



HEX

A WITCH AND ANGEL TALE

RAMONA WRAY

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For Mom

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PROLOGUE



GLOUCESTERSCHIRE, ENGLAND, 1657

The sun was well past the zenith when a black-cloaked rider came into view from behind the scenic green hillock. Galloping wildly, the horse followed the foot of the grassy mound with uncanny precision and then made a beeline for the forest, where it vanished in a swirl of black cloth and dead leaves.

At the same time, deeper in the woodland and partly out of sight behind a thicket of ferns and wild blackberry bushes, two individuals were involved in an agitated verbal exchange. The young woman, perhaps sixteen years of age, seemed unable to stop crying and shaking. That left her escort, a youngster scarcely a couple of years her senior, with little choice but to curb his own concern and focus on calming her down. At the end of a tender but persistent coaxing campaign, he was finally allowed to bring his arms up and cradle her closer. Not a moment too soon, either; her slender body all but collapsed against him in a soft, exhausted heap.

Laying a gentle kiss upon her forehead, he began murmuring soothingly in her ear. With patience worthy of an angel, he carried on crooning to her in this manner until the shivering ceased. Until she raised her hollow-cheeked face to his and their lips met. Timidly, despairingly, guiltily.

Unbeknownst to them, the embrace had become the object of scrutiny for a third party, the black-cloaked silhouette on horseback, who watched them closely. Having approached undetected, the rider halted just shy of being seen, but perfectly positioned so as to see it all. The mysterious character waited until the kiss was over, drinking in the sight of the young couple, their every gesture, every grip, every last sigh, and then proceeded to dismount in one graceful motion, not interested in hiding anymore.

The forest itself quivered and the air inside the secluded grove grew too hot to breathe. The cloak slipped away to reveal the rider's identity. She was a girl, willowy, with raven curls that fell loosely over her shoulders. She would have been lovely to look at, but anger had turned her delicate complexion a very unpleasant grayish-blue shade. It felt as though even the earth beneath their feet trembled and groaned under the load of her pain.

The young man seemed unable to move, his expression not ashamed but haunted. Pained. His companion, now whiter than a sheet, swayed on her feet. He gently pushed her behind him, supporting most of her weight with his right arm.

"You snake!" the raven-haired young woman spat. "And you, Katherine, my beloved sister. You, my own flesh and blood. Damn you! Damn you both to hell!"

Raising both arms above her head, she cried to the sky.

"By the blood of my ancestors, O, ye vengeful halflings and elementary spirits, I call upon thee! I seek retribution! Blood, to be paid in blood, a hundredfold. Hear my plea! A curse. A curse upon them both!"

"No!" her sister cried, already running toward her.

But it was too little, and much too late. Lightning bolts plunged from the unclouded

sky, confining the dark-haired sister inside a ring of static and blinding white light. Dead leaves and branches soared and spun around the circle in a hellish rhythm. Thunderclaps roared from above, where the sky opened and bled red down on the grove alone. The earth shook again and again.

“Elizabeth, what have you done, sister?” Katherine cried, falling to the ground, where claws of lightning seized her, feeding on her life spark until it was almost extinguished.

At the same time, an otherworldly creature descended with the lightning; it was beautiful, ageless, swimming in silver light. Unflinching, one glowing arm rose, bringing down a blade that plunged deep. Katherine’s chest didn’t bleed right away; a grayish-white light layered her skin and her body seemed to absorb it like a sponge. It stemmed not only from the knife, but from her sister’s chest as well. Like a tempestuous two-armed river, the silver energy spilled into young Katherine, and once it failed, so did her slight body. The killer was swallowed up by a new burst of lightning. She slipped away. All in a heartbeat.

“No!” the young lad bellowed, and threw himself over her. But he found her very still and already cold.

“You shall regret the day you were born, my betrothed!” Elizabeth howled. “This is not the end, mark my words. It is merely the beginning.”

But he took no notice of her. He could care about nothing beyond the lifeless body he held in his arms.

Later, much later, he’d wish he had taken more heed of Elizabeth’s warning. For being forewarned is being forearmed, and later, much later, he’d come to grasp the value of such things. Of course, by then it would be much too late; by then he’d wish he hadn’t been born, just as his scorned fiancée had promised he would.

Hell hath no fury ...

CHAPTER: ONE



ROSEMOUND, MICHIGAN, PRESENT DAY

Raising a daughter must be a tricky business nowadays. Much more of an issue than, say, six hundred years ago, when a family could, for instance, ship their young female offspring to a convent. There, behind sturdy walls and under the watchful eye of black-robed crones, the girl's chastity was, at least in theory, totally safe. But that was then; one sexual revolution, and one Internet explosion, later brings us to what is now. People's interests have moved on. The issue of anyone's chastity is so passé! Our century is big on keeping things casual when it comes to relationships — or the ozone layer, or adding chemicals to our food supply, but that's another story — and banishing girls to convents has long fallen out of fashion. Then again, there's always boot camp.

I wouldn't know about any of that, though. My parents never worried about my teen hormones getting the best of me, and with good reason. Getting touchy-feely with anyone has always been a big no-no for me on account of that pesky habit I have of keeling over after as little as a few seconds of physical contact. *Zap!* I'm out cold. Live like that for seventeen years and you either start seeing boys as chocolate-covered French éclairs on legs, the kind packing a thousand calories apiece, strictly hands-off, or you stop seeing them at all. As it happens, no forbidden-fruit complex or the related gross amounts of drooling occurred in my case; instead, I kind of stopped noticing boys.

Until him.

Funny how I always thought the world would dilate and then snap back with a loud bang the day a boy happened to me. But there was no explosion, no fireworks, no sudden shift in the tectonic plates of the earth. It was more of a Zen moment. Quiet. Everything was instantly quiet. The world, my mind, the flux of time — all still. And in the middle of it was him. Golden. Tousled inky hair. At the very center he stood, a leather-clad god looking upon his subjects with indifference. It could've been the curve of his lips or the way his hair whipped around his face, blown by wind as if in a sharp Spanish dance. But somewhere inside me something tensed and shattered.

I watched him and ached. Blown away. Wanting. Wanting him.

Of course, as soon as my mind processed that, I quit staring with the rest of the school. Slamming my shields in place, I crawled back into my shell faster than you could say "tortoise." Naïvely hoping it wasn't too late.

But, of course, it was. There was no going back for me, not anymore, not ever. After all, ignoring a guy is kind of hard to do when you're convinced he wants to kill you.

But I'm skipping ahead.

Let me go back to one deceptively typical April morning circa one year after my Zen moment. It started off like any other day, with me sleeping like a rock through the numerous efforts of my cauldron-shaped alarm clock to wake me. Since I was running late, I had to skip breakfast, which left me hungry and very much inclined to take my frustration out on the car. Still, none of this was new. In fact, there were no hints that my day was going to be anything but ordinary until after I made it to school.

The first weird fact had to do with the school's parking lot, which looked markedly deserted. Rosemound High was closed, I ventured a guess, already scrolling down a list of potential reasons in my head. A pandemic. Terrorist attack. Low attendance. Or did I maybe forget it was Saturday? None seemed likely, I concluded with a frown, moving on to checking the time again. My trusty Juicy Couture horologe shocked me fully awake by revealing that, in fact, there was nothing wrong with the world, or my school, for that matter. I was just way too early! But ... how? Even if every clock in my house had magically become faster overnight, the fact remained that I'd never woken up in time to be early for anything in my life.

I was considering a range of far-fetched scenarios when I was confronted by the weird fact number two. Someone was hanging around in the parking lot, as usual making a show of seeming as cool and unapproachable as ever. Ryder Kingscott, aka Zen-moment guy. What was so strange about him hanging out there? Hmm, how should I put this? Well, Ryder didn't *hang*. He didn't talk to anyone, didn't look at anyone except maybe to make the person feel small and irrelevant, and he definitely didn't kill time in the parking lot. Ryder just was. A mystery man. Much like the original rebel-without-a-cause, only with better hair. Rumor had it that he lived alone, that he was one of those emancipated minors. What I knew for sure was that he had a job at Dave's Garage; I'd seen him there a couple of months back when we'd dropped off Mom's car. Oh, and he rode a bike! Uh-huh, a sleek black thing that seemed to be the object of every male student's desire. Personally, I viewed it as a death trap, but since I'd often been called a party-pooper, I may have been narrow-minded. But probably not.

I was staring, but didn't feel bad about it because everyone with a double *X* chromosome stared at Ryder. In fact, I was willing to bet that even a few dudes sneaked a peek at him every now and then when they thought no one was watching. Because he was just that hot. Picture the body of a model, tall, long-limbed, and conspicuous in all the right places, paired with a face of absolute sin, should the concept of sin ever take on a physical form. I had it on good authority that his lips alone provoked and inflamed a whole lot of naughty fantasies all over town.

So imagine my surprise at seeing this ravishing specimen suddenly deciding to mosey on up to ... me. *No way*, I thought, already considering having my eyesight checked pronto. Except that I was parked in the corner with all the other spaces next to me still empty, so the logical conclusion seemed to lean heavily toward *yes, way*. There was no mistake; he was coming right at me.

"Oh dear God," I whimpered. "Please don't let me throw up."

Staring at him while he stared right back wasn't as much fun as before, but quitting now would have been too spineless, even for me. In the meantime, sporting one of his signature outfits made up of worn-out jeans, a black leather jacket, biker boots, plus a pair of aviator sunglasses, he approached my car very relaxed, as if he'd done it a million times before.

I basically flatlined in reaction to the show-stopping smile he dazed me with. A lazy, lip-quirking smirk that flashed only an impression of extra-white teeth and bordered on arrogance. Right there and then, I knew it: I was toast!

To avoid gaping any longer, I rushed to roll down the window.

"Hi," I said, with an uncertain smile.

Taking off his sunglasses, he proceeded to unleash the full mojo of those silver eyes

on me. “Hi, Lily.”

Just like that, with one snakelike flick of the tongue across the upper lip, he made the sound of my name into everything he was about, sexy and dangerous.

“I was wondering, is someone taking you to prom?”

My jaw dropped. But at the same time, a little warning light started blipping somewhere in the back of my stunned head. Why would he want to take me, of all people, to prom? Did he even care about prom?

“If you don’t stop looking at me like that, I’ll blush for sure,” he said, and his mouth did that quirking-thing again.

He was being dismissive and teasing all at once and I was hypnotized, which, I would guess, made me look a lot like a tongue-tied idiot.

“So, prom? Date?” he insisted, sizing me up as if attempting to establish if indeed I possessed a brain.

I shrugged, trying for cool and only mildly interested. “What are you expecting me to say?”

“Yes would do nicely.”

“But, uh, we don’t know each other. At all. I think people should know a little bit about each other if they’re going to prom together.”

I stopped, happy that the words coming out of my mouth reflected nothing of what was really going on inside me. My instincts shouted: *Run!* But I didn’t. If I’d learned anything this past year, since Ryder had moved to Rosemound, it was that no matter how far I ran, no matter how well I hid, his ghost always stayed with me. Haunting me. Toying with me.

“Define ‘know each other,’” he demanded.

“I don’t know. People date and stuff.”

“So, you want us to date?”

“What? Date? No, I didn’t say —”

“You don’t want us to date.”

“No! I mean, yes ... I mean ... hold it! How did we get from you asking me to prom to us dating?”

He tilted his head, sunshine bouncing off his hair to show all the tones I never knew black could range across. Sleek obsidian, glossy onyx, thick ink, his tousled hair fell around his face like shreds of living darkness. I was deeply in awe.

“We could date, if that’s what you want,” he went on.

I shook my head unconvincingly. “That’s not wh —”

“But you’re wrong.”

“About what now?” I asked, exasperation seeping into my tone. This was, without a doubt, the strangest conversation I’d ever had in my life.

“I do know you,” he said calmly.

“You do?” My reply sounded like *Yeah, right!* but he didn’t seem to care.

“You’re smart, outspoken to a fault, consistent. Some might even argue that you take yourself too seriously,” he added with a grin.

“What are you —”

“You’re not really a loner, but you’re lonely. Missing your dad and all. And you’re special, in more than one way, not that you don’t do a bang-up job of hiding it. That part of yourself you put in your candles. The reason you go out to gather plants in the woods,

at midnight, when there's a full moon."

He paused.

"So, I'm thinking, horticulture degree. Cornell or Ohio State. Cornell is more prestigious, but Ohio State puts you closer to your father, so I guess that comes out on top." Another moment's breather. "And you have a cat. Raisin, is it?"

I had the uncontrollable urge to just repeat "huh?" and "what?" over and over, but my jaw seemed to have other plans, which didn't include unclenching in the near future. I couldn't move! Just like one of those creepy French mimes impersonating a statue, I took my time and observed Ryder Kingscott — the legend, the most envied, desired, talked about, etc., guy in school — mutating before my eyes into Ryder Kingscott, the ... possible stalker? But how? And when? And where the heck was I when this happened? Also, could my guy-radar be any more defective? Never mind answering that.

He took one last step, trespassing on the remaining inches of space between him and the car door, and his fingers latched on to the side of my open window. Holy cow, he was suddenly standing so close! Smelling sooo good, like leather, pine trees, and something else, a faint trace of ... gas?

"I scared you, didn't I?" he asked, with eyes foraging for the truth in places no one should've been able to reach inside me. "I'm sorry."

Get it together, Lily! a voice thundered in the back of my head. Apparently, Lily McGutsy, my alter ego, wasn't spooked by Ryder, the friendly neighborhood stalker. Caught between the two versions of myself, I couldn't decide if I should hit the gas or initiate a ferocious attack aimed at putting him out cold.

In the end, I did neither, opting instead for brain rather than brawn usage, mostly because there was no other way to get to the bottom of this. Plus, alarm and trepidation aside, I couldn't honestly say that the notion of the hottest guy in school following me around didn't do anything for me. Sure, kind of insane, but not entirely off-putting. He was my Zen-moment guy! Curiosity may have killed the cat, but not figuring out his reasons would kill me just the same.

"You've been following me around."

"No," he denied, without flinching.

"Gosh," I scoffed, "I had no idea the woods were rigged with TV cameras. My bad."

One of the corners of his mouth twitched.

"I live in the old McArthur cabin. Do you know where it is?"

The dwelling he referred to was an old hunting shack in the woods, about a mile from my own house, which marked the edge of the forest. The log cabin, supposedly his, was located right next to one of my favorite trails so, yeah, I knew the place. In fact, I knew it well enough to call his bluff.

"You do not live there," I said with supreme certainty.

"Yeah, I do."

"No, you don't."

"How long are we going to argue about it?" He was amused. "Tell you what. Why don't I cook dinner for you, at my place, for our first date? So you can see for yourself?"

Hmm, tempting. Sure, why don't I willingly agree to meet the potential stalker alone, in the woods, after sundown?

"I don't think so."

"Lily, Lily, Lily," he chanted my name, shaking his head. "If I wanted to hurt you,

believe me, I could've done it many times by now."

Reassuring, that was *not*.

"Rosemound High is an incredibly boring place," he continued. "Don't you know how you stand out? Don't you know that, other than you, there's nothing to make coming to school bearable?"

Asking the question in a voice that somehow felt like warm liquid skimming over my skin, he reached out to touch my face. Fortunately alert enough to see it coming in time, I moved away from the window, all the while giving him one of my back-off-now-or-prepare-to-meet-your-Maker looks. Being called "special" wasn't exactly a turn-on for me.

The softness in his face melted away. I was reluctantly congratulating myself on a job well done, expecting him to turn angry and show his true, stalker-like colors, only he didn't. He looked sad. And, my oh my, how that hit me! Smashed into me, more like. There he was, the most gorgeous creature I'd ever laid eyes on, still as awesome and dreamy as ever, but oh-so-sad. And for all my flippant bravado, there was no pretending that watching him and knowing that I somehow caused this sadness, that I had that kind of power over him, didn't affect me. What female gifted by God with eyes and a heartbeat wouldn't react to those lavender-flecked silver eyes drowning in misery? To that bitter set of his — *sigh* — kissable mouth? That heavy fall of those ordinarily straight, proudly planted shoulders of his?

"Look, Ryder, I'm going to assume that you're quick and able to understand that I'm a little freaked out by this. You get that, right?"

And ... we were back to being contemptuous again, I gathered, from the way his face realigned itself into a plain mocking expression. That was good, I figured, because I could deal with arrogant-Ryder. It was sad-Ryder I had no idea how to handle.

Sarcastically, he said, "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Mock if you must, but this just goes to prove me right. We really don't know anything about each other, so all I *can* do now is assume. That you're smart, hopefully not dangerous, and also that you're telling the truth."

"Elementary, my dear Watson."

"That's a misquotation, by the way," I countered without thinking. Which might've made more of an impact if I'd stopped grinning like a cretin.

"See? Ten minutes and you already know that I read Sherlock Holmes. Just imagine what you could discover if we went out on a real date."

"Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. You read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Sherlock Holmes is just a character."

The effort of holding back a snicker was working his lower lip into the yummiest shape. Naturally, me being me, it gave me flashes of biting into it.

"Should I take your attempt at educating me as a sign that you'll go out with me?" he asked. "I promise to provide you with ample opportunity to correct me and prove your intellectual superiority. If nothing else, any time we'll spend together should be a great confidence-booster for you." He winked, using three fingers to salute. "Scout's honor."

Toast, toast, toast. I was *so* toast.

"Before I agree," I said, "exactly how do you know the name of my cat?"

He chuckled softly. "There's nothing you can't learn at Rosemound High if you pay enough attention."

