated on taking another bite of my pancake. If I stared at him any longer, I might have made him drown, too...in my drool. Eww. Gross imagery. Forget I thought of that. I caught sight of Lucian staring at me in apparent fascination. “What?” I blurted out.

Lucian recovered himself. “Moving is simply out of the question.”

I gritted my teeth. "But I can't stand it here."

Lucian drawled, "If you think throwing a tantrum will get you somewhere, think again."

My hold on my fork tightened, annoyed enough to seriously consider flipping a slice of pancake at his face.

"Don't even think of it."

I jerked in surprise, my eyes flying to him in guilt. "Excuse me?"

"Your face is an open book," Lucian clarified, his tone cutting. "I can easily see what you're thinking, and I'm telling you now, stop acting like a kid."

Dyvian studied me intently. "She gave herself away that much?"

"Apparently," I muttered, sulking but letting go of the fork. Why did Lucian always insist on treating me like a kid? Well, okay, I knew the answer to that, too. Lucian treated me like a kid because I tended to act like a kid, but couldn't he just pretend? Boys back home did and happily, too.

I shot him a dirty look, which he didn't even seem to notice. "But I'm just not happy and if you're heartless enough to—"

"Delilah."

"What?" I growled, never happy to be interrupted when I was in drama mode.

"We can't leave Sanger, mostly for safety reasons. I will explain all that to you in time, but for now you should trust me regarding this matter." One eyebrow lifted, asking for confirmation.

I gave him a reluctant nod. Lucian might be overbearing most of the time, but bottom line, he was devoted to keeping us all alive. If he said Sanger was the safe place to be, then it was.

Lucian spoke again. "But if there is anything else I can do to make your new life more bearable..."

A compromise. I never imagined Lucian would be willing to do that. "Let me think about it," I exclaimed.

A wicked smile suddenly slashed Lucian's lips, making him even more unbearably attractive. At once, my tummy felt like it had all the pancakes it

could take, creating a weird queasy sensation that was good and bad at the same time. I also started wondering like crazy what it would feel like to kiss those lips. *Oh, God.* Those were crazy thoughts, indeed. I looked away hastily.

“Deli?”

“Mmm?” *Must stare at my plate. Must stare or die trying. Can’t think of his lips. Just can’t think.*

“You must tell me what you want before you leave the table.”

My head flew up in shock, the unknown taste of his kisses all but forgotten. “That’s unfair.” That seemed to be the story of my life, lately. “You know I don’t think that fast.” Unlike other people, I was smart enough to admit the fact that I wasn’t a genius and probably never would be. I just thought it was dumb to pretend something you’re not, you know?

Dyvian settled back on his seat, looking at us with great interest.

“Take it or leave it,” Lucian warned.

Unfair. But I was already considering my options. *Okay, brain cells, work with me here. I let you guys rest for long periods of time each day so you owe me this.*

Willing myself to relax, I recited the facts in my mind.

We couldn’t leave Sanger.

We were Evren.

I wanted to have a normal life.

All of it pointed to one direction.

Lucian appeared disconcerted, but I was feeling too giddy to wonder about that. “I have it now.”

“Deli—”

Uh-oh. I didn’t like the sound of that. I said quickly, “I want to go to school.”

Dyvian and I waited for Lucian to kick up a fuss or make a flat-out rejection but he did none of those. Instead, he became eerily quiet, like he was thinking so hard he was in another dimension. I mean no offense to Dyvian

and myself when I say that both of us could never do that. Dyvian and I were kindred souls. We were people of action—act now, think much, much later.

After several minutes, Lucian emerged from his Yoda-like meditation and gave me permission to go to school. *Sanger High, here I come.*

~ ~ ~

The next day, Dyvian and I woke up early, and we managed to have breakfast once more with Lucian. Although neither of us was exactly fond of mornings, we did manage to wake up before noon. But Lucian, as I had already discovered, was very much a morning person, and we rarely caught him eating breakfast.

Lucian looked extraordinarily handsome as usual. Dyvian told me Lucian was older than him by a year, which made Lucian nineteen, but there was an air about him that made him seem so much older. All he needed was a pair of glasses, a business suit to get rid of his shirt-and-jean uniform, a leather briefcase, and I could easily mistake him for a bank teller. But a gorgeous one.

He watched me gulp down my chicken pie, cheese omelet, and yogurt curiously.

Across from me, Dyvian was busy gobbling his own food fast. I could barely see his face—the pile of food on his plate was just so high.

“What are you guys planning?” There was a mixed note of reluctance and resignation in Lucian’s tone.

With both our mouths full, we could only manage to grin.

“We’re just going out.” The twinkle in Dyvian’s eyes belied the innocence in his voice.

“Right. Dare I ask where?”

“It wouldn’t matter even if you knew,” I told him, my grin widening at the dryness of Lucian’s tone. Lucian was concerned about us, but he fought hard not to show it. He, no doubt, understood that all he could do later on was to

clean up whatever mess Dyvian and I would get into, like all good older brothers do.

"And boyfriends," a naughty voice whispered inside my head. It still sounded horribly like Lucian, and I couldn't help blushing.

Dyvian noticed it. "Hey. You suffering from a heat stroke or something?" He had reason to be concerned. Even though I was Evren now, my body was still adjusting to the changes and as such, one Evren trait which I didn't possess was their indifference to heat. Think of it this way. Evren can go to a beach and sunbathe forever, getting a perfect tan without being troubled by thirst, sunburn, or lagging strength.

But I wasn't there yet.

"I'm okay." Honestly, could that scary inner voice just be a part of my body's adjustment to being Evren? "Just excited to go to town," I lied and wolfed down another healthy bite of my omelet.

"Why are you eating so much?" Lucian's words were spoken without inflection, but his eyes did widen a bit as he took in my eating binge.

"Because Dyvian says I need protein to stay invisible longer. Like, solar energy gives us strength, but it's protein that gives us stamina." I had a horrible thought all of a sudden. "Don't tell me he tricked me into gaining a few pounds." I shot him a nasty look, not putting such a trick past him. "Dyvian—" I pointed my bread knife at him and waved it threateningly.

Dyvian quickly lifted his hands up. "It's the truth. Tell her, Lucian."

"It is. You're going somewhere you need to be invisible?"

I tactfully ignored the question, and after taking a gulp of water, I turned back to Dyvian with a frown. "Why does it have to be protein anyway?"

"Building blocks of life ring a bell?"

"Building blocks like concrete and cement?"

Dyvian gave me a pained look. "Seriously, Deli, you know I love you like you're my long-lost twin sister, but is it really all air up there?"

“Seriously, Dyvian, I love you like the annoying twin brother I’ve never had, but can you just answer my question and accept that my area of expertise has never been science?”

Dyvian chuckled. “At least you don’t make dumb comebacks.”

“Enough fighting, children.” Lucian intruded with his usual dryness just when I was about to give Dyvian another one of those not-dumb comebacks he was so dazzled with. “I won’t ask you two where you’re going and why you need to be invisible but just promise me you’ll take care. Understood?”

Dyvian and I became the recipients of Lucian’s sharp looks—the message of which totally passed us by. I gave him a cheery salute. “Yes, sir!”

Lucian let out a chagrined grunt. “A simple yes would suffice, Deli.”

I was finally done with breakfast, and I pushed it away with a little sigh of victory. Eating was hard work. I turned to Lucian and caught him staring at me. He looked away immediately, of course, but it was too late.

“I’m going out to check on my rocks. You follow when you’re ready, Deli.” Dyvian got up from his chair, utterly oblivious to Lucian’s sudden uneasiness, and left the dining room.

“You can go now,” Lucian reminded me without meeting my eyes. He was finding the ceiling a suddenly fascinating sight.

Oh, my God. Could it be possible? Could someone like Lucian have a crush on me the way I was so crushing on him?

I thought about it.

Well, it wouldn’t hurt to dream, would it?

“Lucian.”

It took him a long time to look at me. The mask of impassiveness had settled back on his face. “Yes?”

I smiled at him and teased, “I’m going to miss you.”

His eyebrow lifted just the tiniest bit.

I wasn’t done. I tiptoed to his side and surprised him with a kiss on his cheek, Lucian’s whole body freezing as my lips touched his skin. “I’m sure

you'll miss me, too," I told him with a mischievous smile before straightening and skipping out of the room with the silliest smile on my face.

Could he have a crush on me? The idea teased my mind the whole time Dyvian and I flew into town, invisible to human eye. We were moving at remarkable speed, but I was certain he could have gone so much faster if I hadn't been with him. Beside me, he whispered, "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing." Talking while flying at the same time wasn't something I was used to, and I felt myself dropping in unimaginable speed. Horrified, I materialized into view, hissing, "*Dyvian.*"

Dyvian caught me before I could scream some more. "Concentrate on keeping yourself light," he commanded and I gave a general smile in his direction since he was still invisible.

His grip on my wrist tightened. "Go back to being invisible. But we'll fly together for now, just to be safe."

"Good idea."

After a while, he squeezed my wrist. "Tell me what you were thinking about, really. I can feel you hiding something."

I stayed silent, smart enough not to fall for that conversational trap. I studied the huge three-story granite building ahead of us. For a small town like Sanger, its school certainly looked fancy with its huge expanses of tinted ceiling-to-floor windows and a rooftop glasshouse. "That's it, right? The building to our right?"

"Yup." Dyvian and I slowly glided down, making sure our feet didn't cause any ripples as we touched ground.

I dragged him with me toward the glass doors. "Come on," I urged excitedly, "I want to see how things are inside." We waited for a tall, sandy-haired guy to open the door and slipped inside with him.

Two-tiered lockers lined the empty entrance hall between doors with nameplates identifying them as several offices of the school's administration.

I walked back and climbed the stairs on the left side of the hallway. Beside me, Dyvian observed our surroundings in silence. That got me curious. “Where did you go to school?”

Dyvian hesitated then said, “Eton.”

I gasped. “Are you serious? That’s Prince William’s school, right?”

Dyvian shrugged. “It seemed to be the only option back in those days.”

I considered his words with a frown. “The only option? What do you—”

“Check out the classrooms, Deli,” he interrupted heartily as he opened the door to one of the second-floor classrooms with flourish.

There were about thirty seats in the room. On the back wall, there was a huge corkboard with various photos, artwork, and news clippings posted. I took a step closer, my gaze ensnared by a clipping that featured the Sanger Dragons as last year’s first runner-up in the basketball division. Dragons, huh? I smiled a little, appreciating the irony.

I moved to the first chair in the leftmost row, the one nearest the windows. I peered out and the sight of the school’s football field greeted me like a long-lost friend. There were about a dozen guys in uniform practicing right next to a group of cheerleaders doing pyramids. Gazing at them made me remember my old life.

I used to be a cheerleader in the private school I had attended back at home. I had even been offered the position of cheer captain, but I had declined, knowing that I didn’t really have the streak of ruthlessness required for the job. I remembered my friends, the fun times we had. I remembered my sister, I remembered the way my parents used to watch me perform, and a wave of miserable homesickness engulfed me. I turned away abruptly, as if with it, I could also turn my back on the memories.

I glanced at Dyvian and said with determined enthusiasm, “Tell me more about the time you spent in school. Did you and Lucian go to school together?”

“Lucian never went to school.”

I almost collapsed in shock. “B-but he’s so *nerdy*.” How could someone as smart as Lucian never go to school? I mean, even if he had a super high IQ,

nerdy guys—including those who were as gorgeous as Lucian—tended to be stupid enough to still want to go to school.

Dyvian grinned. “He just didn’t want to.”

“Well, tell me about your time in school then. Were you the guy every girl wanted to date?” It wasn’t hard imagining Dyvian in that role. “And did you break everyone’s hearts?”

“Eton’s an exclusive school for guys.”

“But you at least got to talk to Prince Wills once, right?” Boys could be so dense. They went to the same school with royalty. The least they could do was take advantage of it by rubbing elbows!

“Eton has thousands of students enrolled but, yeah, I think I managed to walk past him in the library,” Dyvian deadpanned.

“Funny.” I planted my hands on my hips and gave him a suspicious look. “Why are you so secretive about your school life, Dyv? I’ve been asking you over and over—”

“I’m not,” Dyvian protested. “I just don’t have anything interesting to share, okay?” He changed the subject, saying, “Seen enough?”

I made a face at his evasiveness but nodded. “I think so. I can always explore more once classes start.”

We left the school, and in a few minutes, we were airborne again. “Are you sure Lucian will be able to get me enrolled in time? I mean, classes are going to start next week and—”

“Relax. If Lucian says it’s okay, then it is.”

“But what about the legal stuff? Like, who’s going to serve as my guardian and why is it I’m living—”

“Didn’t Lucian tell you?”

“No, he didn’t. Whatever he didn’t tell me, I mean.”

“Lucian’s applied as your guardian.” Dyvian seemed to hesitate before saying, “I mean, he’s of age already, you know?”

“I guess.” But I didn’t really like the idea of Lucian being my guardian. It made him seem like my older brother when I wanted him to be, well—I shook

my head even though he couldn't see me. "And the reason that I'm living with two single guys?" My eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute—you are single, right?"

"I am."

"And Lucian?"

Dyvian smirked. "Who cares if he is or he isn't?"

Drat. I walked straight into that one. I lifted my chin. "Just curious." Oh, God, what if he, like, married really young?

"Chill, Deli. He's absolutely single, and you can go after him without a guilty conscience."

I refused to show the amazing sense of relief I was feeling. "I'm not going after anybody," I denied with as much dignity as I could muster.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it's so."

"Even if I tell you that Lucian also explained your presence in our home by identifying you as his online-turned-real-time girlfriend from Australia and that you came here as an exchange student to be with him?"

"He what?" I shrieked and immediately lost control. Dyvian shouted my name as I fell down with horrendous speed.

"Dyvian," I screamed, shock and fear paralyzing my limbs.

When I opened my eyes, I was in the Chevaliers' garden, cradled in Lucian's arms, and Dyvian was breathing hard in front me, his face white.

"How could you have fainted?" Dyvian's tone was pained.

I'm in Lucian's arms. I could feel his heart beating fast against his hard chest. Underneath me, his arms were strong and gentle at the same time. *I'm in Lucian's arms.* Lucian tensed against me, and realizing that I was probably too heavy for him, I struggled to get up. A wave of dizziness hit me at my sudden movement.

Lucian's arms tightened. "Later." His voice was unusually rough.

"H-how—"

"You fainted. I caught you just in time and brought you home." Dyvian lifted a hand to his hair and I was surprised to see it shaking a little.

I looked up at Lucian, whose face was white in anxiety. “Did I seriously scare you two that much?”

“You lost your balance a hundred feet off the ground, Deli, and you fainted.” Dyvian shook his head. “How could you react—it’s like fainting just because an ant bit you!”

Now, I began to feel silly and ashamed. “I guess I’m just not used to, well, flying.”

“It’s good you understand that because from now on, I’m banning you from flying till you’ve had proper lessons,” Lucian informed me.

My jaw fell open. “Banned?”

“Yes. Banned. And no arguments.”

I studied the grimness in his face and decided that I might have a better chance of arguing with him when he wasn’t so—emotional. “Okay.”

Lucian’s eyes flashed. “And I won’t change my mind.”

I didn’t dignify that with an answer. “I think you can put me down now.”

Lucian didn’t say a word, but he slowly lowered me to the ground.

I swayed a bit, but I waved them away when they immediately moved to support me. “I can do this.”

Lucian crossed his arms against his chest. “Delilah?”

“Yeah?” I took one careful step forward and was satisfied when no dizziness assaulted my head.

“What made you lose your balance?”

I blinked several times, surprised at the question. And then his words hit me and I started to smile. I turned to Dyvian. He was whistling and he was looking up at the darkening sky like his life depended on finding the Big Dipper.

“You.”

Lucian stiffened. “Excuse me?”

My grin widened all the more. “Dyvian told me that you introduced me as your girlfriend.” I batted my lashes at him. “Honestly, Lucian, you could have told me first, don’t you think?”

A dull color spread throughout Lucian's beautifully shaped cheekbones. "I beg your pardon." His tone was so coldly polite that he could have dubbed for Prince Charles on television with no one the wiser. "The question had taken me by surprise during the school interview and it was the first thing that occurred to me."

I looked at him under my lashes. "Really, now?"

"Yes." His tone got even colder, "really." But his cheeks were still stained with color. "I also gave them all the necessary documents to prove that your parents had given me legal guardianship."

"You know, you could have just said she was our cousin or something," Dyvian suggested.

Lucian opened and closed his mouth.

Dyvian and I turned to each other and we immediately burst into laughter.

"I think your brother likes me," I confided in him.

"For God's sake."

Ignoring Lucian's outburst, Dyvian nodded and confirmed, "I think so, too."

The door slammed shut. Lucian walking out on us was fast becoming a familiar routine. I turned back to face Dyvian.

He smiled. "You like him, don't you?"

"I didn't plan to, and I didn't want to, but yeah, I think I do." Maybe I'd regret admitting this to myself, much less to someone else, but right now, after the latest fright I had, acknowledging my feelings for Lucian was gloriously liberating.

"But it's just a crush. I mean, I like him, but I'm not in love with him or anything." *I hope.*

"You will be."

I wrinkled my nose at how confident Dyvian sounded. "Will he?"

"Fall in love with you?"

I nodded.

Dyvian sighed. "I'm not sure, but if there's someone who could make him fall in love, it's definitely you."

I beamed. "Aww. You mean that?"

Dyvian returned my smile and said pleasantly, "Nope. I was just kidding." And then laughing, he strolled back to the house.

Stupid Chevalier brothers.

Chapter Five

I wasn't what you'd call an overachiever. I had simple goals in life and that didn't change when I turned Evren. For my first day of school, I only wanted to make new friends, have someone say I was pretty, and have a chance on the cheerleading squad. Surely, that wasn't so hard to achieve?

"You're going to be okay." Dyvian shook my shoulders a little too hard, his voice a little too jovial.

I gave him a worried look. "I know I am but are you?" It was the first day of school and Dyvian was in a strange mood, waking up early to eat breakfast with Lucian and me, and now he was acting like a dad about to give his daughter away.

He grimaced. Even with his sleep-tousled hair and sweat pants, Dyvian still managed to look better than most guys I knew. "I'm not actually sure. I just don't think you're ready to join humans yet."

Here we go again.

"News flash, Dyvian. I was human less than a month ago, remember? So, I don't see any reason why I won't be able to fit in just because I'm different inside."

I walked toward the framed mirror hanging on the wall near the doorway. I gazed critically at my reflection, making sure that my hair was all right. I'd chosen to wear a please-everyone outfit—pink Balmain top to get a nod from

the fashionistas, jeans for the no-nonsense dean's list peeps, and de Pinto black bracelets for the rockers. As the new girl in school, I didn't want to box myself in on my first day.

Dyvian followed with a sigh. "Just take care. I'll be in invisible form and—"

My eyes narrowed. "No. Swear to me you won't be like this invisible nanny, guarding my every move." Didn't he realize how weird that would make me feel? And didn't he understand how different I already was from the rest? I wasn't just the new girl in school. I was also the new girl in town living with two guys I'd known for less than a month, and I had a dragon for a soul. Didn't that simply scream weird?

Dyvian's normally carefree expression was still nowhere to be found. "Honestly, Dyvian, I'm a big girl now." Lucian walked in from the kitchen and I sought his support. "Right, Lucian?"

Again, there was this delicious feeling of excitement sweeping all over me at seeing Lucian. Unlike his younger brother, Lucian was already dressed. Still the usual outfit—same style, different color.

Lucian didn't answer me, but looked at Dyvian instead. "Just do what she says, Dyvian. It's her life."

The frown on Dyvian's face deepened, and he looked at Lucian like he didn't understand why Lucian wasn't backing him up. But he nodded and muttered, "Fine."

He was clearly unhappy, and I sought to cheer him up by teasing. "Besides, Dyv, if I really needed someone to guard me, I'd rather have my *boyfriend* with me—"

"Here you go." Lucian quickly cut me off as he took a couple of bills from his wallet and slipped them in my hand.

Dyvian's expression finally lightened and he started to chuckle. "You got a point. So, why shouldn't your *boyfriend*—"

“And here are the keys to your SUV,” Lucian interrupted in a hurry and pushed me none too gently outside the house. “Take care, have a great day at school.”

The door slammed shut and I stood there, gaping. Then I found myself smiling wistfully as I turned and walked toward the SUV. Lucian had just given me about a thousand dollars for my allowance and my own ride. I would have thought my life was perfect if only my sister wasn’t in a coma, my parents weren’t dead, and I wasn’t hiding away from a bunch of reptilian killers.

I squared my shoulders. But it was time to move on. Mom and Dad wouldn’t have liked me to dwell on the past. They’d rather have me pick up the pieces of my life and forge a new one. Going to school was the first step. Mastering my Evren abilities would follow, and later on, if ever the opportunity turned up, I thought it would be nice to kick some Zekan ass. I might not have been exceptionally smart and strong, but you didn’t have to be either to kill, did you?

~ ~ ~

Dyvian and Lucian didn’t warn me it would be this noisy. My head pounded as I tried to block the sounds invading my ears. The whispers of the girls sitting behind me seemed like words blared out in a megaphone, and it didn’t help to know that they were talking about me.

So far, they’d wondered if the designer shoes I was wearing were fake—they weren’t, and I only got them after winning in Monopoly against Dyvian. How many guys I’d slept with—none, unless I counted the time I really did just sleep next to Michael after almost having sex during prom night. If I really was Lucian’s girlfriend—another negative, unfortunately. And what Lucian Chevalier could have possibly seen in me—I wondered about this, too.

The school bell rang, and I winced because the sound almost made my eardrums crack.

Relax.

I stiffened in surprise when The Voice—I'd decided to give it a name to make it sound less frightening—spoke out of the blue. I still hadn't confided to either Dyvian or Lucian about it. I didn't want to find out that it was a hallucination and that my turning Evren might have made me insane.

And yes, it was another head-in-the-sand decision for me again.

The Voice still sounded like Lucian and I had also decided that was because he was the one person I trusted and relied on the most.

"You have to relax and take control of your senses. Then they'll automatically modulate the sounds for you."

I closed my eyes and willed myself to relax. The sounds faded little by little and I smiled. It was working. Thank God for—

"You're in my seat," a voice said coolly, followed right after by a swift hard kick to my shin.

I opened my eyes. If I were still human, I'm sure the kick would've hurt badly. But I was Evren and the kick landed on my skin like an inconsequential but pesky fly.

A tall, statuesque blonde in a glitzy blue dress and funky red sandals stared at me disdainfully, her expression mirrored by the small circle of girls surrounding her. The rest of the class watched in spellbound silence. Everyone's reaction—or lack of it—told me all I needed to know.

The blonde girl was the Queen—all schools had one. The Queen might or might not have a King, but one thing she did have was power.

I smiled brightly, certain I could smooth things between us. I had never had problems with anyone in my old school, and I didn't see why it had to change now. I stood giving a little wave of my fingers. "Hi. I didn't know you were—"

"Did I give this idiot any reason to think I wanted to hear what she has to say?"

"You so did not," Royal Servant Girl Number One trilled.

"Because honestly, I don't." She tried to shove me out of her way, scowled when I didn't even budge, and went round me instead to take her seat.

The Queen's nose lifted in the air before saying very clearly, "Loser." The other girls started shoving me as well and, shocked at being called the L-word, I let them have their way even though I could've held all of them back with my little finger.

Other kids in the room hastily looked away when they were in danger of meeting my stunned gaze.

This might be the understatement of the year, but I thought I had just received my first lesson in public humiliation.

The rest of the morning was barely better. If I wasn't being picked on by the Queen and her mindless, personality-deficient RS girls, I was being painfully and studiously ignored. Maybe Dyvian was right to be worried.

When lunch break came, I wasn't really feeling hungry, but I still forced my feet to head to the cafeteria, too proud to do anything else. The food they served was surprisingly good even though the choices were not as diverse as I had hoped. Wasn't Sanger High informed about the existence of low-fat yogurt, for instance, or pesto pasta?

Tray in hand, I paused a while to study the cafeteria. It was like living a scene straight out of a teen flick, and I played the usual underdog role. If I wanted this to end just like the movies—which meant winning over the entire school to my side and having a handsome guy in love with me in the end—the next thing I was supposed to do was look for the table where I could join social outcasts like me.

I spotted a match in seconds and headed toward it. With every step I took, the tables I passed were blanketed in silence, as if they had to concentrate real hard on me, hoping they'd find something new to gossip about.

I stubbornly focused my attention on my future friend, a slim redhead with creamy skin. She was exceedingly pretty, just as long as you didn't mind the multiple piercings in her left ear and her intimidating all-black attire. She sort of looked like a young Catherine Zeta Jones with red hair and Goth fashion taste.

There could be no doubt about her lack of popularity. She was alone at the table, sitting right next to the trash bins, and being stared at. Oh, yes, unpopular with a capital *U*. We were so going to bond.

“Hi!” I tried not to sound so perky but failed. I was just too excited at the opportunity of finally having a new friend in school. Being unpopular was honestly draining my energy. “Could we share?”

The girl looked up. Her eyes were a beautiful shade of blue. When she spoke, I detected a faint accent in her tone. “I don’t own the table.”

Taking that as a yes, I sat next to her and pretended to ignore her raised eyebrow. Maybe I was pushing it, sitting BFF close, but I just badly needed a friend. My sister used to say I had a pathological need to make friends. Maybe she was right, but surely feeling friendly all the time wasn’t that bad, right?

I unwrapped my ham and egg sandwich. “So, what’s your next class?”

“History.” She went back to ignoring me.

I tried again. “I’m new here, by the way. You can call me Deli—”

“—but your full name is Delilah Winters. You come from Australia and you live with the Chevalier brothers,” the redhead ended. “You pissed off Melissa, the much-revered cheerleader captain of Sanger High, because she’s been after Lucian forever so she made sure this morning everyone knows you’re not one of her favorite people in the world.”

“You know Lucian?”

“Everyone knows who Lucian *and* Dyvian are. They come into town, maybe, once a week and everything practically comes to a standstill. Everyone even knows that you like to help Dyvian with that rock garden of his.”

Stunned at how much she, and apparently the rest of the school, knew about me, I sat back and said weakly, “Nice to meet you.”

The other girl stared at me before a smile slowly formed on her lips. “I’m Audrey, by the way.”

“Hello, Audrey.”

The smile widened. “Hello, Deli.” And then she laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“You.” Audrey’s eyes twinkled and it just showed how desperate I was for a friend when I actually welcomed the sight even if it did mean I was glad about someone laughing at me.

“What did I do?”

“It’s more like what you’re not doing. I’ve just told you that the most powerful girl in school virtually wants you dead—”

“What’s new,” I muttered under my breath, thinking about the Zekans attempt to massacre my entire family. Really, was there something about me that made me an ideal murder victim?

Audrey frowned. “What did you say?”

“Err—nothing.” Stress over my current status allowed the cafeteria noise to get to me, making my head pound again. The clanging and banging of forks and spoons seemed as loud as claps of thunder. I willed myself to relax and eliminate everything but Audrey’s voice.

Audrey lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “Well, anyway, here you are, acting all bright and happy.”

I put my half-eaten sandwich down and took a gulp of my orange juice. “I’m not bright and happy.” I forced myself to take another bite of sandwich and almost gagged. Being unpopular made me lose my entire appetite. “I just think it’s pointless to worry. And anyway, I’m sure things will get better in time.”

“Sure.” She rolled her eyes.

I looked at her curiously. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What made you one of her least-favorite people in the world, too?”

Audrey’s mouth tightened. “Oh, that.”

Immediately regretting my impulsive question, I hastened to assure her, “You don’t have to answer. Who cares if we’re both unpopular, right?”

“*You do*,” The Voice pointed out resignedly.

“Hush,” I responded mentally. “*It’s not polite to butt in when you’re not being spoken to.*” I turned my attention back to Audrey and was relieved to see the hard expression on Audrey’s face easing a little.

“I guess.” After a few moments, she said slowly, “But I don’t think it would hurt to let you know.”

“You don’t have to—”

“You’ll find out sooner or later anyway. Everyone knows about it.”

I didn’t know what else to say to that so I simply kept quiet.

Audrey finished the last bite of her burger and wiped her mouth with tissue before speaking again. “It happened last year. I was going out with Matthew—he’s a jock. I’ll point out the jerk to you when I see him. I was totally shocked when he asked me to be his girlfriend. I wasn’t exactly Ms. Popular even back then, with how I look and, you know, how *different* I was. But then I found out about his little hobby so I had to break up with him.”

“He’s dating behind your back?”

“He’s doing drugs.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed.” Irony tinged her words. “A social user I might tolerate but he couldn’t even pee without snorting a gram. So, I dumped him. His ego couldn’t handle it so he decided to tell the whole town I was a slut and the one with a hidden stash in my bedroom.” Audrey’s fingers curled. “The idiot was pretty thorough, actually. He even managed to hide a packet in my drawer—”

I impulsively took her hand, saying earnestly, “There must be a way to convince people—”

Audrey snatched her hand away, releasing a bitter laugh. “When my own parents believed him? They saw the stash and that was it.”

My mouth opened and closed. An uncomfortable moment of silence elapsed. “If it’s worth anything, I believe you. And if there’s any way I could help—”

“I’d appreciate it if you have your Chevaliers beat the hell out of Matthew,” Audrey quipped right away.

The tension between us broke and I giggled just as Audrey's lips formed a tiny smile. "Just you point me in the right direction and I'll have them kick his ass."

The school bell rang then, and thanks to The Voice's training and Audrey's company, the sound barely hurt my ears. Audrey and I had the second period after lunch together so we decided to meet up in the hallway in an hour. Audrey headed to her history class while I proceeded to the music room.

It was a relief to see that neither the Queen nor her ladies were present. Music was tolerable as long as I exerted enough effort not to let the shrill notes from string instruments get to me. Trigonometry with Audrey was a blast. The rest of the afternoon was fine. But just when I started to think everything was going to be all right, the Queen came back to ruin my mood.

Someone had slashed my tires and was thoughtful enough to stick a note under my wiper.

Welcome to Sanger High, bitch.

"Back atcha," I mumbled, still a bit shell-shocked that someone would go this far just to let me know they didn't like me. Couldn't a text message do for them?

Footsteps from behind made me whirl around, surprising the guy walking toward me from the edge of the parking lot and disconcerting even me because I still wasn't used to how good my hearing was these days. When I paid attention, that was.

"Problems?"

I gazed at him warily, the varsity jacket making him a potential RS boy. He could even be the detested Matthew, for all I knew.

He whistled when he caught sight of the tires. "That's bad."

"You think?"

His sheepish smile just made his attractive face cuter. "Do you need help?"

I debated with myself and for once, I decided to listen to my head. "It's okay, I can take care of this." I couldn't let myself trust him. Well, at least not yet and not so soon.

He gave me a doubtful look. "Sure?"

I made my smile more reassuring. "Yes, but thanks for the offer."

He dug his hands in his pockets, not seemingly inclined to leave. "You're the new girl in school, right?"

I found myself smiling again. "You really don't know?"

He laughed. "All right, I know. You're Deli, right?"

"Yup." I gave him a questioning look.

"Wesley." He hesitated, shifting on his feet. "I guess I better go."

It was then I realized in absolute surprise that he liked me. Or maybe the better word was that he was attracted to me. And he didn't know what to do about it—either because of my run-in with Melissa or the fact that I was supposed to be Lucian's girlfriend.

"You got that right," The Voice said grimly.

I ignored that and smiled at Wesley. "See you tomorrow."

"Really?" Wesley coughed. "I mean, right. See you tomorrow in school." He began walking away backward. "Sorry about your tires. Are you sure—"

"It's being taken care of," I lied even though I still had no idea how to get home. When Wesley left, my despondency returned and I stared at the tires in frustration. It was only half past five, but the school's parking lot was nearly deserted.

"I'm curious. How are you going to take care of it?"

I spun around in a gasp.

Dyvian grinned while Lucian simply gazed at me quizzically upon asking the question.

And without knowing why, I burst into tears.

"Deli." Dyvian was quick to panic.

I cried harder. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We were worried about you," Dyvian answered.

A pair of arms slowly came around me. I looked up and met Lucian's wry smile. "Bad day?" His tone was still clinical, but this time, I knew him well enough to hear the slight thread of concern in it.

A teary laugh escaped me. "Not very, but it could have been better...and I like to cry. You know that."

"I want to comfort Deli, too," Dyvian declared almost plaintively and promptly pushed Lucian away to hug me so tightly my ribs were in danger of cracking.

That effectively put a stop to my tears and I burst into laughter.

Dyvian pulled away, grinning. He ruffled my hair. "Feel better now?"

"Quite. But the car—"

"Is being taken care of," Lucian deadpanned.

My face scrunched into a grimace.

"A mechanic's on the way. We called him while you were busy flirting with the football dude," Dyvian explained.