“You mean, if you eavesdrop,” I decoded. “Raisin?” I asked again.

Lips pursed, he returned, “That’s one way to look at it. You and J,” — that would be my best friend, Jane Archer — “discuss all kinds of things. But there are snoopers, and then there are snoopers. I mean, Casanova himself spent a few years spying for the Inquisition,” he added whimsically.

With a frown, I asked, “Your point being?”

“Mysteries are made to be solved. And it’s no accident that I should be the one solving yours. And vice versa.”

“Some prediction. Should I just call you Nostradamus from now on?”

Ignoring the mockery, he insisted softly, “Just say yes, Lily. Why try avoiding the unavoidable?”

Ah, why indeed!

CHAPTER: TWO



Sharing major news with your best friend in class? Without easing her into it? Not a good idea. “What? Ryder Kingscott asked you out?” J squeaked, one octave too high and perfectly audible to many of the healthy pairs of ears in the classroom, which, most likely, included the culprit, Ryder himself.

I probably looked as if instantly submersed in red paint, my face hot right up to the hairline. Even with my head buried between my shoulders, I could easily count all the pairs of eyes surveying my now-clownish complexion.

“Louder, please,” I hissed. “I don’t think they heard you in the next solar system.” “Sorry,” she whispered back. “But, come on, this is mind-blowing. Can’t blame a girl for getting excited.”

Humphing, I risked a peek at Ryder. Two rows behind and to our right, he was, of course, staring at me, a self-satisfied smirk curling his mouth lopsidedly. Fantastic!

Letting my hair fall over my shoulder to block out that sight, I made a point of elbowing J. “Aw!” she wailed, once again too loudly. “How did it happen? I mean, what did you do?” “Nothing. Nothing at all. But the thing is that, well, he knew stuff about me.”

“Stuff? Like what?”

“Like my candle-making.”

She scoffed at my answer. “That’s not really a secret, Lil. Everyone knows about it.” The “it” she was talking about was, in fact, a tad more complicated than she made it sound. See, my family didn’t exactly fit the profile of a

typical Copper Country household. Once upon a time, we used to live in New York, where Dad was a big-shot lawyer and Mom, well, mostly she was just unhappy. Then came the family trip to the Keweenaw Peninsula and Mom’s love at first sight for the place, which brought about an ardent desire to relocate, effective immediately. Somehow, she became convinced the place vibrated very auspiciously, that because of the copper, metal of Venus, good for relationships and health, and an absolute feminine force, it was the perfect spot for our family. Living here was going to be empowering for her. It would make her happy. Trying to explain about the copper mines being depleted led nowhere, Dad had once told me. That’s how, just after I turned six years old, we moved from a beautiful apartment in Manhattan to a country house smack in the middle of nowhere, on the outskirts of a dense woodland area.

So how did it work? Dad now worked in Chicago. Through a combo of driving and flying via Houghton, he’d come home every Friday night, only to set off again late Sunday evening. Crazy? No doubt. But then crazy could easily be argued, in that Dad, an Armani-wearing, Mercedes-driving, His Majesty’s Reserve cigar-smoking, sixty-year-old-single-malt-drinking kind of guy, had married my New-Agey, laid-back, starry-eyed crackpot of a mom to begin with. Not that she wasn’t an awesome crackpot.

More to the point, at least in certain respects, we were a textbook case of “like mother, like daughter.” She owned a little place called The Enchanted Forest Occult Emporium, where she performed tarot readings and sold magic crystals, mystical trinkets,

and such. Among the “such” were a number of special candles, most likely the only legitimate items in her shop. What made the candles special? In a word, me.

Okay, first off, peculiar family living arrangements and kooky mom aside, I didn’t like to think of myself as anything but your typical seventeen-year-old from middle-of-nowhere, Michigan. Most of all, I hated that words like *witch*, *fortune teller*, or *psychic* often popped up in casual conversation next to my name. Because that was *so* not me! So what if I could “see” a person’s whole life, and sometimes bits of their future, too, simply by touching them for a second? So what if I could fix virtually any problem by mixing certain plants with wax? So what if my candles actually worked? That didn’t make me a witch; I was simply more sensitive to people’s energy and to Mother Nature’s gifts to us. Freaky? You bet. Except there was more to me than freaky talents. In fact, for the most part, I was just a run-of-the-mill, small-town girl. Not that a lot of people got that.

“Thank you, Lady Old-News,” I snapped. “I’m well aware that everyone knows about my candles. But how many people know I gather the plants at night, during a full moon, huh?”

She breathed out sharply. “Uh-oh.”

“Yeah. Also, he called me ‘special,’” I expelled the word with a glare aimed mostly at the battered surface of my desk.

“Double uh-oh. But wait, maybe he meant it as in ‘cool.’ Maybe he didn’t —”

I was about to bestow upon her a would-you-stop-dreaming-already look when Mr. Garcia intervened.

“Señorita Crane, Señorita Archer, *por favor! No puedo oír a mis propios pensamientos por su chachara.*”

“Sorry, Señor Garcia,” J answered, trying for repentant and failing. “Er ... I mean, *lo siento*,” she corrected herself, to the mirthful enjoyment of some of our classmates.

“*Silencio!*” Mr. Garcia demanded.

The class quieted down. It was an effort, though. With the SATs behind us and the summer break fast approaching, simply being here was a feat of sheer willpower. Everyone was either tired or distracted, longing to be out in the sun and taking advantage of the unusually balmy weather. The only thing that made school at all attractive was the upcoming prom. That reminded me ...

“He asked me to prom, too,” I whispered.

J’s eyes widened with shock. As always, she was dressed to fit the week’s theme, which was a sexy-secretary kind of deal. The girl had style, no argument there, but it was pretty out there and always modeled with great panache. She put her outfits together around a weekly concept — smooth secret agent, chic French ingénue, Greek goddess, upper-crust Brit, etc. — and for seven days she wore only stuff that kept to it. Today, as part of the sexy-secretary motif, she was sporting an ensemble which I viewed as a cross between Victoria Beckham’s gray period and Lady Gaga’s look: fiery crimson button-up shirt, mostly unbuttoned, pencil leather skirt so tight she could barely sit down, spiky metallic heels of dizzying heights, and a futuristic hat in a starfish shape. The getup was completed with red lips and exaggerated smoky eyes. The surprise with which she met my news clashed with the makeup somehow, making her look like a mug-shot version of her typical self.

“I didn’t say yes yet,” I added, before she could ask.

“But you’re going to, right?”

“I don’t know, J. I mean, he *is* really hot and everything.”

Not to mention that, for the past twelve months he’d been constantly on my radar. The same radar that had stopped registering any male life forms at about the same time I’d sprouted boobs. But J didn’t know about the Zen moment. She didn’t know that Ryder had been in my head ever since. Don’t get me wrong, I loved my BFF loads; she was tough, beautiful inside and out, and *so* overly avant-garde for rural Michigan. Gutsy enough to parade her true self in front of people whose second nature was to judge, she was, in some ways, just another outcast, like me. So our friendship seemed to be a match made in heaven. But she was suffering from these full-blown terrors which centered on my boyfriend-less state. In her mind, I was sure to end up living alone with a mob of cats, or worse, revert to a Neanderthal form of Lily and seclude myself in the woods, which, of course, opened the door to unsavory sanitary habits and possibly cannibalism, too. So I couldn’t tell her about my Zen moment, not without risking her already booking the church where I should immediately marry Ryder, only minutes after she would have already picked out the names for our five, to seven, unborn, but definitely on the way, children.

I peered back at the unknowing groom-to-be again. He was reading a book, acting mighty indifferent to everything around him. Sunlight clung to his hair, glazing the darkness of it in a bluish luster. There was something so careful, delicate even, about the way his long fingers were curled over the book’s cover. It made me sigh in a way that crumpled my chest achingly.

“But?” J pressed.

I swiveled in the chair to face her. “He even knew Raisin’s name, J. My cat’s name! Not to mention that —”

“You’re freaked,” she interrupted, her head going up and down a few times, like one of those little hula-girl dollies.

“Well, yeah,” I agreed, and then sighed again. “What should I do?”

She flipped a handful of black curls over her shoulder, shrugging. Hard to believe, but her funky hat never moved. Was it glued on?

“You should definitely take him for a trial run.” She grinned impishly. “In a public place, of course, with lots of people around.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “He’s been here, what, a year? I had no idea he even knew I existed.”

“I think that’s a widespread belief among the female Rosemound High students,” she soothed.

“So you think I should do it?”

“What I think is not really relevant here. The only thing that matters is, do you like him?”

“Well, I’m not blind, am I?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to today’s episode of *Lil Crane, Strictly Skin-Deep*. Would you forget how he looks for a sec? Do you like him, as in do you think he’s worth taking a chance on, weirdness and all?”

I glanced over my shoulder again. He was still reading, but as he turned the page, his eyes trailed sideways and locked on mine. He didn’t smile, even though he’d just caught me spying, and there was something incredibly intense about the way he held my gaze. And then, very deliberately, he dropped his again, returning to the book with an almost

bored expression. Talk about mixed signals ...

With a frown, I answered, "Maybe. Maybe I think he's worth the effort."

J's generously rimmed eyes bulged. "Wow! High praise from you."

"Like it's my fault that most guys in Rosemound are either total jerks or dull as ditchwater."

"Amen to that. But obviously Ryder is neither. So go for it. I mean, what's the worst thing that can happen?"

"Um, let's see ... he could be Ted Bundy, Jr.? In his time, Ted Bundy was pretty hot, too, you know."

She laughed her sultry, deep laugh that had so many guys drooling over her. Not that she cared much. If her fashion sense followed weekly patterns, her love life moved in seasons. There were only two: the *I'm-bored-I-think-I'll-date-someone-to-help-pass-the-time* phase and the *all-boys-suck-I'm-thinking-about-joining-a-convent-and-embracing-abstinence-forever* one. Presently, she was plodding through the latter.

At the sound of her laughter, Señor Garcia's nose re-emerged from the pages of the book he was reading. He cast us another murderous look, his thin mustache twitching in aggravation, to which J reacted by raising her arms in something of an apology. We were expected to finish translating some obscure piece of literature scribbled onto the blackboard, as Rosemound High was one of those places still stuck back in the blackboard-era. Both J and I had yet to write down a single word, but a brief peep around the classroom revealed that we were hardly the only ones avoiding the task. Luckily, given his lack of reaction, Señor Garcia wasn't going to call anyone on it.

"Oh, Lil," J sighed. "Spoken like a true hermit living in the middle of the woods."

"Gee, thanks. Spoken like an annoying pain-in-my-neck."

She rolled her eyes. "Look, what's the big deal? Do you really think he's dangerous? Did you get some weird vibe off him or something?"

I shook my head. "You know I have to touch someone before I can tell anything. There was no touching."

Her face lit up like the Fourth of July pyrotechnic display Mom had insisted on last year. Turns out you can actually set trees on fire if you're a lawyer unused to handling firecrackers and yet willing to give in to your harebrained wife's every whim. Dad knew that now.

"That's it! You have to touch him."

"By candlelight or what?" It was my turn to smile.

J tsk-tsked me. "You know what I mean."

"Sure, I'll just walk up to him and say, 'Hey, Ryder, I need to hold your hand real quick, think nothing of it. And don't even worry about my thrashing around in pain, happens quite often.'"

Her lack of response offered me another chance to glance at him. He was wearing what he always wore, a layered outfit consisting of a T-shirt pulled over a long-sleeved shirt, and was still decisively ignoring everyone. My eyes met Chrissy Glenn's, since she was basically gawking at him, too. It made me wonder about the number of times I'd stared at him before today. Of course, until today it had been different. At Rosemound High, watching him was pretty much a given among us girls. We could've started a secret society based on that alone: *The Dribblers: Perfecting the Art of Drooling over Ryder Kingscott in a Ladylike Fashion*. Still, the girls' interest was merely similar to the

enthusiasm people show for, say, a piece of art. They eyed him the same way someone looks at a painting — in awareness of its beauty, sometimes touched by it, sometimes simply wanting to own it. But a potential boyfriend? Ryder was so good at being distant. He never gave anyone the time of day. So why me? Why now?

“I know what this is,” J said, interrupting my train of thought, ogling and all, and sounding off-puttingly serious. “You like him, really like him, so you’re doing that thing you do again.”

“Thing? What thing?”

“Chickening out. Using his calling you ‘special’ as a reason not to go out with him. You put so many walls around you, I’m surprised you can still breathe behind them. And I get why you’re being so careful, but this is more than that. You think no guy will ever see past your freak rep. So you won’t even try.”

I swallowed hard. “Tell you what, J. You should reconsider that medical career of yours. Your bedside manner stinks.”

“It’s called tough love, Lil. I’ve watched you do this for years. You know I’m right.”

In all honesty, she probably was. I got that. What I didn’t get was the blame. Seriously, was I wrong in assuming that guys were interested in normal girls? Picture this: possible boyfriend X takes normal girl versus freak girl, namely me, home to meet his mother. After a handshake, normal girl comments, *Oh, what a pretty manicure, Mrs. X*. My comment? After I wipe away the foam at my mouth and I’m finally done convulsing, *Mrs. X, you’ll die in a car crash two weeks from today. You may as well take care of the arrangements because I’m never wrong*. And we live happily ever after? Fat chance.

“You’re going to have to try it sometime, Lil,” J went on. “Might as well be with him. I mean, he’s gorgeous and he likes you. What more could you want?”

Ah, what indeed!

CHAPTER: THREE



To J's profound, and loudly declared, annoyance, nothing much happened over the next couple of weeks. Every day I returned to school, thinking, *Okay, today I'll talk to him. I'll tell him I decided to ...* And that's where it got sticky; some days I wanted to tell him yes, some days I wanted to say no, but mostly I just swung from one end to the other, incapable of stopping at either.

As for the object of all my trials and tribulations, he seemed to be doing the same things he'd always done: showing up at school on occasion, working at Dave's Garage, ignoring everyone, and still generating vast amounts of gossip. Some said he was now looking at a suspension after being caught doing something really scandalous, like drinking on school grounds. Others said he'd won the right to come back to classes via a bet in some sort of game, pool or poker, against Principal Turner himself. Of course, one of the stories widely circulated around the school claimed that, following an ugly bike accident, he'd been marred so badly, it took hours of plastic surgery to patch him up; that essentially his face wasn't his at all. Which was just crazy, the way gossip usually is.

But if, on the subject of him, the school was buzzing as usual, the topic of us, should such a thing actually exist, was as silent as the grave. At the end of that day when he had asked me to prom, I'd almost fainted at the sight of him waiting by my car after classes. *When you're ready to go out with me, you let me know, okay?* had been his one and only message to me. Since then, we'd say hi when and if we passed each other in school, but nothing more. Never once since that day had he tried pressuring me for an answer.

And at first, that worked for me; there's only so much pressure you can put your bike under before blowing the tires, right? But as the days flew by, the utter lack of pushing got me wondering. Had he changed his mind? After all, how patient can a boy be? Worse still, I wasn't without theories and possible explanations, and the more I thought about it, the deeper I settled into, well, *madness*. Before I knew it, my daily schedule started to look a lot like this:

Monday: Woke up, thought of Ryder; went to school, stared at Ryder; had lunch with J, gaped at Ryder; went to PE, brooded over Ryder's absence; went home, thought of Ryder; took a drive, "accidentally" passing by Dave's Garage, spied on Ryder; came home, thought of Ryder; had dinner, no appetite due to lack-of-Ryder; went to bed, tossed and turned thinking about Ryder.

Tuesday: See above, with minor adjustments.

Wednesday: Ryder wasn't in school, my world collapsed.

Thursday: Same as Monday and Tuesday.

Friday: See above.

Saturday: Nightmarishly long, boring. Drove by Dave's Garage twice, hoping to see Ryder.

Sunday: See above, minus the drive-by. But, yay, tomorrow I'll see Ryder in school! God bless Mondays.

Ryder, Ryder, Ryder. Every blasted second of every blasted day! It wasn't like I enjoyed walking around as this stalker-y version of myself. In fact, having him in my

head, non-stop now, was sure to drive me apoplectic with exasperation. But could I kick him out of my thoughts? Not a rotten chance.

So what did playing Nancy Drew bring me? Well, first off, an absolute assurance that he hadn't, in fact, taken an interest in someone else, which, not surprisingly, had kept me awake on more than one night. Other than that, the more I learned about him, the less I actually knew.

He had no friends, I concluded, since he hardly ever talked to anyone at school. Clearly he liked books because he was always reading, in and out of class. As far as I could tell, he paid zero attention to whatever he put on, but still managed to look impossibly hot every single day; that was just unfair and annoying. In class he always acted regally bored, and I was beginning to suspect it wasn't an act. Classes really did put him to sleep and, judging by those few times he'd actually graced a teacher with an answer to some question, his boredom seemed justified. Because he was smart, no doubt about it. He would've made honors classes, if only he'd cared enough. But, after Inspector Clouseau-ing him for weeks, my conclusion was that he didn't care, about anything, in fact, except maybe his bike and the books he always carried around.

"Please tell me today is the day," J begged, as she and I found each other in the school parking lot and headed for the entrance.

Smiling angelically, I tried distracting her by pointedly noticing her outfit. This was tribute-to-Jackie-Kennedy week and she had on a pink dress that flaunted an elegant boat-neck cut and a three-quarter-length flared skirt, pale lavender kitten heels, gloves in the same color, and of course the emblematic pillbox hat. My BFF sure loved her hats.

"Looking hot, J."

She held out a hand, displaying cotton-clad fingers.