"I wasn't flirting." I tiptoed to kiss both brothers on the cheek.

"Thanks." Dyvian took it in stride, but Lucian again froze when my lips made contact. I hid a smile and said brightly, "So, how do we get home?"

"We walk."

I laughed. "No, really—"

"No, really, we walk." Dyvian's cheerful voice began to grate on my nerves.

"You honestly don't mean that, right?"

Lucian raised a brow. "What's wrong with walking?"

I couldn't believe he even had to ask. I stuck one foot out. "Look," I demanded. "Don't you see what I'm wearing?"

"They're very nice," Lucian said politely.

"They're not just nice. These are Jeffrey Campbell shoes, Lucian. Do you understand what that mean?"

"Jeffrey Campbell made them. So?"

I clutched my chest, unable to believe he could be so disrespectful about my shoes. “His shoes are so limited you’d have to sell your soul for them.” I raised affronted eyes to meet his. Lucian’s forest green eyes were still to die for, but their mesmerizing effect was temporarily muted by the sheer horror of his words.

“You can’t make me walk all the way home. You’re going to ruin them!”

“It’s not like we’re going to make you walk all the way to Kansas, Dorothy,” Dyvian teased.

“Ha-ha.” I shook my head. “I’m not going to walk.” Then my face brightened. “Why don’t we just fl—” Lucian’s hand immediately clapped over my mouth.

“Remember where you are.” He directed a meaningful gaze toward the other town folk loitering in the area. All of them were staring at us in great interest but quickly looked away upon meeting my gaze.

“You’ve been too at ease already with using words you should never speak outside home.”

Lucian took his hand away and I nodded. “Sorry. But can’t we do that instead?” I insisted in a whisper this time.

“Haven’t you forgotten? You’re grounded.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, come on. You didn’t really mean it—”

“He did,” Dyvian chanted gleefully. “Really mean it.”

“*Lucian.*”

“If you don’t walk home with us, that’s your choice.” Lucian turned his back and began walking away. Dyvian simply shrugged and turned to walk away, too.

“You don’t mean that,” I cried out.

“I have to follow what big bro says, sorry.” Dyvian tossed the words over his shoulder.

Lucian didn’t even bother to answer.

I began to walk. “I won’t forget this, Lucian.”

Still no answer.

Gritting my teeth, I thought hard about how I could get back at Lucian, and after a while, I knew what I had to do. “I’ll also make sure everyone knows what a bad *boyfriend* you are to me.”

Lucian stumbled, which was enough for me.

Chapter Six

My second day of school, even if I didn't actually get to class, taught me a valuable lesson—never ever let anything lull you into thinking Evren life could be in any way normal.

Breakfast was the typical Chevalier affair. Lucian pondered the state of the economy, Dyvian ate his food like there was no tomorrow, while I fussed over the way I looked.

"I have a question," I declared after joining them at the dining table. I took a slice of toast and told myself I wouldn't touch anything else on the table. Lucian's cooking was delicious—too delicious, actually, making it hard for me to maintain my weight. Although Dyvian told me Evren didn't gain weight the way humans did, I wasn't taking any chances.

"Shoot," Dyvian garbled out while munching on a strip of bacon. Once again, half of his face was hidden behind a pile of food. The mouthwatering feast tempted me to ignore my weight goals.

Turning away from the invitation to sin, I doggedly bit my way through my toast—whole wheat, bland, but utterly safe. "Lucian told everyone I'm from Australia. But I don't sound Australian, do I? What if people start noticing?"

Dyvian's twirled his fork around. "That is a bit of a problem."

I glanced at Lucian, expecting him to have a solution. He always did. He was reading the business papers—again—but I had no doubt he was listening to our conversation at the same time.

“Well?” I pulled his Financial Times down so I could see his face and enjoy the beauty of his forest green eyes.

Not that I'd ever tell him his eyes are beautiful. Teasing Lucian about crushing on me was one thing, but having him know about my crush on him was another, and one of the X-Files-Don't-Ever-Speak-Of-It variety.

A small smile played on Lucian's lips then. It made him so much cuter. The smile widened. I frowned. What in the world could be in Financial Times that would make him smile like that? Curiosity temporarily wiped out the niggling issue of my so-called-Australian identity. “What are you smiling about?”

The smile vanished and Lucian coughed. “Nothing.”

My eyes met Dyvian's in mutual suspicion. “Oh, wait. I think I know what it is.” When Lucian glanced at me in wary astonishment, I became convinced of the accuracy of my hunch.

Lucian took a drink of his coffee. “What is it then?”

“You hit the jackpot with your stock investments.” I flashed a triumphant smile. “Didn't you?”

Lucian's lovely eyes blinked, stared, and gleamed. “You could say that I've hit the jackpot, I guess.” Another smile started tugging at his lips, and I decided he was laughing at himself for being silly enough to think he could keep something like that from me.

Dyvian and I gave each other hi-fives. “Told you I knew.”

“He doesn't usually keep things like that a secret though,” Dyvian remarked.

I had figured the answer to that, too, and I answered before Lucian could. “Because he still doesn't want to give us any reason to celebrate in Vegas.” I rolled my eyes and turned to Lucian. “Right?” I had been pestering Lucian to let me go to Vegas—what was the point of being in Nevada if you could never go

to Sin City?—and Dyvian had been supporting my side just to annoy his brother.

Lucian, who had opened his mouth to speak earlier on, closed it and simply nodded. The gleam in his eyes had turned into a full-fledged twinkle, and by now, his gorgeousness had reached the eye-popping level.

My breath hitched but I quickly willed it back to a normal pace. Drat. I had to stop hyperventilating every time Lucian did something more than blink. With Evren hearing so good, I was sure one of these days, either Lucian or Dyvian would notice how my breathing tended to race when Lucian was around—add one and one, and come up with a hugely embarrassing two.

The thought was enough to make me shudder.

“Are you all right, Deli? You’re breathing rather fast.” Lucian’s perusing gaze landed on me with razor-like precision.

I choked on the toast and reached for my milk. I tilted the glass all the way up to cover my face and used all my power to stop my cheeks from reddening.

The last drop of milk vanished, and I lost my excuse for avoiding Lucian’s gaze. “I-I’m okay. Just—worried about the Australian thing.”

Dyvian settled his elbows on the table and clasped his fingers under his chin, his eyes narrowing. That wasn’t good. Of all the times for Dyvian to pay attention to something besides his self-indulgent pursuits, why did it have to be now?

“There’s something you’re not telling me here. I don’t believe that’s the only thing you’re worried about—”

“It is,” Lucian and I insisted at the same time, his voice curt while mine sounded defensive.

All three of us looked at each other in shock.

Incredible. Lucian had taken *my* side?

Lucian was the first to recover. His face took on its usual unreadable mask and he nodded to me. “If you don’t leave now, you’ll be late for school.”

A glance at my watch confirmed his words and I stood up quickly. “I’m off then.”

“You two are hiding something from me,” Dyvian muttered.

“It’s nothing,” Lucian and I once again responded simultaneously.

The three of us shared another moment of body-freezing shock, with a mixture of suspicion—Dyvian’s, confusion—mine, and irritation—Lucian’s.

“See?” Dyvian broke the silence as he stood up. “You two never agree on anything, and now you’re saying the same thing at the same time? You guys are officially keeping a secret from me, and I intend to find out what it is.” On his way out, Dyvian made a sudden about-face, and he slapped a hand on his forehead. “Damn. I can’t believe I didn’t think of this.”

He knows, oh, my God, he—

“You guys are secretly going out, and you don’t want me to harass you about it.”

“No,” I yelped while the word rolled out from Lucian’s tongue dispassionately. But we still spoke at the same time.

Dyvian’s grin widened. “I rest my case.”

“It’s not like that,” Lucian bit out as his brother turned away, whistling, but Dyvian didn’t even miss a beat.

I scowled at Dyvian’s back. If he kept teasing Lucian like this, there was no way Lucian would ever confess that he liked me. And he liked me, he did! I could feel it. But I was willing to concede that maybe he hadn’t accepted the truth yet.

Lucian faced me and I forgot all about my consternation with Dyvian as embarrassment surged forward. Was I being too obvious about how much I liked him?

“You’ll be late if you don’t start moving.” He cleared the table, scooping up the dirty dishes like a pro.

I jumped to my feet to help him but he waved me away. “It’s okay.”

Lucian moving around in the kitchen with impressive finesse that always seemed surreal, and I teased, “Tell me honestly. Have you never thought of

yourself as uncool for always having to be the one to cook and do the housekeeping?”

“Dyvian would end up burning the whole house down if I left him in charge.” He began loading the dishwasher. “You’ll be late,” he said for the third time.

“Sheesh. I can take a hint when someone wants me to leave.” I grabbed my school bag, feeling ridiculously wistful at the thought of leaving Lucian. I hesitated, then grinning, I skipped to Lucian and tapped him on the shoulder. Dyvian teasing Lucian was bad, but me teasing Lucian was fun.

He twisted halfway and glanced at me questioningly.

I puckered my lips. “No goodbye kisses for your girlfriend?”

“I heard that,” Dyvian shouted laughingly from the living room.

“Out.” Lucian glared, pointing to the doorway.

Laughing, I left the house feeling much better. He liked me, he really, really did.

It was a normal—and beautiful—start for the day, like I told you. It’s probably why I never imagined that ten minutes later I’d be careening off the highway and fighting for my life.

T-Pain and Akon were singing from my car’s radio when a lunatic suddenly blocked the road.

I slammed on the brakes and held on to the wheel for life. Not the world’s most experienced driver—nor the best person to be with during emergencies—I could only scream and pray silently for rescue as the car spun out of control.

The seconds ticked off until I finally crashed against a tree head on. If not for the seatbelt, I’d have been thrown out of the seat at the ferocious impact.

A tearing sound of metal from above penetrated my badly jarred brain. I looked up and gaped as a pair of hands tore the roof of the SUV away.

This is so not normal. The words pounded my brain over and over, and I shakily worked on unclasping my seatbelt. But then again, how could I ever let

myself think that being Evren was normal? I threw the door open and fell out of the car just as the roof of the SUV made one last ear-splitting shriek.

Never, ever look back. It was the one thing I learned from watching horror flicks. I ran as fast as I could but someone—something—gripped my hair painfully, pulling me back, and I screamed, struggling wildly.

A man with flashing red eyes—the lunatic who thought standing in the middle of the highway was a safe mode of entertainment—grinned at me, a long curling tongue striking out from his parted lips. He saw me shudder and tightened his hold, making me cry out involuntarily.

“It’s nice to see you again.”

Again?

“The pleasure’s all yours.” Ignoring my thudding heartbeat, I struggled to remember if I’d had the misfortune to meet him in the past.

He sniffed. “You smell different.”

Oh, God, how gross could he be? Couldn’t he be polite enough not to let me know he wanted me for lunch? Close to hysterics, I wondered whether he’d been raised to be a cannibal or if he was, like, a product of genetic mutation or inbreeding and no one ever taught him that it was bad manners to eat one of his own.

Another painful wrench of my head and then he was twisting my arms behind my back, followed by more disgusting sniffing.

I flinched and tried to push myself back against his hold to avoid the sickening contact of his wet, wrinkling nose.

“Different but familiar,” he continued in a terrifyingly conversational tone. Violence, apparently, was nothing new to him.

“Would you taste just as good, I wonder?” Whatever he was, he did have good diction, but it just made him scarier. He reminded me of Hannibal Lecter, only he was younger and uglier.

Bile rose in my throat when I saw the hunger and depravation in his eyes. This was one sick creature—no way could he be human with that snake-like

tongue of his—and I had no idea if that hurt or helped my chances of surviving. But one thing was clear to me now—he didn't know I was Evren.

He grinned in pleasure when he saw the revulsion in my face. "Don't you remember who I am?" He leaned close and even though I tried my best to lean away, he held me immobile with his grip. Tears of helpless frustration and revolt stung my eyes at the wet swipe of his tongue on my cheek.

"Don't you know what I am?"

His question broke through my haze of panic and confusion. A terrible sense of recognition mixed with fear gripped my heart when I realized exactly what I was dealing with.

Zekan.

His cruel laugh filled the air, and he obviously rejoiced in seeing my horror. "Yes," he whispered, flicking his tongue on my cheek again even as I renewed my struggles.

"The insects told you what we are, didn't they?"

Insects? He was calling Lucian and Dyvian insects? Zekans referred to Evren as insects? Wait a minute, they were calling me an insect, too?

I laughed. I couldn't help it, even though fear was still squeezing my heart.

The sound surprised and incensed him, and he slapped me hard on the cheek.

My cheek flamed in pain, but I kept on laughing. His anger revealed a chink in his armor. I had to provoke him more. It was my only chance to escape. "Insects? When was the last time you checked the mirror, *worm?*" Did he think he was the only one good at name-calling?

The redness of his eyes darkened in hatred. It made me pause because I couldn't think of any reason he should hate me. Besides the worm thing, that was. But I pushed the distracting thought away almost as soon it occurred. Understanding was for later. Now was all about surviving.

The moment I had been waiting for all throughout our exchange came when he lifted his hand to strike me again. I closed my eyes and used all my effort to turn myself invisible like Lucian and Dyvian taught me.

Ice sheathed my skin, and I had never been so glad to feel cold. The Zekan cursed just as I jerked free from his hold. I had deliberately goaded him, hoping he'd be provoked into hitting me and leaving even just one of my wrists free.

"*Lucian,*" my mind cried out helplessly and I began running again. It was silly and stupid to cry for him, I knew, but my mind didn't seem to understand that. "*Help me.*"

"*What is it,*" The Voice demanded. I almost stumbled in shock. But crazy or not, I was too desperate to mind that I was conversing with a voice inside my head. Who knew? It could have been an undiscovered power of the Generation X of Evren.

"*It is,*" The Voice didn't hesitate to confirm for me.

"*It is? Why didn't you tell me sooner? Do you know how worried I've been about my sanity? Do you—*"

"*Delilah, concentrate. What's happening?*"

Oh, right. "*A Zekan attacked me, I'm on the run, and I'm invisible.*"

"*Where are you?*"

I told The Voice my location and tripped on a blasted cactus right after. A *cactus*. Its needles pierced through my skin. Blood slowly tricked out, and I gasped at the stinging sensation enveloping my legs.

Something hit me from behind, and I looked up just in time to see the Zekan trip on my invisible body and fall on top of me. I scrambled away but the Zekan was no idiot and his hands swiped and scratched, trying to take hold of whatever invisible limb of mine he could grab.

I kicked wildly, but he still caught hold of my leg.

The Zekan laughed at hearing my shriek.

"*What's happening?*" the Voice demanded.

Unable to shake my leg free, I took a deep breath, then used all my strength to punch the Zekan in the face. It was enough to have his face snap to the other side, but not enough to loosen his grip. *Damn, damn, damn.*

The Zekan spit at me, and I almost groaned as a pool of saliva landed on my neck. It was official—Zekans were the grossest things on earth, and they fought dirty, too.

“Had enough?” he yelled, his arm clawing roughly in the air to take better hold of me as I worked on wriggling out of his grasp.

“*Delilah,*” The Voice growled, but I couldn’t answer. Taking another deep breath, I decided on another tack and bit my attacker on the wrist as hard as I could.

He tasted just as bad as I feared, and his skin had a slightly rubbery texture to it. But the ploy succeeded, and he grunted in pain and surprise, his grip loosening a bit as his body automatically reared back. It gave me the perfect opportunity to kick him where it would hurt most. I took the opportunity, of course.

He let go of me completely, and I got to my feet and ran again, this time making sure there were no life-threatening cactuses in my way.

“*Delilah, focus on an image of Lucian, and he’ll know what’s happening.*”

I focused on an image of Lucian right away, and even though I was busy running for my life, my fashion-obsessed brain couldn’t avoid lingering a little on choosing the clothes he’d wear. He’d look good in a pinstriped suit. And Italian shoes—

“*That’s enough, Delilah,*” The Voice said dryly.

I almost blushed until I remembered that The Voice wasn’t Lucian. It only sounded like him. And that, I decided, was something I really had to figure out later—among other things.

The Zekan’s curses were all I needed to hear to know he was still dangerously close behind me. Evren were fast, but Zekans were apparently just as fast. Their hearing was just as good, too, because even though I

swerved in all directions to confuse him, the Zekan used the sound of my passage to follow my trail.

Common sense urged me to fly but my mind recoiled at the thought. I didn't have enough confidence in my flying abilities. What if I took too much time adjusting my body mass? The Zekan might catch me before I could even lift myself an inch off the ground. And since neither Lucian nor Dyvian had taught me how to conjure my dragon, having the Zekan's ass whooped by my inner Evren sidekick was out of the question, too.

My strength showed signs of flagging, warning me about the little time I had left before I wouldn't be able to continue running. I definitely shouldn't have acted weight-obsessed this morning and stuck with whole-wheat toast when there were so many protein-rich foods on the table.

But the moment I stopped running, the Zekan would catch me.

Should I just face him and hope to God I can fight him off till Lucian and Dyvian can come save me?

"No," The Voice commanded forcefully, but it was too late. And even if it hadn't been, I wouldn't have listened anyway.

Lift leg, curl, and kick. I made the move just like they did in the movies, and it was brilliant. Caught by surprise, the Zekan was an even more vulnerable target for my second and more powerful kick. He toppled to the ground, and it would have been a TKO if only for one thing.

My skin heated up, shedding off my invisibility with it.

"Shit," I whispered as I almost dropped to my knees. My Hollywood moves had completely drained me of energy.

It was too late for me to run away, but of course, I still tried. A stranglehold on my ankle was all it took to defeat me. I lost my balance, crashing face down on the ground, smashing my nose. A drop of blood trickled past my lips.

"You're not getting away this time," he snarled, throwing himself at me.

I rolled away and hastened to my feet. “That’s what you—” He flung himself at me again, and I twisted away, knowing all the while I had twisted a second too late.

Chapter Seven

I never considered myself bloodthirsty. When my ex-boyfriend, Michael, made me watch the last Rambo movie, I sobbed my eyes out while everyone else in the theater yelled as heads and limbs splattered the ground in the midst of war. Sure, the good guys had reason to kill, but I still didn't understand how they could have stomachached killing anyone. It was different now, of course.

The attack never happened.

I slammed into something hard, and I almost wept, certain that, somehow, the Zekan had been able to maneuver himself ahead of me. How could it end this way? I did everything I could do to be like those fighter chicks in the movie. Granted, I wasn't resourceful like Lara Croft—that woman could turn a paper plane into an F-16 with a yard of copper wire—but I had done my best and it was unfair—

“Deli, it's me. You're safe now.”

“Dyvian?” I tried to look up, but he tightened his hold and kept my face hidden against his chest.

“Lucian's fighting and when you've got a Zekan on the other side of the ring, it's bound to be messy.” His voice was gruff with worry. “Are you okay?”

I burst into tears.

“*Deli.*” Awkward helplessness lined Dyvian's tone. The grip of his hold tightened and loosened, as if he was itching to set me away but he was

valiantly determined to keep me close while the weirdly silent battle behind me raged on.

Endless minutes passed before Dyvian spoke again. “It’s over.” That made me start on another round of crying, prompting him to panic. “What’s wrong now?”

“Check the perimeter for any witness, Dyvian.” Lucian issued the command as he strolled into view, calm as you please. His slightly messed-up hair was the only evidence of what he must have gone through. But besides that, he was the Lucian I’d always known—aloof, powerful, and gorgeous.

“Sure thing.” Dyvian didn’t even bother hiding his eagerness to leave me and my tears, having ascertained I was physically fine. He walked away, and a gust of air was the only indication of his invisible take-off.

Lucian slowly looked at me.

I didn’t hesitate.

He caught me in his arms without a word and being that close to him brought about another wave of tears. The smell of charred flesh told me what had become of the Zekan and I shuddered.

He cupped my cheeks. The tension etched on his handsome face didn’t surprise me, but the pallor of his skin did. I couldn’t imagine Lucian being so worried about me.

“I was terrified something had happened to you,” he revealed. I was stunned to see his hand shaking.

My heart flipped. “I’m okay now. Thanks to—”

He shook his head. “No.” He disagreed so strongly I was taken aback. “I should’ve known this would happen. I should’ve thought—” He stopped talking and stared at me in frustration. “Deli, there’s something I should have told you. I—”

Another slight gust of wind blew past us and then Dyvian materialized into view. “The coast is clear.”

Lucian stepped back from me so quickly I almost lost my balance.

Dyvian raised a brow. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No.”

One glance at Lucian’s closed face told me I’d never know the rest of what he had to say. I suppressed a groan of frustration. Had he been about to confess to worrying because he liked me?

“We’re lucky,” Dyvian continued. “At this time of the day, people are rarely around. In fact, you can even—”

“Oh no, no, don’t even think about it. I’m definitely not going to school today.”

“No one’s making you,” Lucian assured me with a slight smile, for once, the usual clinical quality of his voice replaced with something tender. “He’s probably just thinking about how close-knit Sanger is.”

He nodded to Dyvian. “Just call the principal and make an excuse.”

Dyvian was already fishing his mobile phone out of his pocket. He spoke less than a minute, but his tone oozed with practiced charm. When the call ended, he grinned. “All done. I told the principal that you two are getting hitched in Vegas.”

Lucian gave his brother a stoic look while I didn’t know whether to start jumping for joy. Then he scowled, which was bewildering. What did I do?

“Be serious, will you?” he snapped.

“I didn’t say anything,” I protested, hoping all the while my face wasn’t giving anything away. So, I sort of entertained the idea of getting hitched in Vegas. Surely, he didn’t know that?

Dyvian was gesturing toward something behind my back. “We do need to go to Vegas for that.”

Following his gaze, I turned around and was startled into a gasp.

My day-old SUV was barely recognizable with crushed metal for a bumper and an improvised, hand-torn sunroof.

A low moan of dismay escaped my lips.

“It’s okay.” Lucian dismissed it with a wave of his hand.

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from my car. “But—”

“I hit the jackpot in the stock market, remember? I can afford to get it fixed.” He shrugged. “Or we can get a new one and—”

“I’d rather have it fixed,” I interrupted, feeling sentimentally attached.

“So we go to Vegas and get it fixed?” Dyvian prompted. “Anywhere else could raise questions.”

“What about Pahrump?” Lucian inquired.

Dyvian groaned. “I knew you’d say that.” He gave me a beseeching look, his eyes adopting a lost puppy expression and the corners of his lips turning down. “Come on, Deli. Tell Lucian you need the bright lights of Vegas to help you get through your ordeal.”

Now that he said it, maybe that was just what I needed. I didn’t really feel like going home yet. I had the urge to cleanse myself first, to wait for the memories to fade before returning home.

“I do feel like going somewhere...”

Lucian’s scowl gradually melted into a resigned sigh. “Just this once, I suppose.”

Dyvian whooped. He winked at me, saying, “You were right, Deli. You do have him wrapped around your little finger.” His words made me laugh, and I relaxed even more as Lucian responded in his usual biting fashion. As long as I got to be with Lucian and Dyvian, I could somehow convince myself that things would turn out right in the end.

~ ~ ~

Secrecy was of the essence. My eyes perpetually scanned the area for possible witnesses. We were the only ones living in this part of Sanger, but we didn’t want to take any chances. Behind me, Lucian had turned Evren, gathering all the wreckage with a sweep of his invisible tail before setting everything on fire.

By the time the Chevaliers’ pickup rumbled into view, with Dyvian behind the wheel, everything had been reduced to cinders. He hooked the SUV

to the pickup while Lucian got in the passenger seat next to him and I climbed into the back seat.

We had been driving for a few minutes when I finally broke the silence. “He told me we met before. I’ve been thinking about it and I realize he could be one of the guys who attacked us that night. Couldn’t he?”

Dyvian’s worried gaze checked my expression through the rearview mirror. “You’ve only stopped crying yourself to sleep—”

“I *want* to know if he’s one of them.”

“Yes.” Lucian spoke without looking at me.

“Then I’m glad you’ve killed him.” Tears of helpless anger trailed down my cheeks. “I wish I could’ve killed him myself. Any Zekan would do.”

“You might still have a chance to do that.”

“What?” Dyvian’s tone was sharp in his surprise.

“Deli’s attacker was no ordinary Zekan. The kind of heat we have here in Sanger could’ve easily crippled most Zekans, but your attacker hadn’t seemed bothered by it. By my estimate, he seemed to have been a middle official of their race.”

“A middle official? They think I’m so hard to kill they sent a middle official—”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but they most likely sent a middle official because they considered you an important target and not because they think you’re, err, indestructible. Also, I believe they wanted to capture you alive.”

“Oh, suuuure. He so wanted me alive he gave me these bruises to keep me safe.”

“But did he try to bite you?”

I gaped. “Why would he bite me? You didn’t tell me Zekans were vampires—”

Lucian twisted in his seat to make sure I received the full impact of his exasperated frown. “For the last time, Deli, enough with the vampires. They do not have exclusive rights to biting. Snakes bite, don’t they? So do Zekans.

Their venom is also a hundred times more deadly. It has been so since they discovered drinking human blood made their poison more potent.”

“So, you’re saying Zekans aren’t just half-snakes but vampire wannabes as well? And the more they kill, the more poisonous they get?”

“Your obsession with vampires—” Lucian began darkly.

“That’s so unfair.” I cut him off with a groan. “It’s like rewarding bad guys for being...bad.”

“*Did* he try to bite you, Deli?” Dyvian burst out.

“Like I’d let him.”

“Humans die from one bite, but it would take a couple to kill an Evren. The Zekan attacking you probably thought you were still human. As your body’s still adjusting, you still wouldn’t smell like Evren to him. And because he thought you were human—”

“He didn’t risk biting me,” I finished, numb once more with shock. Did I have the words “kill me” stamped on my forehead that only Zekans could see?

Dyvian shook his head. “Do you have any idea why they seem so keen on getting Deli?”

“Not at the moment, but I will find out. Trust me on that, Deli.”

I sniffed back tears. “I do. And I just can’t thank both of you enough for helping me.” I scooted forward to kiss Dyvian on the cheek.

“Chill, big bro,” he said when I moved away. “Deli’s not my type.”

I caught sight of a fleeting scowl on Lucian’s face. It made me smile. “Yes, no need to worry. Dyv’s totally not my type either.”

“I have no idea what both of you are talking about,” Lucian said dispassionately. He leaned back in his seat and turned toward the window, staring at the scenery like he had never seen a desert in his entire life.

Eager to lose myself in humor and forget about all the bad stuff, even temporarily, I bit back a smile as I let my fingers walk on Lucian’s shoulders. “You fit the bill of my ideal guy, though.”

He swatted my fingers away. “Stop talking nonsense.”

Dyvian and I succumbed to laughter.

“You two have gone insane.”

That got his brother laughing harder, but all his talk about nonsense and insanity made me remember another issue, one that had made me seriously doubt my own sanity...till today. “Lucian? Did The Voice tell you I was in danger?”

“The voice?” Dyvian echoed.

Lucian made a strangling noise while pulling on the collar of his shirt. “The Voice?”

I smiled knowingly. “No point denying it, Lucian. The Voice told me you can hear him—it—too. Don’t you?”

“Ah, yes.” Lucian seemed to have a hard time meeting Dyvian’s eyes or mine.

Poor guy. He was probably still struggling with the same doubts I had about my sanity. “It’s okay, Lucian. You’re *not* crazy. The Voice is real.”

“Will somebody please tell me what’s going on?” Dyvian demanded.

I was more than eager to explain. “It’s a new ability of Evren, Dyv.”

“A what?”

“Deli,” Lucian groaned in a pained tone.

I scooted forward again to squeeze his shoulder in sympathy. “I know, Lucian. It’s hard to adjust to, but you will in time.” I met Dyvian’s questioning eyes through the rearview mirror and, adopting a professor-like tone, I explained, “It’s like this, Dyvian. You’re like Evren version 1.0 and I’m Evren version 2.0 so I have better features so to speak.”

Dyvian smirked. “And you think Lucian believes—”

“Of course, he does!” I spoke up before Lucian could even open his mouth. “Because he hears it, too.”

“Riiight. One question, though—hasn’t it occurred to you that if I’m what you call Evren version 1.0,” his voice made it obvious he was still smarting at the term since Dyvian hated anything that made him less than fashionable, “then Lucian would qualify as something like Evren version zero, don’t you think? He’s older than me, after all.”

I hated it when people came up with smart points like that and I had no back-up answer. “Well,” I stalled and looked outside my window for inspiration. The road sign at my right told me that we were just minutes away from Vegas, but I didn’t know how that could help me.

“It’s because I made her.” Lucian was also staring at the scenery outside when he said the words. I guess the scenery was of more help to him than it was to me. “That’s why I share this, ah, new ability of hers.” His voice was low and strained. Poor, poor guy.

“Because you were the one who turned her Evren? You’re saying you have this special connection to her, and that’s why you can hear this voice as well?”

“Yes,” I answered when Lucian didn’t seem inclined to speak.

“What does it sound like?” Dyvian glanced back at me, his brows furrowed in suspicion.

Lucian stiffened in response just about the same time I froze in my seat. Was this the right time to admit about The Voice sounding like Lucian? “Well,” I stammered.

“Lucian?” Dyvian insisted. “What does it sound like?”

Lucian cleared his throat, and I knew right away he was hiding something.

And then it hit me. Oh, my God, what if Lucian’s Voice sounded like mine? What if The Voice borrowed the one you’re destined to fall in love with or something like that?

But my attention veered away from the possibility when in front me, Lucian’s shoulders suddenly jerked. “Are you okay?” I asked right away, worried that his fight with the Zekan might have done him more damage than he had let on.

“Alien,” Lucian barked out, startling Dyvian and me. He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “It sounds very, ahh, very much like an alien, the words all garbled up.”

“Oh.” Since I very well knew I didn’t sound like an alien, Lucian’s response definitely killed my theory.

“How about yours, Deli?”

“Something like that, too,” I lied, still feeling dispirited.

Dyvian was slowing down to drive into a crowded automobile service center. “This is me then,” he declared as he unlocked the doors. “I’ll take care of things from here and meet up with you later on at—” Already halfway out of the car, Dyvian turned to raise a brow at Lucian.

“Caesars Palace, probably,” Lucian replied after a moment. “As we’re here, we might as well enjoy it.”

Dyvian grinned. “Now, we’re talking.”

Watch me, I mouthed to Dyvian before gushing, “Oh, Lucian, you mean it?” and throwing my arms around him from the backseat.

Dyvian didn’t even blink. “I’ll leave you guys to celebrate in private.” He walked away, whistling.

“Deli.” In spite of Lucian’s even tone, the threat in his voice was unmistakable.

I released him, laughing. I could sense the memories of this morning fade, losing their tormenting sharpness, and I laughed even louder. Lucian and I got out of the car. I moved to Lucian’s evacuated seat while he went around the pick-up to take the wheel.

Waving goodbye to Dyvian as Lucian pulled out of the service center’s driveway, I turned to Lucian when he spoke my name. “Yeah?”

“It’s better not to talk about, err, The Voice, to anyone, you understand?”

“Duh. Who do you think I can talk to about it?”

“You know we’re not the only Evren in this world. And then there are the Zekans, of course.”

“Oh.”

“It’s a new ability, as you said, and other people not knowing about it could come in handy when you’re in danger.” Lucian’s forest green eyes

darkened. “Not that I’m intending to leave you to get into trouble again.” He tipped my chin up. “Do you understand?”

I nodded. “Crystal clear.”

“Good.”

Silence resumed inside the car.

“Voice,” I ventured.

It took several seconds before The Voice answered. “Yes?”

It still sounded like Lucian, and I didn’t know whether that was good or bad. “*Do you know what you sound like when you’re talking to Lucian?*”

There was a moment’s hesitation before it replied, “Yes.”

“*What do you sound like then? Do you really sound like an alien when you’re talking to Lucian?*”

The length of time it took for The Voice to respond made me wonder what could be so important about my question that it would make The Voice unnaturally hesitant.

“Voice?”

“*It sounds...*”

I held my breath.

“*Like you.*”

I collapsed on my seat as air whooshed out of my lungs. I stole a look at Lucian but he still had his eyes firmly fixed on the road.

“*Are you sure, Voice?*”

“Yes.” It sounded more like itself now, responding matter-of-factly.

“*But why did he lie?*”

“*I am not in a position to answer that.*”

“*Right. Sorry. But...what about its significance? Why do you sound like me when you’re talking to Lucian?*”

Again, a note of hesitation before The Voice replied, “*The voice I borrow belongs to the person you care for the most.*”

Chapter Eight

When I realized that having The Voice inside my head didn't mean I was insane, I considered myself lucky because I had such a unique, smart, and understanding "companion" only few others, humans or Evren, had. Me being me, of course, I never considered having The Voice inside my head could have any negative consequence.

"You're oddly quiet," Lucian observed as we stepped inside the ornately designed elevator together with several other hotel guests.

"Oh?" My voice cracked.

He raised a brow. "Is something the matter?"

I shook my head quickly. "Nothing." How could anything be wrong when I had just found out that Lucian cared for me? It was a thought I fully embraced, especially as it temporarily allowed me to ignore the other not-so-nice-things in my life.

The elevator chimed as it reached our floor, and I followed Lucian out. Even in his less than immaculate clothes, he still made heads turn—a fact he seemed unaware of.

I tried to duplicate his indifference. People were gawking at me, too, but only because they didn't understand how I could've gotten past the doorman with my windswept-slash-broomstick hair, dirt-streaked skin, and torn clothing.

Staying confident while being everyone's object of unfavorable amazement was not an easy thing to do, and by the time we reached the hallway leading to our room, I felt about two feet tall.

"We're here," Lucian murmured with a glance over his shoulder before turning to the door on his left. I was okay with washing up in any of the hotel's public restrooms, but Lucian had insisted on getting a room instead. That jackpot of his must be beyond huge.

I moved to step past the housekeeping attendant and her cleaning trolley, pretending not to notice how the pretty brunette gave me a dismissive once-over, her lip curling upon seeing my less than perfect appearance. My self-esteem further diminished, I now felt eleven inches tall.

"Excuse me." There was no way I could pass without either bumping the trolley or Lucian.

She ignored me, continuing to ogle Lucian shamelessly.

This was so not what I needed. After battling it out with a Zekan, I was by no means letting a rude hotel employee get the better of me. I took a deep breath.

"Baby?"

The woman and I both turned to Lucian in surprise. Who was he calling "baby?"

Lucian touched my cheek. "Let's go in, baby." He gestured to the door he had just unlocked. His eyes gleamed, and I knew instantly he had known all along about the silent war I had going with the other woman. Calling me "baby" was his way of letting her know whose side he was firmly on.

A smile broke out on my face. "Oh, *baby*, sure." I hugged him quickly, turning just enough so I could gloat at the woman. Her envious glare was manna to my eyes.

"And you know what, baby? I'll forgive you for—" I couldn't say anything more because Lucian had already dragged me inside the room with him. He let go of me with a little frown. I frowned right back, irritated at him for not letting me finish gloating.

“It was overkill,” he told me, as if reading my thoughts. Lucian sighed and ruffled my hair briefly. “You didn’t really think I’d let you get away with acting like I’m your lapdog, did you?”

I pouted. “I wasn’t treating you like a lapdog.”

“A trophy boyfriend you have around your little finger then.” He took his hand away.

The loss of physical contact between us made me feel even more irritable. “But—”

Lucian quelled the rest of my sentence with a curt shake of his head. He waved toward the door across the suite. “That’s your room. It has its own Jacuzzi so go ahead and take your time freshening up.”

Seeing the familiar, busy look on Lucian’s face and knowing it more or less meant he was thinking about a million problems and maybe trying to find a solution to global warming along the way, I turned away with a sigh and did as told.

~ ~ ~

Lucian was right. There was a Jacuzzi. I smiled wistfully as I let my fingers trail the smooth cold surface of the black and gold marble tiles. *This* was what I had envisioned an Evren lifestyle was all about. But I would give it all up just to have my family back.

Well, to have my family back *and* the Chevalier brothers.

When the Jacuzzi was adequately filled with warm, scented, foamy water, I took off my clothes and got in. I closed my eyes, my body relaxing gradually against the tub’s slick walls.

I remembered my conversation with The Voice and it made me smile. But soon, my memories turned ugly as I relived my encounter with the Zekan. They turned uglier still as I recalled the night I lost my parents and Davie.

Tears and not water soon wetted my cheeks.

Questions I had never dared ask myself suddenly rose to the fore.

What could I have been thinking, acting like everything in my life was normal, going to school and crushing on a tall, dark, and silent hottie? My parents were dead—no, they were murdered. My sister was in a coma. The creatures that had harmed them were still on the loose.

What was I doing to avenge them?

I grabbed a tissue from the box behind me and blew my nose. I switched off the tap, having lost pleasure in lounging around in the Jacuzzi. Without the whirling buzz of water, the bathroom was once again encased in silence. I rubbed myself dry before padding toward the bed. I was only planning to rest, but I drifted off to a dreamless sleep as soon as my head hit the pillows.

~ ~ ~

Dyvian's loud angry voice woke me.

"Did you really think I wouldn't have figured it out? Did you really think I was that stupid? If you thought it had taken me too long to realize what you've been doing, it's only because I couldn't believe you'd do something like that. How can you be so manipulative, dammit?"

Lucian's reply was muffled, and I shook my head groggily, unable to completely comprehend what I was hearing.

"You're being unfair. How long will you continue hiding this?" Incredulity and contempt underscored Dyvian's tone, making me wonder what Lucian could have done to make Dyvian so furious. He always took perverse pleasure in irritating Lucian, but there was no hiding how much he worshiped his brother. I had never heard him speak an ill word against Lucian till now.

The fight was more than enough to waken me fully. I got off the bed in a hurry and grabbed the bathrobe hanging on the door, shrugging into it and securing it with a tightly knotted belt around my waist as I crossed the room.

I opened the bedroom door just in time to hear Lucian reply, "It's not how you think it is, dammit. I had no bad intentions when I first did it. It took me completely by surprise and then—"

“Deli,” Dyvian sputtered, his eyes widening when he saw me in the doorway. Disconcerted surprise briefly crossed his eyes, so fast that I could have imagined it.

Lucian spun around at the sound of my name, his face pale but inscrutable.

I approached them anxiously. “What’s happening?”

“It’s nothing,” Lucian said very firmly.

“It’s not nothing,” Dyvian retorted, fury rekindling in his eyes.

“We will not talk about this in front of Deli if you know what’s good for you.” His eyes were hard on his brother’s face. “What’s good for all of us.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I burst out, the tension in the room reaching almost palpable heights.

Both of them ignored me. Dyvian stared back, his eyes just as hard. “Then I want you to explain why you did it.”

Lucian’s response was a jerky nod.

“Now.”

Lucian stiffened but he nodded all the same. He glanced at me and said with perfect politeness, “Will you excuse us for a minute, Deli?”

“I…” My voice trailed off and I ended up nodding instead, realizing that at the moment, nothing I could say would prevent them from having the face-off both of them seemed to want.

Dyvian stormed toward the balcony while Lucian followed sedately, closing the glass doors behind him. I stiffened in nervous anticipation, dreading what a dragon battle between two strong Evren like the Chevalier brothers could result in. Honestly, why couldn’t boys just learn to fight like girls and resort to subversive tactics and backstabbing?

When minutes passed and no blood was spilled, I began to relax. Maybe, those two were smarter than other members of their sex. They were certainly smart enough to keep their voices too low for me to eavesdrop, even with the benefit of Evren hearing.

Lip reading wasn't one of my talents either, forcing me to make my own conclusions based on what I could see. Dyvian was speaking in a furious rush, pacing in an agitated fashion, his hands clenched at his sides. Lucian, however, looked as calm as he always did, but his mouth was tight, biting out each word he spoke.

"Well?" I demanded when they walked back into the living room.

"Were you worried, little sister?" Dyvian flashed me his usual charming smile.

I couldn't make myself smile back just yet. "Is everything okay now?"

"Of course it is. Big bro and I just had a little misunderstanding. But it's all okay now." He winked at Lucian. "Isn't it?"

Lucian didn't answer as he reclaimed his seat on the sofa.

"Aww, come on. Don't be such a spoilsport. Everything's okay now, isn't it?"

Lucian stared at him. As the seconds ticked by, my trepidation increased. Didn't Dyvian know he was skating on very thin ice? Why was he so bent on provoking Lucian when he was in this kind of mood?

When Lucian finally spoke, I expected him to bite Dyvian's head off, but all he said was, "Yes. It's okay. Satisfied?"

My jaw dropped. Lucian's voice was colder than usual, true, but it was the only indication he showed of his displeasure. Lucian never let Dyvian have the upper hand in their arguments, so why was he giving in to Dyvian now?

Something smelled fishy here, and it stirred up my protective instincts. I took an aggressive step forward to Dyvian, tiptoeing so I could look him in the eye. "Are you blackmailing your brother?"

He choked. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Unbelievable."

Lucian cleared his throat. "Deli—"

"It's okay, Lucian. I'll handle this." I flashed him a reassuring smile, and when he returned it, my heart did its stupid fluttering dance and my protective

instincts swelled up. I tore my gaze from Lucian to give Dyvian the most ferocious scowl I could muster. “Are you blackmailing him?”

He huffed. “Why do you assume I’m the one blackmailing him and not the other way around?”

“Because Lucian would never do that.” I turned to beam at Lucian. “Right, Lucian?”

“Well,” he deflected in all modesty.

“See?”

“He just said ‘well!’”

“Lucian is honorable. He’s always fair and honest, unlike *some* people.” Lucian coughed behind me and I turned to him in concern. “Lucian?”

“Dyvian’s—ah, not that bad and he wasn’t really blackmailing me.” He avoided my gaze.

I snorted. “You don’t need to defend him.”

“You’re being unfair.” Dyvian’s twinkling eyes made it obvious he wasn’t taking any of this seriously. “I can be nice, too. In fact, I was actually arguing with Lucian out of concern for you.”

“For me?”

“Dyvian,” Lucian hissed at the same time.

My eyes flitted back and forth between the two brothers. “What, exactly, were you arguing about?”

“The Voice,” Dyvian intoned, letting the words fall from his tongue like they held the key to the universe’s secrets.

“For God’s sake,” Lucian muttered.

I blinked several times. “The Voice? You mean, like The Voice Lucian and I can hear and you can’t?”

A strangely ironic smile played on Dyvian’s lips. “Got it in one, Deli. Since he’s so much older and experienced than you are, I wanted to make sure he’d educate you *properly* about The Voice.”

“How?”

He sat on the other end of the sofa and extended his arms on the back. "Like the fact that The Voice shouldn't listen to your thoughts all the time."

I frowned. "Shouldn't listen—"

"He means hear," Lucian stepped in quickly. "The Voice *may* not be able to hear you all the time. We know so little about it that it would be foolish to rely on it too much."

"In fact, I think you should tell me everything The Voice says," Dyvian suggested. "Sometimes, you need an outside perspective, and though Lucian here is smarter than I am, he could have been brainwashed—" Dyvian ignored the choking sound coming from Lucian, "—by The Voice."

"The Voice," he continued in an oddly careful tone, "just isn't something you should fully trust at this stage."

"Dyvian—"

But Dyvian went on, ignoring Lucian's interruption. "It's just not safe for you to completely believe what it's saying, even if it never wants to hurt you."

The amount of concern Dyvian was exhibiting unnerved me, and I blurted out, "So when it told me I'm the girl Lucian cares most about, The Voice could have misunderstood things?" I clapped my hands over my mouth right after, embarrassed at the sort of beans I had spilled.

Dyvian's eyes gleamed. "It said that?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"It was lying," Lucian gritted.

"It wasn't," Dyvian countered.

"Lucian?" I appealed, hurt by his words.

For a second there, I thought Lucian would be stubborn—and cruel—enough to maintain his stony silence, but in the end, he just shrugged.

I took that as a yes and nearly jumped in happiness. "Then it's true," I enthused. "I am the girl you care about most!"

"Like a little sister," he snarled.

I opened my mouth to argue but Dyvian forestalled with a shake of his head. "Give the poor guy a break, Deli."

I grinned. "Poor guy indeed." I sent Lucian a look of sham sympathy. "I've noticed how hard it is for him to acknowledge his true feelings."

Lucian snatched a magazine from the coffee table, held it up until it covered his entire face, and began to flip through it.

"You're reading Vogue?"

"Whatever," he muttered, completely focused on page flipping.

I stepped close to Dyvian and nudged him with my foot to gain his attention. "That's really what you guys were talking about?"

"In a nutshell," he answered with a lazy shrug.

"Lucian?"

Lucian grunted.

But somehow, I still wasn't completely convinced. "I don't think you guys are telling me the truth, but I'll let it go for now."

"How magnanimous of you." Lucian lowered the magazine long enough to snarl.

"True," I replied airily while promising myself to Google what magnanimous meant. Davie had never used that with me.

Dyvian grinned. "Admit it, Deli. You just don't know what—"

"Anyway," I interrupted him, "I've been doing some thinking and I have a little announcement to make."

"The floor's yours." Dyvian waved a negligent hand.

I took a deep breath. "I want you two to teach me everything there is to know about Evren powers." My announcement took them by surprise, which I expected.

"That's a sensible decision to make," Lucian began.

"Especially when the last time we tried to teach you those things, you told us you only wanted to learn the easiest and coolest stuff," Dyvian ended.

"Well, I've changed my mind."

Lucian's eyes settled on me in steady contemplation. "What is this for?"

Another deep breath. "I need to learn everything because I want to kill my parents' murderers."

Chapter Nine

My task list for my third day in school—second day, technically, considering the little mishap the day before—was slightly unique. Catch up with homework, catch up with Audrey, practice becoming the toughest Evren chick in town, and maybe, if I was lucky, get Lucian to flirt with me.

But first, I had to get past the bullies. Beautiful, sexy, and blonde, but you know how bullies come in all shapes and sizes.

“And here I was thinking you had chickened out when you didn’t show up for school yesterday.”

If Queen Melissa thought I was still going to play nice, she was wrong. Suicidally wrong. I hadn’t slept a wink last night. Whether I had my eyes open or closed, the images I saw in my mind stayed the same—Zekans murdering my parents, Zekans after me, and Zekans after Davie.

Needless to say, thoughts of Zekans didn’t put me in a good mood.

“*Don’t draw attention to yourself,*” the Voice spoke inside my head just as I opened my mouth to let small-town Barbie know exactly what I was capable of. And I wasn’t even talking about my Evren powers.

“*You’re going to endanger everyone—yourself and even your sister.*”

I snapped my mouth shut and pasted a smile on my face. “We just had things to do in Vegas.”

“Whatever.” Melissa’s fingers made a talking motion.

And that was it.

Gaping as she flounced off with the rest of her entourage, I stayed rooted to my spot, unable to believe that was the end to today's bullying session.

"You're wondering why she's letting you off so easily, huh?" Audrey suddenly popped in front me with a smirk.

I squealed, throwing my arms around her. "I missed you."

She pulled away with a grimace. "*Deli*. It's not as if we hadn't seen each other in a million years. And it's not like we're BFF or something." She wrinkled her nose.

I gave her my most winning smile. "But you missed me anyway, didn't you?"

"Whatever." She even mimicked Melissa's expression and hand gesture, making me laugh.

I curled my arm through hers. "Anything interesting happen yesterday?" It was so nice to be with someone so...uncomplicated. I mean, not that I was belittling what happened between her and her jerk of an ex, but at least she wasn't getting targeted by reptilian bloodsuckers right?

"Give yourself a month and you'll know how stupid that question is."

"Stop putting Sanger High down and show some school spirit—"

"God, I knew it." She gave me a pained look. "You were a *cheerleader* in your old school, weren't you?"

"Yeeeeees, and I don't know about here, but in my old school, cheerleaders weren't synonymous to nose-picking, prejudiced serial killers." That was how she made cheerleaders sound—disgusting, snooty, and evil.

She smiled grudgingly. "Fine. Maybe there are rare—really rare—exceptions."

"I knew you could stop being cynical for five seconds." We had about five minutes before first period started and we took our time walking to class. "So, what about yesterday? Anything interesting I missed?"

Audrey pretended to think hard. "Let me see...our lit teacher was absent because he had to hold a memorial service for his pet."

“Aww.”

“It was a pig.”

I choked back a laugh. “But still sad.”

“Exciting, isn’t it?” Audrey drawled as we reached her room.

She probably hadn’t noticed how guys left and right had been checking us both out, but I had. Personally, I wasn’t interested—I was a one-man woman, and it was Lucian for me. But as for Audrey...I was sure a number of them would have gladly asked her out if not for Matthew’s lies.

Maybe if I was not so busy learning how to be a proper Evren, I could figure out a way to get rid of Audrey’s ugly reputation.

P.E. was another class I shared with Audrey. She was baffled when she realized how serious I was about learning basketball, the sport assigned for us juniors.

“You heard what Coach said,” I told her while practicing dribbling the ball. “Basketball won’t just improve your aim and accuracy but it can also develop your speed, grace, and reflexes.” And I definitely needed all three to beat up some snakes.

Audrey’s eyes widened and she immediately checked my forehead. “You’re not running a fever.” Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me you’re a closet sports buff?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why all this interest in basketball? It’s not like you’ve got to be the next Michael Jordan to pass this class.”

Because I need to practice fire shooting? Tail-whipping? Flying? All honest answers but the truth wouldn’t fly right now, no pun intended.

“Well, ahh—” An image of Lucian entered my mind. He tended to be the first person I thought of when I was in trouble.

Inspiration struck. “It’s Lucian,” I confided and dribbled the ball some more. “He likes it when a girl’s good at sports, and I thought basketball would be a nice sport to learn.”

“I can teach you,” a voice offered from behind.

Wesley jogged into view, his good-looking face creased with a smile. Since he was playing for the varsity team, he didn't have to wear our P.E. uniform. He had on Sanger High's red and gold basketball jersey instead, and it showed off his buff body to perfection.

Not as good as Lucian's, of course, but still good.

Wesley smiled at my friend. "Audrey, right?"

I waited for Audrey to act all cool and sarcastic like she usually did and readied myself to apologize on her behalf.

My jaw slackened when Audrey's face slowly cracked with a rare smile. "Yeah. You're, uhh, Wesley, right?" Audrey's voice was completely unlike her. You know, sweet, cute, and nice. Not that she wasn't all of those, but she tended to keep such traits hidden behind her cool, cynical, badass persona.

"Yup. Glad to meet you officially," he replied even as his eyes were embarrassingly glued to me.

Awkward. That was the best way to describe our threesome.

"So..." He tossed me another grin. "What do you say? I can teach you basketball if you want."

"Uhh, sure, when there's time, but thanks for offering."

Wesley was visibly disappointed but he smiled back at me anyway. What a really nice guy. If I hadn't met Lucian before him, I'd no doubt fall for him.

After a few more minutes of small talk, Wesley was called away by his buddies, who were flirting with Melissa and her gang near the bleachers. I asked Audrey right away, "What's up with you?"

She shrugged, grabbed the ball, dribbled, then took a shot. It fell through the hoop seamlessly. "What are you talking about?"

"Showoff," I muttered and jogged to get the ball back.

When I was standing next to her again, I paused mid-dribble and frowned at her. "You're usually antisocial and all, so what's that about, acting like you're suddenly Miss Sunshine with Wesley?"

"You're talking crap—"

The brain cells kicked in, later than they should have as usual. “Oh, my God, Audrey, you like—”

Audrey’s hand slapped against my mouth and she looked around fearfully. “Will you keep it down?”

I started to laugh. “You do.”

She grumbled, “Even if I did, he obviously likes you so it makes no difference, you know.”

“He doesn’t.” I dribbled the ball one last time, aimed, and let it fly. It didn’t even reach the ring, darn it.

Audrey smothered a laugh and I scowled. “Laugh one more time, and I’m going to take Wesley up on his offer to teach me basketball.” My tone dropped a notch. “One on one.”

“I don’t care,” Audrey retorted.

“You don’t, really?” I turned away to look for Wesley and spotted him talking to the coach. “Wes—”

Audrey hastily covered my mouth once more. “All right, you blackmailing witch. You win.”

I curtsied with flourish. “Now repeat after me. Please, Deli, please help me with the boy I like.” I ended the plea with an exaggerated flutter of my lashes.

I expected her to snap at me, maybe even pretend to puke, but instead, she gave me a somber look and she said slowly, “Please, Deli, please help me with the boy I like.”

My grin vanished. “Hey, I was just—”

Audrey shook her head. “But even if you wanted to, you can’t. One thing you should learn about small towns is that people rarely forget.”

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Dyvian was waiting for me when I stepped out of school with Audrey. Another thing we had agreed on was that it would be safer for me not to be alone on my way to or from school. It was a relief, honestly, but it also

increased the guilt inside me for adding another burden to the Chevalier brothers.

In my current state, I was no match for any Zekan.

Yet.

“See you tomorrow then?” Audrey’s smile was a bit strained. She was no doubt uncomfortable at how much she had revealed to me during P.E.

“Yup.” And ignoring her rolling eyes, I insisted on giving her a quick hug before parting ways, wanting to make her smile. She did, and this time it reached her eyes.

“Cute friend you have there,” Dyvian remarked when I reached him. “You should’ve introduced me.”

I might not have known Dyvian long, but I knew enough about guys—human or not—to know when I was in the presence of a pro. I smiled up at him. “Never.”

His lower lip pushed forward, the male version of a pout and something he was *extremely* good at. “Aww, come on. I just want to get to know her.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Since Lucian will kill me before that happens, I guess it’s never then.”

When we got home, I rushed past him, heading straight to the kitchen. “Aah.” The flow of ice-cold lemonade over my tongue soothed my parched throat. “How long before I become like you guys?” I complained, envious at how Dyvian’s CK scent still clung to him as he walked past me, unmarred by sweat and all other undesirable elements—while I stank of hot salty air that was typical of Sanger and the rest of this side of Nevada.

“I honestly don’t know.”

I glanced around hopefully. “Where’s Lucian?”

“Up in Death Valley. He wants to talk to some Evren there about the attack.” His tone became sly. “You know, there are a lot of beautiful Evren girls up there. Most of them have a crush on Lucian.”

“Oh?”

“Feeling jealous?”

I lifted my chin. “Nooooo.”

“Liar.”

This was a subject-changing moment if ever there was one. “Are we going to start on the lessons tonight?” I didn’t want Dyvian to know how irritated I was. Lucian had again stuck his brother with babysitting and now he was off in DV flirting with dragonettes.

“Yes. He put me in charge of training you on the basics.”

“Great.” But worry gnawed on my thoughts. What could Lucian be doing right this very minute? Again, without thinking, I sought support from The Voice. “*Do you know who’s with Lucian—*”

“Deli, no.”

I jumped. “What?”

He shook his head. “Don’t make it a habit, talking to The Voice like that.”

His unerring guess made me gasp. “How did you know I was talking to it? You hear it, too?”

Dyvian rolled his eyes. “No, I don’t, and I doubt I ever will. But really, your face is an open book. It’s easy to know when you’re talking to it.”

“It is?”

“Yes, Deli, and I told you, you can’t trust it completely. Okay?”

“It’s not as bad as you think it is, Dyv. It’s actually helped me—”

“I know.” He held up a hand. “But we still don’t know that much about it. In emergencies, yes, I think it’s better to trust The Voice. In fact, it’s absolutely imperative. But as for relying on it even for the smallest things—” Dyvian paused.

“It’s like a sleeping pill, okay, Deli? You have to take it only when absolutely necessary. If you take it when you don’t need to, it’s going to be an addiction, and it could lose its effectiveness.”

I understood the analogy but wasn’t there also something a little off with his logic? Nevertheless, I decided to let it go. Dyvian had my best interests at

heart and I respected his judgment. If he thought it was wrong to rely too much on the Voice, then I'd have to believe that until I learned otherwise.

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Two hours later, I was wishing Dyvian had never been born.

When I said I wanted to work on having full control of my Evren powers, I was sort of envisioning wearing a cool karate uniform—custom-made, of course, to show off my figure—while practicing some fancy kicks. But never in my wildest imaginations did “practicing” include doing a headstand for hours in the middle of the Mojave.

Oh, and did I mention that Dyvian had also tied a rope around my ankles and hung me from a branch fifteen feet off the ground so I couldn't escape? Sure, he had lowered the rope enough so I could touch the hot dry soil, but still.

Dyvian checked his watch. “A couple more minutes, Deli.” He was sitting nice and comfy in a folding chair he had brought with us and browsing through People magazine. Angelina Jolie's face pouted back at me from its cover. It was yet another area where the Chevalier brothers differed. Lucian devoured the business papers while Dyvian—okay, I was guilty of this, too—gobbled up gossip rags.

“I swear, Dyvian,” I gritted out. “You are one dead lizard the moment you release me.”

“Name calling? That warrants another hour hanging upside down, don't you think?”

“*Dyvian.*”

“I was just kidding. Relax. Two more minutes.”

“I'm going to tell Lucian about this,” I threatened.

He snorted. “Who do you think taught me how to let my dragon out? And how do you think he taught me?”

I could only stare at him in horror. Barbarians. I was living with two drop dead gorgeous barbarians.

His watch buzzed and Dyvian stood up. “We’re done,” he announced in such a cheerful voice that if looks could kill, I’d have murdered him ten times in the last five seconds.

He flew up in the air and took me with him, hoisting me onto the branch while I leaned against the trunk, grateful to have something to support me. He untied the rope around my ankles and grinned. “How do you feel?”

“Come here and I’ll show you.”

He flew a step back, still grinning. “Now, now. You were the one who wanted to practice, Deli.”

“But to do it like that?” I sputtered, glaring at him. “Surely there’s an easier way—”

“No, there isn’t,” a voice below countered just as Lucian materialized out of thin air.

His presence automatically made me smile. “Lucian.” Just seeing him filled me with pleasure. There was something about him... “Catch me!” I jumped off the branch.

“No,” Dyvian and Lucian objected at the same time.

I was laughing when Lucian caught me in his arms. His scowl could’ve frightened small animals. “You fool!”

It was weird but these days, I was beginning to think Lucian’s angry words were like an endearment. In my mind, his anger meant he cared. And because of that line of thinking, I found myself immune to his fury.

“I missed you, too,” I responded, delighted when his scowl melted into disconcertment.

“Can’t you think before you do something? Anything?” he almost begged.

I giggled. “Oh, come on. I knew you’d catch me.” Dyvian and I laughed as a familiar shade of red slowly stained Lucian’s cheekbones.

He lowered me to the ground. “The next time you do that, I won’t catch you.”

I made a face then, remembering that he had been gone for the day. I tried to sound very casual as I prodded, “So, where have you been?”

"I had to meet some Evren."

My "Oh?" was loaded with meaning.

Lucian raised a brow, but his questioning glance was directed at Dyvian.

"Is there something I should know?"

Dyvian was loading his stuff in the pickup, but he gave Lucian an innocent look and replied, "Beats me." He opened the driver's door. "How many times have you talked to The Voice today, Deli?"

Lucian stiffened. Their opinion when it came to The Voice still vastly differed. "Besides the time you stopped me from speaking to it?" I asked cautiously.

Lucian and Dyvian exchanged looks.

"Yeah, besides that."

I almost looked at Lucian for guidance, but that was silly, right? The Voice was inside *my* head, not his. It had nothing to do with him. "Just once," I admitted, not knowing why I was reluctant to answer Dyvian's question. "And it was for my own good. It told me not to draw attention to myself in school because if I did, it would endanger all of us."

Dyvian nodded. "I see. That's good. Maybe it's beginning to understand its boundaries. It should be rewarded somehow."

Now, I was totally confused, especially when I saw Lucian looking annoyed. "Rewarded?" I repeated blankly.

But Dyvian was already inside the pickup. His window slid down just as I was about to open the door to the backseat.

"By the way, Deli?"

"Yes?"

"Your practice session isn't over."

All my muscles groaned in protest and my head started aching. "What?"

"You need to walk back home."

I paled. "You have got to be—"

"But Lucian's going to be with you." Dyvian grinned wickedly. "That's not too bad, right?"

Darn, but he was smart. While I debated choosing between comfort and love, Dyvian was already driving away.

Lucian sighed from behind. "It's too late to think now, Deli. He's gone."

I searched for signs of disappointment in my heart and found only pleasure. I shrugged. "It's okay."

We started to walk home, and I took his hand, ignoring him when he sighed again. Well, we were a couple, weren't we? Even if it was a sham, we still had to keep up appearances.

Lucian snorted.

I turned to him in surprise. "What?"

"Why are we holding hands?" he inquired in that clinical tone of his that I alternately loved and hated.

"Because I'm your girlfriend, and we have to keep up appearances." Good thing I thought about this already. Geez, sometimes I could be so smart I even amazed myself.

"For the sake of what?" He pointed to the bunch of red-spotted toads croaking under a palm tree, the only living creatures close enough to see our clasped hands. "Toads?"

Sensing a losing argument, I changed the subject. "Who did you talk to when you were in Death Valley?"

"I told you, other Evren."

"Male or female?"

Lucian stopped walking to look at me. "Does it matter?"

I gasped. "You have to ask?"

A smile was tugging at his lips. "Jealous?"

I gritted out, "No," and stalked away.

He easily caught up to me but didn't say anything.

Two can play this game. "You know, we had P.E. today."

"Oh?"

"Basketball. I was thinking of using basketball practice to improve my aim."

“That’s good.”

“And Wesley? You remember him? He offered to give me extra lessons,” I said sweetly and was satisfied when it took Lucian longer than usual to reply.

“Really?”

I smiled up at him. “Jealous?”

Lucian blinked then shrugged. “What do you think?” But he was smiling and the smile said it all.

It was all I could do not to throw my arms around him. Would he push me away if I did? But he was just so darn gorgeous, and it felt like forever—well, okay, more like twenty-two hours and fifteen minutes—since we were alone with each other.

“Lucian?”

He gazed down at me with dark eyes that hid so much.

When was he going to tell me he cared for me? When could I be his girlfriend—his real girlfriend and not just some fake girlfriend from down under?

“What is it?”

“When do you think you’re going to be comfortable enough to tell me you like me?” *Love me*, I wanted to ask but it was too soon.

He choked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Never mind.”

He touched my cheek, startling me.

“Lucian?” This time, my voice filled with wary hope.

“I can’t say it.”

My shoulders sagged but I rallied valiantly. “It’s okay, I didn’t—”

“But I can do this.” And the next thing I knew his lips were touching mine and my feet were no longer touching the ground.

Chapter Ten

I'd kissed Lucian many times...in my dreams. But none of them could ever compare to the reality of having Lucian's lips finally touch mine.

"Turn invisible," Lucian whispered against my lips. I shifted to obey him, but his arms tightened around my waist.

"No, don't move." My entire body shuddered as his lips nibbled mine, shaping and molding mine to his. His skin turned icy cold, and I forced my mind to focus on doing the same. He laughed softly when I only succeeded after several failed attempts. His kisses were too much of a distraction.

Lucian is kissing me. The words played over and over in my mind.

His hands held my face, moving to dig through my hair, gripping to pull me closer to his.

I love you. The words jumped out of nowhere.

A slight tremor shot through Lucian's body, and he pulled me even more tightly against him.

I love the way he makes me feel. I love his kisses. I love—

"Deli," he groaned against my lips before kissing me so deeply he bent me completely backward. I gasped in fright, aware that we were a few hundred feet off the ground.

But he only chuckled. "Relax."

My body responded by softening, instinctively trusting him.

He covered my face with light, sweet kisses, and every one of them made my skin sizzle. His lips traced my hair. He breathed against my neck, nuzzling the sensitive skin. It was weird having someone you couldn't see kiss you. Weird but good, I thought dreamily as Lucian uncurled one arm from my waist to hold my nape and pull me forward, making the kiss more intense and mind-blowing.

Lucian steered for us both and—clasped in his arms, with his never-ending kisses—our flight back home was very much like dancing in air.

I was very, very close to fainting when he lowered me gently onto the ground. My knees wobbled. He chuckled, supporting me as he materialized into view.

The same transformation took me longer but only because I was still woozy over Lucian's kiss, my head in the clouds even though we weren't flying anymore.

He unlocked the door, leading me inside. I stared at our entwined hands, my mind still blanketed in a euphoric haze.

I bit back a protest when he gently unclasped his hand from mine and headed for the study.

"Dyvian?" I called but there was no answer. I ran to the kitchen and a note magnet-pinned on the fridge immediately drew my gaze.

I read the note with widening eyes. Dyvian was out? He didn't want us to wait up? Lucian and I were alone—

A pair of hands settled on my waist, whirling me around. I opened my mouth to share the good news—sorry, Dyvian—but was unable to because I was too busy being kissed. By Lucian. Again.

~ ~ ~

"Do you know just how beautiful you are?"

Lucian simply rolled his eyes.

He was in my bed, and I was curled right next to him. *Nothing* happened and I hadn't fooled myself into hoping that something would. Lucian just

didn't seem to be the type to do that on the first date. Or, technically speaking, right after the first kiss.

I giggled. "I've always wanted to ask you that." The TV was on but neither of us had paid attention to it in the past two hours. We had simply been too occupied kissing and talking.

My fingers traced his face. I couldn't get enough of him. I couldn't even believe I was allowed to touch him.

"Tell me about your family."

He tensed against me. "Why would you want to know?"

"Why are you being so secretive? I just want to know more about you."

He relaxed again, startling me when he bent down to kiss my hair. I was still amazed that he could be this...*affectionate*.