"Uh-uh! Don't change the subject, Lil. Prom is three weeks away and I still don't know what I'm going to wear. You need to make up your mind already."

Before Ryder had asked me, the plan was that J and I would go together. She'd wear a tux with no heels and basically be my date, as that was our typical way of doing things. But if I went with him, then she'd don a dress; we had already found this purple and black corset-tutu number online, which we agreed would look gorgeous on her. However, since I had yet to decide how I wanted things to play out, she had neither bought the dress nor rented the tux. She was not a happy camper.

Arching my eyebrows pleadingly, I tried for the old homeless-kitten-inneed-of-a-hug trick and bombed. She just ignored me.

"This whole thing is crazy. You spend your time staring at him when he's in school and pining for him when he's not. So what's the point in delaying it? You know you want to go out with him."

Standing before the two-level red-brick construction that was Rosemound High and arguing about how very insane my behavior had become wasn't exactly how I wanted to kick off my day. Stopping in front of the double door entrance, I allowed her to go in first, less out of politeness than to give myself extra time to produce some semblance of an answer.

But there wasn't anything left to say in my defense. I was well aware of why I hesitated, but she'd also watched me working myself into a frenzy over going for it. And she was right; the delay was just me being a coward. Me being pathetic. So, before my mouth could seal itself off the way it did sometimes, I said it.

“I’ll talk to him today. Maybe we’ll go out this weekend.”

Her face relaxed in a huge grin. “Really? Promise?”

I nodded in agreement, my throat already constricting in silent agony. Sure, talking to him would be easy-peesy. Heavy on the lemon-squeezy, though, seeing as the mere thought of it sent waves of nausea through my stomach already. It sucked being me today.

Focused on keeping my breakfast down, I noticed nothing and no one on our way to class. It was there, right by the door, that J’s screech brought me back in an alarming way.

“Holy cow!” she yelped.

A thin stream of blood leaked from her nose, threatening to ruin her beautiful pink dress.

“J, are you okay?” I quickly fished a Kleenex from my messenger bag and handed it to her.

“Peachy. I’m going to the bathroom. Tell Mr. Evans I’ll be right back.” She was already hurrying away.

“Hey, don’t you want me to come with you?”

“I got it.”

That left me walking into the classroom alone, in yet another case of easy-peesy. *I’m not going to look at him, not going to look at him, not going to ... oh, shoot!* Of course my eyes refused to see anyone but him. Next came the heat in my cheeks, the clammy palms, the shirt instantly sticking to my sweaty back. Entering the class alone? Oh yeah, real easy!

He, on the other hand, was the picture of cool. Ubiquitous book in one hand, he lifted those silver eyes from the pages and, with an irresistible quirk of lips, gave me a nod and a lazy going-over. I had on my favorite jeans with a baseball jersey and sneakers, as usual going for casual comfy, but the way his stare dragged slowly over every last scrap of fabric covering my body left me wishing I’d dressed more like a girl. It wasn’t just a first for me, but also vaguely annoying.

Shifting my weight uncomfortably, I fingered the strap of the bag carelessly slung over my shoulder and ground my teeth in aggravation, unable to break the eye contact. Long seconds passed before I recovered; I could’ve stared into those silver eyes for hours. With a great effort, kicking myself for spazzing out like that, I eventually turned my back on the source of my pain and the rest of the class, focusing instead on conveying J’s situation to our young, offbeat English lit teacher.

When Mr. Evans dismissed me, I swiveled with the grace of a partly paralyzed sumo wrestler and proceeded to my desk, examining my sneakers with painstaking intent. Yep, with or without a clown hat, I was still frontrunner for village idiot.

After tripping over my feet once and finally plunking myself down on the chair, I was forced to face up to one sad but obvious truth: I didn’t have a choice anymore. I had to go out with him, if only to get rid of some of the tension that was turning me into a cartoonish character from a TV show. I was one orthodontist-stop away from becoming Ugly Betty. Ironically, if he hadn’t talked to me, if he hadn’t waited for me in the parking lot that day, none of it would’ve happened. I would have been fine just watching him from a distance with the rest of the crowd. I knew Ryder Kingscott would be trouble from the day he first showed up in Rosemound, when he literally stopped my world. But I was

seventeen and had had plenty of time to perfect my avoidance technique. People, topics, even random thoughts, I was so very good at steering away from all dangerous items. People adapt; we learn to live with virtually anything, and I'd made it through a whole year without incident, a whole year of pretending that he was nobody. That my Zen moment had only been a fluke. If he hadn't talked to me that day, I would've been safe. Safe from him being ... not nobody, anymore.

"Okay, ducklings," Mr. Evans's voice rose above the lively chatter. "Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, broadly known as F. Scott Fitzgerald. Who can tell me what about the man?"

"He was born in Minnesota."

"Expelled from high school."

"Was an alcoholic."

"The Lost Generation."

"Married the wrong girl."

The noise was standard procedure. Mr. Evans gave us a week's notice before we'd start on a new book, in which time we were expected to research the author. Not their work, but their lives. Mr. Evans believed that understanding how writers lived was the key to understanding what they and their work were about. It was fun, almost like a contest, the way we all did our best to dig out little-known facts about the authors. The empty names became actual people who lived, loved, and struggled, just like the rest of us. All around, it was an interesting exercise.

It was in the middle of this familiar pandemonium that the door to the classroom opened, revealing the whopping frame of a blond stranger. There were about two hundred and fifty students in Rosemound High; a new face, like that of the guy standing at the door now, didn't go unnoticed. It was a newsworthy fact.

So the entire classroom grew instantly silent.

"May I help you?" Mr. Evans asked the towering figure.

Spread over more than six feet of spare but naturally muscular build, the new guy seemed entirely comfortable with the attention and the fact that every pair of eyes was aimed at him. Sporting a short, messy haircut and the kind of smile that said I'm-too-confident-to-give-a-hoot, he answered in a strangely tuneful voice.

"My name is Lucian Bell. I'm new. You're Mr. Evans?"

He walked as he talked, halting in front of the teacher's desk and handing him a piece of paper. And ... hello, weirdness! While Mr. Evans read the slip, the guy turned to the class, steadily and with calculated nonchalance, his eyes perusing the various faces cursorily until he found me. And, as if *I* had been the object of his search all along, once our eyes met, he froze. He simply gaped at me, without moving, without smiling, without seeming to notice anyone else anymore. All of a sudden, it felt as though we were alone, not just in the classroom, but in the whole darn world. It wasn't privacy, either; it was more like being locked up. I felt like an animal caught in a trap, with no hope of escaping.

He was the one to break away first, his eyes leaving me to deliberately zero in on ... *Ryder*? Even more bizarre, something seemed to pass behind his sharp blue stare once he and Ryder first speared each other visually. It was a recognition of sorts, something that was immediately followed by an unpleasant twitch of his lips. He smiled at Ryder, raising his eyebrows in an unspoken challenge, and even if it lasted only a second, it was enough

to raise goose bumps all over my skin. Who was this guy? What was his deal with Ryder? Did they know each other?

I was trapped in a bad Western, expecting one of them to pull a gun and blow the other to smithereens any minute now. Very *Deadwood*. At last, Mr. Evans spoke, bringing the freaky duel-thing to an end.

“Alright, Lucian, why don’t you sit down?”

The back of the class was empty, offering plenty of seat-taking opportunities. What does he do? Stops right next to me and sets his bag on the empty chair belonging, in fact, to J.

“No, you can’t —” was all I could say, before Ryder just materialized next to me.

The duel resumed, verbal effects to be added momentarily for sure. Oh, for Pete’s sake! I checked out the rest of the class, pointedly eyeing Mr. Evans in particular. Everybody scoped out the scene, but with a kind of glazed look on their faces, a look impossible to achieve without the aid of potent narcotics.

With eyes like pits of angry storm clouds, Ryder hissed, “You’re not getting anywhere near her!”

Lucian smiled calmly. “I’m sorry, is she your girlfriend? Because I just assumed that since she’s sitting alone —”

“She isn’t.”

“Not your girlfriend?” An ideally arched eyebrow shot up.

Ryder’s face was a guarded, smooth mask, but for a moment something flickered in his eyes — hurt, was it?

“Not sitting alone,” he clarified quietly.

“The chair next to her is empty.”

“And I’ll bet you know exactly why that is, don’t you?”

Lucian seemed confused.

“You’re too early,” Ryder added.

The newcomer glanced at the clock above the blackboard.

“Am I? I think I’m kind of late, actually.”

Smiling in a way that made me doubt he was talking about the current time, he picked up his bag and split. Their verbal face-off thus completed, extremely fast, in the space of mere seconds, I was finally able to snap out of it, close my mouth, and proceed to ask for an explanation with all the tact of a mentally impaired chimpanzee.

“Wh-what the heck was that all about?”

Ryder’s nostrils flared anxiously. “I’m sorry.”

“Mr. Kingscott? Is there a reason you’re not seated?”

Great timing, Mr. Evans. *Now* he was alert.

Ryder vamoosed back to his desk, providing me with all the privacy I could use to bite my nails and scratch my head in peace. Needless to say, that didn’t accomplish much. I was at a loss about what had just happened. Intent on questioning Ryder about it as soon as the bell rang, I was, however, forced to see my plans come to naught. Mr. Evans’s request that I stay after class to discuss my latest paper saw to that. And, by the time I was done, neither Ryder nor the puzzling Lucian Bell were anywhere to be found on the school grounds. Fantastic!

CHAPTER: FOUR



The rest of the school day was one big bundle of fun, if your idea of fun involves, say, living through an endless Brazilian wax. Between J's questions, "Do you think they know each other? Why would Ryder take him on like that? What do you mean, the whole class looked like mummified living statues?", and the time I'd wasted uselessly searching every square inch of the school for Ryder, the day really, *really* sucked. I also managed to screw up the algebra test, for which I'd almost killed myself studying for days, and inflame Señor Garcia's wrath, again, with my apparent lack of interest in his ... whatever it was that he was talking about at that moment. All in all, people roasting in the flaming pits of hell fared better than I did today.

Ditching the day's altogether jolly vibe didn't seem possible once school was over, either. What was meant to be a brief stop at J's place on the way to my house revealed that Delilah Archer, her mother, was passed out on the couch, drunk, and, therefore, little disposed to do anything about the mess in the house. Or the lack of food in the kitchen. Or the laundry still waiting to be dealt with.

Despite being a smart, reasonably educated woman who came from a solid middle-class background, Delilah had always been a mess. A disaster waiting to happen, only growing worse with age. Exactly where she and J would've been without the small fortune inherited after the death of her father was anyone's scary guess. My BFF blamed the absentee father, who had run out on them when J was still a baby, but my own suspicion was that the poor bastard hadn't so much run as been driven out by good ol' Delilah. Sadly, his leaving hadn't cured the woman's longing for male companionship; men still came and went from the Archer household with a frequency reminiscent of the rush-hour traffic in any metropolis.

So instead of spending the afternoon studying, arguing about normal things like Bright Eyes or Dashboard Confessional, and trying to solve the new Ryder mystery on our hands, what did we do? House chores. At least Delilah's conscious self didn't join us until we were done, dinner ready to be popped in the oven and everything. Her slurred excuse to J was promptly followed by a half-hour rant about her latest boyfriend, who apparently had up and left her in the morning. Shocker!

Eventually J talked her into taking a long bath, at which point, after giving my friend a quick but heartfelt hug, I left their house feeling more grateful than ever for my mom. So grateful, in fact, that I decided to pay a visit to The Enchanted Forest Occult Emporium.

She was just finishing a tarot reading.

"Lillian Marie," she more or less sang my name. "What a pleasant surprise."

Draped in a colorful sari, her long blonde hair fixed in intricate braids, Mom was a breath of fresh air, especially as the image of bloodshot-eyed, wild-haired Delilah still burned the inside of my retinas. To go with the outfit, she'd chosen a number of clunky bracelets, which, together with a couple of leather cuffs, covered both her forearms. The result was kind of flower child meets edgy Indian goddess ... so, awesome. The incense burning inside the shop couldn't mask her own scent; she always smelled like the forest.

“Hi, Mom.”

More curious than worried, she studied me discreetly. The physical likeness between us was striking; well, except for the hair and those fine crinkles around her eyes. While she boasted a head of straight golden tresses — think Reese Witherspoon — I, on the other hand, was the proud owner of a mane of loose red ringlets. Strange, too; apparently, nobody in our family had had red hair before.

It didn’t take long before she had me all figured out.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

Shrugging my bag off, I sank into an orange-cushioned chair and began telling her all about my strange day, careful to leave out the part about how scared I had been of the whole Ryder-Lucian duel and the entire class turning into inanimate objects for the duration of it. I’d long since spilled my beans to her about Ryder, or, most of my beans, anyway. I may have left out how I’d made it my mission to watch him like a hawk and the subsequent ridiculous amounts of time I wasted effectively obsessing over him. Mom was cool enough; she’d reacted to the news about his asking me to prom with whoops of joy and even a few “hallelujahs” in the mix. She thought he was “awfully cute” and obviously “a responsible kid,” seeing as, even without a family to guide him through, he was still in school, while also holding down a job. But I was reluctant to admit just how much I agreed with her. As far as mother-daughter relationships go, ours was super-duper. We didn’t swap clothes or go to Pilates classes together, since Rosemound was light years away from discovering the aforesaid exercise system, but we spoke each other’s language. Still, I wasn’t ready to come clean about losing sleep over a guy, no matter how cute and responsible he might have been. Call me crazy, call me cautious, but my feeling was that Mom wouldn’t appreciate that.

Anyway, between the burning incense, the Celtic folk music playing softly in the background, and Mom’s rare and mostly innocent comments, I felt much better by the time we left the shop. Not George-Bailey-realizing *It’s-A-Wonderful-Life*-after-all better, but on the road to getting there.

We got home just before eight. Our house was a testimony to how you can take the girl out of the South, Carrollton, Georgia, being where Grandma Charlotte had first unleashed Mom upon the unsuspecting world, but you can’t take the South out of the girl, hence the Southern feel of our humble abode, built in agreement to Mom’s every wish. Enfolded in tall ferns, silver lace and climbing trumpet vines, it melted naturally into the surrounding forest. A sweeping covered front porch rested on white columns, the three dormers on the upper level were evenly aligned above the central entry, and everything was crowned by the gabled roof, partially swallowed up by green vines. A crazy-monk-retreat or a green-thumbed-hardcore-environmentalist deal, but stamped “country living” by Mom’s touch. *Once a Southern girl, always a great homemaker*, was her mantra.

While she started dinner, I went up to my room and delved into my homework assignments with all the enthusiasm that made snails seem fast by comparison. Raisin, my sometimes-senile black cat, kept me company, for some reason acting just as wiped out as I felt.

But, as the poet confesses, there were still “promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep.” Tonight was a full moon, so I had plans to sally forth into the woods later on. As usual, my job involved finding and bagging certain plants while whispering in a language I never understood, but somehow always spoke. It was weird stuff, sure, but also

liberating. For once, I could bask in my weirdness and be as happy as a pig in mud, away from any condemning eyes. Tapped out or not, I couldn't put it off; the candle stock at the store was very low and I was expected to replenish it. Besides, the timing didn't really suck, all things considered. Molding the candles worked better than deep breathing for me, calmed me down. It was too bad that I could only work at night, but luckily I was just enough of a freak to survive on as little as a few hours' sleep each night without a problem. Just as well. With all the time I spent forgoing my beauty sleep in favor of either fashioning the candles or haunting the woods gathering supplies, the sleep deprivation should've killed me a long time ago. Yet here I was.

But if my sleeping habits varied widely, Mom's, on the other hand, were basically written in stone. So she was pretty much comatose by the time, scourge of homework finally crushed, I set off through the back door.

The full moon provided plenty of light and I knew the paths like the back of my hand, so carrying a flashlight was pointless. It wasn't easy, but I did my best to stay focused on the task; that is, collecting the plants and not straying toward the dirt road that went past the McArthur cabin. And, boy, did I struggle to force my legs to move away from and not to it. Because the fact was that I had questions — not to mention raging hormones, but that's another story — and the person who could answer them all, Ryder, lived only a short walk away. There wasn't anything I wanted more than to take that cabin by storm and pluck my answers, and possibly other *pluck-able* items, too, by way of peaceful conversation or not. At this point, I was just about ready to beat the truth out of Ryder.

But little by little, the familiar routine crept back into me and I into it ... find, choose, snip ... like a lullaby drowning my thoughts, calming my nerves ... find, choose, snip. By the time my bag was half full of greenery, I was relaxed. Breathing in when the forest breathed out. Whispering words with meanings I'd never known, in a voice too sweet to be mine, my magic humming melodiously. When ...

"Isn't it kind of late to be out here all alone?"

My mystical communion with Mother Nature was abruptly butted in on. Instead of breathing in concert with the forest, I found myself almost panting in shock at someone's sudden materialization. Ryder was standing right in front of me. Through some miracle, I did not, in fact, yelp in alarm.

"What are you doing here?"

However, my manners appeared to have succumbed to the scare. He crept closer, seeming almost unreal in the light of the moon, beautiful and cold.

"Just making sure you're okay. The forest can be a dangerous place at night," he taunted, as if intentionally trying to spook me.

Frowning, I snapped, "I don't need babysitting!"

"Of course not."

The next step he took put him close enough to touch. Close enough to smell. Close enough to reach out and ... Down, Lily. Down, girl. Focus.

"I have questions," I informed him, with all the oomph my wobbly body could muster. And it wasn't much to speak of; Mickey Mouse's buddy Goofy, during his *goofiest* moment, probably scored more poise than I did right then. But being so close to him continued to work against me.