Lucian sprang away and accidentally threw me off in the bargain.

"Hey." I rubbed my head gingerly, which had bumped hard against the headboard at his sudden move.

"Sorry." He returned to my side, his face twisted in a combination of embarrassment and exasperation. He checked my forehead. "Are you hurt?"

"Of course not. This is a tough Evren chick you're talking to, remember?" I ignored his little eye-rolling response and touched his face, concerned. "But what about you? Why did you—"

"Nothing." He hauled me right back into his arms. "I was just thinking."

"What-e-ver." But I wasn't about to be sidetracked, so I demanded again, "Tell me a little bit about your parents and how you and Dyvian grew up."

"There's nothing good to tell. We weren't a happy family."

"No family's completely happy or perfect."

"Trust me, Deli. My family's completely deranged."

The coldness in his eyes appalled me. It chilled me to think he had so little care for his family. My hands curled against his chest. "Don't be so harsh. I'm sure—"

He cut me off. "My mother was a bitch."

His body was again rigid with tension. I reached out to soothe the tension away, kneading the muscles in his neck.

"She raised me with tender loving care at first." But his biting tone contradicted his words. "It wasn't real but it was very convincing, enough to put me into shock when I realized that she had left me for good."

"Left?"

"Abandoned in a Paris alley," he spelled out. "I starved right next to crooks and drug junkies. If I was lucky, I'd find a crazy man to stay next to and snatch a few hours of sleep. It's always better to be taken for a lunatic. You get bothered less because you're not the ideal victim."

"Helpless, you mean?"

Lucian seemed reluctant to speak. "No. Insane people generally aren't aware of what's happening to them and around them, and some men...women...creatures, some like their victims to be completely sane because they draw more pleasure from seeing them confused, wondering why they are being tormented—"

"I get it now," I said shakily, having heard enough. I blinked back tears, knowing how allergic he was to them. But my heart ached at how much he had suffered. What had happened to Lucian wasn't unheard of, but it was my first time meeting someone who actually went through such agony.

"Tell me the rest only when you're comfortable about it or when you need someone to talk to." I hugged him tightly, wishing I could erase the ugliness of his past with hugs and kisses. It was a silly thought, but the world would've been so much better if life worked out that way.

"At least I understand now."

He raised a brow. "Understand what?"

"Why you think your mother was a bitch."

It coaxed a startled laugh from him. "I expected you to tell me that maybe she had some good reason for it."

"How did you survive?" My voice was muffled against his warm chest.

"I did what I had to do."

“And Dyvian?”

His voice became colder. “My mother came back when he was seven years old. I suppose Dyvian and I should be thankful she took enough effort to find me.”

I sprang upright, a confusing thought occurring to me. “Wait...you’re just a year older than Dyvian, right? But you only knew about him when you were eight? Are you saying she had Dyvian and you didn’t know about it?”

“There were...times...when she was gone for a long period...”

I scowled. “So, basically, she gave birth to Dyvian and gave him away, too. Then she had this tiniest moment of guilt and decided that it was better if the two of you were together so she gave Dyvian to you before disappearing for good. Is that how it happened?”

“Something...like that...” Lucian looked like he was regretting telling me the truth, probably because he couldn’t bear to remember his mother’s cruelty.

I couldn’t blame him. He was completely right. She was a bitch and another name had just been officially added to the list of people I wanted to kill. Or at least there would have been if I knew her name. How could their mother bear to leave these two beautiful beings?

I went back to Lucian’s arms and hugged him tightly. “Was she Evren, too?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“How about your father?”

“We know nothing about him.”

I sat up. “Have you tried looking for him?”

He pulled me back down just as quickly. “Stop worrying too much about me and my family,” he scolded, but there was a smile in his voice. “And, yes, we tried our best but found nothing. We believe he’s dead.”

It was getting harder and harder to stop myself from crying. Life could be so unfair. He had an unknown Mr. X for a father and a bitch for a mother. “I wish I had known you before,” I whispered fervently. “I’d have adopted you and Dyvian right away.”

“Then we’d be siblings.”

“Oh.” I scowled at my stupidity. “I didn’t think of that.”

He chuckled. “It’s okay. I have you now.”

I blossomed with those words. It was impossible not to hug him again. Very, very tightly.

“Are you trying to crush my ribs?” he teased.

I ignored that and said instead, “Thank you for sharing a little about yourself, Lucian.” I knew without being told that what he had revealed to me was to be cherished, a confidence he didn’t just share with anyone.

I also knew I had his mother to blame for Lucian’s coldness. He was probably so hurt by his mother’s insane cruelty that he refused to trust anyone—

“Tell me something you haven’t told anyone,” Lucian urged in sudden haste, distracting me from my thoughts.

“Anyone?” I fussed with the bedcovers, not meeting his eyes.

His face was grave. “I know it’s a challenge, considering how you tell everyone everything.”

I gasped. “I do not.”

“Then tell me.”

I grimaced at how neatly I had fallen for that trap. “Umm...” A hazy thought formed in my mind. I gulped. Certainly not that.

“You’ve thought of something.”

I was doing my best not to, actually. “No.”

“Deli.”

“Yes?”

“Stop beating around the bush.”

“I’m not.”

I found myself rolled over to my back and Lucian glaring at me.

“Tell me.”

“Well—”

"A word of advice, Deli," Lucian said gently, his tone making me shiver a little. Lucian was always scarier when he was nicer. "Don't try fooling me."

"But you wouldn't want to know." I nodded jerkily. "I just know."

"Trust me to be the judge of that, mmm?"

A glum sigh escaped me. "You promise you won't be mad?"

"I won't even raise my voice."

"Ha. You don't have to. The angrier you are, the softer—"

"Stop prevaricating."

Drat. He was too smart for his own good.

"What is it then?" he asked a few moments later.

I disclosed it in a single, mortified, and breathless rush. "During prom night, I almost slept with my boyfriend—make that ex—in the backseat."

When Lucian didn't say anything, I peeked at his expression. He looked...blank. And then he sighed.

I winced. "I know. It's so clichéd, right? You'd think I'd know better." I was about to defend myself and tell him that at least we were riding in a limousine and not just any cheap car. But I fell silent instead as his head lowered to my shoulder.

I didn't know what to think of it except...*this feels good*.

His chest rumbled in laughter.

"Err, what's so funny?"

"Nothing. Everything." He didn't sound amused now. He pushed himself up on one elbow. His other hand tucked loose strands of my hair behind my ear.

"You think I was stupid, don't you?"

"No. But you were right." A rueful grin tugged at his lips. It made him so gorgeous I itched to have a camera in my hands to capture the image forever.

"I was?" He might as well have been speaking Chinese. I was too entranced at the tenderness in his eyes.

"I didn't want to know that."

~ ~ ~

“Lucian?”

“Mmm?”

It was three o’clock in the morning. Dyvian had called half an hour ago, informing Lucian he was staying over at a friend’s house up in DV. I had begged Lucian to sleep with me, and he gave in when I finally threatened to tell him more about my ex.

I pushed myself to my elbows so I could see his face. His brows were just the tiniest bit furrowed. He was thinking about something again. And with Lucian, that something could be anything from the real estate market conditions in Idaho to my love-and-hate-relationship with Chemistry. I loved physical chemistry, but the scientific sort hated me.

He coughed a little. It sounded a little too much like he was trying to hide his laughter but I doubt it. There was nothing to laugh about. “Are you okay?”

“Just thinking.”

“Stop thinking,” I urged, unable to help sounding petulant. I wanted us to savor our first night together, even though it was sickeningly innocent. I didn’t want him to try predicting stock market trends while he was with me. Right now, his topmost priority was supposed to be thinking about how pretty I was, how nice it was to have me next to him, and how soon he should have been kissing me.

“Lucian.” I shook his arm until his eyes finally met mine. I was surprised to see him smiling slightly. “What are you smiling about?” I demanded, frowning.

He ruffled my hair. “Nothing.”

“No, tell me.”

He looked at me for one unreadable moment. “Tell you what. Let me know what you think I’m thinking, and I’ll tell you if you’re right.”

“You’ll let me guess until I get it right?”

"I'll give you three guesses."

"Deal." I sat up, locking my knees under my chin, scrutinizing his every expression. Staring at him, it was easy to get distracted. Lucian really was beautiful. The way his hair fell against his forehead, the shine in his eyes—

"Deli." Lucian sighed.

I colored, realizing I had been caught daydreaming. "Sorry."

"Well? Give me a guess."

"You're thinking about...me?" I was joking so I was stunned when he nodded, an approving smile curving on his face.

My eyes widened. "You are?"

"Yes."

I gulped. He sounded too serious. "Is it bad?" I ventured in a small voice. My imagination overflowed with pessimistic thoughts. "You think what happened is a huge mistake, don't you? You probably think—"

He pressed his fingers to my mouth. "Sssh." His lips twitched. "Stop being so melodramatic." His voice lowered. "I love it that I finally got to kiss you. I'd never trade it for anything." He pulled away and leaned back against the headboard. "But that wasn't what I was thinking."

The sweet words and the tender smile on his face gave me hope.

"Another guess?"

I became excited. "I know." Now, why hadn't I thought of this before?

His eyes widened in alarm.

I smirked. He probably knew I had guessed the truth. "You're in love—" I couldn't continue with his mouth suddenly covering mine.

Never the type to refuse something I wanted, I reached out to him but he was already pulling away after the briefest touch of our lips. "Don't think things like that, Deli."

I couldn't help feeling hurt. He looked like falling in love with me gave him gastritis. Surely, it wasn't that bad?

I pulled away, too, but just so I could see him more clearly. "What are you saying?"

“Let’s just enjoy this, okay?”

That would have sounded incredibly crass if anyone but Lucian had been saying it. I tried to understand where he was coming from but my mental GPS couldn’t nail his exact location. Was it commitment phobia? Was it an aversion to something about me?

He sighed but I also detected a glimmer of laughter in his eyes. “Stop thinking crazy thoughts.”

“How do you know what I’m thinking?”

He touched my nose. “Because I know you very well.”

“But I want to—” He kissed me again, effectively killing my brain cells.

He pulled away just when I was about to close my eyes. “I want to keep this between us for now. You know how I am with other people. I don’t want anything to ruin what we have.”

I bit my lip. “I understand, but what about Dyvian or other Evr—” Another kiss halted my words.

I scowled when I realized what he was doing. “You’re distracting me with kisses, aren’t you?”

“Am I?” The mischief in his eyes, a rare sight for Lucian, belied the innocence in his voice.

“Duh. You know you are.” I took a deep breath. “But we have to talk about this, Lucian. What changed between—” He kissed me again.

When he pulled away, I said breathlessly, “I’m serious, Lucian. I want to know how you feel about—” Another kiss.

He lifted his head a few moments later, chuckling when I refused to let him go. But he was too strong for me. “Let’s just take it day by day,” he advised and tipped my chin up. “Okay?”

I nodded. “But—”

Another kiss that made my toes curl and he was moving away again. “We keep things private between us.”

“Promise.” I was willing to agree to anything just so he’d kiss me again. I waited, but he seemed content to gaze at me. That was sweet, honestly, but right now, I was in the mood for something more exciting.

When he still didn’t make any move to kiss me, I decided to use his own strategy against him. I clasped my hands, feigning anxiety. “I think we have to talk—”