Shadows flitted across his face and his shoulders went stiff. "I'll tell you what I can."

That was hardly what I wanted to hear! Grimacing, I made an effort to collect my thoughts, which was about as easy as shooting pool blindfolded. One year of relentless gaping plus another two weeks of obsessing over whether or not we should date was more than enough to render talking to him ridiculously problematic.

“Who’s this Lucian guy?”

His shoulders moved slightly. Ah, the great, evasive shrug, the one that meant he’d already brushed my words aside, but *gently*.

“The new kid at school?” he asked innocently.

But playing this game wasn’t going to do the trick tonight. “And...? You two know each other?”

One last step and he was standing so close that our bodies almost touched. His lips curved into another über-confident smile. The kind of smile that reduced everything else in the world to background noise. The kind of smile that went straight to your knees. The kind of smile you could swoon over.

“Are you trying to make me jealous?” he asked in a dangerously soft voice.

With just the tips of his fingers, he began to trace the strap of my bag, starting at the neck, across my chest, coming to the place where my fingers clutched it. So slow, so light, so careful not to touch me. I watched in fascination, my pulse speeding up at the thought of those long fingers brushing mine, when ... he stopped. He let his hand drop, and when I glanced up, he was licking his lips. So close; he was so close I could smell the leather of his jacket.

“You’ll find I’m very possessive about the things I want.”

“You don’t say.”

Ignoring my mumbling, he leaned in closer, still carefully avoiding actual contact. Eyes fastened on my face, lips almost on mine, he whispered, “And I want you, Lily. Bad.”

His breath flared in my nostrils, fresh mint, but hot, and my bones liquefied. My eyelids fluttered and closed. I swayed on my feet. Next, his mouth hovered over my ear, still only shy of touching me.

“Question is,” he went on softly, searing breath caressing my neck, “what do you want?”

Maybe because of my senses whirling out of control, I hesitated. But he lowered his mouth to mine anyway, close enough that our lips almost brushed for a millisecond before his glided across my cheek, his breath laying a fiery trail from the corner of my mouth to my ear.

“I’m not going to kiss you, Lily,” he whispered. “I’m patient. I’ll wait until you want it bad enough.”

Before I could protest, he’d already put some distance between us. A teasing smile played on his mouth again, curving that yummy lower lip, and laughter filled his eyes.

“You’ll be asking for it soon,” he added. “No hesitation.”

His overall amused expression, not to mention the cocky attitude, was my wake-up call. In the blink of an eye, I went from having my hormones performing a high-speed rumba inside me to being submersed in a tubful of ice. He was toying with me, the arrogant creep!

“What game is this, Ryder?” I asked frostily. “What are we playing at here?”

Shrugging, he replied, “It’s not me who’s playing. I’m not the one who’s wasted the

last two weeks trying to make up her mind. Not the one who's asking about other people or has second thoughts about something as innocent as a kiss. If you want to know what we're playing at, I suggest you ask yourself."

"Don't put this on me!"

"Oh, no?" He was still relaxed, almost as if he was enjoying this. "Who should I blame it on, then?"

Actual smoke was coming out of my ears, I was so mad. At him, because he was right; at me, because I couldn't get into the reasons I had stalled. And because I was losing sleep over him. But most of all because he was, bit by bit, luring me out of my safe-zone, which was more terrifying than dying in the coils of a boa constrictor.

I bit back. "You want to blame someone? Blame yourself. It's not my fault that you live like a monk. That nobody knows anything about you. You want to point the finger at me for being cautious? Fine, but you're not exactly Mr. Transparent, either. For all I know, you could be a lunatic. So excuse me if I'm not rushing headlong into something that might well lead to my own untimely death," I finished lamely, failing to admit to a single relevant fact.

He threw his head back and laughed. Wholeheartedly. Which, not surprisingly, didn't make me fume any less.

"What would you have me do, Lily? Hang out with a certain crowd? Start a blog detailing my everyday life? Waste my time on pointless things and people so I can look more like a regular Joe? Would that do it? Would that

suddenly fill you with enough confidence to give me a chance?"

"That's not —"

"Because you're not exactly a regular girl, either," he went on, smiling no more. "Here I was, thinking that you'd be interested in someone who shared a certain uniqueness. Someone that didn't belong, like you. But I guess I've been mistaken."

Did he actually think that pointing out my freak condition was a turn-on? I was quivering with nerves.

"You're nothing like me!"

He met my anger with a frustrated groan. A storm was brewing in his eyes, and they kept changing from silver to lavender and gold at blinding speed.

"How would *you* know?"

His own anger surpassed mine by far. I wanted to answer, but my mouth opened for only a second before snapping shut again. My annoyance changed to surprise and that quickly became exasperation because, once again, he was right. I didn't know. He had given me the chance to find out, but I'd chosen not to take it. Because I was that brave.

"One date, Lily," he said, switching to a gentle, pleading tone, "one date is all I'm asking for."

He was a chameleon, I concluded. In a few short minutes he'd gone from teasing to arrogant, from seducing to arguing with me, from furious to bone-meltingly gentle. How was I supposed to keep up with all that? More importantly, which one was the real Ryder?

I looked at him, tall and sheathed in black leather, his dark hair swaying gently in the breeze and catching the moonlight. My eyes lingered on that absurdly appealing mouth. Would he kiss me if we went out? Would I survive it?

There was only one way to find out. So, pulse booming in my throat, I gave in.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

He tilted his head, almost amused by my making such a big deal out of it, and then smiled rascally. “Are you finished? I want to walk you home.”

Was I finished? Not really. But did it come up? Not exactly. We walked silently, side by side, just us and the moon. Over and over, I told myself that, as long as I was careful, it would be okay. I could do this. At least, I had to try.

The questions I’d been dying to ask him lay forgotten in some faraway corner of my mind. But it didn’t matter. It was as if his being there, strolling next to me, held the answer to everything. It wasn’t until later, while mixing a few drops of my blood with the cinnamon, deer tongue leaves, raspberries, and hot wax, and pouring it into the seven-knob candle molds, that it occurred to me I still had no idea who Lucian Bell was.

It was the love-attracting mix I used for that batch of candles, or maybe the seven-knob shape, the burn-one-every-day-for-a-week-to-have-your-heart’s-desire-come-true concept that did the trick. If I should keep one of the candles for myself, what would I wish for? The answer hit me like a jab to the stomach. A kiss. What I wanted more than anything was for him to kiss me. It had to be the worst idea since 1912, when the first fast-food restaurant opened in New York, not to mention dangerous. So why was I dying for it? Simple.

I was in love with Ryder Kingscott.

Hmm! Why did it feel like a big “duh” was in order?

CHAPTER: FIVE



Ever since he first showed up at Rosemound High, Ryder had never been short of female attention, mine included. But there's a difference between having a thing for someone and falling for him all the way. I had no idea exactly when my crush had become a full-scale attachment, but one thing was certain: it wasn't recent. Maybe I'd only let myself consider it during the past weeks, but the *boo-boo* had been there all along. Something about him blew through my defenses. Probably the same something that proved very effective at keeping me awake for the rest of the night. After all, how could I sleep when there were so many available things to obsess about?

First, it was the clothes; all of a sudden my wardrobe seemed sadder than a rainy day. How could I possibly go back to school dressed in any of that? Every last shred of clothing I owned was a clear statement about how incredibly gender-confused I was.

By four thirty a.m., though, the outfit-dilemma had dropped significantly on the list of things driving me crazy. What did he mean by my having second thoughts about "something as innocent as a kiss"? Because after replaying the conversation in my head, oh, about a million times, I realized that his phrasing was very suspicious. Basically it said that a kiss wouldn't be a big deal for him, which begged the question, what would? Alright, so maybe he wasn't the holding-hands-watching-the-sunset-together type, but did that mean he was a let's-get-crazy-between-the-sheets-on-our-first-date kind of guy? On second thought, very possibly. He did live alone. Maybe the reason he never paid any attention to anyone in school was because he was dating older women, the kind that didn't have an issue with the whole first-date-tumble-in-the-sheets thing. Come to think of it, he hadn't even said that he liked me; the verb he'd used was "want." That made me very nervous.

And then there was that blowing hot and cold thing he did. The times when he smiled and watched me like he was so into me, and the times he gave me bored faces and just enough interest to make the Arctic ice caps seem warm by comparison. Not to mention the attitude! There was something almost scary about the way he looked at me sometimes, as if intent on frightening me, on ensuring that I kept my distance. And what about Lucian Bell? After the scene in class, I was sure that, for some reason, he didn't want Lucian anywhere near me, and yet when I asked for answers in the woods, he offered to tell me what he could. If he was referring to Lucian, it almost sounded like he was trying to protect him, or whatever secrets surrounded him and their relationship. If that was consistent with any form of rational behavior, then someone should've stamped "idiot" on my forehead because I just didn't see it.

Around six a.m., exhausted from having my head spinning with all kinds of unanswered questions, I collapsed, nearly landing on poor Raisin and crushing her in the process. I must have fallen asleep within seconds. It sure felt like seconds when, less than two hours later, Mom swooped in with her chirpy, "Morning, sunshine. Time to get up."

I dragged myself into the shower, unsteady on my feet and still dog-tired. The emotional roller-coaster I'd put myself on had wrenched all my energy out. The cold water helped a lot, though. In fact, by the time I stood in front of the mirror, my face

revealed nothing of how I'd spent the night torturing myself. My eyes were clear, my face not much paler than usual; I looked just as fresh as the plate of pancakes Mom had left for me downstairs.

As it turned out, I spent only minutes pulling on some jeans and a roomy cotton shirt; how could I have wasted hours last night worrying about what to wear? Now, it seemed positively ridiculous. Adidas sneakers, a zip-front hoodie, and I was finally ready to attack my breakfast. That, I did, with the appetite of a blue whale. Okay, so maybe I didn't exactly devour eight tons of krill in one sitting — which, by the way, yuck — but I gulped down the stack of pancakes before Raisin had time to meow twice and complain about my not sharing enough.

I was about to leave the house when the phone rang. That'd be the home line, since Rosemound wasn't exactly the best spot in the world for cell reception. Frowning because it was so late, I stalked back into the kitchen in a huff.

"Hello?" I managed to convey volumes in that one word.

"Whoa, bite my head off, why don't you?"

Blushing so violently that my cheeks were sure to bear scorch marks, I stammered, "R-Ryder?"

"Indeed, it is I, my fair 'n' feisty."

Testy or not, I couldn't possibly *not* smile; I was, after all, only human. Actually, I spent the next moments getting to know a certain swarm of butterflies and the freestyle routine they performed in my tummy; Ryder had the strangest effect on me. But then I remembered ...

"I'm kind of —"

"Late." He cut me off, as usual. "Yeah, you're a slacker."

I humphed, while still grinning, though. "Do you have to be so deprecating?"

Slapping my own forehead had never felt more appropriate. I mean, *deprecating*? People actually said that?

Naturally, he laughed. "Ouch, Lily. 'Deprecating,' really? What did you score on writing, eight hundred?"

Oh dang! I'd just hit way below the accepted coolness-factor limit. "None of your business."

"Ouch, again. I take it you're not a morning person, huh?"

"Ryder, what do you want?"

"For you to come outside already. I'll be your ride to school today."

My jaw dropped. "You'll be my what?" Wait, did that mean...? "Where are you?"

"On your porch."

"On my po —"

Running on pure adrenaline, I threw the phone onto a chair and whizzed over to the front door. And who should I find behind it if not Mr. Kingscott himself? Happily toying with a sleek black cell. I could never get a signal out here; how did he do it?

"Good morning, Miss Crane." He greeted me with that killer smile already peeking at the corners of his — *sigh* — still very kissable mouth.

"Um ... uh-huh," represented the whole extent of my quick-witted response. That, and an unsure nod.

Wearing distressed jeans over chunky biker boots and a white shirt under a black leather jacket, he was indeed a sight for sore, or tired, eyes. The dark aviator shades were

perched on his head, leaving those silver eyes exposed to all the avid gaping my heart could possibly stand.

“Are you okay?” He’d stopped smiling and was now staring at me with a frown, most likely trying to work out if he had the right girl. My usual self was somewhat more talkative, not to mention healthier-looking. Those butterflies were really making a mess of my stomach.

I shook myself. “Fine,” I managed to articulate. “So ...”

“Ride with me to school, please!”

“On your bike?”

Moronic question, obviously. I could see the aforesaid vehicle parked just at the end of our driveway. How did I not hear him arrive?

He smiled at the poorly concealed terror in my face.

“You’ll be fine. I’ll take us there slowly, although,” he glanced at his watch, “we’re going to be late if we don’t leave right now.”

My face fell. Pointlessly, a list of pros and cons still popped into my head. Pros? The closeness, topped off by another whiff of his scent, and did I mention the closeness? Cons? Real easy: we could have an accident and either die or be permanently scarred. Only, of course, we’d never get that far because the contact would make my head blow up long before that. *Hmm*, I mused, totally crushed. This was going to be the shortest relationship in the dating history of mankind.

“Do you have your iPod with you?” he asked.

“Why?”

His eyes twinkled. “I want us to go on our date after school.”

In a knee-jerk reaction, my eyes ran over my body, assessing the outfit I was wearing with all the objectivity allowed by my almost two hours of sleep. I was *so* not in suitable first-date attire! Not that there would be one, I reminded myself, tears blurring my vision already.

“You look fine,” he assured me, his expression softening in a way that led my stomach into light fluttering. I blinked away the tears. “You’ll just need your iPod,” he insisted.

“It’s in here.” I pointed to my canvas messenger bag.

“Good. Now, we really have to go,” he said, checking the time again.

And there it was, the ordinary, simple gesture a boyfriend could, and normally was even expected to do: he offered me his hand. He may as well have punched a hole through my chest, it hurt so badly. My fear, everything that had kept me awake so many nights and the reason I took so long to say yes, was all right there, made flesh and hanging between his outstretched fingers and the hand I couldn’t let him hold. Our eyes met over that small space in between and we had a moment. His face was alive with something so fierce that I tingled inside. The silver in his eyes changed to gold and swirled like soft ripples of honey. His smile never faltered, but it was sad and unusually tired. Silently, insistently, he held my gaze as if I were the only thing in the world that would ever be worth anything to him.

“You ... I-I’m sorry. I can’t!”

Clearly, he didn’t know me as well as he claimed to. I had hoped that he was aware, and maybe even okay with it. I should have known better. Now, for the fun part ... letting the cat out of the bag. Telling him how, when I touched people, their whole lives —

secrets, regrets, things buried so deep that sometimes not even they remembered them — simply poured into me. Telling him how the pain knocked me out if I held on for longer than ten seconds. Followed, no doubt, by saying good-bye to him, right after. I mean, who'd want that for a girlfriend, right?

His eyes flayed me alive. Wispy gray clouds and drizzling lavender sparkles fixed on my face, stripping off layers of skin. And fear. My bravery. And all the pretense in between.

"Take my hand, Lily." He sighed. "There won't be any pain, I promise. I wouldn't offer it otherwise."

Frowning deeply and shaken up by his statement, I looked at his fingers like they were alien artifacts. Or little time bombs, set to go off if touched. By me. Past experience contradicted his words, but still I trembled with something that felt a lot like hope. Could he be right?

In my opinion, it took about eight or nine hundred years until slowly, one finger at a time, I slipped my hand into his, still very much expecting to be pummeled by images, sounds, glimpses of his past, and maybe even flashes of his future. In a word, waiting to have his life's "hard drive" instantly downloaded into my consciousness. But there was nothing! Other than the actual contact, firm but not crushing, and warm, I deconstructed it reflexively, there was nothing but silence. And peace. The kind of peace I'd never known from touching another human being. Soothing, so soothing it brought me to tears.

My eyelids fluttered closed. Sweet angels in heaven, it was so good to touch someone without being torn to shreds by his mind!

"How...? Who ... what are you?" I whispered incoherently.

He gripped my hand hard and my eyes flew open.

With a soul-shattering sadness painting his face solemn, he said, "You know who I am. You *know* me."

I didn't pretend to understand what he was talking about. But he was right, in a way; there was something very familiar about the way my hand fit in his, which was simply crazy. Holding hands had always been a big no-no for me, since I was rather fond of my head being attached to my neck and didn't want to see it exploding like a can of beans in the microwave. Other than the quick hugs I rarely gave my parents and J, whose minds I already knew, which lessened the pain a notch, I tried not to touch anyone on purpose. Sometimes, when a life-and-death issue, like a serious sickness, was involved, I was forced to do it in order to find out if and how I could help. But I always kept it majorly short. Holding hands? Uh-uh, big no-can-do for me. So why did holding Ryder's feel like a memory, like something I'd definitely done before?

"This is very weird," I decided out loud.

Light amusement welled over the sadness in his eyes.

"I bet you're sorry now for brushing me off for weeks," he teased, with a smile full of mischief.

Then, fairly unceremoniously, I was dragged to the bike, our hands still entwined. I had reasons, valid reasons, not to get on that thing, but I couldn't remember a single one. Within seconds, I was wearing a helmet and was perched behind him with my arms securely looped around his waist. And, boy, had I been right! It felt so good my toes curled.

"Comfortable?"

“Very.”

The shiny death trap roared to life and off we went.