He smiled knowingly as his face inched closer but I didn’t mind.

~~~

“Good morning.” I entered the kitchen with a huge smile on my face, but it faded soon enough when only Dyvian smiled back from the table. “Where’s Lucian?”

He glanced at his watch. “As of this moment, he’s probably just arrived in Tokyo.”

I choked on my juice and set the glass down carelessly, liquid spilling over. I stared at Dyvian in shock. “W-what did you just say?”

He frowned. “Don’t you remember?”

I moved his plate aside so his mountain of pancakes wouldn’t obstruct my view. I squinted at him. He didn’t look like he was joking. “*Tokyo?*”

He sighed. “That’s what I said. He’s had this trip scheduled for ages. Weren’t you listening to him? He told us about it over dinner the other night.”

“He did?” I grabbed a toast and munched on it lifelessly. “I didn’t hear.”

“You were probably too busy staring at him.” He moved his plate back and gobbled down half of its contents in just a few bites. “And knowing Lucian, he was probably too busy constructing a business proposal in Mandarin and Japanese while secretly smirking at you because you’re too *obvious*.”

I was too miserable to come up with a retort. My appetite was completely gone. I missed him so much already. Why hadn’t he reminded me last night? Why hadn’t he said goodbye?

“Deli?”

I shook myself out of my reverie. “I’m fine.” I stood up, gulping down the rest of my juice before setting it in the sink. “Do you want me to wash the dishes before I leave for school?”

“I’ll handle that later, don’t worry about it.”

I turned back to him and took my school bag. “Well...”

A rueful grin formed on his lips. “Oh, cheer up, Deli. He’ll be back soon.”

I wanted to tell him I missed Lucian, that my heart had a hole because Lucian was gone and he hadn’t even kissed me goodbye. But I didn’t. Lucian’s words were on my mind. *People don’t have to know.* And I wasn’t so stupid not to understand what he really meant. *He didn’t want people to know.*

I sighed. “See you later.”

~ ~ ~

The rest of the day passed in a blur. I drifted from one class to another like a zombie. Audrey wasn’t in school. With her gone, I was left alone with my thoughts. I kept thinking about Lucian, wondering if he missed me, too. There were so many questions I wanted to ask him, but I was also pretty sure Lucian would kiss them all away.

Dyvian was already waiting for me outside school when classes ended.

I grimaced. “Training again?”

“You did want to become—and I quote—‘an Evren warrior chick,’ didn’t you?”

“Remind me to keep my big mouth shut next time,” I grumbled, climbing inside the pickup.

He slid into the driver’s seat with the kind of smooth grace I could only envy but never imitate. “Do you still want to practice today? You know you don’t have to.”

“I have to.” If anything, being suspended upside down would at least take my mind off Lucian.



Minutes later, we had reached our destination and I was, again, hanging upside down, ankles and hands all tied-up. Dyvian had pushed me gently so that my body would sway forward and backward. It was all part of the plan, he told me loftily when I asked him if he was just being sadistic.

Dyvian let out a low chuckle.

I managed to turn my head to look at him. In my current condition, my head was the only thing I could easily control. "What?"

"You really are depressed, aren't you?"

"I'm not."

"Of course, you are. If you weren't depressed, you'd be shrieking by now and telling me that you're going to kill me the moment I untie you." He took hold of my body, pulled it slightly to the left, then let go with one big push.

I swayed left to right this time, creating huge invisible arcs in the air. The new direction made me feel nauseous, and I closed my eyes.

"Still not complaining?"

"You told me this was all part of my training."

"I lied."

My eyes shot open. "Dyvian." But the fury just wasn't there, and I sighed again. "Whatever."

"See? You are depressed." He jumped back to the lounge chair he had brought with him and stretched out. "Lucian's coming back in *three days*," he stressed. "It's not like he's going to be gone forever. And it's not as if he's doing something bad out there. He's just participating in a trade show, something like that. He's not there to meet other girls."

I started to shake my head but stopped when it made me queasier. "You don't understand."

Dyvian took a sip of his iced tea. He always came prepared for our outings. "It's creepy to see you not bubbly, Deli."

"Misery loves company."

"I said I find it creepy, not that I feel sad, too."

I didn't bother responding.

Dyvian rolled his eyes. “Just let me know if you want to pack up early.”  
The minutes trickled by.

“Voice?”

“Yes?” it replied with reassuring speed. I seldom spoke to it now, and I had been afraid that the ability to hear and speak to it would disappear.

*“I thought you’d be gone.”*

*“Why would you think that?”*

*“Because I hadn’t been talking to you for some time, and I thought you’d...rust away.”*

*“I’m not a machine.”*

*“I know.”* I wanted to smile. I could almost picture Lucian saying it. He’d frown and look like he couldn’t understand how I came up with such thoughts.

The Voice never took the initiative in our conversations so waiting for it to address me when not directly spoken to would be pointless. “Voice?”

“Yes?”

God, but it sounded so much like Lucian and right now, I missed him so much that hearing his voice—even if it wasn’t his—made me feel just a tiny bit better.

*“I miss Lucian.”*

There was a pause. *“I believe it’s safe to say he misses you, too.”*

I gasped.

“Deli?” Dyvian exclaimed in concern.

I cleared my throat. “I fell asleep. I forgot where I was so you can understand how shocked I was when I woke up.” I scowled at him in the end to make it more convincing.

“You managed to fall asleep like *that*?” He shook his head, muttering something about dragons and bats, but his attention had returned to the portable DVD player on his lap.

When I was certain Dyvian was too engrossed with *The Transformers* to notice me, I closed my eyes and asked eagerly, *“Lucian misses me?”*

*"Yes."*

*"But why didn't he say goodbye?"*

*"I'm not in the position to answer that."*

*"Oh, right. Sorry. I got carried away in thinking you're the Magic Mirror or something."*

*"Magic Mirror?"*

*"You know? Snow White? Who's the fairest of them all?"*

*"I...see."*

Lucian missed me. That was very nice to hear. My chest eased, allowing me to breathe more easily. *"Voice?"*

*"Yes?"*

*"Lucian and I are dating now. I think. How do you think I should proceed? I mean, based on what you know about him and me?"*

*"Slowly. You proceed very slowly and let him make all the moves."*

*"Oh."*

*"You have to be patient with him. You know he's not used to having relationships."*

My eyes widened. *"Does that mean I'm his first girlfriend?"*

*"I'm not in the position to answer that."*

I exhaled in irritation. *"You may not be a machine, but you're beginning to sound like one."*

*"I'm not in the position to change that."*

I managed to keep myself from laughing. Dyvian still had this weird thing against The Voice and he might prolong my training if he found out about my private conversation with it.

*"Be patient, huh?"*

*"It's the only way."*

*"So be it. But for now..."* I wanted to giggle but swallowed it back in time. My head in the sand tendencies beckoned.

*"Voice?"*

*"Yes?"*

Oh, it really sounded so much like Lucian. This was just too irresistible an opportunity to pass up. I wanted to giggle again.

*“Voice, I want you to do something for me again.”*

*“What is it?”*

*“Tell me you love me.”*

It didn’t respond for a long time. *“Voice. Come on. It’s just three little words. I love you. I want to hear you say it.”*

*“Because I sound like Lucian?”*

*“Yes. So come on—”*

*“I love you.”*

## Chapter Eleven

*Lucian Chevalier was everything a girl could want, and if I hadn't been Evren like him, I would have felt there was no way I'd get someone like him to fall in love with me. But I was Evren, and it was something I had that none of the rest of the human girls had, not even Blake Lively or Megan Fox. It was a thought I cherished whenever I felt insecure, a thought that was doomed because I failed to consider that there might be other Evren females in this world.*

"Concentrate within and block everything else," Dyvian instructed.

I stood still, eyes closed, and shivered a little at the icy breeze sweeping through the desert.

Today was the first time he'd asked me to attempt transforming into Evren. Today was also the third night of another of Lucian's seemingly endless "business trips", which he again didn't inform me about, but I tried not to think of that too much.

It was a few minutes after midnight and no one was in sight. Night, with its dangerous nocturnal inhabitants and howling winds, only made the desert more sinister than usual.

Earlier on, Dyvian and I came across an honest-to-goodness Mojave rattlesnake. It reminded me so much of Zekans I had jumped on Dyvian's back, forcing him to carry me until we reached a snake-free zone.

My fear of snakes was something I had to conquer really soon, especially since I wanted to go up against Zekans, the snake of all snakes—

“Deli, *concentrate*.”

I flinched at his whiplash tone and pushed out thoughts of ugly killer reptiles from my mind. My forehead creased with the effort of blocking all distractions from my mind. It was harder than it should have been because I was a thousand times more sensitive now than when I had been human.

The footsteps of an ant could be as loud as a bear’s if I let them. The soft smell of flowers could be overpowering if I let it. Everything became overblown because of my Evren senses, and I had to make all of them disappear.

“What color do you see now?”

“Black—no, wait. It’s starting to change.” I gasped. “It’s *red*.” I mentally gaped at the vision. I was surrounded by pure redness, its shade so rich it seemed alive. Would I see it again if I opened my eyes? Did it exist beyond my mind?

My eyelids twitched.

“Don’t open your eyes.”

I forced my eyelids shut, sealing my vision closed. “Why?”

“We’ll have to start over if you do. Now, do you still see it?”

“Yes. What does it mean?”

“It’s your color as Evren.”

“I’m a *red* dragon?”

“The fastest of us all.” There was a smile in Dyvian’s voice, but I didn’t understand what was so amusing about my Evren shade. Maybe his shade was prettier than mine?

“What’s your color?” I demanded.

“Gold.”

I gasped. “Lucian’s gold, too. Why do I have to be just plain red while you guys get to sparkle?” It was bad enough to turn into a creature with claws, but if I had to be a monster, couldn’t I at least be a glittery gold monster like the Chevalier brothers and not just some ordinary—ugh—red dragon?

“It reacts to your DNA, something like that. You’d have to ask Lucian for a more technical explanation because he’s the one into facts. Anyway, gold dragons are usually bigger. Our line also has the best firepower and we’re considered guardians of our race. The red line is the fastest and highest to fly.”

Now, I knew why he was amused, and I laughed.

Dyvian laughed, too. “I know, I know. You have trouble gliding on air even just three feet off the ground, but as it’s in your blood to fly high, we’ll just have to work on your flying soon.”

Keeping my eyes shut when I was wide awake was getting exhausting, and I decided to distract myself with a bit more Evren trivia. “Are there other colors?”

“Two more. The blue ones are usually small. They’re able to turn invisible more quickly than any other line, and they stay invisible the longest, too. And finally, the green dragons are our race’s warriors. They’re the largest and strongest of all four.”

The information he gave me was interesting, but not enough to distract me. “I want to open my eyes now.”

“Not until you’ve turned.”

“When’s that going to happen?”

“Just concentrate, and I’ll let you know when it’s time.”

“But—”

“*Deli.*”

“Okay, okay,” I grumbled, feeling like a kid who wasn’t allowed to ask if we had reached our destination. I indulged in a little tantrum, kicking my foot back and forth, spraying tiny pebbles all over, and was rewarded with a “Dammit, Deli.”

Several more minutes passed, although it seemed like hours.

“What do you see?”

I sighed and said with exaggerated patience, “Still the same red shade.”

“Good. If you’ve no trouble maintaining it even while we’re talking, then you’ll probably have no trouble creating your shape. The next thing I want you to do is make that red shade burn.”

“That won’t happen literally, right?”

“Even if it does, fire can never harm you now that you’re Evren. The power to create fire is within you. So, just will it to burn and it will.”

“Then I’ll change?”

“If things proceed normally, yes.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Just do it, Deli.”

It wasn’t the assurance I wanted, but I supposed it was all I’d get from him. *Hmph.* Stupid gold dragon. I refocused my mind on the endless sea of red, a sea that didn’t ripple but stayed still. I took a deep breath and thought one word.

*Burn.*

The red sheet blazed into life. Fire once again bathed my skin, invisible, hot, but painless. It was fast becoming a familiar sensation. I could no longer feel the icy climate of the desert. Now, everything was too hot. Every emotion was too sharp.

I finally understood why Dyvian had to hang me upside down.

Turning Evren was like wearing a shirt inside out. While humans concealed their souls within themselves, Evren had to expose them. To turn Evren was to open yourself up completely, leaving nothing in the darkness. The heat tore away the skin of deceit. It burned through pride, fear, misery, and everything else that made even the smallest piece of me untrue.

A spurt of fire flickered inside me.

It was my soul.

And then it was taking over my body and the dragon within me roared into life.

My eyes flew open.



A gold dragon stared back at me. *Dyvian*. He was laughing, the sound a terrifying mixture of a lion's roar and the grumble of thunder.

I laughed, too, but stopped abruptly when a higher-pitched version of Dyvian's laughter emerged from my throat. *"That was mine?"*

*"Yes, that's yours."*

I gasped in surprise and gasped again when flame shot out of my mouth. *"That was mine?"*

He couldn't stop laughing. *"That's yours, too."*

*"'Ew' for the first one and 'cool' for the second."*

*"You really have a way with words, Deli. I'll give you that."* His enormous dragon body shook with mirth, and I almost expected the ground underneath us to crack at the effort it took to carry us both.

*"God, we're huge."*

He laughed harder. His tail twisted and slammed against the ground, the sound akin to a crashing boulder.

*"Stop laughing—"* I gasped again, but this time I managed to stop myself from breathing out fire. *"Oh, my God, Dyvian. Don't you realize? We're communicating through our minds."*

My words cut his laughter short, and Dyvian was staring at me in amazement. God, his eyes were huge, too. They were probably the size of my head—my human head. It also occurred to me that my own eyes right now were probably as huge. It was a disgusting thought, and I mentally switched topics before I could think of more ways to describe how ugly I was at the moment.

*"Why hadn't I thought of this?"* Dyvian seemed to murmur to himself. *"We had always been able to communicate with our minds in Evren form so it's not surprising that—"*

*"Dyvian?"*

*"Nothing."* His jaws formed a smile, which I think he meant to be nice but only ended up grisly. *"How does it feel to be Evren?"*

*“Super. We should use this form more often. We could invite other Evren and have a...a dragon festival. We’d have flying races and—”*

*“Deli.”* He almost sounded like Lucian when he said my name like that.

*“What?”*

*“In this form, our scent becomes more pronounced, and that means leaving a trail for Zekans. Moreover, only a handful of Evren know how to turn.”*

I blinked, and it was proof of my immense size that I could sense the weight of my lashes. Oh, my God, but my lashes were heavy. Another thought occurred to me. Oh, my God, but dragons had lashes.

Dyvian’s booming laughter revealed that I had inadvertently “spoken” my thoughts out loud.

*“I can’t believe someone like you could...”* He shook his head.

I lifted my chin, which was admittedly rather longer than I liked.

*“Someone like me could...what?”*

*“Only the oldest and strongest these days are able to let their dragons out.”*

*“Does that mean I’m special?”* I clapped my hands in delight but stopped when my claws made loud sounds of clashing steel.

*“Let’s just say you’re more stubborn than the rest.”*

*“Ha-ha. Very funny.”*

*“With this, you achieved your goal.”*

*“My goal?”*

*“You did say you wanted to be, and I quote for the fifty-seventh time, an ‘Evren warrior chick,’ didn’t you?”*

His words pleased me so much I ran to hug him but stopped when my tail—my God, my tail—slapped against a Joshua tree, splitting it in half.

*“Oops.”*

Dyvian laughed again. *“If you keep on doing that, there won’t be any trees left in the desert.”*

*“Very funny.”*

Dyvian's dragon form somersaulted in the air. His eyes shone with brilliant fire against the darkness. His golden scales glinted.

I laughed. The natural form for Evren might not have been attractive by normal standards, but I'd have been first to admit it also came with a gloriously liberating sensation.

Taking a deep breath, I flew up to join Dyvian in the skies. It took me a while to adjust to the idea of flying with wings, and then I was racing through the desert. Dyvian followed shortly behind me, his chuckle rumbling out like a passing storm. I flew above an oasis and almost fell into the water when I caught sight of my reflection.

I shrieked, then stopped because the sound was just...*nightmarish*.

Dyvian's thunder-like laughter burst through the night.

*"That was me, wasn't it, Dyvian?"*

*"Yup, that was you, and your voice was enough to terrify even hyenas into hiding."*

*"You won't win American Idol with your voice either, you know."* The reflection on the water came back to me, and I had to say it. *"I'm ugly, aren't I?"* Deep inside, I knew I'd be ugly like Dyvian was now, a fact I had planned to ignore. But not anymore.

*"Yup."*

Being ugly wasn't a big deal and I knew it. But I was also sixteen and knowing was different from feeling. Seeing the actual extent of my ugliness was traumatic, but I controlled myself with an effort. If I cried, my tears might be large enough to create a small flood. If I stomped my feet, I might cause an earthquake. Honestly, everything about Evren was so exaggerated.

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Dyvian proceeded directly to the kitchen as was his wont. Laziness and hunger seemed to work hand in hand with him. Merely turning a page could make him tired and hungry.

I clambered up to my room for a quick shower. On my way down, I spied light shining from underneath the door to Lucian's study. My heart skipped a beat. He was back?

In the two weeks we had been "dating", today was only the fourth time I was able to catch him at home. I'd have liked to think it was just an awful coincidence, but his trips had become more frequent. The trip to Tokyo had been followed by a sudden overnight stay in DV, and then early this week, he told us he had another "emergency."

Where, he had been disinclined to reveal.

The door stood slightly ajar, and I tiptoed to it, not wanting to make noise as I peeked in.

Lucian sat behind his desk in the study. I wondered what time he had gotten back and if he had missed me at all. His fingers danced on the keyboard while he spoke on the phone in some foreign language. He was brokering another multimillion-dollar deal, no doubt. Didn't any of his business associates mind that they were dealing with someone less than half their age?

He glanced up, saw my head poking through the slight gap, and smiled.

It was a dazzling smile. I straightened, looked behind me to make sure Dyvian wasn't around, and darted inside. I locked the door. Lucian's eyes stayed on me as I made my way to him. Shyness slowed my steps to a halting pace, but it wasn't enough to stop me from moving toward him.

Giddiness swept over me. I was excited to share with him my newly acquired, hard-earned warrior-chick status, excited to be with him, excited at the thought of kissing him again, and for a hundred more reasons.

He swiveled his chair to face me as I reached his side. He stopped typing and spread one arm wide. It was all the invitation I needed. I sat on his lap and hugged him as tightly as I could.

I love you.

Lucian's tone suddenly became distracted, and he was speaking quickly. Then he was putting the phone down and his arms were going around me. I

sighed as our lips met. His kisses always tasted sweeter than anything I imagined, and I couldn't get enough of them, of him.

My fingers played with the curls in his hair, drifting slowly to his nape. His kiss deepened. It shocked me. It thrilled me. He usually played it cool, never letting our kisses last longer than half a minute, pulling away when things got too...heated.

And then, it was over.

I blinked, stunned and extremely unhappy to find us seated across from each other, his desk serving as a barrier between us.

"I want to kiss some more," I complained.

He shook his head. "Later," he said but softened his rejection with a tender smile.

It was a rare sight, and I wished I had a camera handy to capture it.

He chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Err...nothing." He asked hastily, "How did your training go?"

"Fantastic," I bragged with a grin. "I'm sure Dyvian thinks I'm the best student he ever had."

"You're his *only* student."

I waved his clarification away. Really, he was too concerned about semantics. "I'm a red dragon, do you know?"

He shook his head.

"Dyvian tells me our line's supposed to be the best flyers of Evren."

"That's right."

"Well, I'm not exactly the best yet but I'll get there eventually." I caught sight of my reflection in the windowpane behind him and sighed. "Now, I remember. God, Lucian, we're *ugly*."

"Speak for yourself."

"It's true, Lucian, and it's best you accept the fact." I clucked my tongue. "Ignoring facts isn't good, you know."

"You being the best person to give that advice, of course."

“It’s nice that you know.” I agreed without an ounce of shame. I leaned back against the seat and closed my eyes in remembered bliss. “Being Evren was so...amazing. It was almost like how I’d imagine skinny-dipping would be like, but with scales—

Lucian choked.

“—and the *power*, Lucian. It was incredible, knowing I was about twenty feet tall and able to swallow a person whole.”

“Gross thought,” Lucian said with a perfectly straight face, “but I understand your sentiments.”

“Ha-ha. You know I didn’t mean it literally.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.” He walked around his table, hands inside his pockets. “I’ve something to tell you.”

I brightened. “You’re going to tell me you’re in lo—”

“Deli.”

“It’s not that disgusting an idea.”

“Let it be, Deli.” He pushed me toward the door. “Now, let’s go join Dyvian in the kitchen. We have something important to talk about.”

~ ~ ~

“There are only two reasons why Lucian would call for an emergency meeting,” Dyvian declared.

It was four in the morning. He was freshly bathed and gobbling his way through steak and fries. It had been a few hours since we had successfully concluded our training. Lucian wanted to have the talk immediately, but Dyvian had insisted on showering and cooking himself an early breakfast first.

“What’s the first reason?” I stole a fry from Dyvian’s plate and munched.

“All outcomes agree with him.”

Lucian rolled his eyes.

“And the second reason?” I tried helping him spread butter on his toast, just like how a loving girlfriend would, but he batted my fingers away.

“Only one outcome agrees with him, and he’s thought of a way to make us think it’s our idea to choose that outcome.” Dyvian shrugged. “Either way, he stays in control.” He moved his chair closer to mine so he could whisper in my ear. “Now do you understand just how bossy your boyfriend is?”

“Perfectly,” I tried to say coherently, having just taken a huge bite of my Philly cheese steak sandwich.

“Shut up, Dyvian.” Lucian’s voice was as mild as a gentle wind, like it always was, making his rude words sound like a quote from the Bible. He frowned at me. “And you, don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Yes, sir.” Dyvian and I saluted at him in perfect synchrony.

Lucian sighed. “Must you two always be childish?”

I pretended to think. “Umm...yes.”

“Tell you what,” Dyvian suggested. “How about we reverse roles just for fun? We’ll act like we’re 348 years old—”

Lucian’s eyes flashed, and I was scared we might have taken his even temper for granted.

“—and you act like a teenager for once?”

I waited for Lucian to snap but all he did was pat his mouth with his table napkin. “Thanks, but no thanks. Now can we talk seriously? It’s about Davie.”

That effectively put a stop to our amusements.

“What have you found out?” I asked uneasily. I still wasn’t completely convinced it was safe to leave Davie to the mercy of Zekans.

Lucian’s lips formed a grim line. “It’s not good. One of my sources had tipped me off about plans for Davie being moved out of the hospital.”

“She’s not in a coma anymore?”

“She still is, I’m sorry. And that, in itself, makes the move suspicious. I went there to find out more, and what I’ve learned is something that doesn’t just affect you or us but the entire Evren race.”

My mind went blank. How could something about Davie or me affect other Evren?

Lucian continued, "Do you know someone named Colbert Winters?"

Shock made my fingers nerveless and my half-eaten sandwich fell on the plate soundlessly. "He's my uncle," I told him in a dull voice. He was my dad's younger brother, and Davie and I had never liked him or his social-climbing wife. If my uncle was involved, it was sure to be bad news.

"He's assumed guardianship of your sister and ostensibly had her moved to his home for private care so that she'd be near her loved ones."

"And his real motive?" If Colbert loved anyone, it wouldn't be me, my sister, or even his wife. Money was Colbert's first and only love. I shuddered, wondering if his love of money had anything to do with my parents' death.

But there was a part deep inside me that already knew the answer. When I glanced at Lucian, the regret in his eyes confirmed my worst fears.

"Colbert had contracted people to kill your entire family. What he doesn't know is that the criminal organization he's contacted is run by and employs Zekans."

"And Davie?" I whispered.

"Bait. Colbert knows you're alive. Officially, you're considered dead. A human body, burnt beyond recognition, was thoughtfully supplied by the Zekans to serve as proof of your death. With Davie the only survivor and your parents having left no will, Colbert automatically becomes Davie's guardian and now possesses full control of your family's finances. Davie is his way of luring you to a trap."

"And he's right, dammit," I muttered.

Lucian tipped my chin up. "I know I can't and have no right to stop you from helping your sister, but I advise you not to do so right now. She's still in a coma, and they have every reason to keep her alive. It's best to attempt rescuing her when she's at least out of medical danger."

His words made sense but I had to ask, "You promise we'll go after Davie when she's conscious?"

"Yes."

I nodded, telling myself to be satisfied.

“What do the other Evren have to do with this?” Dyvian’s fingers drummed on the table.

“The criminal organization was established to give Zekans access to human blood. Lots of it.”

The ramifications weren’t lost to us. I spoke my thoughts out loud. “And that’s why they’re more powerful than before, aren’t they? You told me once they used to be weaker and afraid of the modern world. But it’s different now, isn’t it?”

I was so furious, that if there had been a Zekan nearby, I’d have happily poked its eyes with my fork a hundred times. God, they were clever. Evil, gross, but hideously clever. As a criminal organization, they had certified means, albeit illegal, to obtain human blood. None of their “clients” would care about their victims as long as they were properly disposed of. The Zekans killed humans, drank their victims’ blood, and got paid for it with no one the wiser.

“I’m seriously itching to whip some Zekan ass.” I grabbed a plastic cup of yogurt, tore the lid off, and took out a spoonful, hoping its bland taste would reduce my desire to kill.

“With great power comes great responsibility,” I said under my breath, reminding myself that becoming an Evren warrior chick was not synonymous with becoming a righteous killing machine.

Dyvian choked, his face a picture of incredulity, exasperation, and amusement all rolled into one. “Are you quoting *Spiderman* to yourself?”

“Mind your own business,” I snapped, embarrassed at being heard, and busied myself with another spoonful of yogurt.

He made a small toast to Lucian. “We appreciate the heads up, but you haven’t told us the purpose of this meeting yet, have you?”

A slight smile touched Lucian’s lips. “No.”

There was still more bad news? “What is it?” I sighed. Why did I ever think being Evren would be glamorous and easy?

“We’re going up to DV to report our findings.”

I straightened in my seat. “You’ll take me with you?”

Dyvian stared at him in disbelief. “You’re taking Deli with us?”

I couldn’t believe it either. Did this mean...oh, my God, but maybe it did.

Lucian rolled his eyes. “It’s nothing to be excited about.”

Dyvian gave him a pitying look. “After everything, you still don’t know how Deli’s mind works, do you?”

I blew Lucian a kiss. “Don’t mind him. He’s just jealous you’re going out with a pretty girl like me.” Lucian began to look alarmed, but I chalked it up to his obsessive need to worry. He was probably nervous at how *intuitive* I was becoming these days.

“I told you he likes me a lot, Dyv. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t be thinking of taking me there, would he? I mean, it’s the closest he could do to having me meet his parents.”

~ ~ ~

The drive to DV was spent in silence. Lucian was behind the wheel, frowning about God knows what. Dyvian sat in the back, content with listening to his iPod. I sat next to Lucian in front, despite his protests, but with Dyvian’s blessings and my insistence. We had to make the right first impressions, you know.

Lucian parked the truck in the slots reserved for VIP visitors of the Death Valley National Park. I grabbed his hand as we walked and held tight even as he tried to tug his away without being too obvious.

It was early morning yet, but already the temperature was rising. My body hadn’t yet completed its adjustments to being Evren. I could only wish the day would come soon and sweating would just be a bad memory.

I only had a moment to appreciate the beauty of Death Valley—vast sand dunes appeared endless, a golden carpet covering the earth. The sheer size of the canyons was breathtaking, their ragged edges carving a treacherous path to heaven. Marble and limestone would occasionally break the monotony in color, streaks of light amidst all shades of brown.

In seconds, we were invisible and soaring high. Lucian held me tightly against him. He told me flying together would save time, but I liked to think he just wanted me close.

The Holy Grail of Evren was inside an enormous cave. The maps had only designated a number for the trail leading to it, but I liked to think of it as DVC, for Death Valley Cave. I didn't share this with the Chevalier brothers though. They'd just laugh at me anyway.

DVC was a refuge for Evren who grew weary of living amidst humans and hiding from Zekans. It was also where Hallir, the great prophet and Lucian's former mentor, resided. His word was pretty much law for our kind.

DVC lay behind the ridges of the Devil's Golf Course, a majestic black-and-white pan of immense salt crystals. One misstep could be your last. A guidebook to DV referred to it as the place only the devil could play golf.

Obviously, the author didn't know Evren could be the devil's golf buddies.

We materialized into view when we reached the entrance. Many gave us second glances, curiously at me and admiringly at Lucian and Dyvian.

It was a busy, busy place. People rushed in all directions, going in and out of countless passageways. Colorful stalls lined the walls all the way in. I was taken aback at my first sight of DVC. I had expected to see the Vatican and got a New York shopping bazaar—in a Flintstones setting—instead.

"This is your church?" I whispered to Dyvian.

He chuckled. "We don't exactly have a church, but if you're wondering where Hallir lives then you'll find his place further inside."

I pulled on Lucian's sleeves. "Do you think he'll like me? Will he think I'll suit you as a girlfriend?" I had dressed to impress with a yellow cotton polo shirt, pleated white mini-skirt, and pink canvas sneakers. Since Evren were strong and I wasn't—yet—I was aiming to look *athletic* at least with my tennis-inspired get-up. I had even debated carrying a racquet to complete the look, but Dyvian had said it was overkill.

Lucian seemed to be counting to ten before answering. "For the last time, Deli—"

“Oh, look, they’re selling really nice jewelry here.” I waved vaguely toward a booth displaying rows of colorful accessories. I had a feeling he had been about to say something quite cutting, and I wasn’t in the mood to have my confidence dampened.

He didn’t say anything, and I stole a look at him when the silence continued.

He was gazing at me with inscrutable eyes when the smallest sigh escaped him. His knuckles grazed my cheek. “We’ll go shopping after I speak with Hallir. Would you like that?”

I could only stare at him in amazement. It almost seemed like he was apologizing, albeit indirectly. I opened my mouth to tease him, but he had already turned away, snapping at Dyvian and me to hurry.

He led us in a series of twists and turns, going up and down in a maze of torch-lit alleys.

“People are looking at us.”

“Yup,” Dyvian agreed cheerfully.

“Why?”

“Because I’m good looking and popular?”

“*Puhleez.*”

“Okay, Lucian’s almost just as good looking—”

“Why are they looking at me?” I butted in before he could go on and on with his delusions.

“Ah, that. I guess it’s because you’re the first human in centuries to have been successfully turned into Evren.”

I mulled that over. “Is that a good thing?”

“Of course,” he assured me. “Our numbers are far from growing and successful conversions give our race hope. We don’t want our race to die out.”

Lucian motioned us to hurry, his stride lithe and graceful as we traveled down a steep stairway that took us deeper into the cave. The passage ended with a barricaded bronze door where two men in white livery stood guard.

They saluted Lucian. The gesture surprised me, and when they were done unlocking the door, I asked them, "Is he your captain?"

They gaped.

"Ignore her," Lucian said quickly and pulled me inside.

"It was just a simple question."

"Ask me instead."

"But you never answer the questions I ask."

"Exactly my point."

I stuck out my tongue.

"Is this the girl I've been hearing about?" a laughing voice asked, and I turned to see an old man with a fuzzy gray beard in long white robes. He could be none other than Hallir. He was everything I had imagined a prophet would look like. The huge crucifix, the altar with its tablecloth of gold silk, and the rows of church aisles just affirmed it.

The old man approached us with a kind smile. "Hello, child." He had a gentle face and a friendly voice, but for the life of me, I couldn't help feeling nervous. An aura of power emanated from him, and I was scared of making the wrong impression as Lucian's unofficial girlfriend.

Without even knowing what I was doing, I found myself curtsying. "Good day sir," I stammered as Dyvian started laughing.

I glared at him before smiling nervously at the prophet.

"Relax, Deli. He's not going to eat you."

"I know," I gritted out as I continued to smile. Duh. Didn't he know how badly I wanted to make a good impression?

Lucian frowned. "Then why are you so nervous?"

"You can be quite insensitive, son," the old man scolded and smiled at me again. "Forgive his manners. I had thought we taught him better, but I suppose he's forgotten after so many years."

"Hallir, I have to tell you something—" Lucian sounded oddly...anxious.

"Were you his teacher once?" I asked shyly at the same time.

“I suppose I was or had been.” He offered his hand. “First things first though. My name is Hallir. And you must be Delilah?”

“I prefer Deli.” I began to relax and flashed him my brightest smile. “How long has it been since you taught Lucian?”

“Hallir,” Lucian repeated, his voice more urgent.

The prophet ignored him, intent on answering my question. “Maybe...a hundred and fourteen years?”

I laughed, then stopped when Lucian and Dyvian’s faces paled. Drat. Maybe I had been too impolite? “Sorry,” I apologized quickly, flushing in embarrassment. “I didn’t mean anything—”

“It’s all right, child. I’ve never been good with numbers. I suppose that is why you’re laughing?” He turned to Lucian. “How long has it been? Maybe one hundred twenty-five years? Twenty-six?”

“Years?” I laughed. “Sir, maybe—”

And it hit me. My brain cells were again delayed in their reaction, but better late than never as they say.

I was Evren. If it were possible to turn into a dragon, wouldn’t it be equally possible that we were immortal?

I spun to face Lucian and demanded with narrowed eyes, “The truth, Lucian. Are we immortal?”

It took him several seconds to reply. “Yes.”

Chapter Twelve

Sulking could only be rewarding if you knew the person you were mad at would be miserable and guilty. But since there was no way to know if Lucian was feeling anything underneath his cold, gorgeous exterior, sulking only made me feel worse and getting lost didn't make me feel any better.

I had warned Lucian and Dyvian not to follow me and told them I'd make a huge fuss if they dared otherwise. It had been a beautiful exit, and now I just had to figure out a way to make an equally beautiful return. I wanted to maintain my dignity and not let them know I had gotten lost.

"I'm lost," I said to The Voice, needing someone to talk to.

"I'll tell Lucian—"

"No. If you do, I'll kill you."

The Voice remained silent and I took that as a symbol of surrender. Of course, I didn't think it was possible to kill The Voice, but I was gratified it was programmed to tactfully pretend otherwise.

"Why do you think he lied about our being immortal?"

"I do not believe he intended to lie. At the start, perhaps, he had chosen to withhold the information from you because it could only complicate matters further. The promise of immortality has driven many people insane. The elixir of life, alchemy, and all sorts of legends have told us how willing Man is to commit unspeakable acts for the sake of eternal life."

“But I wouldn’t have—”

“As I’ve said earlier, he didn’t mean to lie to you. But as time passed, he probably didn’t know how to broach the topic. It is not in his nature to blurt out facts. He would have felt silly telling you out of the blue, ‘By the way, Deli, we can never die.’ And perhaps—”

“What?”

“This is purely a hypothetical guess, you understand.”

“Yes, yes, now what?”

“Perhaps later on, he became worried you might treat him differently, once you were aware of the disparity in your ages—”

“Oh, my God, Voice. I remember now. Dyvian said he was 348 years old. He is, isn’t he?”

“I believe it would be safe to assume so.”

“Sheesh. He’s like my great-great-great—and maybe twenty greats more grandfather.”

“I suppose so.” There was a slight edge to its tone. I paid it no heed, focused as I was on assimilating facts.

“Thanks, Voice. I’m lucky to have you. You’re so smart. I wonder if your IQ is, like, a reflection of my natural IQ?”

“Natural IQ? As opposed to...unnatural IQ?”

“You almost sound amused there, Voice. Or confused. Hanging out with me must be making you more human. Anyway, what I mean by natural IQ is like my inborn IQ, my true potential. You know, like I’m born smart but I just haven’t realized it yet.”

“I...see.”

Talking with The Voice would have to be temporarily postponed, now that I’d found myself in a cafeteria of sorts. The place was just as noisy and crowded as the rest of DVC. I observed in silence, ignoring how I was being observed in return. I was the newest freak show in town, and I was tempted to charge them for admission. *Welcome. Step right up if you want the chance to speak with the newest red Evren in town.*

I asked for a can of soda from the nearest stall and tried to hide my shock when they charged me \$124.99 and asked if I wanted to pay in cash or by American Express. Was Hallir aware the merchants in DVC were in the habit of overpricing?

Half a minute later and more than a hundred dollars poorer, I sat at the nearest unoccupied table, pulled off the lid of my Coke Zero and drank it all in one gulp. Sulking was such a draining activity.

I put the can down just as a beautiful redhead slid into the opposite seat with an icy smile on her face.

Shocked, I choked on the last mouthful of soda.

She said nothing as I coughed and tried to regain my composure.

“You’re Delilah, yes?” Her voice was cultured and had a French accent. She didn’t sound warm like most of her countrymen, though. She wore a red-checked ruffled shirt unbuttoned to reveal a healthy amount of cleavage and—after a surreptitious glance underneath the table—hip-hugging, bell-bottom DKNY jeans. I wished I could have called her skinny but she was just the right side of slender.

She oozed sophistication and my tennis babe getup, which I thought pretty earlier, now seemed too...*juvenile*. She made me want to be ten years older, five inches taller, and twenty pounds lighter.

“I am, yes. And you are—”

“Angelica Vernon.” She reminded me of an icicle, a beautiful one, but still an icicle. French women were supposed to be sensual, but this woman radiated cold rather than heat and passion.

But she’s sexy, I’ll give her that. Even I had difficulty keeping my eyes away from the expansive amount of cleavage she was showing.

“You are alone, no?” Watching her speak was like seeing a mask of ice moving, each word threatening to crack its crystal surface.

“Oh, no. I’m with—” I hesitated.

“Lucian? Dyvian?”

I glanced down at my lap, not wanting her to see my surprise. How did she know them? I smoothed my skirt and forced myself to look at her with a smile. “Yes. Are you a friend of theirs?”

Her laugh reminded me of metallic wind chimes, melodious but lifeless. It also sounded taunting, but I told myself not to jump to conclusions.

You can't be sure she's here to make trouble, Deli. She may remind you of a beautiful viper from the Antarctic, but you shan't judge a book by its cover. She could just be here to make small talk.

“You could say that, yes.” Her voice dropped an octave. “Especially of *Lucian*.”

I stand corrected. She *was* here to make trouble. The cover said it all for what was within—she was an overrated classic, as empty and stuck-up as its admirers.

The way she said *Lucian*'s name made my skin crawl. “I see.” I hoped my flat tone would discourage her from talking. If I was lucky, maybe she'd even leave me alone, and I could be happily ignorant forever.

“Please tell him that Angelica says ‘hi,’ yes?”

“Will do.” Behind my false cheer, I contemplated the various ways I could make her suffer public humiliation. Maybe I could make her trip on her stilettos.

She leaned forward. “And tell him, if you please, that I have missed him, and I'd love to have him over to my place again.”

I didn't give her the satisfaction of seeing how much her words stung. “Of course.” I smiled sweetly, saying, “I'll even give him a kiss for you if you want,” and was rewarded with a flash of anger in her ice blue eyes.

Her eyes narrowed. “Oh, that won't be necessary. I believe he enjoys my kisses enough not to need any substitute from someone so...” she made a delicate pause, “...*innocent*.”

And the way she said it, she made “innocent” sound stupid, silly, and unwanted.

I glanced at her nails. They were painted red, perfectly cut, and extremely sharp. My own nails were freshly clipped. If I clawed her eyes out, she'd claw me back, and I wouldn't stand a chance.

Oh, well. We could always have a catfight next time. But for now, I had better chances of winning if I continued our verbal war.

I nodded understandingly. "You're right. Lucian may have a preference for *older* women." My barb struck home and I said with relish, "Really, really, old." I planted one elbow on the table, resting my chin on my hand as I gave her a thoughtful glance. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but knowing how Evren are immortal and all, I'm wondering exactly how old—"

"There you are," Dyvian's hearty voice intruded upon our conversation just as Angelica had been about to launch her next verbal missile.

And just when I'm starting to enjoy myself. I got to my feet with a smile for Dyvian. "How did you know—" My smile faded when I caught a glimpse of Lucian right behind him.

But he wasn't paying attention to me. He was smiling at Angelica and the redheaded woman was moving forward, her arms clasping his shoulders lightly as she kissed him full on the mouth.

On the mouth.

In public.

And this was Lucian.

I took a step forward, ready to grab her by the hair and pull until she was forced to stop mauling Lucian, but Dyvian was suddenly there, curving an imprisoning arm around my shoulders. I glared at him. "Let me go." I tried to shrug his hold away.

"Don't be so childish," he gritted.

"That's *my* boyfriend—"

"And, of course," Lucian cut me off in his smooth velvety voice, walking toward us, Angelica on his side, "you've already met our ward."

Angelica's eyes gleamed.

Ward?

I could only stare at Lucian in hurt shock. I know he had this thing about privacy, but surely, this was an exception? He had to acknowledge me as his girlfriend in this instance.

But he and Dyvian were saying goodbye already and with a lilting “ta-ta,” Angelica was walking away with swaying hips in a cloud of expensive perfume.

Yeeeeeeargh.

I wrenched free of Dyvian, intent on stalking away, but Lucian swiftly gripped my arm. “Not here.”

“Fine,” I bit out, eager to start our quarrel as soon as possible. I was definitely going to rake him over the coals for his deliberate omission.

We left the cave in silence, and I didn’t make a single protest as Lucian hauled me close upon taking off. I stayed rigid in the circle of his arms, pain making me oblivious to the once inescapable feelings of wonder at being this close to Lucian.

Back at home, Dyvian mumbled an incoherent excuse before driving away. He was a smart guy, really. He knew staying behind would only make him an unfortunate casualty of my anger. When Lucian closed the door behind him, I whirled around and shrieked, “You never told me about Angelica.”

“There was nothing to tell.” His voice was tightly controlled.

“Of course, there was. And you called me your *ward*.”

“Stop shouting.” He sat down as calm as you please, his gaze almost insulting in its utter steadiness.

That only made me shriek even more loudly. “I’m mad and when I’m mad I shout!”

“Fine.” The bored expression on his face almost drove me to murder. “Let’s just get this over with, shall we?”

His fingers drummed on the armrest. “You’re mad because I hid our immortality from you. I apologize for that. There just didn’t seem to be a right time to tell you. You’re mad because I didn’t tell you about Angelica? Then I’m sorry. You can ask me now, and I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.

You're mad I called you my ward? Then again I'm sorry, but I've told you from the start I don't want others to know about what we have."

His litany of sins was honestly weakening, and I collapsed on the sofa. *One thing at a time, Deli.* That was the trick to solving things. And if it didn't work out, well, there was always the ground to bury my head into, wasn't there?

I started with the least hurtful, albeit also the most surprising.

"The immortality thing..." I paused, trying to find a way to combine all my thoughts into a single sentence.

He raised a brow. "Yes?"

Oh. Now I get it.

"How does it work?" There. That was a great question, wasn't it?

Lucian coughed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We don't die of sickness. We can, of course, die if someone tears our head off, but it's rare for humans to obtain such an opportunity since we're a lot faster and stronger than they are. Besides, humans have never been our problem. Zekans are."

"But what about...aging?"

"That's the tricky part. If you're born Evren, your body should ideally stop aging beyond your eighteenth or twenty-first year—the age more or less depends on how fast your body matures. And to stop the aging process permanently, you just have to let your dragon out regularly."

"Like I did during training?"

He nodded. "You could think of it as...exercise, if you will. Something that not everyone's capable of doing...like yoga or something like that."

I frowned, remembering the old and young Evren faces I had seen and belatedly realizing that the majority didn't lean toward the youthful. "Is it really that hard to let your dragon out?"

Lucian nodded.

"B-but I could do it at the first try!"

Lucian nodded again. "I suppose it was because we were the ones training you and—" he cast me a quick, doubtful look, "—you could be stronger than others."

“*Special*,” I breathed.

He rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

I ignored that. With my questions about our immortality satisfied, my stomach tightened up in a knot of unease, telling me that I could no longer run away from confronting him about *that* woman.

But coward that I was, I still grasped for more straws. “B-before...you told me about your mom leaving Dyvian for you to take care of...”

Wariness shrouded Lucian’s face. “So?”

“I once thought you were only alone for a short time before you had Dyvian with you, but now...how old is Dyvian?”

His hand slashed the air in a gesture of incredulity. “What’s the point of this?”

“I’ll know anyway so just tell me.”

“He was born in 1804. You do the math,” he snarled.

I tried calculating that as fast as I could and whitened at the result. No wonder he was so antisocial. Lucian’s mother had left him when he was eight and came back over a hundred and forty years later only to dump Dyvian on him. He had more than a century to perfect his aloofness and distrust. I should count myself lucky he was telling me this much, shouldn’t I?

“Is that all?” Lucian’s impatient gaze scorched me on the spot.

No, but I wish it was. I took a deep breath. “How long have you and Angelica been together?”

“We didn’t have a relationship. We just went out whenever there was a chance.”

“How long did you *date* then?”

His lips compressed into a thin line, but he answered, “A couple of years.”

My chest tightened. I was right. They had known each other for a long time. And since this was Evren we were talking about... “How long is a couple of years?” No one had seemed surprised that Lucian and Angelica were particularly close. Could that mean he didn’t mind people knowing about her?

And could that mean he didn't feel the same about me? That he was ashamed of what we have?

He cursed when he caught sight of my tears. "Deli—"

"How long?" I shrieked. I knew I had no business caring about how long Lucian and Angelica had been going out in the past. It happened before I came into his life. It shouldn't have mattered, but it did. And it hurt because, even though I loved Lucian with all my heart, I just wasn't sure yet about what he felt for me, and every little threat to what we had made me jealous, fearful, and insecure.

"A hundred maybe? Are you satisfied now?" He scowled and swore when I sucked in my breath at his answer. He tried taking me into his arms. "For God's sake, Deli, I'm only human. She offered company and there were times—"

"No," I countered, feeling cold and petty. "You're not human."

Lucian ignored it. "Don't be such a baby. The point is, I enjoyed her company, she understood the rules. She didn't care about labeling what we had."

And try as I might, my head just didn't want to stay buried under the sand. I heard the words he hadn't said, words that may or may not be real. "You had sex with her, didn't you?"

"So?"

"*You did?*"

Lucian's mouth opened and closed, his face stunned as he realized that he had fallen for the trap.

"How could you have sex with a block of ice?"

No answer.

"Did you have to use an electric blanket?"

More silence.

"I hate you," I shrieked. I wished I could think of something more hurtful and sophisticated at the same time. "I really, really hate you." It was what I felt, and I spat the words out, meaning them with all my heart. Angelica knew

Lucian *that* way. The knowledge was like a knife in the gut, and I ran up to my room and slammed the door shut with enough force to make the walls shudder.

I had another reason to sulk now, and I was definitely going to sulk, big time.

~ ~ ~

Another week had passed in my Evren life, a week that was tedious, tortuous, and tiring because I still wasn't talking to Lucian. Why couldn't he just say sorry? Why couldn't he even show he cared that I was mad?

But, no, Lucian was colder than ever and a hundred times busier. He went on trips almost every day and when he did come home, he'd be locked in his study all the time.

Maybe he didn't really love me. He wouldn't have been able to stand being apart from me this long if he did. In fact, the only reason I could think of to explain his stubbornness was that he *knew* without a doubt I was suffering, too, and he was waiting for me to come to him first.

Could that have been it?

He probably didn't even miss me. He was probably having so much fun single-handedly dominating Wall Street.

I hate him, I growled silently to myself as I viciously wrote my answers to my homework for History. But I was holding the pen too tightly, and I had to tear off another pen-punctured sheet, toss it into the wastebasket, and rewrite my assignment.

Dyvian knocked on the door an hour later, just as I was scribbling down my last sentence about the injustices in the Civil War. "I brought you hot chocolate." He shut the door with a light backward kick and strolled inside.

I took the mug and managed a smile. "Stop being so guilty, Dyv." He had been showering me with little good deeds the entire week to atone for his own role in Lucian's deception. "I told you you're already forgiven for not saying anything about our..." The fact that we'd never die—by natural causes

at least—was even stranger than the idea of being Evren, and I finished awkwardly, “our lifespan.”

He pulled out a chair, straddled it. “How was school?”

“Just the same.”

“Is that Wesley guy still making the moves on you?”

I blushed.

His eyes widened. “What have you been doing?”

“Nothing.” But I had answered too quickly and he wasn’t fooled.

“You’ve gone out on a date with him, haven’t you?”

“Of course not.” I fussed with the things on my table, repositioning the huge pencil sharpener Lucian—the mere thought of his name made my chest ache—lent me and piling my notebooks on one side.

“Come on, Deli, spill. You know you’re going to tell me sooner or later.”

“No, I—” I shut up, but it was too late.

“So, you *are* hiding something from me. If you didn’t go on a date with him then...” His voice trailed off.

I bit my lip hard, doing my best to keep quiet. But my propensity to talk won out in the end. “Okay, I flirted with Wesley.” I stole a look at Dyvian, scared of what he’d think. His smile somewhat soothed my worries.

“You don’t think I’m a slut?” Sure, Lucian and I had a tiff but it wasn’t like we had broken up. I still thought of myself as Lucian’s girlfriend...even if he didn’t like admitting it.

“No, I don’t think so. There’s no harm in flirting.”

“But I wouldn’t want Lucian to flirt with another girl.”

“You’re hurt and that’s why you probably indulged in a little flirting with another guy. It’s an understandable reaction, and I don’t think you’ll do it again, will you?”

I shook my head.

“Then that’s that. Lucian will simply have to accept it.” Dyvian’s eyes suddenly narrowed. “When was the last time you’ve talked to The Voice?”

“A while?” He didn’t have to know it was just this afternoon, did he? Dyvian could be so unreasonable about my special ability. If I didn’t know him so well, I’d think he was envious of the fact I had the super smart Voice inside my head.

But again, he saw right through me and groaned, “Didn’t I tell you to speak with it only during emergencies?”

“It was an emergency! I was *sad*.”

He snorted. “I suppose you told it about how much you’ve missed Lucian and all.”

“Umm...”

“Don’t bother lying. Your face says it all.” He massaged his temples with a sigh before suddenly looking up and demanding, “Did you also tell The Voice about the time you flirted with Wesley?”

“I did. So?”

An unholy gleam appeared in his eyes. “In *explicit detail*?”

“Well...maybe, but only because I was drowning in guilt and—what’s so funny?”

He stood up, his shoulders rocking in laughter. “Just something I thought. You wouldn’t understand.” He patted my head. “Sleep tight, Deli. I know someone who won’t.”

“If you’re talking about Lucian,” I said before I could stop myself, “don’t hold your breath. I don’t think he has even noticed we’re not talking.” And I wasn’t whining. I wasn’t.

“You never know, Deli. You never know.” And he left my room, still laughing.

~ ~ ~

“Have you and Lucian made up?” Audrey shifted her weight from one foot to another as we waited in line. Our P.E. instructor had scheduled a surprise shootout test for today, one I had a feeling I’d barely pass despite all the hours I’d put into practice.

There was simply no word to quantify how terrible my aim was. I didn't want to imagine what harm I could do if the time would come I'd have to use my fire-breathing powers to toast some Zekans. What If I ended up roasting another Evren? Did my new race have any laws for unintentional murder?

"We're still not talking," I answered glumly. I bent down to tighten my shoelaces. Someone walked past me, hitting me on my shoulder with enough force that I skidded back...about a tenth of an inch.

Just what I need. I looked up and found myself the object of Melissa's glare, frustration evident in her eyes. Someday, I'd really have to let her understand just how *strong* I was so she'd stop physically harassing me. All these harmless but annoying shoves were getting on my nerves.

I gave my shoelaces one last tug before standing up. "Hello."

She tittered. "Sorry. I didn't notice you."

"Right." I stared at her, wondering why I ever thought she was something to worry about. After everything that had happened, getting attacked by Zekans, discovering my immortality, coming face to face with Lucian's voluptuous and 145-year-old—I asked Dyvian—former flame, yada, yada, yada, nothing this blond Queen Bee could do would ever be of consequence.

She was a pest, but a really tiny pest.

"So, anyway, Denny—"

"It's Deli."

"Umm, whatever." She rolled her eyes. "Like I was saying, I have this cousin in Australia, and I told her we've got someone here from her country. Where did you last study again?"

Okay, maybe a not-so-tiny pest.

"It's a private school," I told her. "She probably wouldn't know it." Australia simply wasn't far enough. Lucian should've said I came from Zimbabwe or somewhere just as obscure. If Melissa started digging up my past, she was bound to learn more beyond the fact that I really hadn't come from down under.

And that was very bad. It could force us to leave town, and though that was something I still desired, I didn't want it to happen for the wrong reasons.

"Maybe she would. She comes from a private school, too."

I should've said I was home schooled, darn it.

"It's—" I blinked several times and gasped. "Oh, my God, is that a genuine Tiffany necklace you're wearing?"

Melissa's hands flew to her throat. "Oh, this little thing?" She laughed and the RS girls laughed with her dutifully.

Audrey coughed, doing her best not to laugh, not with them but at them.

"It's soooo nice," I gushed, wanting to make sure Melissa forgot all about my yet unnamed private school in Australia. Note to self—Google private Aussie schools ASAP. "I've always wanted something like that, but Lucian doesn't want to buy me one. You're so lucky."

"Uh-oh." The words came out triumphant rather than sympathetic. "Is your relationship with Lucian on the rocks?"

I heaved a great sigh. "I just don't know." A long whistle pierced the air, and I quickly pushed Audrey forward. "It's our turn to shoot baskets. Maybe we can talk next time again, Merissa."

Melissa's face became stone. "It's *Melissa*."

"Umm, whatever. Audrey, hurry up, will you? And stop laughing. We need to be serious about this test."

~~~

Dyvian and I were still laughing when we reached home. I had recounted what happened, and he congratulated me for my quick thinking. He disappeared to the kitchen directly afterward, and I walked slowly up to my room, doing my best not to be obvious as I looked around for Lucian.

No light came from Lucian's study or bedroom, and I could only surmise he was again on some errand or another.

Over dinner, I managed to control the urge to ask Dyvian about Lucian's whereabouts. When I was done eating, I hurriedly told him I had homework to

do and raced to my room. But all I could do was stare sightlessly at my textbook for hours.

Finally, I gave up, got in bed, and burst into tears.

*"Voice?"*

*"Yes?"*

I sniffed. *"Do you know where Lucian is?"*

*"He's in Death Valley—"*

*"Probably flirting with Angelica, no doubt."*

*"I believe—"*

*"Don't bother. I don't want to know. I don't care about him, and I don't miss him."*

And then I covered my face with my pillow so Dyvian wouldn't hear me crying.

The minutes ticked by and I tossed and turned in my sleep. Images of Lucian and Angelica entwined in each other's arms tormented me.

Frustrated at my futile attempts to sleep, I made an impulsive decision. I checked the alarm clock. *Three o' clock in the morning.*

*"Voice?"*

*"Yes?"*

*"Where's Lucian now?"*

*"He's in his room."*

I jumped out of bed, opened the door quietly, and tiptoed as fast as I could to Lucian's room.

I peeked and found myself staring straight into Lucian's warm green eyes. For one week, I had made myself avoid looking at him, and now, the sudden sight of Lucian in all his quiet perfection was almost too much for my eyes.

I badly wanted to blink, but I was scared if I did, I'd open my eyes and find him gone, realizing he was an illusion my desperate heart had conjured.

"Lucian?" I ventured, testing if the Lucian before me was an apparition or not.

He said nothing but only spread his arms open.

The next thing I knew, Lucian's arms were wrapped tightly around me. I sobbed noisily against his chest. "I missed you..." I wanted to tell him the various things I missed about him, like the way he'd say "Deli, please" whenever his brainpower turned out to be inadequate in helping him understand what I was saying or doing. Or the patient way he'd tutor me with my homework or the martyr-like resignation in his eyes when I managed to convince him to watch *Gossip Girl* with me.

But I couldn't tell him any of those because I was too busy crying and reacquainting myself with the feel of his arms around me, loving how broad his shoulders were, how strong his chest felt, and how warm his lips tasted against mine.

He kissed my hair. His arms tightened around me even more, and I let out an involuntary squeal of pain. His arms immediately loosened and he apologized.

I shook my head, and because I couldn't help it, I said again, "I missed you." And for some reason, that only made the tears fall once more.

He handed me the tissue box from the bedside table. "Your nose is running."

"Sorry," I mumbled and blew my nose.

When I was done, he pulled me back into his arms, and murmured, "I missed you, too."

I pulled away so he could see just how incredulous I was. "You're lying. It didn't seem like it at all."

"But I did, cross my heart." His smile was tender as he made the appropriate gesture.

His attempt at making me smile was endearing, but I still wasn't done with my little interrogation. I hated every minute I had spent away from Lucian, and I was determined to know everything that could help me prevent us from fighting again.

My fingers traced his jaw as I asked haltingly, "Why didn't you just say sorry?"

He sighed again before quietly admitting, "Pride...among other things."

"Are you really sorry?"

He kissed my forehead. "Yes."

"I love you, Lucian."

He answered the words with a kiss that swept all the sadness away. My heart told me I shouldn't be so weak, that I should berate him for being too proud and forcing me to come to him first.

But it was impossible to stay angry with his lips moving over mine, and he was holding me like I was something precious and fragile, something he would die for before letting go.

*Next time*, I promised myself, drowsy and tired after crying so hard. *Next time I won't be so weak.*

And then Lucian was kissing me again, murmuring he was sorry and that he'd watch me while I slept, and I closed my eyes, surrendering myself to the best night's sleep I'd had in days.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Never force a guy to do something he doesn't want to do. It was the most painful lesson I had to learn and probably the same for anyone else who preferred to ignore inconvenient truths. If you forced a guy to do something he didn't want or wasn't ready to do, the outcome would always be unpleasant, no matter how much he cared for you.*

“Just for an hour, please.” I batted my eyelashes but the usually fail-proof technique was ineffective. Maybe my pretty fluttering eyes were only potent against humans?

We were in the living room on a warm cloudy Saturday, the Nevada weather cooperating nicely with the country fair scheduled to open tonight. Audrey and I had made plans to go, and I was hoping Lucian would let go of his privacy issues enough to accompany us.

“Stop it, Deli,” he ordered, irritation making his voice just a tiny bit less doctor-like. He might even pass for a normal human being with normal human emotions if I pestered him further.

“But, Lucian, it's just a harmless fair—”

“I mean it, Deli. Stop it. You're starting to look like a goldfish and it's creeping me out.” And then he was snapping his Financial Times open, which ended the discussion as far as he was concerned.



Dyvian frowned and shook his head. "I don't agree. I think you looked more like Nemo when you were doing that." He fluttered his lashes, which were ridiculously long like his brother's.

"Do me a favor, will you?" I didn't wait for him to answer. "Mind your own business. Please?" I fluttered my lashes. "Pretty, pretty, please?"

"You should just ask me instead," he advised. "I'll be more than happy to go with you and Audrey to the fair."

"You're not my boyfriend."

"Is that so? Well, the last thing I've heard, Lucian here still hasn't officially—"

Lucian lowered his newspaper just enough to give his brother a warning glance. "Enough." He turned to me, saw me still fluttering my lashes hopefully, and just...grunted before hiding himself again behind his beloved newspaper.

Dyvian smirked and returned his attention to the latest gossip Ryan Seacrest was sharing on television.

I jumped off the settee and perched my hip on Lucian's armrest. "Please, Lucian, please, pretty, pretty, please—"

He sighed and folded his paper back. "Let's make a deal. I heard you failed your quiz in History—"

I scowled at Dyvian. "It's *his* fault. He lived through the Civil War and when I asked for help—"

Lucian's raised eyebrow was enough to silence me. "Do you want this or not?"

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"What's the name of Abraham Lincoln's assassin? Give me the right answer and I'll go."

"Mark—"

Dyvian hooted. "That's John Lennon's assassin, Deli."

"I rest my case." Lucian lifted his newspaper back to eye level, and this time it stayed there.



I tried one last time a few hours later. Deciding to ambush him in his study, I skipped to his table and asked casually, “How do I look?”

Lucian put down his pen and pushed his checkbook aside, giving me his full attention.

I espied the organizations he was donating money to and was flattered to note that he was giving me preference over Brangelina’s foundation. If I worked hard enough at being his perfect girlfriend, maybe he’d even place me above world peace on his priority list one day.

His eyes traveled all over me from head to toe. I had curled my hair and worn a pink, lacy headband to accessorize my fuchsia mini-dress and chunky three-inch-heeled leather boots.

“Well?” I demanded when he continued to observe in silence.

He said finally, “You look nice,” and returned his attention to writing out checks.

It was difficult to extract pleasure from his words when he had spoken them like a medical diagnosis. I decided to think he was just *shy* and what he really meant was I was too beautiful for him to look at.

Lucian coughed but didn’t look up. There was an absent-minded air about him now. He was doing his all-time favorite activity—thinking. And though it also meant he was close to forgetting I was even present, the frown of concentration on his face only made him more gorgeous in my eyes.

Why did I love this guy so much?

He rarely had time for me, and yet, I still didn’t mind if I had to wait the whole day just to have a minute alone in his arms.

He should have been too silent for comfort, but instead, I found his one-word-per-minute style cute.

Unless he was making me breathless with his kisses, he treated me like a bratty younger sister he was inclined to ignore.

He wasn't the perfect boyfriend but...he made me feel safe. He never made me feel ashamed I was occasionally the opposite of a brainiac, and he did lots of little things for me just to make me smile or feel better.

I sighed loudly and sat across him.

"The puppy eyes and the sad face won't work, Deli."

"I just want to be with you."

"The pouting won't work either," he informed me without looking up or pausing from his writing.

"Lucian." When he didn't answer, I raised my voice. "*Lucian.*"

"What?"

I was intent on asking him to go with me one last time, but my lips seemed to have another idea. "I love you."

If I had expected Lucian to be overcome with passion at the words, I would have been vastly disappointed. But I didn't and I giggled when the words only made Lucian still as a statue. And then he was raking his hand self-consciously through his hair, asking briskly, "Do you have enough money for tonight?" He took out his wallet and began counting out notes.

I planted my hands on my hips. "I know you have a hard time trusting people, especially women, but I shan't be defeated. I know you love me, Lucian. I just know."

"Deli, *please.*" He handed me a couple of bills and pointed to the door. "Now, go."

Walking backward to the door, I encouraged him, "Come on, Lucian, it's not that hard to say. Follow me. I. Love—"

"Out now, Deli." But there was a smile in his voice.

Laughingly running back, I threw my arms around his neck and placed the sloppiest kiss on his cheek. "I still feel bad you're not coming with me, but it's okay, I forgive you." I nodded with self-righteous generosity against his shoulder.

He pulled back and, for one moment, everything I had ever hoped for from Lucian was shining in his forest green eyes. His eyelids shuttered closed, then he was back to being his aloof, busy self.

“Stay out of trouble,” he reminded me before waving me away.

~ ~ ~

“It’s just the two of us then?” Audrey got inside the SUV next to me. She looked prettier than usual. Her purple and white striped blouse hugged her body like second skin, emphasizing the kind of cleavage that flat chested girls like me could only dream of. The black miniskirt, tights, and mules she wore with it added funky glamour to her look.

“Just the two of us, yes, and you look fantastic, by the way.” I raised a brow and teased, “Are you planning to get someone’s attention?”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, Deli. You and I know Wesley’s so into you he barely notices anyone else when you’re around.”

I remembered the last time I had spoken to Wesley and looked away guiltily, busying myself with driving. “Audrey?” I asked in a small voice.

“Yeah?”

“Are you angry at me?”

She asked in astonishment, “Why should I be?”

“Because when Wesley flirted with me a few days ago, I flirted back.” My voice had gotten smaller and smaller until I was close to whispering the last few words.

“Oh. That.” She didn’t even pretend *not* to know what I was talking about and my guilt increased.

“I’m sorry,” I burst out before she could say anything further. “I know it was wrong. I know it,” I repeated miserably. “But I was just so *mad* at Lucian I wanted to get back at him in any way. Then Wesley came and I wanted to make Lucian feel jealous—”

“It’s okay, Deli.” She stopped my ramblings with a soft laugh.

“Is it really?”

"I can't say I wasn't a little hurt, but in the end, I knew you didn't mean anything by it."

"I promise I won't do it again."

"Not make Lucian jealous?"

"Duh. Not *that*. I mean, flirt with Wesley." I tossed my hair over my back. "I can't promise I won't try to make Lucian jealous. There will be times when it's the only way he'll remember I'm not just his ward—"

"Is that an Australian term for girlfriend?" Audrey tossed me a curious look.

"Something like that." I tried laughing my little blunder away.

We got to the fair at half past seven. The whole town seemed to have turned up for it, and we had to endure long lines just to buy cotton candy, throw darts at colorful balloons, and ride the Ferris wheel.

Nevertheless, Audrey and I had fun. It was pretty amazing how well we got along considering the short span of time we'd known each other. She was as outrageously blunt as ever, and I couldn't stop laughing as she pointed out people she knew, whispering horrendous facts about them.

There was the primly dressed Martha, a lovely brunette who had been caught two years ago having sex in the boys' locker room with Arthur, the pimply-faced son of Sanger's Reverend Andrew Roberts. She had been quickly wedded to Arthur, and her wild child days had come to an end under the Reverend's strict supervision.

Bartholomew Scott, a large, balding man in his fifties, was described to be an old, pompous, know-it-all. He was the richest man in town, lived in an ostentatious two-story home, and everyone knew the only reason he came to live in Sanger was because he had been tired of living in the shadow of his far wealthier relatives.

And then there was Matthew. He was exactly as Audrey had described—tall and stocky with handsome blond looks. He had a nice smile and even nicer teeth, and I realized why so many people had chosen to believe his word over the rebellious-looking, albeit equally good-looking, Audrey.

One of these days, I had to figure out how to avenge Audrey on this jerk.

“Hey, Deli. Do you want to try that out?” She pointed to one of the attractions at the edge of the fairgrounds.

It was a two-story structure with the words House of Mirrors garishly painted on a sign above it. I could hear people screaming and laughing from within. “What is it?”

“You’ve never tried something like it?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a maze of mirrors. All you have to do is find your way to the exit.”

I glanced back at the makeshift house. “Is it safe?”

She laughed. “Of course, it is. Why shouldn’t it be?”

But what if a Zekan was in there, hiding, waiting to kill me? I forced a smile. “I don’t think—”

“Oh, come on,” she exclaimed, dragging me with her to the ticket booth. “It’s going to be fun, I promise. My treat, too.”

And that was how, minutes later, I found myself gripping her hand tightly as we stepped past the entrance and into a dimly lit passageway. Inside, the so-called House of Mirrors was even scarier than I had imagined. Larger, too.

There were two doors to choose from. A couple of sophomores were with us and they took a chance with the red door on the left, half-succeeding in scaring each other as they made jokes about seeing ghosts.

“This is the best,” Audrey exclaimed, jumping up and down in excitement. “The man outside told me they’d have *zombies* here to make things scarier.”

I managed a sick smile as I moved to follow the girls, now squealing, as they crept past the door.

Audrey caught my arm, frowning. “Where are you going?”

“Inside?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Where’s your sense of adventure? We’ll take the other door and see where it leads.” She opened the blue door, gesturing me to follow her. “Come on.” I had a bad feeling about this, and

when a loud gust of wind shut the door closed behind us, it took every ounce of my courage not to run away.

We found ourselves in a small cubicle, our reflections staring back at us from the front, left, and right. It was even darker here, with just the tiniest glow of yellow light from the ceiling.

Of course, my Evren sight made me see things more clearly. Audrey was wide-eyed in fear and her giggle was high-pitched and tinged with nervousness.

“Don’t you be scared, Audrey. That’s my role.” Evren or not, the House of Mirrors was a creepy place, and I had the strongest urge to go back.

Then again, why shouldn’t I?

“No,” Audrey protested when I moved to open the door behind us. She looked more relaxed now and took my hand in a firmer grip. “We can do this, Deli.” She began touching the mirrors and the one to our right slid back, revealing yet another cubicle of mirrors.

“See?” she boasted and pulled me in. The door closed behind us. We looked at the mirror in front us, saw the zombie grinning at us from behind and screamed.

*Oh, God, save me.*

I ran through more cubicles of mirrors. Audrey and I had parted ways in our confusion, and I had no idea how to find her, much less find a way out.

Should I turn Evren now?

If I turned into a dragon, I was pretty sure I’d stop feeling frightened. No measly human in a zombie costume could ever scare me when I was twenty feet tall.

*“Voice?”*

I hurriedly relayed my dilemma and afterward, I asked anxiously, “*What should I do?*”

*“Let me tell Lucian.”*

*“He’s not coming here. I already asked him—”*

*“This is different. Just stay where you are. Count backward from ten and he’ll be right beside you.”*

*“But—”*

*“Start now. Ten.”*

I bit my lip and looked around furtively.

*Nine.*

I could still hear the younger girls screaming but there was no sound of Audrey. She was probably just as scared as I was but just too proud to shriek.

*Eight.*

I fidgeted, trying to look anywhere but my reflections, which was hard, since they were all around me.

*Seven.*

Oh, God, Lucian, hurry up or I’m going to panic, and then I’ll turn Evren and I won’t care if the whole United States of America sees me.

*Six.*

I froze when I felt the door of a nearby cubicle squeaking open. Oh, drat. What if it was another zombie? I clenched my teeth, hugging myself tightly.

The door directly to my right opened slowly and I forgot counting by the second.

*Five, four, three, two, one!*

To heck with waiting. I got ready to scream myself into Evren, but a hand suddenly clamped down on my mouth. And then I was being whisked away, traveling through cubicles without pause.

Was I being kidnapped?

I sank my teeth on the hand still clamping my mouth shut.

*“Deli, dammit.”*

*“Lucian?”*

*“Did you have to bite me?”*

*“I thought I was being kidnapped.”* Relief reduced me into a weak-kneed state of gibberish, and I threw my arms around him. *“Oh, Lucian.”* I burst into tears.



He held me awkwardly in his arms, still speedily and steadily making his way through cubicles. In a moment, we were outside, and he set me down gently on my feet. "Stop crying," he muttered, looking around self-consciously.

But we were all alone. The House of Mirrors had been erected at the edge of the grounds, and the closest people I could see were half a mile away, lining up to shoot balls and have the bikini-clad lady inside a portable tank dumped into the water.

He sighed. "What am I going to do with you? You're stronger than everyone here and yet, a man in a zombie costume made you cry."

"But he looked *scary*."

He pressed his hands to his forehead. "*Deli*."

He always looked cute whenever he was struck speechless by my logic. I stared at him and I just *knew*. *I'll never ever stop loving this guy*.

Lucian's hands dropped, and the way he was suddenly looking at me made me gulp and take a step back. "Lucian?"

He kissed me.

He didn't stop kissing me as he urged me backward, picking me up when I hit the corded borders of the fair. He jumped over them with nimble ease and yet his lips never left mine.

When we got to my SUV, my hands shook so badly I had a hard time taking the key out of my pocket.

Our drive home was spent in silence, and I remembered to send Audrey a text message almost at the last minute, telling her Lucian had come to take me home. As an afterthought, I also texted Wesley and asked him if he could please make sure that Audrey got home safely.

And then Lucian was switching the ignition off, his lips covered mine, and I lost myself in his kiss.

When I opened my eyes, Lucian was already kicking the door open to my bedroom.

I stared up at him, wide eyed.

He stared back at me, locking his gaze with mine even as he continued to move without hesitation. Another light kick sent the door slamming closed and then he was laying me down on the bed.

He followed right after and pulled me close, embracing me with such fierceness I actually had a hard time breathing.

“Lucian?”

He kissed my forehead. “Mmm?”

“What are we going to do?” I whispered.

He tugged a lock of my hair and chuckled. “Definitely *not* what you think we’re about to do.” He stroked my back. “I just want to be with you.”

“Can I record that?” I couldn’t believe he was saying those words back to me. I had no idea what made Lucian act like this, like he couldn’t get enough of me, but I wasn’t going to complain.

He chuckled again. “Never.”

Three minutes later, I whispered, “What *are* we going to do?”

“Just sleep and be with each other. Don’t you like the idea?” he teased.

“I’d like it better if you’d also tell me you love—” One mind-blowing kiss made me lose my train of thought.

“Just...enjoy the moment, will you, hmm?”

“But—”

“Sleep.” Lucian yawned and he looked so cute I just had to sigh.

He stopped yawning and glared.

I blinked. “What did I do?”

“Just...” He sighed, pulled me even closer to him, and his hand drifted over my eyes, urging them to close. “Just sleep, okay?” he grumbled.

*So totally cute.* I smiled at myself.

Lucian grunted next to me.

“Goodnight, Lucian.”