Here’s the thing: no matter what anyone says, being a teen ain’t easy. There’s everyday studying, pimples, social status issues, your whole system crumbling into complete and utter anarchy when you fall in love, so it’s often hard to get a clear sense of what’s what. But as I rode that bike, clamped to the most gorgeous boy I had ever laid eyes on, I thought: *Every seventeen-year-old should try this at least once.*

Okay, so maybe it was the unexpected freedom of being able to get up-close and personal with him without having every inch of me quivering in pain that was doing the talking, but still. I couldn’t remember ever experiencing freedom like this before: the warm sun, the caressing wind, his body warm and solid beneath my arms, a perfect blue sky above us. Clichéd? Maybe, but guess what? Also about as close to perfection as anyone can hope to get. Happiness can be so absurdly simple sometimes.

CHAPTER: SIX



I was afraid the euphoria would fade once we reached the parking lot, but it didn't happen. Long after he killed the engine, I was still walking on sunshine. In fact, my state of mind ranked somewhere in the region of onebunny-suit-away from the suitable-for-psychiatric-treatment area. I was just so unreasonably giddy!

"You ready?" he asked, helping me off the bike.

"Ready for what?"

He offered me his hand again, smiling, looking every inch like someone who belonged to teen superstardom. I wondered if he'd be cool with me purring just then. Yep, I was completely off my rocker.

"Feeding the rumor mill."

My stomach churned at the thought, but I wouldn't let it show. "I think we're both used to people talking behind our backs. Only difference is that now they'll talk about us, um, you know, together."

Hesitation be damned! "Us, together" in a sentence was definitely a milestone and a very bold thing for me to utter. I flushed violently and grabbed his hand with embarrassingly shaky fingers. Then, after closing my eyes for a second and breathing in deeply, I spent a moment reflecting on the actual magnitude of the moment. Because it was really happening. I was arriving at school with a boy and we held hands while walking across the parking lot. It was official: I, Lillian Marie Crane, had a boyfriend. Lightning bolts, thunderclaps, earth shattering would soon follow, no doubt. I wanted to chant it, squeak it, dance it, put it on my darn forehead in glitter: I had a boyfriend! Yippee!

"Breathe, Lily, breathe," he told me softly, his fingers gently kneading the inside of my palm.

Sure, normally I would've shot back some smarty-pants reply, except he had a point. The lack of oxygen was becoming an issue. I tried even breaths while musing on how, no matter what biting remark I produced, he'd see right through it. His claim about knowing me didn't seem so naïve anymore, though the very idea was more ridiculous than some celebrity baby names. Honestly, Fifi Trixibelle? Moxie CrimeFighter?

It didn't make sense; how *could* Ryder know me? But, inexplicably, I could have sworn he did; I sensed it. And my brain didn't explode when I touched him, either. It was strange, unexpected, and just as intoxicating as a whiff of Dad's well-aged whiskey. My body ached with how happy I was, but it also tightened at the thought of asking questions, any questions, because what if I messed it up? Poking at whatever was happening could kill the magic behind it. And then ... what then? I couldn't risk it.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked quietly.

It was probably best if I lied. "Just that we're so late."

He glanced at me sideways and I blushed conspicuously because it was as if he knew I wasn't being honest. "Don't worry," he drawled. "Mrs. Flint is a nice lady, she'll let it slide."

The hallway was just as empty as the parking lot had been and our footsteps echoed

loudly on the concrete floor. Anxiety spiked; well, mine did, anyway.

He instructed, "Just let me do the talking."

I happily agreed and then we were inside the classroom, holding hands no more, with people staring from all sides. Ah, the joy of it! While he glided to our history teacher's desk with a *lion-esque* stride, I was left alone by the door, praying that the floor would open and swallow me up. We'd made everyone's day with our entrance. It was a really good time to be into gossip, I sensed unhappily.

Strangely, though, there were only two pairs of eyes that caught my attention. One pair belonged to J, who was beaming from ear to ear, which suited her pastel makeup to an almost disturbing perfection. Her black curls were tucked under a vintage white scarf and she looked properly attired to ride in a convertible. The second person was Lucian Bell, who had somehow asserted ownership of the chair behind mine, usually filled by Mike Carter. He wasn't just distinctly not smiling; his eyes actually glimmered like spheres of blue ice.

Ryder must have worked his magic on Mrs. Flint because she motioned us both to proceed to our desks. I slipped into my chair, feeling as grateful as a Bedouin finally coming upon an oasis after days of drifting through the desert. In all the relief, a couple of moments stole by before I realized that Ryder was lingering by my side. That sparked a whole conversation that we carried on with only our eyes. It went something like this:

Me, with brow furrowed: *What are you still doing here?*

Him, eyes flickering to my desk, almost angrily: *Look!*

When "heeling" as instructed what should I discover but a perfect red rose innocently lying on my beat-up desk. Not just a random one, but an exquisite Cara Mia rose, ideally happening to be at that precise moment in time when a flower turns from a bud into a blossom, deep red on the outside, just peeking scarlet at the center.

Me, my eyes wide with shock: *I'm sorry, I have no idea what this is!*

Him, sighing: *'Course you don't. It's from him.* His head discreetly gestured to my new northern "neighbor," Lucian.

Me, shaking my head, then shrugging: *Don't know anything about it. Don't care anyway.*

Got to go. To be continued.

You bet.

As you'd expect, the rest of history class went by in a daze. J wanted to know everything about Ryder, I wanted to find out about the rose, Lucian was obviously trying to drill holes in the back of my head where I could feel his eyes locked on me, and Ryder probably wished Mrs. Flint hadn't allowed us in after all. All in all, not the most relaxed hour I'd spent in my life.

Since the teacher kept a vigilant eye on the class, communication between me and J was limited to little clandestine notes, hastily scribbled across the knees, in a code of hieroglyphs impossible, for anyone but us, to decipher. To sum up, by the end of first period, J had learned that I could touch Ryder without my head blowing up, that I got to ride on his bike to school and survived it, and that I was basically drunk with the knowledge that sometime soon, hopefully, I'd get my first kiss. Without passing out from it, either, which was a big plus. In short, everything. For my "haul," I found out that Lucian was indeed the one who had left the rose on my desk, that he and J had chattered like a couple of excited soccer moms at a PTA meeting, and that she apparently was now

his number-one fan. That I met with very little appreciation. Why? Because there was something about Lucian Bell, something that didn't sit well with me. He was bad news. But according to J, no one else at Rosemound High saw it. In fact, Lucian Bell was the new *it* guy, the new must-know, must-have, must-be in school.

As soon as the bell rang, I launched myself at Ryder, intent on learning exactly what Lucian's deal was. And this time, I would make darn sure I didn't get distracted!

But the pest in question cut in.

"Wait," he said silkily. "We haven't really met yet. I'm Lucian."

He stuck his arm out while I, casting Ryder a desperate glance over his shoulder, was forced to shy away from it. He was dressed in red and black, very preppy, and with his short blond hair and that icy blue stare, he was effortlessly easy on the eyes. But the way he towered ... Ryder was tall as well, but in a way that made you want to curl up next to him and let his strength be your strength, too. His size wasn't intimidating but reassuring. Lucian's energy was different, darker and controlled in some way, even with the bright smile he'd plastered on his face at the moment. It felt as if he was putting on a show for my benefit, as if he was working hard at concealing his true feelings from me. I was puzzled.

"I'm sorry, I don't really shake hands."

"Oh!" He let his arm fall, not hiding the disappointment. "Did you like the rose?" he asked, perking up a bit.

Gulping, I said, "Sure. I don't think I should accept it, though."

His smile wilted a second time. "Why not?"

"Probably because it's not from me," Ryder replied softly.

He stepped around Lucian and came to stand by my side, winding his arm around my waist, which made me ridiculously happy because he was basically marking his territory. Lucian followed the gesture with eyes that grew emptier the moment Ryder touched me. In the corner of his cupid-bow mouth, a muscle jerked.

"I thought she wasn't your girlfriend," he said, with a softness that echoed the calm before a storm.

"That was yesterday."

"Huh." He studied me slowly, wonderingly, as if waiting for me to take Ryder's words back. "What a difference a day makes, right? Imagine what could happen in a week, or a month, or a year." He refocused on Ryder, smiling. "Or a hundred." The smile widened. "I mean, some things stay the same, obviously, but others ..."

He went back to eyeing me again, very deliberately, not bothering to disguise his interest. His steady gaze drifted across my body with something akin to care, delicately, as though it wasn't with his eyes but his fingers that he probed. Despite myself, I shivered.

"Others do change," he went on quietly, a look of deep longing in his eyes.

At my side, Ryder stiffened as they locked stares again, both of them unsmiling. The air smelled of electricity.

"But some never do!" Lucian added, in such a harsh undertone that I cringed.

Ryder pulled me closer and I was happy to lean against his body. How incredible, I marveled, to suddenly find myself at the center of a clash between two of the strangest, though also cutest, guys in school. Too bad it was like watching a foreign movie without subtitles. I had no idea what was going on.

Regrettably, I wasn't the only one wondering about it. People all over the classroom were keenly watching the bizarre testosterone display.

"Guys, cut it out," I snapped, even sharper than intended. But my classmates' attention was becoming tedious. Rosalie Miller, who was blonde, athletic, and the unofficial president of the Ryder Kingscott Fan Club, together with her friends, Anna Sullivan and Cat Cole, were giving me black looks and whispering to each other, probably plotting my death.

To my surprise, Lucian actually took notice of me. He recovered himself very quickly, pleasant smile snapping back into place in a flash. "You're right. We're drawing attention to ourselves," he admitted, and when his eyes ran over my face, he looked genuinely sorry. "But listen, Lily, I was wondering if maybe you wanted to go out with me sometime. Perhaps on Friday?"

My face fell. I couldn't muster the guts to glance at Ryder. Was this going to turn into a fight? Bludgeons and clubs to be drawn momentarily?

"I'm sorry, but I don't think so," I hurried to say.

"Don't answer right away," he continued, as if he hadn't heard me. "Think it over."

Ryder's arm jerked once around my waist and my hand moved involuntarily to cover his. Again, Lucian watched me doing it with a keen eye, like he knew exactly just how extraordinary that ordinary gesture was for me.

I couldn't put up with that intent scrutiny any longer.

"Please, excuse us," I said, polite to the tips of my fingernails. Grandma Charlotte would've been so proud.

Clutching Ryder's hand and motioning with my head for J to follow, I forced us all to make our exit before any actual blows could start. Yay, me!

"You forgot your rose," Lucian called, and then somehow he was standing before us, holding the delicate flower in his outstretched hand.

"Er, I ..." I choked out, holding on to Ryder's hand as tightly as I could.

"She said she didn't want it," he hissed.

"Of course she does. This is a rare rose. It's called Cara Mia, Italian for 'my darling,'" Lucian explained, eyes locked on mine. "And something tells me that Lily knows her flowers. She can appreciate a gift like this."

Now, how the heck did he know that?

"But she doesn't, so why don't you take a hike?" Ryder shot back.

Suddenly, I was both tired and fed up. "Okay, could you two stop talking about me like I'm not here? Lucian, thank you for the rose. It's beautiful, but I can't accept it. Ryder, stop speaking for me, I've got a mouth of my own. J, why don't you take it?"

That won me frustrated stares from the boys and one elated smile from my best friend. My heart twitched painfully at the thought of having upset Ryder, before remembering what Mom always used to say about how, in a relationship, people don't bend one another but themselves. I may have been new to the dating world, but I'd been my parents' daughter for seventeen years and had seen them constantly bending bad luck, circumstances, themselves, for the sake of making each other happy. It was all about love and respect. Hopefully, Ryder wasn't going to try to prove me wrong.

At least we had successfully put some well-needed distance between us and the tormenting Mr. Bell. I waited until he was out of earshot before cornering a still-sulking Ryder.

“I want to know exactly who Lucian is, right now!” I demanded, more or less flattening him against a wall, with J standing guard at his side so that he wouldn’t escape.

His brow collapsed in a frown, sad eyes sweeping my face intently. The lavender accents coiled and twisted, with lovely gold winks flashing at the center every now and then. It was a sight meant to steal your breath away and I succumbed to it.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’ve got weird eyes?” I whispered, without wanting to.

“Did you really like the flower?”

Wounded boy-pride alert, J’s eyes seemed to shout at me.

“It’s a rare rose,” I sighed. “I liked it enough to have my best friend enjoy it. But not enough to have you getting upset over it.”

“Wow, that makes me feel ... so not much better!”

“At least I gave you an answer. Imagine how I feel! Every time I ask about Lucian you change the subject. Who is he, Ryder? What does he want with me?”

He proceeded to do the avoidance thing again, and the more he pulled away, the harder it got to breathe. I’d done it. I’d asked the first question, first of many, no doubt, so, ready or not, there was no turning back now.

“There are things I can’t talk to you about, Lily,” he responded quietly.

“Let me guess. Lucian is one of them.”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, averting his eyes. “But you don’t understand. It’s not that I don’t want to tell you, it’s that I physically can’t.”

“You can’t? What do you mean, you can’t?”

“Watch.” He took a single deep breath, his skin stretched taut over the high cheekbones, muscles locked in place. Almost as if he were preparing to receive a blow. “Lucian Bell is —”

He choked. Literally! The golden skin of his face reddened as his hands rose first to his neck, then to batter the air like a hanging man drawing his last breath. Next, the wildest outburst of coughing erupted from his chest, and before I knew it, J and I had to keep him from tumbling to the floor. People gaped. And Ryder was suffocating in front of us all.

CHAPTER: SEVEN



Personally, I thought it was dumb luck that he eventually recovered, but he argued, mumbling something about always coming back from it. That meant the seizure wasn't his first, and the idea of sick-Ryder emptied my lungs of air. Until I paused and pondered what I'd seen, and figured out that the episode hadn't been a seizure at all. Not when it'd all started with my own stupid question, which, even knowing what would happen, he'd chosen to answer. Seizure? Yeah, right! Try mystical mojo, the really bad kind. He had been literally choking on magic, something powerful enough to hurt him physically if he broke whatever rules he wasn't supposed to mess with. Like answering my questions. About Lucian Bell.

So that's where it stopped. Questions? Yeah, I had tons, but no answers were worth hurting Ryder. In the end, I wanted him, not the truth behind why I could have him. By magic or some twist of fate, I did have him, and that was enough for me. Or so I thought ...

At the end of the school day, we got on his bike and rode away. The sky was cloudless and perfectly blue, the sun shone brightly without being too hot, and the highway stretched out in front of us like a giant, drowsy snake begging to be ridden.

He refused to tell me where we were going, but that was cool with me. My instinct sang, cheering me on, letting me know that I was closing in on something big. I was supposed to be here, with him. Besides, when you can assimilate people's lives through one simple touch, you can always wake up one day in the middle of a weird wave, like the one I was swimming in now. When all the pretending in the world, all the I'm-just-a-normal-kid-from-Michigan stops working. On some level, I'd expected it. Maybe I didn't want to believe, but I knew it would come.

And the bottom line was that I trusted Ryder. Even in the middle of whatever was happening, of the unknown, I trusted him enough not to care where he took me. Timbuktu even, was alright with me, as long as we were together. Call it instinct, call it early onset dementia, but being with him felt a lot like belonging. I'd never experienced anything like it before. Heck, I'd never been able to touch someone else and not have my brains liquefy inside my skull before. How could I not trust him?

Now, Lucian, on the other hand, was a different story. At first I'd written him off as bad news, but was he really? He didn't seem so bad when he looked at me. His eyes warmed up whenever they locked on mine. But no, I wasn't turning into a tramp; my interest in him was strictly practical. Because it was clear that the three of us were linked, though exactly in what way remained to be seen. It had to be something metaphysical. Why else would it revolve around me, Rosemound's own magical freak resident? It was the reason Ryder had gotten sick when attempting to talk about it. Probably the reason Lucian had come to Rosemound in the first place, and why he had taken such a conspicuous interest in me. The three of us were all part of something. A really bad occult affair.

That was precisely why I was dead-set on enjoying my date with Ryder. There was no telling when or if there'd be a sequel.

The ride lasted about forty minutes. We took the 41 and then turned east, eventually swerving onto a narrow road that snaked through tall undergrowth and even taller trees. Once we crossed the village of Gay and then left it behind, the buildings on the side of the road grew fewer and further between, and the foliage changed until the road cut through nothing but dense forest. My wolf-sharp sense of smell alerted me that we were approaching Lake Superior. A beach had to be somewhere nearby.

The idea of him taking me somewhere special had turned my heart into a giant hammer, which hadn't stopped pounding against my chest since we'd left school. But when I understood that his idea of a special place involved a beach, I flattened like a stabbed balloon. I hated the beach! When the weather was as beautiful as it had been lately, every sandy beach within a hundred-mile radius crawled with people. That was fine by me, since I usually avoided setting foot anywhere near them from April to November. And today of all days, when what I really wanted was privacy; of all the rotten luck ...

Leaving the narrow road, he slowed down considerably and took us smack through a patch of trees, which, of course, gave me flashes of crashing into them and subsequently needing whole teams of people to scrape the remainders of our brains from the trunks. I almost squealed out my terror when the trail opened onto the most beautiful beach I'd ever seen. What made it special? Simple: it was completely, blissfully deserted. And I mean not a single foot, human or animal, disturbed the white, soft-looking sand. I was in awe.

In front of us, Lake Superior stretched as far as my eyes could see, blue as the cloudless sky above, with soft waves that only kissed the shore here and there. And once Ryder silenced the engine, nothing disturbed the unexpected peace the place enjoyed. It was quiet and serene. Perfect.

"Do you like it?" he asked, helping me dismount.

"Boy, do I!"

He smiled at that, just a quick flash of teeth, and I had the urge to put my arms around him and squeeze hard because he seemed sad and still tense. The seizure thing had left a mark and I wanted it gone. But could I erase it?