“Goodnight, Deli.”

~~~

When I woke up at dawn, Dyvian was angrily hauling Lucian out of my bed, and I began shrieking.

“What the heck are you doing?”

Dyvian barely glanced at me, unable to stop glaring at Lucian. “What does *he* think he’s doing?”

Lucian shoved him away but didn’t say anything. He glanced at me, his face unreadable, his mouth forming a grim line. “Are you all right?”

I nodded, bewildered and scared.

His face softened a little and he smiled. “It would help, you know,” he murmured, “if you looked the part.”

I looked down, realizing I was clutching the covers to my neck for no reason, and hastily let them go so Dyvian would see how fully dressed I was. Because that was what he was worried about, wasn’t he?

“*Nothing* happened, Dyv. At all,” I gritted out, embarrassed at how Dyvian was acting like his brother had taken advantage of me. If anything, I was the one intent on taking advantage of Lucian last night.

He shook his head. “Nothing *has* to happen for him to take advantage of you.” His chin jutted aggressively as he scowled at his brother. “How could you have been so dishonorable?” The word, quaint as it was, should have sounded weird on Dyvian’s tongue but terrifyingly enough, it didn’t.

“This isn’t any of your business, Dyv.” I didn’t want him to continue, afraid of what he’d provoke Lucian into saying.

He ignored me, focused entirely on his brother. “Well?” he challenged. “You violated our agreement, didn’t you? You still—”

“Dyvian.” Lucian’s voice was extremely soft.

I swallowed and even Dyvian’s voice faltered. But he proved I wasn’t the only idiot around here when he straightened and met Lucian’s gaze head on.

“At least be man enough to admit your real reasons for doing it, for being here, with *her*.”

“Oh, you’ve done it,” I whispered and began praying there’d be enough of him left to stitch back together. Didn’t he know how fanatical his brother was

about keeping his feelings private? I waited for Lucian's fury to explode spectacularly, but he only remained silent.

Dyvian's next words were worse. "Admit it, Lucian. You love her."
And hell, once more, broke loose.

Chapter Fourteen

Breakfast used to be one of my favorite times of the day. But it was hard to remember that when Lucian's seat was empty, Dyvian was sporting a black eye, and I was struggling with depression. Whoever said being immortal was lifelong fun should try stepping into my shoes.

The silence was uncomfortable. Dyvian sat in his usual place, exuding “don’t talk to me” vibes I was happy to oblige. I had my own worries to think of.

Awful. It was the only word I could think of every time I remembered the fight between Lucian and Dyvian. They had grappled on the floor, slamming each other against the walls and ceilings, making the entire house shudder with the force of their blows. I could only be thankful we had no nervous neighbors to call 911.

Dyvian had given a good fight, but it was obvious something stronger had been driving his brother. Lucian had seemed possessed, and I had been out of my mind with worry, crying for them to stop. When my voice had gone hoarse, I whispered the last thing I could think of saying.

“Please stop, Lucian. You don’t have to say you love me.”

They were, apparently, the magic words he had been waiting for.

He walked out on us without looking back.

I shook myself out of the bad memories just as Dyvian’s face twisted in pain when he leaned forward, reaching for a slice of banana cake.

I quickly helped him with it.

Lucian strode in when I had just finished sipping the last of my coffee. His cold face spoke volumes of the fight between him and Dyvian. “Hallir has called for a meeting.”

Dyvian didn’t look up, staring hard at his plate, which for once didn’t contain a mountain of food. “Has something happened?”

“He didn’t say. But he made it clear all Evren are expected to attend.” It pained me to realize how Lucian’s gaze studiously avoided mine. “Be ready to leave in ten minutes.”

He left just as quickly as he appeared. Fed up at being ignored by Lucian, I glared at Dyvian and accused him jokingly, “This is all your fault. I won’t be surprised if he runs back to Angelica’s arms after this.”

I had expected him to retort like he always did, but he didn’t. He shook his head, smiling tiredly. “Believe me, Deli, I did it for both of you.” He stood and bent to kiss me on the cheek.

I caught hold of his hand when he was about to turn away.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I just...” I bit my lip. “I know you’re trying to help me, but you don’t have to. You *didn’t* have to. I was *happy*.”

“Not completely,” he rejected vehemently. “If we had left things as they were, if I had decided to turn a blind eye to what happened, Lucian would never admit to himself he loves you.”

“You don’t know that—”

“Yes,” he interrupted me with terrifying certainty. “I do. I’ve known him far longer than you. I know things—”

“If this is about your mother—”

He jerked. “You know about her?” He laughed bitterly. “He probably whitewashed it. I was the lucky one. When that bitch gave me to Lucian, he was old enough to have taken care of me. But Lucian hadn’t been as lucky.”

His voice became low and tight. “She left Lucian without so much as a word of goodbye. He was only eight years old, and she left him, dammit. I

could never get him to speak about the years he had been alone, but I could see in his eyes that what *that* woman did hurt him incurably. You have to understand, Deli. For the first years of Lucian's life, she had acted like a perfect mother only to toss him away like he was trash for no apparent reason."

I wasn't surprised to realize I was crying. The thought of Lucian in pain for any reason was horrible. I wanted to draw in Lucian's hurt and set him free.

"Every damn thing that happened to him was *her* fault, Deli. It made him refuse to trust people, to love people. I'm an exception but even *I'm* kept at a distance. But *you're* different," he said with sudden fierceness. "And that's what I want him to acknowledge. That you're different and that he loves you. I want him to be happy. He deserves to be happy. You believe the same thing, don't you?"

I sniffed and turned away to blow my nose.

"*Ew.*"

"I can't help it," I wailed. "What you told me is really *sad*." I wiped my runny nose and threw the used tissue into the wastebasket. It missed, like always, and I had to pick it up to make sure it went in the second time.

He smiled a little, and the sight was heartbreaking.

"You'll be patient with him?"

"I will. I love him, Dyvian. I know it's not much. I know *I'm* not much but I love him."

He ruffled my hair and the gesture reminded me so much of Lucian it made me want to cry again.

Okay, stuff that. I was crying again. Tears were my best friends, after all.

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The ride to DV was worse than the last time. The silence was heavier, uglier, and remained unbroken till the end. Lucian was cold and undoubtedly furious, but I wasn't sure if he was angry at himself, Dyvian, me, or maybe all of the above.

Again, Lucian took me in his arms as we turned invisible and flew off. I hugged him very tightly. I was scared he'd go on ignoring me, so I cried in relief when he hugged me back and kissed my forehead.

*I love you.* I didn't speak them aloud but I tightened my arms around him, thinking of those words and hoping he could miraculously hear them.

When we arrived at the entranceway to DVC, Lucian was careful to set me away from him before materializing into view. I tried not to be hurt and told myself he just needed time to recover. Dyvian gave a sharp glance at my swollen eyes and the wet spots on Lucian's chest, but I pleaded with him silently, urging him not to say anything. He didn't.

I looked around, and the first thing that struck me was the silence. The next thing that unnerved me was the absence of crowds. DVC felt empty, but surely, it wasn't. All Evren had been summoned, after all. Maybe, the emptiness in the air wasn't caused by the lack of crowds but the absence of hope and the increasing presence of fear.

For once, I forgot all my problems and began to wonder what could possibly prompt Hallir to call for a meeting of this kind.

An endless stream of footsteps followed, alerting us to the arrival of more Evren. They greeted us with worry in their eyes and that only increased my anxiety.

We walked with the rest of the newcomers to Hallir's temple. The same pair of guards stood in place, but the bronze door was unlocked. Inside, the temple was almost bursting at the seams. Most had seated themselves in the pews but a number of them loitered around, speaking in hushed tones. Every torch lining the wall had been lit and the huge fireplace in the corner blazed out heat.

When you were Evren in Death Valley and you had the holy fireplace going, that could only mean trouble.

I kept my head down as I followed Lucian and Dyvian further inside the temple. I was still an object of curiosity, and I strove to pretend I wasn't being



scrutinized. I told myself it didn't matter. What mattered was to make Lucian love me. Corny but unfortunately true.

Tension was almost a tangible force within the temple. I took another step closer to Lucian, wanting to hold his hand but afraid he'd reject me in public.

Lucian, who had approached Hallir and was still deep in discussion with the old man, took my hand and squeezed it.

I swallowed back tears, knowing Lucian would kill me if I cried now. *He loves me*, I told myself. *He must love me*.

Dyvian had drifted away to speak with a small group of men, all of whom were almost seven feet tall and bulging with muscles. Green Evren, by the looks of them, and I became even more nervous. Didn't they say the green line was our race's warriors? The serious expressions on their faces boded ill for us.

Uncomfortable at the prospect of reading too much on the faces of other Evren, I made another conscious decision to bury my head in the sand, busying myself with studying the statues of saints enshrined behind glass walls. The church within DVC, Dyvian had once told me, was actually registered with the Vatican, and God knew how they managed that. A three-foot statue of St. Monica, dressed in rich velvet and sequin-lined brocade, was at the center, which the Evren revered as the patron of patience.

And that, I decided fiercely, was what I was going to be. I would *patiently* wait for Lucian to realize his feelings, even if it killed me.

"I'll wait for you in the council room," Hallir told Lucian before giving me an abstracted greeting and walking away.

"Is everything all right?" I asked quickly.

Lucian shook his head, but there was already a faraway look in his eyes. I might as well be nonexistent when he was in this mood. "Will you be all right if I leave you alone for a while?"

"Of course—" I caught sight of Angelica heading toward us over his shoulder, and I grabbed his lapels before he could turn away, almost choking him in the process.

“*Deli.*”

I let him go with a mumbled apology.

“What is it?”

Angelica was just three feet away. I flinched at the impatience tingeing his tone and asked in a rush, “Promise me you won’t talk to Angelica.”

“This isn’t the time to be silly.”

“I know you have things to worry about, but it would mean so much—”

“Not *now*, Deli.” And he turned away just as Angelica held her arms out in greeting.

“Lucian.” Her voice was cool and impersonal.

He nodded. “Angelica,” he returned and simply stood still when Angelica pressed her lips to his cheeks in continental fashion.

I clenched my teeth hard to keep myself from screaming “hands off.” Jealousy seemed to breathe life into my dragon soul, and for one moment, the room spun around me and my skin heated up. I had this crazy urge to turn Evren just so I could crush her between my claws.

But the moment passed and the dizziness left me. When I opened my eyes, Angelica was still speaking in that lovely, cold voice of hers and Lucian listened intently, his eyes on her flawless face.

Beautiful, cold, and perfect. They were so much alike they could almost pass for twins.

“Hallir needs us now.” Angelica’s voice was grave but I wasn’t fooled. Her eyes were glittering in malicious triumph as she tossed me a hate-filled glance, a tiny, smug smile curving her impossibly red lips.

How could Lucian be so *stupid* like most men? Couldn’t he see through her and realize she was too cold for someone like him? He needed someone warm and loving like me to balance him out. If he and Angelica ended up together, they’d be enough to prevent global warming, grow polar bears in the Sahara, and make Africa the world’s greatest winter wonderland.

“Let’s go then,” Lucian murmured. He turned to me almost as if I was an afterthought, Angelica doing the same almost at the same time. They moved in near perfect synchrony, a poster couple for Evren.

“You’ll be fine?” Lucian asked again.

Digging my fingers into my palms, I used the stinging sensation to distract me from the greater pain the sight of them together was inflicting.

*Don’t go, please*, I wanted to cry out, but I could only scream the words inside my mind. If The Voice was listening, it would probably have been deaf by now. *Don’t go with her, Lucian.*

But Lucian only continued to walk alongside Angelica.

*I love you, Lucian. Please, please, give me a sign we still have a chance.*

But they only continued to walk further and further away from me, and each step he took was a step he could never retrace, diminishing the chance for him to come back.

*Look back, Lucian. At least look back.*

Angelica murmured something so low even my acute Evren hearing couldn’t catch it. Lucian laughed, and the sound of it was like a can of pepper spray being emptied out on my entire body, burning mind, heart, and soul.

But I ignored the throbbing pain. I was Deli, after all, the expert in ignoring inconvenient truths and without thought, I called out shakily, “Lucian.”

He didn’t turn and, ignoring the curious looks of other Evren, I said more loudly, “Lucian.” I hurried to him just as he reached Hallir’s room. I grabbed the back of his shirt and he went still.

“Excuse me for a moment, if you please,” he murmured to Angelica.

“Of course,” she murmured back and turned away but not without giving me another venom-filled glance as a parting gift. She should’ve been Zekan rather than Evren. It would have suited her more.

Lucian faced me, his beautiful face carved in its usual mask of indifference. I opened my mouth to apologize but he beat me to speaking.

*“Don’t you ever think?”*

He wasn't shouting, but he didn't have to. *Evren hearing*, remember? And since everyone here was Evren, he might as well have broadcasted it to the entire race.

"Can't you *ever* think?"

He was furious. I knew he'd be mad but not like this. His temper had always been reasonable, and I just didn't understand why he was so furious. I could only stare at him, stunned, bewildered, and hurt.

Was he mad at himself, Dyvian, me, or all of the above?

Lucian cursed. I took an involuntary step back, realizing he had actually gotten more furious in the past three seconds.

I started to wonder again. It was an effective distraction, preventing me from breaking down in front of the entire population of Evren. Mad at himself, Dyvian—

"*Dammit*, grow up, will you? Something bigger is happening here, Deli. I know you're not the smartest girl in the world, but could you try to understand there's something more important than your stupid little infatuation?"

"Lucian," Dyvian growled. He was suddenly beside me. Or had he been there far longer? I couldn't exactly remember. I was shocked, enough not to even have the sense to feel hurt at Lucian's unjust accusations. *Why is he so mad?*

*But I have to be patient*, I reminded myself. My brain cells were working hard enough to make me remember that much. I shook my head at Dyvian. "It's not his fault."

Forcing myself to smile at Lucian and almost flinching at the unabated fury in his eyes, I said lightly, "You're right. I'm being a spoiled brat again." I rose to my toes and kissed him on the cheek. "Sorry, Lucian. Say you'll forgive me later with a kiss?"

And then I turned back, walking more swiftly than any human ever could.

I wandered away, making sure to remember the paths I took this time because I didn't want to get lost again. I found myself in a greenhouse, with a sparkling fountain amidst dense but artistically structured foliage.

Taking a seat on its stone ledge, I let my fingers graze the pool of water. I bent down just in time to see another woman approaching from behind in the water's reflection. I spun around, heart beating fast, scared that a Zekan might have sneaked inside the holiest of all Evren places.

The woman smiled. "*Hola.*" She was of medium height, with long black hair, and ebony eyes, her complexion a lovely olive. Her faux fur shrug, cream cotton blouse, and dyed jeans were quite chic but had a travel-weary look to them.

My breathing slowed down and I relaxed. *Stupid paranoid Deli.* I mentally shook my head.

"Hi," I greeted her in overly bright tones, hoping she didn't think I was crazy for smiling so widely. I welcomed her presence. At least she wouldn't let me think too much. The shock had receded, the numbness was gone, and I was badly tempted to give myself a good half hour of loud, nonstop sobbing.

She smiled back and offered her hand. "Teresa Santos-Church."

"Deli Winters." I shook hands with her.

Her eyes lit up. "Ah. *La nueva niña.* I have been excited to meet you."

Since my Spanish was limited to *hola* and *mi casa, su casa*, I could only smile and nod, hoping she hadn't said anything weird or offensive.

"I am like you, too." She took a seat next to me, stretched her legs and rotated her slim ankles. Cracking sounds suddenly filled the place and it took me a few seconds to realize the sounds had come from her—or her joints, to be more specific.

"Wow."

She laughed. "Let's just say I'm more athletic than most Evren." She rotated them again, her joints cracking even more noisily, and gave out a long, satisfied sigh. "*Maravillosa.*"

"You've been traveling?"

"Sí. My husband and I just arrived from Spain, and we came here directly to answer Hallir's summons." She arched her back, sighing when her spine made the obligatory cracking sound. "Forgive me. We've been on the

plane for hours. We had to take the cheapest seats because Hallir asked us to make haste, and the plane accommodations were horrible.” Her nose wrinkled. “The food was even worse.”

I nodded understandingly, but my mind was revolving on her earlier words and I asked casually, “So, you’re like me in what sense? A new Evren?”

“Not quite.” She cocked her head to the side. “Your maker is Lucian Chevalier, *st?*”

“Uhh, yes,” I confirmed even though I found it weird to have someone call Lucian my maker. It smacked too much of a queer father-daughter relationship, and I didn’t want anyone to think Lucian, in spite of our humongous age gap, was some kind of second dad to me.

“And you like him?” Her rotating wrists were making the cracking noise this time.

*Do I tell the truth or not?* “Umm...”

“Don’t be embarrassed, child. My husband is also *my* maker, you know.” She winked. “I like to think love and serendipity are at work when someone is turned Evren.”

It took me a while before I understood what she was hinting at. “Oh.” My eyes were wide. “You were human once, too? And your husband? He was responsible for turning you?”

“I was turned in 1778 and every day, I feel humbled and blessed because Carlos made me like him.” She laughed softly. “Admittedly, the mind-reading takes a bit of getting used to—”

“You mean The Voice?” I burst out and twisted to gaze at her in amazement. “You have one, too?”

She raised a quizzical brow. “Is that how you two call it?”

“What *should* you call it?”

“ESP? Mental telepathy? A private bond? We don’t really have a name for it.” Her voice lowered. “Hallir told us to keep it a secret, you know. There are only pitifully few of us, after all.”

“Us?”

“Evren who had once been human,” she explained. “Only Evren like us and our makers are able to hear each other’s thoughts. Hallir believes our secret ability to communicate could be a valuable asset in our battle against Zekans.”

But I barely heard her words.

My mind had frozen, my heart had stopped beating, and my body had become paralyzed. It took me a while to speak. “Are you saying the voice in my head is *Lucian’s*?”

She looked at me like I was crazy. “Who else could it be?”

*Indeed, who else could it be?*

For one moment, the whole world blurred, and my body swayed alarmingly, making Teresa call out anxiously, “Deli? Are you all right?”

No, I wasn’t all right. I was anything but all right. Nothing about my life was all right because everything had been a lie.

*Oh, God.*

The truth crashed in and brought me back to life. I covered my mouth with trembling hands, trying to stop myself from crying. My lungs threatened to burst, making it impossible to breathe. My chest felt like it was caving in, unable to bear the pain exploding from my heart.

Lucian and The Voice were one. The words smashed every loving thought I had of Lucian in my mind, tumbling down memory lane and making me recall every little damn secret I had shared with The Voice.

“Deli?” Teresa was right in front me, shaking my shoulders, but she seemed a fuzzy, faraway figure in my eyes.

I couldn’t tear away my mind from the memories. The *goddamn* memories. Lucian had probably laughed every time I thought myself lucky because he hadn’t known I liked him. It was probably why he found it so damn easy not to say sorry because he knew I was suffering, too. Right now, he was probably—

I stumbled to my feet, realizing he could be reading my thoughts here and now.

Teresa watched me with fretful eyes. “I have to go,” I said clumsily. “I can’t explain, but I have to go.” I pushed past her, instinctively knowing there was a need for haste. He was going to come after me. I was sure of it.

“*Deli.*”

“No,” I screamed out loud and picked up my pace. It took me a while to find the entranceway to the cave, and I tried to run faster, only to hurtle into an invisible force.

Lucian materialized into view, a stricken expression on his face.

“Let me go,” I snarled, hating myself for being so weak that I was crying again, hating myself for loving him still, and hating myself because I was so *stupid*. Why was I so *stupid*?

I slapped him.

Lucian’s head snapped to the side, but his grip on my shoulders didn’t loosen.

“Let go,” I screamed. For once in my life, I found him ugly and despicable. Shiny black hair, forest green eyes, the strong shoulders, the golden skin... I saw nothing of them because all his lies were staring back at me, taunting me for being so *goddamn* stupid.

He flinched and I knew he had been reading my mind again. I struggled harder. “Stop it, damn you.” Tears clogged my throat and the sea of self-loathing inside me rose higher. I didn’t want to cry for him. He didn’t deserve it. *Why can’t I be smart for once? Why can’t my heart ever listen to my head? I don’t want to cry.*

“I’m sorry.” His face was ashen, the words slipping past bloodless lips. “But I didn’t mean to hurt you, Deli. You must believe that—”

“I’ll never believe you.” I shook my head wildly. “*God*. You make me feel so *stupid*.”

“Let me explain, Deli, *please*.” Lucian sounded desperate. “I’m a coward. I know it. I was planning to tell you, but everything got complicated. I found out you liked me—”



I slapped him again. His head barely turned, telling me without words that he had been expecting it, and I nearly exploded in my rage and misery. “Stop reading my mind!”

If he hadn’t been holding me, I would have slid to my knees, the pain of his betrayal completely zapping my body of strength.

“I can’t let you go,” Lucian whispered. “I know I should. I know I don’t deserve to have you stay with me, but I *can’t*.”

I laughed and didn’t stop laughing even when he flinched. I couldn’t. “Do you know why I love you so much, Lucian?” I touched his face and marveled again at how beautiful he was. I was so stupid. Maybe none of this was Lucian’s fault. Maybe I was entirely to blame, for thinking someone like Lucian could love someone like me.

“I love you because you make me feel good inside. I love you because you don’t make me wish I could be smarter like other girls. A lot of guys like me, but always, there’d come a time that they’d wish I was just a little bit smarter. But you were different. You made me feel happy I’m myself and—” I couldn’t continue because I had to cry.

I needed to cry and I wept, letting the tears do their best to wash away my bitterness and misery. “But I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

Lucian had gone so still I didn’t think he heard me. Maybe he had gone back to thinking about some Evren crisis and here I was, boring him to death—

“Did you have fun, Lucian?” I choked out.

His face whitened even more. “No,” he said so fiercely and with such conviction, I almost believed him.

I wanted to believe him but I couldn’t.

“Did you share the joke with Angelica?” I remembered that painful little scene when Angelica had said something to him and he had laughed. “Were you laughing together behind my back?”

“She knows nothing.” His voice was unsteady but his eyes never strayed from mine. “If anything, believe that. Dyvian had guessed the truth, but I never told a soul.”

“Thank you for that much, I guess.” I despised the brittle sound of my voice and blamed Lucian for making me hate so many things about myself. *He’s not the right one for you, Deli. Do you understand now? Your Prince Charming should be someone who makes you love yourself—*

I stopped and searched his gaze in panic, realizing he could be listening to my thoughts again.

Lucian understood the question in my eyes and he drew his breath sharply as if someone had punched him in the gut. “I didn’t listen. I won’t do it again without your permission.”

“Like that would ever happen.”

He only nodded and his silence hurt. He *must* be bored.

“I’m leaving.”

The faraway look vanished from his eyes and for one second, he looked lost and defeated, before he breathed in deeply, as if preparing himself. “Let me explain—”

“There’s *nothing* to explain,” I interrupted and just this once, I succeeded matching his coldness with my own.

Of course, there was nothing cold about Lucian now. But I didn’t want to acknowledge the fear in his eyes, the desperation, and the despair, so I told myself I had just been imagining it.

“I’m not that stupid, Lucian. I understand what happened perfectly. And I’m sorry if our race is having the equivalent of code red here, but I don’t care.”

“Just let me explain, *dammit*.” Panic flared in his eyes and he spoke hurriedly, “Just give me a chance. I won’t force you to do anything. Just hear me out, Deli. *Please*.”

God, he was good. What was the point of all this? Hadn’t he had enough amusement at my expense?

I tried another time to free myself of his hold, but his grip on my shoulders only tightened. Every second in his company only made the pain inside me intensify. “What else do you want?” I sobbed out.

He tried to make me look at him but I tore my face away, stubbornly staring at anywhere but him. “I want you to forgive me. I want you to tell me how to make things right because I l—”

“I’m sick at the very sight of you.” My voice was hoarse with pain. “Can’t you see that?”

And before he could say another word, I gathered every bit of power within me, expelling it in one blast. The attack took him by surprise. Its force threw him back, and he hit the wall with a hard thud.

I willed myself to turn invisible and at the first touch of ice on my skin, I jumped off the cave’s precipice. I didn’t care to ascertain if my body had adjusted adequately for flight, and I was plummeting to my death.

I closed my eyes.

There was a slight vibration in my mind and now, I knew what it was.

*“Don’t read my mind, Lucian. You owe me this.”*

*“I won’t after this. But I want to tell you something first—”*

*“No.”*

He didn’t listen.

*“I love you. I’m sorry I hurt you. I was wrong. I was a coward.”*

Fresh tears fell. *“You made me beg. You heard me beg. But you didn’t do anything.”*

*“I couldn’t.”* The words sounded like they were torn from him. *“You reminded me of how I was when the bitch left me. I begged, too, Deli. I begged harder than you did but she never looked back. You made me remember how pathetic I was—”*

*“You’re right. I was pathetic.”*

*“I didn’t mean it like that, dammit.”*

*“Enough, Lucian. You owe me this. Stop reading my mind and leave me alone.”*

*“If you need me, Deli...”*

I willed him to leave my mind, erecting a barrier between us, and his voice was instantly cut off. The vibration stopped.

Numbness wrapped around my entire body and time seemed to stand still. I kept waiting for my body to hit the ground. It wasn't that I felt suicidal, but I just didn't want the pain to come back. I remembered Lucian's voice, telling me he loved me, and I squeezed my eyes shut, doing my best to block the words out.

*It's time to stop being stupid, Deli. It's time to stop ignoring reality and start facing the truth. He made a fool out of you, and now it's over.*

## Chapter Fifteen

*Home, they say, is where the heart is. But where could home be when my heart was in pieces and the one person I had given it to didn't want it?*

When I opened my eyes, I was floating a hundred feet over the Statue of Liberty. Somehow, my subconscious had flown me right back home. I had been expecting to be in heaven but this was the next best thing.

I flew without any thought of direction, letting instinct take over completely. After an hour or two, an arch with elegant, black letters caught my attention. *Royal Greens*. I cried because each and every little sight was familiar, cried because it just felt so good to be back, and I even cried at how *smoggy* and *noisy* it was.

In Royal Greens, suburb-like homes stood next to art galleries, tattoo parlors, exclusive boutiques, and Goth nightclubs. In New York, everything was possible for a price, and I grew up in a neighborhood that charged an exorbitant price for a life that blended suburbia with all the modern and sinful pleasures NYC had to offer within its high-security walls.

In a little while, I found myself above Michael Chaldon's familiar two-story home.

Michael was two years older than I was. I thought myself incredibly in love with him when we had started going out. Tall, blond, and attractive with twinkling hazel eyes, he had been the most popular boy in school and everyone

had considered us the perfect couple because I happened to be the most popular *girl* in school.

On Michael's prom night, we had been crowned King and Queen, which was quite a feat since I was still a sophomore. We slept together—yes, just slept...again—and when we woke up in each other's arms, we got to watch the sunrise together.

Then we broke up on his graduation day. It had been one of the few times in my life I had mustered enough courage to remove my head from the sand and acknowledge the truth. I knew he loved me, but I also knew his feelings or even mine weren't strong enough to survive a long-distance relationship when he'd leave for Yale and I'd be staying behind in New York.

I flew down until I was hovering outside his bedroom window. I tried pushing it up and was gratified when it gave way without a sound. I stepped inside, causing the dark blue curtains to billow.

I had expected the room to be unoccupied, so I almost let out a startled gasp when I saw the figure lying on the bed.

*Michael.*

He looked the same, yet different—thinner, younger, but more gorgeous than I remembered him to be. Or maybe I had just grown up a thousand years since the night I slept in his arms. The Deli of those days would have been cheerfully ignorant of Evren and Zekans, basking in the love of the people around her.

In those days, my parents would still have been alive, Davie would have been okay, and I wouldn't have been one of the *least* popular girls in school.

But there would also have been no Lucian.

"And that's okay," I muttered to myself.

Michael stirred in his bed, and I reminded myself invisible didn't mean inaudible. He was bare-chested and the covers were bunched around his waist. He was snoring lightly, but his face was smooth and peaceful. Did he ever think about me? Had he missed me? Had he mourned my death?

I would have spent more time being emotional if I hadn't realized at the same time I was also hungry.

Crossing the room took longer than expected because I had to avoid stepping on the myriad of things cluttering the floor. There was dirty laundry, an empty box of pizza, open CD cases, and several thick textbooks on engineering. He was still the adorable but untidy boy I knew.

Outside, my footsteps treaded mutely on the marble floor. Thank God, I wasn't wearing heels. I could always glide on air, but that would consume more energy, and I was already dizzy with hunger.

There was no sign of Michael's parents. The rest of the house was silent as I approached the kitchen with increased confidence. I pulled the blinds down, just in case a neighbor could spy me drinking and see instead a glass of water floating in the air. My invisibility only extended to the things I wore. Lucian had tried explaining it to me, saying it had something to do with the time and space continuum, but his scientific mumbo-jumbo had only sent me up to my room with a whopping headache.

The refrigerator was wonderfully stocked. Mrs. Chaldon, bless her heart, was also as I remembered, prepared at all times for any culinary emergency. Although she wasn't the type to have a strict inventory, I tried to choose the things she'd be unlikely to miss—one out of four clubhouse sandwiches kept in a foil-covered container, a healthy serving of sliced beef and onions, and, remembering Dyvian's instruction about protein, any other dish with meat in it that I could find.

I took the pitcher of iced tea out and poured myself a glass, drinking it all with one gulp. I washed the glass and put it back on the shelf, then wiped the sink clean of evidence.

In the living room, I made myself comfortable on the leather couch. Outside the curtain-framed bay windows, the sky was gloomy and overcast. It was yet another drizzly New York afternoon.

I closed my eyes, promising myself I'd just rest for a moment.



I woke up at the sound of voices. I looked around, not understanding where I was. None of the furniture was familiar. There shouldn't be a Ming vase to my right, a glass elephant on the center table, and since when did we have zebra-printed walls?

Then Mr. Chaldon's face loomed over me as he bent down to sit. I scrambled off the cushions in time to avoid being crushed under his huge girth. He was munching on a chocolate bar, and I surmised his wife still hadn't succeeded in keeping him to his diet.

I crept up the stairs, placed my ear next to Michael's door, and sneaked in when I heard nothing. He was still asleep.

I moved to sit next to the windows just as the door opened. I held my breath as Mrs. Chaldon entered. She bent down to look at her son and shook her head. "You shouldn't have tired yourself so, my dear," she said softly and stroked his hair.

Michael didn't stir, and his chest rose and fell in regular rhythm.

"I know you love her, Michael, but she's gone. And you need to start living again."

And I knew, without a doubt, she had been talking about me.

When she left, I lowered myself to the floor and leaned against the wall. I pulled my knees close to my chest, tucking my chin behind them as I slowly made myself look at Michael.

I never knew he loved me this much.

The knowledge was bittersweet and the tears began to fall once more. I cried long and hard, but they were tears cried in silence. After a while, my eyes dried and I stood up.

I sat at the edge of his bed. He grunted and turned to his side, but he didn't wake up.

My fingers trembled as I reached out to touch his face.

"Deli."



I froze, afraid for one moment he could see me. But his eyes remained closed. My breathing slowed down. He was dreaming. Of me, probably, and it was another painful thought because I doubted there was ever a time Lucian had dreamt of me.

“Michael,” I whispered and touched his face.

He responded immediately without awakening. It should have surprised me but it didn’t. “Deli. Is it really you?” Was he incredulous because he couldn’t believe he was speaking to someone who was supposed to be dead, or had his mind unconsciously taken in the changes in me and created a different-looking Deli in Michael’s dream?

Could I have changed that much?

“Deli? Answer me, please. Is it really you?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“You look so alive.” The wistfulness in his voice broke my heart. “I love you, Deli. Do you know that?”

“I know now.” I traced his jaw and impulsively decided to shed off my invisibility. It was stupid and senseless but I couldn’t help it. If he woke up, I could just disappear, and he’d think he’d seen a ghost. But even so, maybe it would be enough and he wouldn’t suffer any longer over my so-called death.

“I miss you so much, Deli. I think of you all the time. Why did you have to die? And why did I ever let you go?”

“It was necessary,” I told him and touched his face again. I gasped when his hand suddenly shot out and gripped my wrist.

“Did you think I wouldn’t go on loving you if I was away?” he demanded. “You were *wrong*. I’d never stop loving you. I still do.” His voice broke then, and I was aghast to see tears seep past his lashes, creating a wet trail on his cheeks.

For one moment, I remembered the times we spent together, and they were good times. For that one moment, I remembered how it felt to love Michael and be loved by him, and I bent down to kiss his lips.

He kissed me back instantly, his arms going around me, pulling me as close as he could.

The next thing I did was possibly one of the cruelest acts I've done in my life. My parents taught me better, but you know how crazy broken-hearted people can be.

I lowered the barriers in my mind.

Those barriers were like prison bars when erected, and they made a rustling sound as they came and went. Their rustle alerted Lucian to what I had done and the tiny but noticeable vibration indicated Lucian's presence emerged not one second later.

Lucian started reading my mind the same time I surrendered myself to Michael's kiss.

It was the most passionate kiss Michael and I had ever shared, fueled by my desire for revenge, petty though it may have been. His hands moved up and down my back. "Deli," he groaned against my lips.

He was about to say more but I didn't let him, kissing him more fiercely. I didn't want to have the luxury to think. If I did, I'd have to think about what I was doing. I'd have to compare Michael's kisses to the kisses I shared with Lucian. I'd have to consider a lot of things, and I just wasn't ready for the truth.

I pulled away an eternity later. "Michael." I waited until he sensed my desire to be free, and his arms fell to his sides reluctantly. "This is the last time I'll show myself to you. I'm in a good place now," I lied. "So I don't want you to worry anymore."

"I love you, Deli."

"I love you, too," I lied again. "But it can't be. You need to move on. I want you to move on. I don't want to see you hurt. I want you to be happy. Will you do that for me?" I touched his cheek one last time and could've wept for what might have been. "Please?"

Michael was silent for a long time. He could be stubborn when he wanted to and just when I was starting to think he had no plans of agreeing, he said slowly, "If that's what you want."

"It's definitely what I want," I told him shakily. I stood and gazed down at him, wishing I could tell him how badly I wanted to fall in love with him again.

And the unexpected thing happened.

Michael's eyes opened. "Deli?" he gasped.

I smiled tremulously. "Thank you for loving me, Michael." I didn't wait for him to speak. I turned invisible and jumped out of the window, flying away before I could start crying again.

"*Lucian.*" I remembered Lucian crying out in his mind when he saw me kissing Michael and I winced. I had seen what *he* thought all the while. He knew I was reading his mind. He could have shared some of his thoughts and kept others hidden, like I was doing now, but he had left everything open.

He had repeated the scene over and over. It was pure torture for Lucian, but he had doggedly replayed the images in his mind. In the end, I had been so sickened at the sight of myself in Michael's arms, I had cut the connection between us.

But he hadn't been as weak. The bond between us was like a two-way street. While I had voluntarily stopped reading his thoughts, he could have continued reading mine and he had, every hurtful second of it.

He had listened when Michael said he loved me. He had heard my answer and when I tried reading his mind, I learned that half of him believed it was true.

*"Are you all right, Deli?"*

I wanted to cry again. If my tears had a voice, they would have probably told me I was abusing our friendship. Surely, I couldn't cry over every single thing Lucian did?

*"Why did you keep on thinking about Michael and me kissing?"*

*"Mental self-flagellation,"* he replied without hesitation.

I knew a lot of big words, thanks to Davie, but that one completely escaped me. *“Right.”* I vowed to look it up in the dictionary as soon as possible.

*“I know it’s not much, but suffering somehow makes me feel I could atone for the pain I’ve caused you, even just a little.”*

I understood him better this time and I said sharply, guiltily, *“You didn’t have to watch.”*

*“Yes. I did.”*

We remained silent for a while before Lucian asked again, *“Are you all right?”*

*“I’m coping.”*

*“I love you.”*

The words came out of the blue and I went cold. *“Don’t say that.”*

*“It’s the truth. I’m done hiding from the truth. You and I are alike in more ways than you think. You ignore the truth because you fear it. I ignore it because I’m arrogant, and I tell myself I don’t need to know the truth, that I don’t need anything because I’ve done well living by myself all these years.”*

*“Well...I’m glad to help.”* I couldn’t quite hide my bitterness.

*“You could help more if you came back—”*

*“No.”*

*“Promise me you’ll call for me when you need me.”*

*“If,”* I corrected, *“I need you.”*

*“Very well, then. If ever you do happen to need my help, I want you to promise me you’ll ask for it. I can’t let you go if I don’t think you’re safe.”*

*“Stop pretending like you really care.”*

*“But I do.”* Lucian’s voice lowered. *“You have to believe—”*

*“You know what’s funny? Now that I know the truth about...about this thing we have with our minds, it just made me see things clearly. Before, I never thought of questioning why you loved me. I just thought you did and that’s all that mattered. But I should have. Because now, I’m trying to think of one reason—any reason, dammit—that you’d fall in love me and I can’t!”* My voiced cracked at the humiliating truth.

*"Maybe it was fate."*

*"Yeah, right."*

*"I wasn't looking for love, but there was something about you that instantly drew me. I remember how my pulse raced for no reason the first time I saw—"*

*"Oh, please," I snarled. "Don't tell me you're going to say it's serendipity?"*

*"What else could it be? You're the very opposite of my ideal woman."*

*"Thanks a lot!"*

*"I turned you into one of us simply to save your life. But then I got to hear your voice. Your real voice, your real thoughts, and I couldn't get enough of it. The more I listened, the more I knew about you, the more I fell in love with you. I tried not to...I tried everything to push you away—"*

*"And you succeeded," I finished, not wanting to remember, much less relive, the past.*

Sadness and regret mingled in his tone when he asked, *"Do you remember the time you asked The Voice—"*

*"You mean, I asked you," I pointed out flatly.*

I had reconnected with his mind and he had let me. He flinched at my words but it didn't make him pause. *"Do you remember the time you asked me if I considered you the person I care for the most in the world?"*

I squeezed my eyes shut. *"Don't you dare, Lucian," I screeched at him.*

But he ignored my words and doggedly continued, his voice hoarse, *"I meant it then, and I mean it now. You are the person I care for—"*

I cut him out again, and I opened my eyes just in time to see myself flying straight into a tree.

*"Oh, dear," I said out loud.*

And, through my thoughts, Lucian realized what was about to happen and groaned, *"Deli—"*

I slammed into its trunk. The tree shook at the impact of my crash, showering the people underneath us with dozens of loose, dry leaves. I bit back a painful groan, rubbing my head as I struggled to stay afloat.

“Deli.” Lucian’s voice was exasperated and resigned at the same time. And then he and I were laughing like old times because it *had* been a silly thing for me to allow and yet, it had also been so typical of me.

My smile faded.

Typical because I was stupid—

*“Stop it, Deli. You’re not stupid and you know it.”*

*“No. I’m stupid and, yes, I know it.”*

*“Naïve, innocent, occasionally foolish, yes, delightfully silly, but not stupid, and before you even think about it, they aren’t euphemisms for what I truly think about you because they’re the truth.”*

I ignored the jolt of pleasure I experienced when Lucian described me as “delightfully silly.” *Don’t you let yourself be swept away. He’s just telling you that because he’s guilty.*

I told him waspishly, *“I don’t know what euphemism means but whatever it is, I don’t believe you.”*

Lucian was silent and then he sighed in my head, *“Ah, Deli.”*

It was so achingly familiar I wanted to cry again. But I didn’t want to waste any more of my tears on him, so I ruthlessly held them back. I slowly lowered myself to the ground, materializing to view behind a tree when I was sure no one was watching.

I looked around and knew right away I was in Central Park.

A Korean couple was enjoying a ride in a horse-drawn carriage, their cameras clicking endlessly. Children were shouting and laughing from the playground to my left, one of the many located in the park. Couples stood hand in hand while gazing at the panoramic Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir.

For a tiny fraction of time, I forgot about being brokenhearted and became excited at the thought of the many different and better ways I could enjoy Central Park now that I was Evren, capable of flying, turning invisible, and breathing fire.

Little growls from my stomach interrupted my long-term planning. I was hungry again. No surprise there, considering I was unused to flying and being invisible for such long hours. I still had no money and I decided I'd make a collect call to Dyvian later on for a loan.

*"Get out of my mind now,"* I told Lucian, still sensing the vibration his mental presence was exuding. *"I'm done talking to you."*

*"I'm not."*

Oh, God, he sounded like a doctor again and it was just one of the thousand things I missed about him.

*"Well, I am so I'm cutting this—"*

*"One last thing."*

I hesitated. *"What?"*

*"I know I've hurt you and I know you might never forgive me for it. But I want you to know you'll always have a home with Dyvian and me."*

He struggled for breath. *"And if you don't want me to talk about...about what happened then I won't. You can lead your life the way you want to, and I won't stand in your way."*

*"Do you understand what I'm telling you, Deli?"*

*"Umm..."*

He laughed, but there was something sad about it. *"I'm saying if you come back and you happen to be in love with someone else, I'm willing to stand aside. I can be just your brother, your friend, or even a stranger if that's how you prefer things to be between us. All I care about is for you to be happy and safe, Deli. Keep that in mind, will you?"*

And then he was gone, Lucian severing the line between us himself.

"Idiot," I muttered and burst into tears.

Didn't he know he had me at hello? Well, okay, he had me at the time he called me *human*. How could I even stay mad when he said such lovely, weird things? And it *was* weird. I could never say the same. I was just too selfish. I wanted Lucian, and I wanted him loving me and no one else.

But there were still a lot of things we had to talk about to clear the air properly between us.

“So that’s it.” I said the words out loud. “It’s time to go back home.”

I turned around and there was no time for me to blink before someone had covered my face with a slightly wet hanky, filling my nostrils with a bland, unidentified scent.

The last thing that broke through my consciousness was a long, rasping hiss.

*Zekans again.*



## Chapter Sixteen

*I hadn't been sure if it was an Evren thing, but I had noticed how I kept waking up in the weirdest situations. I wondered if my immortality would allow me to stave off sleep forever. If it could, my life might have taken a better turn. It had been a silly wish, but I tended to grasp at straws when I was alone, heartbroken, and kidnapped.*

I woke up shivering.

It took an awful amount of energy to open my eyes. My teeth couldn't stop chattering. I looked around and dozens of mirror images stared back at me from all directions. I was gagged and trussed up in a chair, hands tied behind my back, and rows of rope curled tightly around my feet.

Blocks of ice surrounded me from all corners, practically serving as wallpaper from ceiling to floor. Even the ground was encased in ice, and I could only marvel how much it cost my Zekan captors to have an entire warehouse outfitted like this.

The murder industry must be booming.

With no viable source of heat, I was as weak as a newborn kitten. Maybe weaker, because I didn't even have claws to scratch some snake eyes out. In my current surroundings, it would be near impossible to acquire enough power to turn invisible. And if I did succeed, I'd have to bide my time because I wouldn't be able to stay invisible for long.

I remained still in my chair, doing my best not to draw attention. I surveyed my surroundings under my lashes. My heart sank at what I saw. There was only one possible exit—a sixty-foot-tall remote-controlled gate. Measuring the distance, and taking into account my weakened state, I guessed it would take probably half a minute for me just to get there.

Could I stay invisible that long? And how could I have the gate opened without alerting them?

The entire place was swarming with Zekans. No surprise there. I tried to estimate how many of them there were. Eighty? A hundred? They were also heavily armed, and I wasn't just talking about poisonous fangs and striking tongues but real weapons. Rifles over their shoulders, pistols hanging from their belts, and knives strapped around their legs. And these were only the weapons I could see.

*"Lucian."*

*"Deli?"*

*"Look,"* I urged and shared what I saw with him.

There was one moment of silence before Lucian sighed. *"What have you gotten yourself into?"*

*"This is my fault?"*

*"Do you know where you are?"*

*"No. I think I was drugged. I can't remember getting here."*

I gauged my location based on my hunger pangs. *"But I'm pretty sure we're still in New York. How did they know where to find me, Lucian?"*

*"Our enemy's cleverer than I believed him to be. I've underestimated him. I'm sorry, Deli. I won't make the same mistake—"*

*"It's not your fault. We really have to talk about this guilt and inferiority complex of yours one day. But right now I want to know how they could have possibly known I'd be in Central Park."*

*"I think they had all your favorite places guarded. They knew if you came back to New York, you were sure to visit places dear to you."*

Drat. I wanted to kick myself for falling for their trap.

*"You're not to blame. I'm the one—"*

*"Who has a million things to worry about while I have only myself to take care of and I still failed."*

*"If it's any consolation, I still love you."* Although Lucian's voice was light, it was also underlined by sincerity, something I tried my best to ignore. Things were *not* going to be okay just because he was telling me stupid stuff.

*"No, it's not,"* I told him even as my face heated and I became warm all over. I hoped he didn't see how his words affected me.

*"Actually, Deli, our minds are still connected—"*

I dropped my head, closed my eyes, and tried not to groan in embarrassment.

*"Our little prisoner is awake, I see."*

*"Company,"* I told him as my stomach churned in fear.

*"Deli."* Lucian's anxious growl was so loud it took all my power not to wince. *"What's happening?"*

Knowing Lucian would see whatever I saw, I slowly lifted my head, then gagged right after when I beheld the monster before me.

Lucian cursed in my mind. *"I know him. He's one of the top officials of the Zekans. Stay calm and don't provoke him. I'm on my way. I've an idea."*

*"No, don't come—"* A violent slap to my cheek cut off my thoughts, and my head snapped to the side. The left side of my face immediately stung, but I was grateful for the chance not to look at him.

He was of average height and slightly balding. He, too, wore the black uniform as all the other Zekans in the place, but there was more bling pinned to his shoulder patch, prompting me to wonder how many people he had killed to earn those medals. Physically, there was nothing grotesque about him. Sure, his eyes were bigger than most, almost bulging out of their sockets, but other than that, he would have only been remarkably unattractive and nothing else.

What sickened me was the total absence of humanity in him. The foul smell emanating from him perfectly defined his character. It reminded me of

rotten carcasses. I remembered the Zekan who had attacked me and knew I had been silly. That one would have been an angel compared to the creature before me.

He grinned, showing bloodstained teeth, and I gagged again as bile rose to my throat. He yanked my head back by the hair, forcing me to stare directly at the bottomless well of evil in his eyes. I tried to breathe through my mouth. One whiff of him when we were this close would have my puke all over us both.

His tongue shot out. I should have been prepared for that—it seemed the all-time favorite trick of Zekans—but I still cringed at the slimy slap of his tongue against my cheek. He licked the side of my face, starting just below my eyelid until his tongue touched my chin.

“Who turned you, *Delilah*?”

I closed my eyes tightly, holding back the scream of disgust threatening to burst from my throat. His tongue folded back with a slight swishing sound, and he began sniffing all over my face.

“Nothing smells as good as Evren once you’ve tasted it.” He twisted my hair painfully, pulling my head back once more as he commanded, “Look at me!”

A smile broke out on his face, when my eyes snapped open, serving to make him look more grotesque. “That’s better. Now, where were we?” He let go of my hair and tapped his chin thoughtfully. After a few seconds, he exclaimed, “Ah.”

He took a lock of my hair between his fingers. “So, smooth,” he murmured. “But useless. I’d rather have you all bald. It makes the preparation easier. Your flesh fetches a high price in our markets. Do you know that?”

“No.” I was proud of the steadiness of my voice.

“You know now.” He laughed a little, sounding secretive, and I had a bad feeling he was psychotic, close to being insane.

Fear should have been coursing through me now. Tears should have been leaking past my lashes but strangely enough, I didn’t feel like crying. If

anything, I was in the mood for...cutting off snake heads? Crushing the brains out of them with my stiletto? Deep-frying them and chopping them into pieces?

“But your blood.” He sighed, his eyes closing dreamily, and he patted his lean stomach. I guess his human diet wasn’t particularly fattening.

“It’s better than the oldest vintage wine, sweet nectar, or ice cold beer.” He kicked the legs of my chair and I screamed, feeling myself falling.

But he was suddenly there, holding the back of my chair just a few inches off the ground. If he had been a second late, I would have crashed to the floor, my head cracking against the back of the chair.

His maniacal laughter made the hair on my skin stand up. “Did I scare you, little Evren?”

I stayed silent, hoping he’d just leave me alone.

“I’m not allowed to kill you. Our prince has taken a liking to your sister. He’d like to use you as, shall we say, a means of persuasion.”

He sounded so...*sane*. Smart and professional, like a lawyer or a college professor. Were eloquence and articulateness taught in Murder 101?

“But he didn’t tell me I couldn’t play with you. What do you think?”

I made myself look at him, searching for a clue as to how he preferred to play this through. I was tired of talking to him. I just wanted to give him whatever he wanted so he would leave me alone.

Was he a bully, preferring me to fight so he could have the satisfaction of beating me into submission? Or was he the practical sort, preferring cowering victims because they presented less trouble?

*Bully*, I decided.

So, I took a deep breath and snapped, “No. Someone like you can’t scare me.” For good measure, I added, “And I think you’re the ugliest—”

“*Deli.*” Lucian snapped in my mind just as my captor threw me across the room. I felt my head smash against the frozen wall. *I think I overdid it* was my last thought just before pain exploded in my skull.

Lucian was muttering something like “*you little idiot*” but I wasn’t sure. Ugly Zekan there was still roaring obscenities at me, then I lost consciousness.

~ ~ ~

I woke up aching all over.

It took me much longer this time to open my eyes. If they were planning to take my life by having me freeze to death, I could only be thankful they didn't want me to suffer.

My vision cleared and this time, my bound feet were dangling in the air and my arms, also tied, were stretched above my head. I was hanging from a huge, rusty hook attached to the ceiling.

*On second thought, maybe I'm not so thankful.*

I guess I angered my captor too much.

*"Lucian?"*

*"I know where you are already. Stay calm and don't dare bait Aurelius again—"*

*"You really know him then?"*

*"Let's just say we know each other from way back. Now, listen. I want you to conserve your energy. Dyvian and I are close—"*

I jerked against my bond, realizing belatedly what his words signified.

*"You can't come here! It's too dangerous if there's only the two of you."*

*"I have a plan—"*

*"It's not going to work."*

*"Do you trust me that little?"*

*I love you that much—I bit back the words, smart and wary enough not to share them with him. "I have my own plan," I lied. "So, you don't need to come here."*

*"Really now? Good. Tell me what it is."*

*"Well—"*

*"I rest my case."*

*"You just can't come here. I forbid you and Dyvian to come here."*

*"Deli—"*

“No.” I gazed at the icy reflection before me and everything about it promised their deaths. Lucian and Dyvian were more powerful than most Evren, more experienced in battling Zekans, but there were just the two of them. How could they ever survive against a regiment of armed and poisonous half-snakes in a freaking ice factory?

*“Please tell me you’re at least using some modern gadgets, electronic whatchamacallits to even the odds.”*

“Nope, sorry.” Lucian actually sounded cheerful.

I wanted to strangle him. *“Be serious.”*

*“I am serious. I’m going to save the girl I love.”*

“Lucian,” I wailed.

*“Don’t burst into tears.”*

*“Then don’t tell me you love me.”*

Lucian was silent. *“Can you tell me something?”*

I didn’t say anything, not sure if I wanted to hear his question.

But he asked anyway, *“You used to want me to say I love you all the time. But now you hate hearing it. Can you tell me why? Is it because you hate me? You can’t forgive me? Do you love someone else? Does it make you feel awkward?”*

I knew how much it had cost him to ask. The door to his mind was also open, and his feelings shone through. He loved me. He really did love me.

But I could never be sure, could I?

He could still be hiding some of his thoughts, thoughts that might let me know he just *believed* he loved me or that his love was born from guilt. And there was always a chance his feelings would change. Even if I loathed Angelica with all my heart, I couldn’t deny she suited Lucian better as a girlfriend.

*“Was my question so hard to answer?”*

My eyes drooped closed. Too much thinking had zapped most of my strength. But I had one last thing to do before losing consciousness.

*“I don’t think I love you anymore,” I lied. “I don’t want to see you again, so much that I’d rather stay here than be saved by you.”* It wasn’t much, but it was the only thing I could think of to prevent him from his suicidal mission.

*I’m sorry, Lucian, but I’m selfish and weak. I’d rather die than see you die.*



## Chapter Seventeen

*When I was human, silly, and oh-so-killable, no one had attempted to murder me until that fateful day my parents had been taken away from me. But now that I was Evren, supposedly immortal, and not-so-silly, everyone seemed to be after my blood. Could an early grave be the price I had to pay for getting rid—mostly—of my silliness? It made me wonder how I'd die. A knife in the back? A poisonous bite on the neck? A gunshot to the head? But of all my worst imaginings, none of them included giving up my life for the guy I loved.*

“Wake up,” someone whispered in my ear. “Wake up, Deli.”

I did my best to ignore it and sink deeper into sleep.

“Wake up,” it insisted and shook me a little.

“I don’t want—” I started to mumble in protest but the rest of my words were cut off as someone pressed a hand to my mouth.

My brain cells reluctantly began to work. The first thing I focused on was waking up. It took long minutes to shake myself from the warm, clinging arms of sleep. My mind was fuzzy, my body heavy, and my heart exhausted, beating at an absurdly slow rate, making every breath I took a challenge.

“Wake up, Deli,” the voice said again.

I recognized it this time. *Lucian*. And the memories flooded back. I was still tied up, hanging in the air from a stupid hook. If I had still been human,

my arms would have been torn out of their sockets by now. But I wasn't and, by some miracle, Lucian was also here next to me.

*"What are you doing here? Didn't I tell you I never wanted to see you again?"*

*"And you won't,"* he assured me, *"just as soon as I get you out of here."*

I fell silent because I hadn't expected him to answer like that. Memory brought back his earlier words but even now, I still couldn't make myself believe him. I wasn't even certain if I still loved him, if we still had a chance... There were so many things to wonder about, but I told myself to stop. Right now, I had to focus on both of us surviving this ordeal alive with every limb intact.

Battling every second to stay conscious was even a greater struggle than breathing. *"What's that awful smell?"* It was almost as foul as Aure-something's scent. There seemed to be some kind of uproar as well. The Zekans nearest me were muttering, complaining about the odor. Talk about hypocrites.

*"Garbage."* Lucian sounded strangely...*gleeful*. It was hard to imagine Lucian's beautiful and expressionless face gleeful, but that was the only way to describe his voice.

Blinking several times, I tried to clear my gaze from the cloudy effects of sleep. *"What's happening?"* The gate was half open and I could see a garbage truck outside. As far as I could tell, none of the Zekans seemed worried about its presence.

*"Dyvian and I drove a garbage truck here. It smells more awful than usual because we had to, err, modify the truck's contents to effectively conceal our scent."*

*"Modify?"*

*"Dead rats, animal manure, sewage water—"*

*"Forget I asked,"* I interrupted him hurriedly. Sheer disgust at the images his recital evoked eliminated the remaining effects of slumber. Even if I did still feel pathetically feeble, at least I was as conscious as I could be.

*"How did you get in?"*

*"I waited for some Zekans to come out and argue with Dyvian. He's still out there, speaking in French and demanding they allow him to dump all the garbage here. It was ridiculously easy to slip in here."*

*"Of course,"* I agreed sarcastically, as if staying invisible in sub-zero conditions was the simplest thing to do for an Evren.

*"And your plan?"*

*"Simple but effective."*

*"The thing is, Lucian, you have to remember not everyone's perfect like you. What you can do isn't something we—"*

*"Relax. It's all planned out, Deli."*

*"I just think it would have been safer if you had cool gadgets with you,"* I grumbled. *"Think Batman. Or James Bond."*

*"Better make up your mind,"* he advised in that mild voice of his. *"Do you want me to be a superhero or a super secret agent? Mind you, I'm against wearing tights though. I don't like tuxes all that well either, but I suppose they're better than wearing my underwear in public."*

I couldn't believe he could even think of teasing me. *"Don't you see what kind of danger we're in? There are a hundred—"*

*"You exaggerate. There are just ninety-seven. I counted."*

*"Whatever. They're still ninety-five more than your team—"*

*"Nice mathematical skill you have there. See? That's what I love about you. You're incredibly smart."*

*"Lucian,"* I snarled in warning. Of all the times for him to shed his serious image, why did it have to be when our lives were hanging in the balance?

He chuckled. *"Oh, ye of little faith,"* he murmured, cupping my chin. *"I have everything under control. Trust me. I won't take the slightest risk where you're concerned."*

I refused to feel flattered, cherished, or loved.

*"What's the plan?"* I growled.

*“Simple—you turn invisible then you turn Evren, and we’ll burst through the roof and fly away.”*

He was right.

It was extremely simple.

It was also impossible to do.

*“I can’t,” I said miserably. “It is a good plan, Lucian, but I’m too weak. I’m not all-powerful like you—”*

*“You can do it.”*

*“It’s too cold. It’s impossible.”* I tried not to sniff pitifully. Ah, what I’d give for just a minute of Sanger weather with the blazing Nevada sun and hot, dry desert air.

*“I’ll help you.”*

*“You’ll make the sun shine here?”*

*“Ah, no, Deli, my love. I’m flattered you think I’m capable of that, but I’m afraid that one is beyond my powers.”*

I hadn’t heard the rest of his words.

Had he just called me “my love?”

*“Lucian—”* I almost gasped when his lips touched the sensitive skin of my nape.

I may not be smart, but in things like this, it was impossible to stay stupid. Lucian’s method of making me warm was wicked, effective, and embarrassing.

*“Oh, dear.”* I gulped silently.

*“Hush, my love,”* he murmured but that only made me feel like groaning more.

Lucian was careful not to make any movements that would draw attention. His hands rested lightly on my waist before they climbed up to stroke my back slowly and softly. There was nothing lewd in his actions. In fact, there was a sense of reverence to his touch, and his hands on my skin humbled and thrilled me at the same time.

I swallowed and saw, in my mind, Lucian swallowing, too.

Even though I was wearing jeans, the heat from his touch burned through the fabric, making me feel almost like sweating.

I nearly groaned as he flew a few inches up to kiss my fingers, one by one.

By that time, I could only be thankful my arms were tied, keeping me upright when all I wanted to do was slide to the ground and sigh.

*"I think...I'm...ah...warm enough,"* I choked out as Lucian flew back down. He cupped my cheeks and began kissing my eyelids.

*"I don't think so,"* he argued and even the clinical tone of his voice was enough to make me shiver. *"I think we need to make sure you've all the warmth you need to last the day."* His arms tightened around me as he twisted to kiss my cheek from behind.

*"Don't move,"* he ordered when I shivered involuntarily.

*"Then stop kissing me."* I tried not to fidget as my skin prickled with heat. Lucian hadn't stopped nuzzling my cheek and I'd have given anything at that moment just to put my arms around him.

*"I'm going to count to three, and I want you to turn invisible just as I cut you off."*

*"Oh, God."*

*"One."*

Lucian moved in front me and held me tightly to him, one arm around my waist while his other arm moved above my head to grasp the ropes.

*"Two."*

My heart beat loud, hard, and fast as Lucian pulled the ropes free with ease.

*"Three."*

He bent down and bit my lower lip lightly, and I gritted my teeth to keep from gasping, its electrifying effect on my body giving me all the additional energy I needed to turn invisible.

Lucian grabbed me to him as the ropes gave way completely, and we soared to the ceiling.

But the danger was far from over.

“The Evren,” a Zekan shouted. “She’s gone!”

Chaos erupted. I looked down just in time to see the ugly Zekan who had kicked me unconscious pointing straight at me. “There she is,” he roared. “Shoot at the rope flying in the air!”

My feet! They were still bound and the range of my invisibility hadn’t extended to the ropes around my ankles.

“*Shit*,” Lucian said, a second before he turned Evren. He was just as I remembered. Enormous, frightening, and powerful, Lucian’s dragon form with its golden scales was an enthralling sight that struck joy in my heart and fear in our foes.

*“You go, Lucian. Kick some snake ass.”*

“*Evren, Deli, now!*” Lucian ordered just as he spun around and breathed out a circle of fire.

“*Right. Sorry. Got carried away.*” I was still clasped to Lucian’s side, a single steel claw around my body. He did his best to shield me from the shower of bullets, but all the twisting and spinning made it difficult to summon the blood-red shade I needed to turn Evren.

“Get close to them,” the Zekan commander bellowed furiously. “Bite them if you can. Our bite is fatal to their treacherous kind.”

I think he had more to say, but they were impossible to hear as the gate to the warehouse crashed. It was Dyvian, in Evren form as well, and he pounded toward us, his thunderous footsteps creating a stampede as Zekans tried to escape being crushed to death.

“Not so fast, old friend,” a voice hissed in ear-splitting volume, and I gasped to find a snake with black and purple scales preparing to lunge toward us from the floor. It was only the slightest bit smaller than the Evren form of the Chevalier brothers, but its glaring red eyes and huge, glistening fangs more than made up for its inferior size.

Lucian, hindered by the need to shield me, still hadn’t been able to burst through the ceiling. Two seconds, three seconds max, were more than enough time for the snake to catch hold of us. Just one bite, maybe two or three at the

most, could paralyze or kill him even. Lucian might be one of the most powerful Evren, but he was also battling one of the most powerful Zekans. Dyvian already had his hands—claws—full fighting on the ground, doing his best to minimize the damage to Lucian and me from the Zekans' heavy artillery.

*It's time to face reality again, Deli.*

If I didn't do something now, both of them would die trying to keep me alive.

*Here we go...*

I squeezed my eyes tightly shut.

It took a second before the blood-red liquid filled my mind.

I focused on it and said the magic word—*Burn*.

My wings spread out and I tore free of Lucian's hold almost the same moment the Zekan lunged for him and bit his tail.

Lucian roared, swinging his tail in a mighty arc and shaking himself free. The Zekan crashed but it took no time to rest, slithering toward Lucian even as it hissed in pain.

A huge net had been cast in the midst of the fight, catching Lucian unaware. Trapped as he was, the Zekan would have greater chances of biting him. It wasn't a risk I was willing to take.

The Zekan shot through the air, its cavernous mouth opening wide.

*Have a taste of this, worm.* I breathed out fire, hoping to burn its head off, but with my bad aim, the flames only reached its body. Darn it. Close battle it was then. *I'm a tough Evren chick.* My opponent had eons of experience and a thousand times more power, but it didn't matter. I was empowered by my love for Lucian. I was soooo going to win this.

I swooped down, claws outstretched.

My first swipe slashed its face, but it quickly retaliated by wrapping itself around my girth with a bone-crushing grip. Not more than a second had passed when the snake released me with a screech as a perfectly aimed stream of fire hit it square in the eyes.

*“Lucian.”* I looked up as he flew toward me with a few burnt pieces of the net still clinging to his scales.

Tears of relief filled my eyes. He was safe. Alive. I turned to look for my other rescuer, and that was when I saw the canon, freshly loaded, and pointing directly at Lucian.

*“Nooooo.”* I flew toward it, preparing myself to die.



## Chapter Eighteen

*When my nightmares receded, I started dreaming about happily-ever-after endings for Lucian and me. We'd be walking the streets of Paris at night, holding hands while watching the sunset in the Caribbean, and enjoying a candlelit dinner while cruising the warm Mediterranean waters. Certainly, none of my dreams involved lying on the burning hot ground, suffering from aching muscles and a pounding headache.*

"Are you awake?"

*I must be dreaming.*

"Are you awake?"

This was certainly a new setting. I hoped it ended the same though, with Lucian, my Prince Charming, giving me a true love's kiss.

Someone choked, making me frown. Weird. Why did we have someone else with us? It was supposed to be only Lucian and me. And why was it taking him so long to kiss me?

"What?"

Dyvian was with us? And why did he sound so worried? In my dreams, he had always been a silent presence, quick to leave when Lucian and I had our passionate happily ever after.

"She's waiting for me to kiss her," Lucian drawled, "because I'm her one true love."

My eyes shot open because the Lucian in my dreams never spoke like the real Lucian. You know, like he was too cool to feel anything, too smart to humor me, and basically, just too good to be true.

“My princess,” he said gravely. “How fare thee?”

I was lying on the ground, my head cradled on his lap. The sun, the sky, and the smell of hot, dry air were familiar, happily so.

*Home sweet home.*

Lucian’s face, still heartbreakingly gorgeous, was above me, a tender light in his forest green eyes as he stared at me. But a wicked smile played on his lips and he murmured, “At last. My sleeping beauty has finally awakened.”

“I think I liked you better when you didn’t talk so much,” I mumbled. “And stop reading my mind.”

He was unruffled. “It’s hard not to when you were shouting your every thought.”

Dyvian glanced back and forth between Lucian and me and burst out laughing. “Lemme get this straight. We’ve just escaped a life-threatening ordeal and you’re here dreaming you and my brother are in your own fairytale?”

“You. Go away.”

“Déjà vu.” He laughed even more.

I gave up pretending annoyance and smiled, happy to be alive, happy to be away from Zekans, and happy to be back with the Chevalier brothers.

Right now, Dyvian wasn’t his usual fashion plate self. He was wearing a jumpsuit of some revolting shade of orange. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“I couldn’t exactly wear a Gucci when I’m disguised as a garbage truck driver, could I?”

I clasped my hands in a show of gratitude. “Oh, the things you do for me,” I gushed. “I am forever in your debt.”

His eyes danced with sly, wicked humor. “Not to me, surely, but perhaps Lucian? After all, he’s the one who had to kiss you for a long, long time so you

could get warm. So tell me, Deli, sister of my heart, where and how exactly did he kiss—”

“Enough.” A familiar shade of red darkened Lucian’s sharp cheeks.

It made me giggle and forget my embarrassment.

“It was the only way,” he said defensively.

“I could have kissed her,” Dyvian pointed out.

“Over my dead body.”

Dyvian and I succumbed to laughter, further increasing the sense of déjà vu.

When Dyvian had sufficient control of his mirth, he sprang to his feet and smiled down at me. “I hope to see you back home with us, Deli.” He waved jauntily before disappearing from view.

“That...was his most polite way of giving us time alone.” Lucian cleared his throat. “Deli—”

“Where are we?” I blurted out. I wasn’t ready yet to talk about what had happened at DVC.

“The park,” he answered, and I had a feeling he was disappointed at my question. “Just below Hallir’s cave, if you want to know. We stopped here to rest and wait for you to regain consciousness.”

“The cannon,” I breathed out, remembering what made me unconscious in the first place. “What happened?”

“It didn’t fire. Dyvian swiped it away in time. Then you fainted in my arms.” He inhaled. “You tried to save my life.”

“I would’ve done it for anyone.”

“I see.”

His mind, which remained unbarred, showed me how my words had hurt him, and I almost confessed it was a lie. But I didn’t. Not just yet...

“The Zekan...Aure-something...”

“Aurelius.” A ghost of a smile flickered on his face. “You can memorize the names of a million celebrities yet you can’t even manage one name of your enemy?”

I sniffed. “They matter. He doesn’t.”

Silence resumed between us, and though I could normally talk a mile a minute, I couldn’t think of a way to postpone the inevitable. I just didn’t want to risk finding out that all he had done was out of guilt, that he had realized he had overreacted and that he didn’t really love me. Inconvenient truths were hell.

Lucian gently hauled me up so I could rest against his chest. He tilted my face toward him. “You’re thinking silly thoughts again.”

“Are you reading—”

“No. But I know you.” He paused. “And I love you.”

I burst into tears.

To his credit, he didn’t even wince. “I’m sorry, Deli. I’m sorry for deceiving you, but I promise you with all my heart I meant you no harm. I just couldn’t help listening. I’ve never trusted anyone and then there you were, and I could hear your every thought.”

“Why was it so important for you to know my thoughts?” I whispered.

“Because I liked you right from the start and I was scared. You made me feel weak...weaker even than I had ever been when I was young. You made me feel almost...helpless.”

He stroked my face, tenderly tucking away the wisps of hair that had plastered themselves on the sweat-drenched skin of my forehead. “I have to be honest. I don’t think I even wanted to tell you,” he confessed awkwardly. “If I had stopped hearing your thoughts, I never would have had the courage to love you.”

“Coward,” I said between sobs.

“Indubitably,” he agreed in a grimly self-mocking tone. “It was cowardice that stopped me from telling you we were immortal, fearing that you would change because of it. It was cowardice that made me call you my ward when I wanted the whole world to know you were mine and that I was so damn lucky to have you love me. I was scared that *you* would think one day I was too old

and boring and leave me. It was cowardice that made me stop from telling Dyvian he was right...that I love you.”

“Jerk.” I was crying harder than before, after hearing him say things I had never ever dreamt he’d be able to utter.

He winced. “I know. But I’ve learned from my mistakes, Deli. And I never make the same mistake twice.” He cupped my face and bared his soul. “I love you.”

Remembering how hurt I had been by his deception, I couldn’t make myself let things go just like that. “What if I don’t love you anymore?”

The hand stroking my hair lovingly stilled for a moment. Then he sighed and—his hand trembling just the slightest bit—resumed its rhythm. “I see.” There was no emotion behind his words.

“That’s it? You’ll let me go then?”

“Of course not,” he denied, shock visible in his face.

I was confused. “But—”

“I’m sorry, but I *can’t* let you go.” His arms tightened around me, as if the mere thought of it was already a threat and I wanted to cry even more.

“I’ll just make you love me again. I have an eternity to do it.”

That was my cue for my happily ever after, but I wasn’t done torturing him. Maybe I was being vengeful and bitter, but Lucian had known everything about me through my thoughts. He *had* to give me the same privilege. It was the only way I could feel we were on equal footing.

“And what if I love Michael?” I held my breath.

He had gone still again. “Do you?”

“Just answer my question.”

“I’ll step back...”

I tried to hide my disappointment, knowing I should be flattered but I wasn’t. I liked it better if he fought for me instead.

“...And then I’ll wait for him to die before I work on making you fall in love with me again,” he ended.

I gaped, unable to believe someone as honorable and well, *proper*, as Lucian could think something like that. “That’s so...*yucky*?”

“I love you that much,” he said so simply and, of course, I had to burst into another bout of tears.

Giving up fighting the inevitable, I babbled almost incoherently, “I love you, Lucian. I love you, and I really missed you, and I thought about you all the time, and I—”

He pressed one finger to my lips, his eyes wary. “Does this mean,” he asked slowly, “you forgive me?”

“Like I could ever *not* forgive you.”

“But—”

I pulled his face down and kissed him, not in the mood to hear all his stupid reasons for thinking he wasn’t worth forgiving. A long, luxurious sigh escaped me as our lips touched. This was what I had been aching to do since he tried “warming” me up to turn invisible.

When he finally lifted his lips from mine, I said quickly, “I want something.”

“Anything,” he replied with such speed and certainty I couldn’t help kissing him again.

“Well?” he prodded with a smile when we broke apart.

I gave him my best angelic smile and said, quite baldly, “I want to...uhh...I want to make love to you.” I was stumbling all over the words, but I was determined to say my peace.

He smiled back, dazzlingly so, and his answer was just as quick and certain as earlier. “No.”

“*Lucian.*”

“Don’t be absurd,” he scolded gently. “You’re still too young.”

“But I hate it that Angelica knows you *that* way and I don’t.”

He kissed my pouting lips, my nose, my hair, and in a second, he was carrying me in his arms, walking toward the park entrance.

“Lucian,” I nagged.

“You’re still too young.”

“You did it with Angelica. She’ll always make it seem like I don’t know you as well as she does—”

“Then she’s wrong because you know me where it really counts.”

I had to giggle. “Lucian, is that *you*? That was so mushy.”

He muttered something incoherent and distracted me by nuzzling my cheek.

“Wait.”

He stopped the delicious things he was doing with his lips and raised a brow.

“How long do I have to wait?”

“At least till you graduate from college,” he replied after a while.

“That’s too long,” I wailed.

“Don’t be such a baby. Besides, if you want to worry about something, consider your sister.”

That shut me up.

He groaned. “I’m sorry. It was a stupid thing to say.”

“But you’re right.”

“No, I’m not. I’m a cold, tactless jerk and I’m lucky I have you. Davie’s all right,” he assured me. “I suppose you know the Zekan prince is in love with her?”

I nodded.

“He’s a good sort, actually. Just...misguided. It’s really too bad he’s Zekan. I’m certain he’ll keep her from harm, but if you want us to try rescuing her now, we will.”

“No,” I decided after a moment. “I trust you, Lucian. If you say it’s better to wait for her to get well then that’s what we’ll do.” My eyes narrowed. “But back to what we’re talking about—”

“No negotiations.” He nuzzled my cheek.

I sighed, told myself I had an eternity to convince him otherwise, to quit complaining, and enjoy Lucian’s newly discovered affectionate side.





## **About The Author**

### **Maeve Tee**

Maeve Tee is from Quezon City, Philippines. She is currently working as an online content provider.



Enjoy A Sneak Peak Of Holiday Hell House from Sapphire Blue Publishing

## Chapter One

“You’re doing it all wrong! Danielle, tell him he’s screwing it up!”

I shot a long-suffering look in Sora’s direction. Her scowl spoke volumes, made even more dramatic by the midnight black lipstick that always outlined her pouting lips.

“I’m hanging ornaments on a tree. How can I be screwing that up, your highness?” Derrick, the cause of Sora’s irritation now and most days, pulled another red globe from the box he was holding and dangled it in front of his face.

I took a deep, calming breath. “Guys, can’t you please call a cease fire long enough for us to decorate the Christmas tree? Is that too much to ask?” My gaze bounced back and forth between the two teens, a silent prayer for peace at the ready.

Sora toyed with the small silver lip ring she wore, her scowl deepening. “Then tell dog-boy to stop hanging all the red ornaments on the same side. It’s making the color scheme unbalanced.”

Derrick laughed and placed the ornament in his hand next to the one he’d just put on the tree. “Like you’re one to talk about color schemes. All black. All the time. Even your own people got tired of it.”

Sora tugged absently at the hem of her black leather miniskirt, then her hand fluttered to twist one of the spikes of her jet black hairdo.

“Derrick...” I managed to infuse my voice with just a hint of warning.

“What? It’s true. All the other fairies kicked her out of fairy land because they were tired of her depressing butt. And her bossiness.” He set the box of ornaments on the dining room table to his right.

Sora *had* been banished by her people ultimately because she refused to fit in. But that didn’t mean he needed to point it out to everyone. Repeatedly.

Silence filled the room for a long moment that I feared would ruin the little holiday spirit I had managed to dredge up with a bit of tree decorating. I glanced over at Sora and found her black lipstick scowl replaced by a smirk.

“You’re one to talk, disowned by your own pack.” Her gaze flicked to me. “We’ll have to keep a good eye on the Christmas tree, Danielle. The mongrel might decide to pee on it, given the manners he seems to lack.” Her dark eyes glinted with scorn.

Derrick ran a hand through his dark blond hair, leaving it ruffled and messy. His amber eyes sparkled mischievously as he crossed his arms over his t-shirt clad chest. “Nah, I took care of that already in your closet.”

Sora’s expression froze for a moment, then her eyes widened. “You didn’t!”

Derrick shrugged. “Guess you’ll just have to see for yourself.”

Snorting in disgust, Sora stalked away, her heavy black boots pounding the floor. She practically flew up the stairs, muttering who knows what curses under her breath.

I peeked over at Derrick, smugness oozing from him. “You really shouldn’t goad her like that. It only makes things worse.”

A small shriek sounded from the upper floor. Rolling my eyes, I frowned at Derrick’s grinning face.

“She should just be glad I shifted into a dog first.” He sauntered into the living room, leaving me to finish the tree.

Sighing, I picked up the box of forgotten red ornaments from the table. These kids were going to be the death of me. Six months as director of Hellsner Halfway House For Troubled Paranormal Teens and I was afraid I wouldn’t make it through another six days.

When the supernatural community finally came out into the open last year, they brought with them the same types of problems we humans had. Their children had the same issues, and placing kids into normal human foster homes or facilities proved to be dangerous to both sides at times, making places like Hellsner House a necessity.

I hummed as I straightened a line of garland and fluffed a few branches on the tree. So many years had passed without a real Christmas tree to decorate or a real home to decorate one in. I inhaled the deep musk of the pine, and stooped to retrieve a small cardboard box, the corners bent, the side slightly caved in. I pried open the flaps and carefully lifted a bundle of yellowed, crinkled, tissue paper—slowly peeling the layers away.

My breath caught in my chest as I stared at the angel in my hands. The paint on her porcelain face was chipped, her golden dress wrinkled and tattered. But none of that mattered. She was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

The feathers of her wings lay brittle and uneven along her back, but I traced their outline lovingly with my fingertip. My parents and sister had been killed in a car accident when I was a child. After bouncing around my entire adolescence from foster home to foster home, my angel was the last tangible thing I had left from my family.

Pushing back the tears that burned behind my eyes, I turned toward the living room. “Carlton, could you come help me for a moment?”

## Holiday Hell House

A loud grunt supplied my answer, Carlton's usual response. I raised my head to see the boy's face as he lumbered into the room, ducking his head as he plodded through the doorway. His large brown eyes studied me silently, the floor vibrating with his steps.

I handed him my angel. "Could you put this on the top for me? And be careful, she's very old."

Carlton took the angel from my hand, his fingers curling gently around her, being as cautious as he could for someone his size. I watched as he placed my girl on the top of the tree, touched by his gentleness.

Carlton was an ogre, so he stood about eight feet tall. His family had been killed in the mountains of the Himalayas. He was rumored to be the last known ogre alive. My first resident here at Hellsner House, Carlton hardly spoke, but we shared a silent connection of mutual loss.

He stepped back and we stood together, admiring my haggard angel in her new home atop the tree. As he turned to walk away, I laid my hand lightly on his arm. "Thanks."

A being of few words, Carlton gave me a nod and trudged back to the living room, settling into his favorite spot in front of the television.

Our silent moment of understanding came to an abrupt halt with the sound of my phone buzzing where it rested on the long wooden dining table. I scooped it up and clicked it open.

"Hello?"

"Miss Stewart?" a familiar, breathless voice greeted me from the other end of the line.

My spine stiffened with apprehension, making my stomach immediately wad itself into a ball of tension. *What now?* "Mrs. Bell. What can I do for you?" Phone calls from my boss were never on my list of favorite things. They always heralded some kind of disaster or chaos.

"I know it's short notice, dear, but I'm afraid I need your help with a situation that's come up."

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Derrick standing in the doorway to the foyer. He raised his eyebrows at me in question, but I gave him a terse head shake.

"It's Christmas Eve, Mrs. Bell. I'm really busy trying to make a nice holiday for the kids here."

Mrs. Bell's exasperated sigh seemed to imply I lacked the understanding to fully comprehend the situation. "That's precisely why I need your help. There's a young lady that needs a place to stay. I don't want to be a bother, but you always seem so capable, dear."

Derrick motioned urgently for me to come over, but I waved him off. *Why did teenagers always want to talk to you when you were already on the phone?* "Of course, bring her over. We still have room. The more the merrier."

“That’s part of the problem, dear. I have my own commitments, so all I can do is drop her off.”

The tinge of uncertainty in Mrs. Bell’s voice shot a troubled vibe through me. Always one to do things by the book, she would never just drop off a resident without going over things with me. “That’s unusual for you. Don’t you need to come in and go over her file with me?”

Derrick started waving his hands frantically to get my attention. I shot him a look of pure annoyance, hoping it would urge him to cease and desist. It didn’t.

“She has her file. Everything you need to know is in there.”

Something was off. There must be information Mrs. Bell wasn’t telling me, and I didn’t like it. “Mrs. Bell—”

“Danielle!” Derrick’s voice bellowed from across the room.

My shoulders stiffened in irritation. “Excuse me for a minute.” I covered the mouthpiece of the phone with my hand. “What is so important that you can’t wait until I’m off the phone?” My voice erupted in a harsh hiss of words.

“There’s a zombie in your office.”