Meanwhile, I tried distracting him. "How did you know about this beach? And how come there's no one else here?"

Back turned to me, he wheeled the bike a few feet off the path, sheltering it from the sun under a thicket of oak and ash trees. He was athletic and lithe; I got an eyeful of muscles rippling under his jeans, bulging and making the leather of his jacket shine in the sunlight. Then, somehow, I was picturing the golden skin underneath, sleek with drops of sweat, glistening in the warm sun.

His sudden spinning around caught me in the act. My complexion exploded into colors they don't have names for, something along the lines of "nuclear eruption" or "incendiary blood-red."

Aware of my fluster and apparently intrigued by it, he came to me, already more relaxed. So my mortification improved his mood; huh, good to know, I guess.

"Something I can help you with?" he asked, one eyebrow arching knowingly.

"Er ... no, I'm good. So, this beach? How do you...?"

Instead of offering an answer, he pointed to our left where, past the tree line, a cottage lay partially hidden by the abundant greenery. The place was so cleverly situated

I would've walked right past and never even seen it. The beach was small, maybe half a mile or so, and the cottage stood more or less on the line where the center of it should've been. The view from the upper floor's windows had to be worth millions.

"That's mine," he said simply.

My eyes widened. "The house?"

"Yes. Hence, the private little beach." He held his hand out to me. "Shall we?"

In a perfect demonstration of the fickle nature of a young mind, I went from contemplating flashes of his bare body to, *Oh my gosh, we're going to be all alone in a house. Together!* Rationally, I knew that it was stupid and childish to waste even a second worrying about it; after all, I had yet to persuade him to even kiss me. But still my hands were instantly sweaty and unsteady, which was plain aggravating, as well as bizarre. I'd wanted to be alone with him, hadn't I?

"You've got to make up your mind, Lily," he said softly.

Since I'd delayed accepting his hand, he let it drop, no longer amused, nothing light about his expression anymore.

"Decide if you're afraid I won't kiss you or that I might make a play for your virtue."

My throat knotted.

"I brought you here to be with you, but not the way you're afraid of. I'd never push for anything you didn't want."

Without waiting for me to produce an apology, he offered me the sight of his back and started toward the house. "Coming?" he asked over his shoulder, without looking back.

I followed, mentally kicking myself for the flagrant *faux pas*. What was wrong with me?

On the little white deck in front of the cottage, he halted so I could catch up. A couple of reclining chairs sat between potted shrubs and he got rid of his jacket, carelessly tossing it on one. The basic white T-shirt showed strong, tanned arms and set off his dark hair in arresting contrast. I didn't think I'd ever seen him wearing white before; it looked really good on him.

"It's usually rented out," he said, letting me know that the previous topic was closed.

A wave of warmth swirled in my stomach. He was concerned with toning down my discomfort, with putting me at ease. It worked like a charm, too.

"So why do you live in Rosemound, then?"

"Because you do."

It was said simply, as if we were only discussing the weather. Carefully, I searched for signs that he was lying or messing with me; there weren't any.

"Why?"

He laughed and it came out as a clipped, sad sound that tightened around my heart like teeth.

"You probably wouldn't believe me even if I could tell you."

Silence fell between us, and across it we studied each other gingerly. Until he smiled. Tentatively, he smiled, and when he did, time stopped. Who cared about the back story, when we had here and now?

"If you're hungry, I could fix us something to eat. There's a lady in Gay who comes in to clean and restock the fridge, so there should be plenty of food inside. Or, if you prefer, we could sit out here. I'll bring us some pillows for the chairs. We don't have to

go in.”

The earlier warmth soared inside me like a tidal wave, soft and wholesome and entirely new to my senses. He was so determined to make me comfortable! How could I suspect him of plotting anything less than sweet? More like wishful thinking. He was a gentleman to the core; I would be lucky if he came within a foot of me at all.

“You can cook?” I asked with exaggerated surprise, ignoring his last comment. Steering away from it was my way of pleading temporary insanity for earlier; hopefully, he got it. “I mean, I know you once offered to fix dinner for me, but I seriously thought you were bragging.”

Those lips, mmm, those sinful lips, pouted briefly, with the sole purpose of driving me crazy, no doubt. He shrugged.

“Nope, no bragging. You hungry?”

“Starving.” Though not exactly for food.

“Alright, then.”

The inside of the cottage was white, immaculate, like virgin snow. Polished white oak floors, elegant and expensive-looking furniture, large paintings on the walls, frothy curtains; it was *awesome*.

“Er ... okay, aren’t you afraid your tenants will ruin it? The place is so amazing!”

“I’m careful about the people I rent it to. Usually, they come recommended by previous ones, and I also charge a security deposit up front. They foot the bill for whatever gets wrecked.”

I trailed after him into the spacious kitchen. There were large windows on three sides and a pair of French doors that opened onto a small patio. Sunlight poured in luxuriantly; in fact, it was so bright and cheerful I loved it at first sight. The white cabinets had tea-green tops, matching the curtains, which were so fine, they seemed almost transparent. A few high stools surrounded the central island and they looked stylish but comfy. I flopped onto one.

“I don’t understand. How can you own all this? You’re just a ... kid.” I immediately winced at my poor choice of word.

Turning away from the open double fridge, the contents of which he was inspecting, he glanced at me in amusement. “Emancipated minor. Let’s just say that my financial situation is the least of my worries.”

Too many questions equal bad things, I reminded myself, *really* bad things. So I took notice, made a nice mental note of it, and then ... moved right along to the next question. Ain’t curiosity the worst thing ever?

“So, why do you work at Dave’s Garage? Since you don’t need the money ...”

Nose buried inside the fridge, he replied, “I enjoy it. I’m good at it, too.” He paused. “Taking an engine apart and then putting it back together is meticulous work, and when my fingers are busy tinkering away, my grip on the passing of time is different somehow. It makes me feel ... I don’t know, like I’m a part of the world. Like time flows through my fingers and through me, too.”

Of course, that didn’t tell me much. But before I could push for an explanation, he’d already piled a carton of eggs, bacon, Cheddar cheese, onions, bell peppers and other uncooked goodies on the shiny surface of the island, and was asking, “Music? Soda?”

“Um ... sure.”

A lively pop song filled the room and a glass of chilled Coke landed in front of me

soon after. I sipped my soda and focused on holding back the tons of questions burning my throat.

For a while, it actually worked.

CHAPTER: EIGHT



Cooking-Ryder was the cutest darned thing in the world. The most natural, too, which was kind of strange. I'd had a year to get used to reading-Ryder, teasing-Ryder, glaring- or gaping-Ryder; I wasn't fazed by those anymore. Sweet-Ryder, even sad-Ryder, it was all good. But him in the kitchen? Cooking? It should have been at least a little unusual. It wasn't. My eyes followed him closely, taking in the easy way he moved, the dexterity of his delicate fingers, the relaxed style with which he juggled food and utensils alike. And somewhere in the middle of that shameless display of active gorgeousness it dawned on me that this was *so* familiar, it almost felt like a memory. He'd cooked for me before, I could have sworn he had.

"I'm having the weirdest déjà vu feeling," I admitted in a small voice, fingers grasping the half-empty glass in front of me too hard.

Back turned to me, Ryder froze. His shoulders seemed to grow even wider with the tension stiffening them. Even the lucky sunlight that got to happily play in the softness of his hair stopped gleaming. Not the tiniest part of him moved.

"What sort of feeling?" This, without turning around. No point in backing out now. I had the chance to keep quiet and enjoy the moment and I blew it. "Like maybe we've done this before. Except I think I'd remember if you cooked for me already."

"Does it scare you?" His voice was so soft I barely made out the question, but packing so much feeling, it took my breath away. It revealed exactly how much my answer mattered to him. How could he care so much?

That wasn't important, though. What mattered boiled down to my words being able to hurt him, something I had to make sure didn't happen because a wounded Ryder, especially wounded by me, wasn't someone I ever wanted to meet.

"No," I denied firmly. Choosing my words with care, I added shyly, "It feels, I don't know ... like I'm home or something."

A long, held-in gasp rushed past his lips, so grating they must've heard it back home in Rosemound. He was breathing again, though he still wouldn't look at me. I didn't push. The sunlight resumed its frolicking in his thick hair. My fingers uncurled from around the glass. The world fell back into place and I exhaled in relief.

"Good," he finally said, low-pitched, quietly. "That's good."

But I didn't relax until after he'd gone back to preparing the food. And even then a part of me just wouldn't quiet down. This was crazy, with a capital C. Strange. Wonderful. Kind of unsettling. Unreal. Breathtaking. And I was completely eaten up with the need to make sense of it. Of him. Don't get me wrong, I can appreciate some mystery and I imagine that sometimes it can be a real turn-on, not knowing every last detail about a guy. Except "some mystery" hardly applied to him anymore. He'd confessed to living in Rosemound to be close to me. And how did that tie in with his spending a whole year apparently without noticing me? Not to mention the déjà vu thing and his reaction to it. My head was abuzz.

"So, is this the kind of music you usually listen to?" I finally asked, afraid that unless I started talking I'd go kablooeey.

He flipped the golden omelet in one skillful move.

Then the world went away and all that remained were his soulful eyes. I was drowning in silver and lavender pools of soft velvet. It was enough to ... wait, what was my name again?

"You want to play twenty questions."

He wasn't asking. It was a statement, one that he uttered with a sigh. At least he hadn't stopped breathing this time. I thought that was a really good sign.

"Okay, then. Go ahead."

Oh boy! My throat was suddenly narrower than a straw; where should I begin? Was it safe to ask anything at all? How did I avoid stammering?

"What's your favorite color?" I started, wary of stepping on any one of his toes.

He shook his head, grinning.

"Red. The red of your hair, actually. What's yours? Wait, I got this. Could it be green?"

I forced my mouth to speak over my thundering pulse. He was teasing me, he had to be. I could be cool about it, couldn't I? "Lucky guess. Favorite book?"

He set the omelet on a plate, a soft smile on his lips.

"Impossible to settle on just one forever. That only works with girls for me." He punctuated that with a meaningful glance in my direction and my heart drummed my reaction out loud. "I really like *What Dreams May Come* by Richard Matheson now."

"Never heard of it. What's it about?"

For a few moments he seemed thoughtful, as if struggling to come up with a good enough answer. Then, going back to dividing the omelet in half, he said simply, "Love."

"Oh!"

"Yours is *Tristan and Iseult*, yes? Probably Bédier's version since it's a good read and stays true to the legend. Best star-crossed lovers story ever told, huh?"

Had I mentioned it in class?

"It was the first, of course," I said. "Before Guinevere and Lancelot, before Romeo and Juliet."

"What about Paris and Helen?"

"Well, technically the Trojan War did come first, but I was never one for Greek mythology. Conflicting stuff. I mean, Paris and Helen are together just long enough to cause the war, but then, when he dies, because of that strange Levirate custom, she marries his brother, Deïphobus. Then there's the whole reconciliation with Menelaus, who was actually her rightful husband all along. I don't know ... it kind of puts a negative spin on the love story between her and Paris. Like it taints it, you know?"

He smiled. "Whereas Tristan dies with her name on his lips and Iseult soon follows because she's just that grieved by his death. Hmm, kind of morbid when you think about it, don't you agree?" he teased me, one brow arching.

"Maybe, but also unambiguous. Clean. Not to mention, made so interesting by the love potion that starts it all. I always wondered what exactly went in it," I mumbled, more to myself.

But in response, he studied me with such a serious face, my reflective mood morphed instantly into full alertness.

"But you wouldn't," he said quietly. "Bringing people together through magic goes against your expectations of unambiguous and clean. You want pure, meant to be."

Nothing less will do.”

The air solidified and clustered in the back of my throat like chunks of rock. On the one hand, it made me deliriously happy that he could see so deep into me; on the other, it scared me witless because I knew he shouldn’t be able to.

There was silence, and then a plate filled with food was gently pushed in front of me. Followed by a question, which he asked in the most casual tone.

“Can I feed you?”

Ever had one of those moments when the world around you slows down to an almost full stop? When time feels pliable and inconsequential, and there is *nothing*, nothing but the person in front of you, that seems real and self-explanatory anymore?

Holy smokes, how did he do that?

A nod was all I could manage by way of reply. In the middle of my chest, booming like a thousand African drums, my pulse raced, rushing to the back of my throat and tasting of candied bitter fruit, of fear and need. His sitting next to me brought our knees so close they almost touched. No way could I remember how to chew and swallow now.

But once he pushed the first bite in my mouth, tangy omelet with slices of fresh tomato and cucumbers, something changed and I was suddenly ravenous. The way his eyes clung to my lips, intent on memorizing every last curve, made me want to eat until the whole planet ran out of food. Just so I could watch him watching me do it. Because there had never been anything more sensual. Intimate. Without laying a finger on me, without saying a word, he made things inside me tighten, flex, and break into soft humming. My body sang for him.

“*So this is how love feels,*” I marveled, and for all my effort I couldn’t be flippant about it. Too much magic was at work between us. For the first time in my life, I sensed it rising and remained watching in awe, on the sidelines for once and not at the root of it. For the first time in my life, I wasn’t the one casting the spell; I was being *be-spelled*.

I didn’t want to talk, to change anything, for fear of breaking whatever was happening.

“Please, ask me something else!” he almost begged, in a rush, as if afraid of running out of time somehow.

But I stalled, still afraid of crossing that line. Nibbling at my food slowly, I let my eyes drag over the angles and planes of his face, careful to steer clear of his mouth, the tempting fullness of which continued to drive me mad with visions of kissing him. Still, somewhere in the middle of that, the big question came.

“Who are you?”

The swirls in his eyes conjured up images of storm clouds again. He seemed hurt and I bit my lip, hating that I didn’t understand and wanting to so badly, it burned.

“You know who I am,” he finally replied, letting out a heavy breath. “You know William Kingscott.”

“William?”

“Yeah, Ryder is a sort of nickname.”

“Oh!”

He kept insisting that I knew him, when the fact was I hadn’t even known his real name.

“What am I to you?”

Instead of responding, he munched on his food, staring absently out the window,

somewhere into the far distance. He did that for a long while, while I watched and waited. The urge to chew my fingernails until they bled was getting scary-hard to control. At long last he stood up slowly, reaching for our empty plates, careful to avoid my eyes.

Clearly, he had no intention of answering me.

"What am I to you?" I repeated, and the irritation changed my voice into a growl. Great, I was *growling* now.

But it worked. He stopped in his tracks, piercing me with eyes like two black holes of despair. My heart broke. Had I done that?

"Everything."

The word was only a whisper, as though simply voicing it was too much to bear. Shoulders slumped, stride stiff, he plodded over to the sink to deal with the small pile of dirty dishes. My eyes stayed with him, but nothing much registered for a while. Was this really happening? Did Ryder Kingscott just tell me that I was *everything* to him? What the heck was in that omelet?

When my head quieted down and some basic feeling returned to my frozen-in-place muscles, dazed, I crept to where he was. His eyes locked on mine, which of course made it even harder to produce anything resembling human speech.

"You can't say something like that to me and then not say anything more."

Arms hanging limp along his body, he eyed me wearily.

"More? There isn't anything more, Lily. You're ... you. My torment, my relief, my curse, my blessing. My warden and my freedom. My ... all."

You'd think no one could say something like that flatly, like a freaking alien from planet Vulcan, but Ryder did. The detachment bummed me; his words said one thing, the attitude, another, and none of it made sense.

He was busy operating a trendy cappuccino machine that had so many little buttons, mini-handles, and switches it would've taken me hours to figure out. I stalked over, intentionally trespassing on his personal space. My chest almost touched his back.

"Not good enough!" I said, with enough feeling that my chest stung.

Tentatively, with unsteady fingertips, I touched his back and almost shrieked in shock right after, when, faster than a wild thing, he turned around and trapped me in his arms. He was crushing me against him so hard, my poor heart was in for a coronary. His face burrowed into the hollow of my neck and he breathed in deeply, desperately, like a drowning man fighting for air. But it wasn't air he wanted, it was ... me.

That realization knocked out whatever breath I had left.

His fingers raked through my hair, pulling it back and baring my neck, and his lips followed the curve of it, just shy of touching it. Slowly exhaling against it. Laying a hot trail that went up to my ear.

"Baby, I don't want to talk," he crooned.

His teeth wrapped around my earlobe and he bit into it, quick and delicate. My knees buckled and I was thankful for his arms gripping me so tightly. And that sound ... was it really me who let out that moan? His mouth moved down my neck, not quite touching it, but close enough that I could tell he was smiling.

"And given a choice, I'd want to breathe you. And feel you," his cheek brushed mine slowly, "and taste you."

His tongue traced an arc following the corner of my mouth. It was gentle but searing, and while I didn't faint from it, the whirlwind of delicious sensations and of things

melting inside me was so ... well, *delicious*, that by the time I recovered, his mouth was nowhere near my own.

He was backing away and I panicked, clutching his arms desperately.

"Please," I whimpered, sounding like a wet puppy begging for shelter in the middle of a rainstorm.

Totally undignified, I'll admit, but then again, all the dignity in the world couldn't give me what I wanted, which was for him to kiss me. Unless he did, my body was going into shock for sure. Kaput. Done for.

His eyes blazed; it was like watching silver melting, becoming liquid, incandescent. His expression reminded me of the *Mona Lisa* and her cryptic smile. But under it, under what I didn't get yet, there was fire. Burning as fiercely as I was.

"Please!" I repeated, more urgently, gripping the T-shirt where it stretched over his broad chest, with hands clenched into fists.

He smiled — *smiled!* — and I read millions of things in it: want, smugness, pain, joy, desperation, doubt, release, triumph. Hands latched onto my waist and then I was floating backward, the world dissolving around me like dandelion fluff swept away by wind.

When a surface grew solid under me, his forehead touched mine and his hands slipped under my shirt, fingertips fluttering over my skin like butterfly wings. Like feathers that got every cell in my body to shiver and sing.

My body sang for him again.

Smooth lips found mine, spicy and wicked like a sin dipped in mint cream. Fingers dug into my bare skin as his tongue flicked mine over, tasting. Behind my closed eyelids stars went off in colorful flames. Sounds I didn't know I could make flowed from my chest and melted across his lips. My world tightened and then burst apart in bits and pieces that didn't fit anything anymore.

Everything changed.

And my soul sang for him as well.

CHAPTER: NINE



The world spasms when we touch,” he sighed near my ear, still holding me close.

Fumbling for a way back into myself was like waking up after a twelve-hour sleep. Stuff came at me in waves. My lips tingled and felt swollen. I was perched on the kitchen island. My arms shook. I tightened my grip around his neck, happy to find that his body wasn’t rock-steady, either. For some reason, knowing it wasn’t only *my* muscles that had the consistency of Jell-O felt perversely gratifying. His arms, still fastened around me, lay on top of and not under my shirt now. The obvious gaps in my memory made me think of UFO encounters, because in a way I really had been abducted, though not by little gray men. But the kiss stole me away from myself. “Wow!” didn’t come close to covering it.

With my head resting on his chest, I let out a sigh that echoed the sound Raisin made when she was warm and comfy. Uh-huh, yup ... I was purring.

I giggled. “You made me purr.”

“What, you didn’t know? Girls always purr for me.”

I nudged his chest with my head, liking the newfound familiarity, but hoping he was kidding. “If you’re so sure of yourself, then how come you took forever to ask me out?”

His arms twitched once around me, before falling like rag doll limbs. Without really wanting to, but nervous now, I unclasped my arms from around his neck. He wasted no time in moving away, which only worried me more.

“Sometimes less really is more,” he said simply. Obviously he was speaking Mandarin, I decided. That or the kiss had messed up my brain to the point where English really did sound like Mandarin. “What do you mean?”

His expression was so annoyingly guarded, I had the urge to leap from the counter and shake him until that deadpan mask broke. Slowly he backed away, and away, and away, until he was leaning against the cabinets. I wondered how far he would’ve gone if it weren’t for the cabinets. Bangladesh? Bulgaria?

“Stop it,” he urged me softly, eyes glued to the floor.

“Er ... what?”

“Stop acting like you can see sense where there isn’t any. Don’t waste our time on questions you know I can’t answer.”

But wasn’t he the one who wanted me to ask?

“It would be nice to understand at least some of what’s happening.”

“Nice?” He gave a vague, disinterested shrug. “Sure, but really necessary? Can’t you simply enjoy this?” He pointed from him to me and back again. “Us?”

I bit my lip to hold back a groan.

“Let me ask you something,” he said, with a lazy smile that instantly confused the heck out of my annoyance. “Who are you?”

“Huh?”

“Do you know who you are?”

He spoke steadily, mindful of each syllable, as if I were a child. I, like the sophisticated young woman I was *not*, reacted to it with an awkward, babyish chuckle.

“Of course I do. I’m Lily Cr —”

“No, no, no!”

Still parading that shamefully sexy smile, he sauntered back across the floor. No rush. Giving my body time to tense in anticipation. Teasing me with it. Killing me with it.

In front of me he paused, licking his lips. His eyes fell on my legs, which were still joined together, putting a dam between us. My knees poked his thighs.

“You believe you’re the I-think-therefore-I-am girl.”

His lingering gaze on my legs felt like a caress, and when his fingers actually touched my knees, I ran out of breath. I couldn’t hear a word of what he was saying, couldn’t even look up to his face. His hands! My whole world was limited to his hands. Touching me. Graceful fingers cupping my knees.

“When in fact you’re the I-can-change-the-world-by-wriggling-my-nose, therefore-I-am girl. The instinctual, one-of-a-kind, always-tuned-in girl.”

Delicately, slowly, his hands slid between my shaky knees and moved upward, thumbs tracing the inside of my thighs. Even through the jeans it felt like fire.

“You’re not about reason, Lily, you’re all instinct. Why not let it guide you for a change?”

One light tug and my legs were parted, his body slipping between them like quick silver in a thermometer. My hips fit his to sweet, sweet perfection. Close, so close, I could feel his belt buckle pressing against my belly button. My hands rose to rest on his chest and I was torn between wanting to grab a handful of his T-shirt and pull him to me or push him away. Being so close to him burned me alive. I remembered nothing. Knew nothing. I cared about nothing except him. His leather-and-pine scent. His hands. The heat between us.

One hand moved under the small of my back, another cupped my face. There was laughter in his eyes, a touch of amusement and wonder, but I couldn’t stop to think what it meant. Not when his breath burned against my lips. Not while the world spun in multicolored circles again.

“Close your eyes,” he said, low and soft. “Look inside yourself and don’t think for a second, just ... tell me, how did you feel when I kissed you?”

My eyes did close, not so much because he’d asked, but because I was getting dizzy. The hand on my back gave a gentle push and a soft sound rushed past my lips. My face heated up to a million degrees. His thumb feathered across my lower lip, lightly tracing its line.

“Here, let me remind you,” he whispered.

Teeth sank into my lip, soon replaced by soft lips that sucked it gently. So slowly, he was kissing me so slowly ... delicately. He was inside and around me, everywhere, moving closer still, wiping out any trace of reality. I lost track of all.

Teeth nipped, lips soothed.

I became ash.

“There,” he whispered in my ear. “How did you feel?”

As far as I could tell, my brain, entirely out of commission now, had absolutely nothing to do with the word that rolled off my raw lips.

“Unbroken.”

I winced, realizing just how weird that must’ve sounded. But it was true. His touch mended something inside me. A dent in my soul. A crack in my heart. It made me wonderfully unashamed of being a magic-bound spaz for once. It made me glad to be me

because, imperfect as I was, I fit *him*, perfectly.

When my eyes opened, I didn't need a mirror to know how I looked. Confused. Alarmed. Happy. Drunk with "us." There was no point in trying to pretend otherwise; I let it all show.

"Unbroken ... such a beautiful way to put it. So true," he whispered. "Lily, you may ask a million questions, a million questions I can't answer for you. But even if I could, my words, *all* my words, would come up short. Words can't mend what's broken inside you. They can't make you whole."

Since I was completely mute, breathless, and could only stare at him with my mouth frozen in a silent *O*, he went on pleading softly.

"I've waited a long time to be with you ... and we're good together, Lily. Why waste time on figuring out why that is?"

My stomach was in knots about speaking. The very same answers I was dying for also scared the living daylights out of me. Because, in the end, I could kiss him! He thought the world spasmed when we touched! And he ... he knew my heart. He cared.

The last thing I wanted was to mess with *whatever* was happening between us.

So I dropped it. "I guess you're right."

But curiosity, the insatiable animal, nudged me forward again. "When you say you waited a long time, exactly how long is long, in this case?"

He groaned. "See? You just can't leave well enough alone."

The way he backed away reminded me of turtles and shells. There was something very sad and vulnerable about it.

"Ever heard of the observer effect, Lily? It's what they call reactivity in psychology: people altering their behavior when they know they're being observed. Ever heard of it?"

"Sort of. Simply observing a phenomenon changes it, or something like that."

He nodded. "Let me put it this way. I love being with you, but I get more out of keeping my distance. I get more out of watching you when you don't know I'm doing it."

"I don't understand." Understatement of the century.

"That's just it. You're really big on understanding. Big on questioning and forcing your way to the truth. It will eat at you now, not knowing why things are the way they are between us."

"You can't blame me for it. I mean —"

"I have this theory," he interrupted. "In everyone's life there's one major event, right? And it shapes who they are. One event that basically decides everything about their lives. The rest, whatever happens before and after, is only ripples moving to and from that one moment in time. By-products. And no matter what anyone does, no matter how hard they try, the best they can do is affect one or more of the ripples. But never the main event. Does that make any sense to you?"

I nodded unsurely. "Sort of."

"I waited a year before asking you out," he added, and my face fell, "because I loved watching those ripples in your life while they were pure, uninfluenced by me. Because without me in your life, you're a different person. Your own person. Happier. And I needed to see that. Watch you laughing, and crying, and being brave, and becoming this amazing girl that you are, I had to see and remember it all: Lily Crane, 2010, Rosemound, Michigan. But for the most part, I waited this long for your own good, Lily. Because I can't be with you without going back and trying to change that main event. Even

knowing that it can't be done, I'm still compelled to try, as you will be, too, with me. But we'll fail. Worst of all, once you've left me, my heart will need much longer than a century to come back from it. Except, time is never on our side. What I'm trying to say is you shouldn't be sorry I waited. Trust me, the closer we are, the more painful it gets. For you and me both."

Only one thing I was still sure of, and it had to do with my mouth refusing to close. And, yes, staring at him with my mouth hanging open basically painted "dork" on my forehead, but at least I got that. I could process that. The rest was a blur, just wild, murky waters sweeping me away. I didn't know if I should laugh or cry, put my arms around him or run.

"Okay," I uttered, once I could make words again. "First off, if you think you'll live to see one hundred and seventeen years, you've got another think coming. Unless you move to Japan. I read about this fisherman's village where people live very long life spans. You're thinking about moving to Japan?"

He only looked at me like I had sprouted horns. Like my irrelevant blabbering wasn't all his fault. His little speech had fried most of my neurons to a crisp.

Anyway, I took his lack of answer for a no.

"I didn't think so. So, that's one. Two, I am not planning on going anywhere. Why would you even think that? Why would I want to break up?"

"You don't understand —"

"Three," I interrupted, yapping away manically, "I don't know what happened in your past, but nothing is written in stone. If you just tell me how I can hel —"

"I can't tell you!" he argued, throwing his arms up in exasperation. "That's just it: I can *never* tell you!"

Hmm! A riddle. This was all a very complex riddle, I concluded, everything that came out of his mouth, every last word. So it was just a question of solving it. Decoding Ryder; reserved, secretive, and, let's face it, kind of weird Ryder Kingscott. Sure, decoding him would be a snap. Who was I kidding?

"Any chance you could rephrase any of that?" I drew slow circles in the air.

"Any chance you could stop pestering me about it?"

Oh, great! He thought this was funny.

"Not fair."

"Ditto."

We stared at each other in silence for a few moments.

"So, let me get this straight. You waited a year to ask me out. And you came to Rosemound about a year ago. So, that means, what? You moved here for me?"

A wicked grin that sent my heart flying right into my stomach was the whole of his answer. I had been grasping at straws, not really believing that his coming to Rosemound had anything to do with me. Was I wrong? Nah! That would just be crazy, I tried reassuring myself. Except ...

"How could you be watching me the whole year?" I asked, sensing my eyes bulging, but unable to control it. "I think I would've noticed."

His smile widened. "What, you mean, since you were always checking me out?"

I poked at his chest, my face already in flames.

"In your dreams!"

"There, too."

How could anyone do that? One second we're bantering jauntily, the next his smile becomes something else completely. A piece of this soft, depthless tenderness that turned my bones into free-flowing liquid.

"Every night, in fact."

It should've been cheesy, his saying that, if not for all that naked honesty in his eyes. And paired with the rest of his adoring expression, it, very effectively, took my breath away. As if intent on stopping my heart altogether, he then proceeded to stroke my cheek, too, which cranked up the heat in my face by another, say, thousand degrees.

A smile bloomed again in his eyes. "I love that you let me bring out the softness in you. You've always been such a tough little trooper, but under that snappy, tough act you put on, you're butter-soft. Sweet as honey. And I can get there! Make that softness come up. I'm so ... *honored* by it."

He stopped, abruptly, and then he was frowning.

"It really does make me regret not asking you out earlier."

"What changed your mind?" I asked in a small voice.

There was only the slightest hesitation. "Why, Lily, you're just that irresistible, baby."

My head swam in whopping disbelief, and his answer was that final drop of nitroglycerin that made everything go *boom*. He'd said it playfully, with a short-lived twinkle that never touched his eyes. But he was lying, we both knew he was, and I just couldn't take that, too.

"Ryder, who are you?" I exploded, growling again. "I mean, are you different, like me? And us ... Why do I feel like we've already met? How do you know so much about me? Why do you care? And don't give me any more cryptic talk, Ryder. I need answers! Real answers. And I need them just because things are so good between us.

"Do you have any idea what it feels like, spending my whole life avoiding human touch? I'm a freaking bogeyman in Rosemound! Little children are taught: *Don't let that Lily Crane touch you, she might steal your soul!* If I go to the grocery store, everyone avoids the aisle I'm in. On the street they're moving away to make sure no one bumps into me by mistake."

The first tears spilled out, scorching in their honesty. My hands, clasped in my lap, shook. Dammit, I was *so* losing it in front of him! But I couldn't stop.

"And ... I can touch you! And when you touch me back the whole world disintegrates. But if I don't understand why that is, if I don't ask the questions you don't want me to ask, then how can I make sure I don't lose it? How can I make sure I won't go back to ...? And ... I'm totally freaking you out now, aren't I?"

Strong arms fastened around me, warm and real, very much like my tears. He held me with care, as if I were precious to him.

"Shh," he soothed. "Sweet Lily ... brave, sad ... sad Lily ... my girl with hair of fire and eyes filled with spring ... beautiful Lily ... my girl ..."

His voice, soft like a baby's coo, whispered many things in my ear. He never let go, no matter how hard I bawled, no matter how I quivered. And pretty, it was not. Since I was always so tightly snuffle-proof, when I did break down all the floodgates opened. Still, he didn't let go. He only cradled me closer, muttering, "I'm sorry" over and over.

"Please! Promise me you won't disappear," I begged.

Desperate? No doubt, but at this point I figured it didn't matter. It'd been one heck of

a first date anyway, and if he hadn't run thus far, chances were he just wasn't going anywhere.

"Where would I...? Baby, you *own* me, all of me! I'm yours, for better or worse."

Final, unambiguous confirmation. Just like that, with two little sentences, he wiped away the hurt. A few words and the world stopped spinning nauseatingly, my pulse slowed down, my muscles grew solid. A few words from him and it was all good again. Or, at least, as good as it could be.

I didn't mind the bittersweetness too much; I'd learned long ago to take the good with the bad. What was happening between us was more sweet than bitter anyway. Questions? Sure, there were still tons of them, but no, I didn't ask. What was the point? Ryder didn't care that I was freak girl. He had feelings for me. Touching him didn't knock me out. And yes, there was weirdness, but I'd dealt with that all my life. I could handle it. As long as I got to keep him, I could learn to live with the rest.

He brought a blanket and we lazed on the beach, where he fed me orange slices while I lay back with my eyes closed, at peace with most things and ignoring the others. Awesome as he was, he added a perfect little game. It involved both our iPods, set between us, and a liberal amount of doing nothing but sharing favorite tunes with each other. He kept one earbud, I got the other, and he played a song for me; then we switched to my iPod, and so on. I took his advice and tried to disregard everything but the sky above. Seeing only the cloudless blue while listening to Ryder's favorite music was just the thing. It was a double-treat: relax and turn up more info on my ever-so-tantalizing yumof-a-boyfriend. Seriously, I would've never taken him for a Tchaikovsky kind of guy. We kept some space between us, with only our fingertips touching, just barely. Electricity blossomed and crackled. So innocent. So completely world-rocking.

My body pulsed with it long after we hit the road. And the best thing yet? It wasn't just me! When we stopped at a junction, Ryder twisted around and cried out his excitement.

"This is the stuff that dreams are made of, right?"

I could've pointed out the misquotation; everybody goes for Humphrey Bogart's famous line from *The Maltese Falcon*, when the words are actually "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" and they belong to Master Shakespeare, but you know what? With all due respect to the women's movement, the fact is that, on rare occasions, silence really is a girl's best garment.

So I just smiled instead.

CHAPTER: TEN



From there on, I happily pranced through what I called “the golden age of my teen days.” But that was laying it on J-style, which was a little thick; in truth, there was good and then there was bad. The good, well, need I say it? Hottest boyfriend ever, stuck to my arm like glue, practically every second of my waking hours. And the best thing about it? No matter how much time he and I spent together, we never seemed to get enough of each other. The bad? By and large, everything left unsaid between us. All the tiptoeing, always having to decide which topics were safe to bring up. Accepting that he kept things from me. Living in fear of the mystical mojo surrounding those secrets. Being terrified of waking up one day and finding it all gone.

So, no bed of roses, but well worth the pain.

Speaking of pains ... Lily Crane dating Ryder Kingscott? The president of the United States dropping by for a surprise visit to Rosemound couldn't have made more waves. The school was abuzz with gossip; in fact, the whole town seemed to have taken an irksome interest in it. Rumors spread like radio waves. Had I lost my magic touch? Was Ryder immune to it somehow? If so, was it because he was an alien? Holy? Covered in protective but invisible slime? Were we sleeping together? Was he going to marry me? Had we already eloped?

One day, while at the drugstore picking up some aspirin for Mom, dear old Mrs. Burns, our pharmacist, shoved a pack of condoms into my hand with a conspiratorial wink.

“They glow in the dark,” she whispered.

This, from a sixty-five year-old granny, I kid you not. Stuff of nightmares.

Then, on Saturday, Ryder's presence was formally requested at the *casa* Crane for a family dinner. Declining wasn't an option. He arrived at seven sharp, sporting slacks instead of jeans and a button-up shirt as opposed to one of his layered outfits. Not only did he clean up real nice, but he was smart enough to come bearing gifts: yellow roses for Mom, Hershey's Kisses for me, and, after first checking with me about it, a box of His Majesty's Reserve cigars for Dad. Between the wholesome outfit and the smooth bribes, he scored serious points with the parental units long before we ever sat down to eat. At least, that's what I thought.

Then the grilling began, with Dad, in his double capacity as lawyer and parent, wildly protective of little ol' *moi*, as the Grand Inquisitor.

Mom didn't need more convincing; she liked Ryder. Dad, on the other hand, was cautious. It wasn't a question of disliking Ryder; it was simply that he didn't know him.

The dinner table was beautifully dressed, in gray linen with embroidered white napkins, and Mom's best china, together with various crystals artfully arranged around a vase filled with white calla lilies. The Italian feast she had prepared was kicked off by roasted eggplant with feta cheese and sun-dried tomato pesto, which I barely had time to sample before Dad moved to full-interrogation mode.

I always kind of wondered if my father secretly belonged to an alien race made up of perfect specimens whose mission on our planet was to make everyone else jealous of

them. Picture intelligence, style, and warmth in a broad-shouldered body, crowned by salt-and-pepper hair. With the same emerald eyes that I, his lucky daughter, was fortunate enough to have gotten from him, Dad had the easy good looks of a younger George Clooney. The same sly grin, too. But under his harmless appearance and the laid-back charm, he was an extremely good lawyer, cunning and eel-slippery. That put Ryder in a difficult place.

“So, Ryder,” my dad, the lawyer, drawled, “are you a football or a baseball man?”

My boyfriend, seated across from me, met that with a relaxed smile. *Let the games begin*, his eyes seemed to convey. Well, at least he wasn’t nervous. Then again, he hadn’t met my father before tonight.

“Neither, Mr. Crane. I’m more of a basketball fan myself. There’s something about a slam dunk I don’t think any other game can replicate.”

Dad, a decisive Cubs supporter, eyed him with curious interest.

“I get your point. There’s that forceful approach to the shot. Some argue that it’s quite poetic.”

“Well said,” Ryder replied.

“Did you go to the games with your father?”

Smooth, Dad, I thought ruefully. Ryder had never hinted at wanting to open the subject, so I always assumed it was too painful for him to go into. But to my surprise, he didn’t flinch at the question. His expression stayed level and his eyes locked on Dad’s.

“No, not really. My parents died when I was very young.”

“We’re very sorry to hear that,” Mom intervened, casting Dad a black look. “You must miss them a lot.”

Ryder rewarded her with a soft smile.

“I don’t remember them,” he said, just as softly. “I was raised by a cousin until I petitioned for emancipation.”

“When was that?” Dad asked.

“A couple of years ago.”

“A valiant decision, looking after your own interests at such a young age. How did you handle financing it?”

“There was a trust fund. Money’s never really been an issue.”

“Ah! That would explain the very fine cigars you brought me,” Dad smiled.

Ryder smiled back and his eyes drifted over to where I was dying, having stopped breathing about ten minutes earlier. The scrutiny was gentle and rigorous; he looked at me like he couldn’t see anything else. Like we were alone in the world. Like nothing mattered but me. My complexion took on tones and nuances no one but he could bring out in me.

“Lily told me they were your favorite,” he finally said, reluctantly turning his attention back to Dad.

The game was on, indeed. Dad proved painfully thorough. Ryder’s GPA was 3.9, which I thought was outstanding considering the level of his interest in classes. As far as college applications and future prospects went, he told us about his interest in architecture, as well as in the two schools that also made the top of *my* list, Ohio State and Cornell. Dad questioned him about everything, from the environment to his view on Hamas, Fatah, and the Middle East conflict, in excruciating detail. They agreed on most things, one Democrat to another, and to my supreme relief, Ryder didn’t seem put off by

any of it. He had answers to every question, was respectful without cowering, and polite but firm about his own opinions.

I was considering doing a happy dance and thanking God that we'd all made it through in one piece, when Dad raised the ultimate taboo point.

"Well, Ryder, I've got to hand it to you, I'm impressed," he drawled, in a way that knocked my dessert spoon right out of my hand and into the bowl of barely touched panna cotta. "It's why I don't want to beat around the bush. Son, why is it that my daughter can touch you with no side effects?"

"Dad!" I groaned.

He chose to ignore me, centering his attention fully on Ryder, who, for the first time since the cross-examination had started, hesitated. His eyes darted back to me for a second, as deep and mesmerizing as ever, and he let out a soft sigh.

"It's complicated."

"Complicated how?" Dad's voice was pure steel.

"With all due respect, I can't talk about it."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Can't."

The lawyer in Dad frowned. The parent tensed. Neither of them moved. "Is it something dangerous?"

"Sir, I *love* Lily!" Ryder countered fiercely, staring at Dad squarely. "I want her to be safe and happy." His shoulders slumped and he let his eyes drop, almost shyly. "She's all I've got in the world," he added quietly.

I flatlined, and stayed dead for a good few moments before my pulse started again with a thundering explosion that almost punched a hole through my chest. He loved me! He had actually said *the* words! And to my dad's face, no less. Way to steal my thunder, Dad, by the way!

For a moment, time stood still. Then Mom shot up like a bow string.

"If you kids will excuse us, I'd like a word with my husband. Nicholas, please join me in the kitchen. Now!"

That last word was a whip cracking and Dad winced, hurrying along. I got off my chair, too, moving to the other side of the table in a flash. I wrapped my arms around his neck, he covered them with his own, and we stayed like that, fingers entwined, no talking. Fear reared its ugly head in my chest, doubt chipped in, too, and my insides became a battlefield. But being a coward had never suited my style. Something about cringing didn't really go with my eyes.

So I dared. "I love you, too."

His pulse sped up under my cheek as it pressed on his neck. I heard a broken breath, half-relief, half-despair. He never answered.

Still, since no heads rolled by the end of it, I counted dinner with the folks a success. And, as the days went by, the gossiping frenzy started to die down, too. Rosemoundiers got used to bumping into us, figuratively, on the street, at the market, in the Hopscotch Café, or at the movie theater. We became yesterday's news. Dear old Mrs. Burns stopped trying to convince me to buy boxes of condoms. Mr. Bentwood at the café learned to save two slices of blueberry pie instead of one on the days I swung, now in my "plus one" capacity, by Hopscotch after school. Dave, Ryder's boss, tossed an old couch in the corner of the shop for me, since that was where I spent most afternoons.

Doing my homework, of course. Watching Ryder working, all sweaty and manly ... that was just a fringe benefit. All in all, things were good. With one exception. *Lucian*.

While the good people of Rosemound learned to adjust to the idea of Ryder and me dating, I did some adjusting of my own. Not really by choice, I learned to live with running into Lucian. Everywhere. All the time. But especially when I was alone. I was beginning to think he'd implanted me with a GPS device. Nothing else could explain his sudden popping-up acts.

On Monday afternoon, I was on my way to Dave's Garage, having stopped by The Enchanted Forest Occult Emporium, and, since Ryder had given me a ride to school in the morning, as he did every day, I was on foot. On Elm Street, passing Miss Copeland's boutique, I stopped to check out the new lingerie ensemble displayed in the window. Miss Copeland used to live in Italy and she had ties to small businesses in the fashion industry. Ricordi, her boutique, was the hottest shopping venue in Rosemound.

The thing that caught my eye now was something I normally never noticed: ripe plum lace and satin, sexier than any of the things Mom ordered from her Victoria's Secret catalogs. I stared at it, imagining the contrast between the dramatic color and my pale skin, and then blushed violently at the rest of the pictures suddenly taking my mind by storm. The ones involving graceful fingers removing the skimpy items in question from my body. Lobster-red in the face, I, naturally, jumped at Lucian's unexpected materialization stunt.

"Big plans?" he asked, eyeing the outfit knowingly.

Heat pulsed in my cheeks like tiny laser beams pricking my face. I gulped and scrambled for words, which, to my dismay, didn't come. Lucian, grinning deviously, obviously enjoyed my squirming. Figured! Wearing one of his numerous preppy outfits — seriously, where did he go before Rosemound High; prep school in England? — and doing it better than any of the Jonas Brothers ever could, he raked his blue eyes over my distinctly un-preppy threads with deliberate slowness. And yes, I blushed even harder.

"It would look great with your creamy skin," he added, just for kicks, no doubt.

"Whatever."

There, both classy and elaborate.

Turning my back to him, I picked up the pace, trying hard to ignore his tagging along.

"So, do you?"

"Do I what?" I grumbled.

"Have big plans?"

"None of your business."

"Only because you won't let me make it my business."

"Right. Maybe you should take the hint."

He chuckled softly. "Hints don't work with me."

"Apparently not."

"In fact, nothing does when it comes to what I want."

"Arrogant much?"

"Not really. Just honest. I usually get what I want."

"Ain't that nice for you."

He stopped abruptly, planting himself in front of me, blocking my way. Forced to halt, I shot him a furious glare that wiped the light expression off his face and left him

looking as serious as a heart attack.

“Why won’t you give me a chance?” he rasped.

“To do what?”

“To show you how good we can be together.”

“Argh! Change the tune already, will you?”

His eyes cooled. “Don’t mock me.”

“Don’t need to. You’re doing a good job all by yourself.”

His nostrils flared angrily, his sculpted jaw flexed.

“What does he have that I don’t?”

“Apparently, me.”

That threw him off. He looked like I’d just hit him in the head with something heavy, and I took the opportunity to scurry away.

“Have you started feeling the cold yet?” he called after me. “Tell him. Ask him what he thinks about it.”

Only my iron will kept my legs moving. How did he know that? They had started on Friday, the odd cold spells. It wasn’t something permanent; they came and went. It wasn’t a natural phenomenon, that much I’d worked out for myself. The chill began inside me, and at first it wasn’t so bad, just a cube of ice melting in the middle of my chest. But then it spread, until every inch of me felt encased in ice flakes. The other night it had lasted so long, I was literally blue in the face.

But how could he know about it?

Pointless question.

How did he do any of the things he did? How did he know to be at Hopscotch on Friday evening when, after spilling some cappuccino on my sweater and running into the bathroom to deal with the stain, I witnessed the nastiest thing? I was in the stall when Rosalie Miller and Cat Cole came in.

“If you ask me,” Rosalie yakked, “she’s done something to him.”

“What, like a spell or something?” Cat asked.

The tap water running drowned out whatever sound Rosalie made to confirm it. “I mean, really. Why else would a hottie like Ryder waste his time on a freak like her?”

“That *is* a good point.”

Rosalie giggled. “Can you imagine them getting hot and sweaty with each other? I mean, eww! She’d have to wear a rubber suit.”

“I don’t know. You’ve seen them, too, holding hands. Maybe —”

“Oh, please! It’s one thing to hold hands and a completely different deal to have skin on skin.” She laughed again. “Picture her covered in latex, like one of those S&M pervs!”

“Gross, Rose.”

“But don’t ‘gross’ and ‘freak’ go hand in hand?”

I’d started crying and the tears kept coming like nobody’s business. Embarrassment burned in my face; so this was what people were saying behind our backs.

The door opened and two different sets of shrieks erupted at the same time.

“Ladies,” I recognized Lucian’s voice. “How are you doing this evening?”

“You’re not supposed to be in here,” Rosalie meowed.

“Yeah, but I saw you come in and I wanted to talk to you.”

“What about?” This, from Rosalie again; apparently, Cat only spoke when and if given permission.

"Do you have a date to prom?" Lucian asked in his silky voice.

"Er ... maybe," she drawled.

Maybe? Huh! So, with just one week left to prom, Rosalie Miller was either dateless or going with someone who clearly wasn't the right "someone".

Ain't karma the best?

"If you don't," Lucian went on, "I wanted to ask if you'd like to go with me."

Hello, injustice!

"Sure." Rosalie giggled. "That'd be grea —"

"But actually," Lucian said, cutting her off, "now that I'm seeing you better, I kind of changed my mind."

"What?"

"Think you could lose a few pounds by next Friday?"

"Jerk!"

He ignored that.

"Now, you, lovely Cat, you, on the other hand, are perfect. Infinitely lovelier than ... say, what was your name again?"

"Come on, Cat!" Rosalie spluttered. "We're out of here."

But Cat must've delayed heeling because Rosalie's shrill voice rose again.

"Cat! Now!"

There was a vague sound of protest, something between a meowing and a hiss, and then footsteps walking away.

"Actually, Cat, on second thought, you're just as fat as she is. So forget I said anything," Lucian called, and laughed mockingly.

The door slammed under a shower of "you jerk" and "creep" and other names I won't repeat. Then, with the exception of the tap still running, there was nothing but silence. Lucian turned it off.

"You can come out now," he said quietly.

Mortified, my cheeks still wet with tears, I opened the door and faced him with all the dignity of a dog carrying its tail tucked between his legs. He was leaning against the sink, very relaxed, but that changed when he caught sight of me. His body tensed and those chiseled features hardened. The blue in his eyes became ice.

"You really are a fool, aren't you?" He sounded mad.

Without another word, he turned on his heel, poised to leave. "Wash your face," he added in a raspy voice. "Your *date*," he spat out the word, "is waiting."

And he was gone. I took my time and washed the tears away thoroughly while trying to figure out what had happened. My instinct told me that he'd been mean with Rosalie and Cat as payback. For me. But how could he have known what they were saying? Unless he'd heard them gossiping on some other occasion. Maybe he had watched them follow me into the bathroom and had worked out for himself what might go down. Strange, I didn't think he'd been in the café ... but then, I was there with Ryder, which made it hard to notice the world going up in flames around me. And why did he get so angry? Because I'd been crying? Absurd.

But absurd often applied to Lucian Bell. The strangest thing about it was that, no matter how hard I tried to deny it, we did share a connection. Nothing like the *déjà vu* flashes I got with Ryder, no, this was something else. When Lucian was close by, I could feel it. Feel him. I had this image of a blue lump of oil pastel splashing into water and

slowly dissolving; thin, delicate tendrils spreading across the water like a net of the finest Chantilly lace. It was something like those delicate blue tendrils I felt pulsing between us, tugging at me, letting me know when he was near. My skin always prickled with them.

It didn't matter, I told myself, but it did. It traced back to Ryder's secrets somehow. The three of us were linked in some way. Not a Larry, Moe, and Curly kind of deal, either, despite all the bantering; whatever the bond between us, it was unnatural. And something told me that it had everything to do with the chill I carried inside lately.

CHAPTER: ELEVEN



I was crushing on Lucian. On top of everything else. I guess my first clue was her laughter, because she always giggled around him in that flirty, oh-Lucian-you're-the-best-thing-since-sliced-bread way. Also, she'd taken to tossing her hair over the shoulder, vigorously enough to make innocent bystanders, namely me, wince at the sight of it. Who in her right mind would do that to her own scalp, but a girl seriously trying to get a guy's attention? Not that this particular girl had to work too hard at it; Lucian was forever hanging around us at school, talking to her but staring at me and pissing Ryder off. Guess where that left me? That's right: between Ryder, my boyfriend, who hated Lucian with the proverbial fiery passion and J, my best friend, who wanted Lucian around, so, basically, in hell.

My own feelings for him were hellishly conflicting as well. Yes, he was cocky, and inappropriately outspoken, and endlessly annoying at times, but ... Sometimes he'd be in the middle of a group, talking and laughing, and then he'd catch my eye and his expression, his laughter, his attitude, everything changed. His confidence melted into a softness that touched his eyes and settled into his smile, making him look almost shy. And therein lay my problem. It was as if there was this whole side of him that had nothing to do with the irritating, bigheaded, and sometimes downright obnoxious Lucian. A side he only revealed when and if I was close enough to see it. It made it hard not to wonder about the reasons why *I* had to be the one with the power to push that magic button. Why, around me, he was capable of acting normal and so... likable, sometimes.

I wanted to know his story, and how it tied in with Ryder's and my own, so badly it hurt, but I was being a coward and he wasn't volunteering any info.

He was waiting for me to ask.

But I wasn't going to. Fear is easier to ignore when it's unfocused, when you don't voice it, so I tried not to put it in words, not even in my head. Because deep down, I knew Lucian had answers. Answers which could potentially mess up the best thing that had ever happened to me: being with Ryder.

So we were in a bizarre on-hold state, treading water. J watched Lucian, he watched me, I watched Ryder, who in turn alternated between watching me and Lucian. Nobody did anything about it. We were stuck.

Meanwhile, interaction between the four of us went something like this:

Lucian, in the cafeteria, pushing away a plate filled with a mystery concoction that may or may have not been lasagna: *This food is incredibly bad.*

Ryder, smiling angelically: *Maybe you should think about skipping lunch. Or going to McDonald's instead, maybe down in Marquette.*

J, blushing furiously: *You know, Ryder, I liked you better when you were all mysterious and didn't open your mouth.*

Me, fed up and ready to hit something: *And, J, I liked you better when you were my best friend.*

Repeat ad infinitum, no matter the topic of conversation, no matter where or when it took place.

Then, Lucian came up with the idea of a big party, a barbecue-slashbonfire that, if nothing else, should have provided the youth of Rosemound with a nutritious meal. It would make up for all the hardship endured during the week, when everyone had to ingest the insipid chow supplied by the school cafeteria.

Right away, Ryder countered, “So, your parents, they don’t mind you having the whole school over?”

“They won’t be home. They travel a lot, so I’m by myself most of the time. But hey, man, if you have a problem with the idea of an unchaperoned party, don’t come! I’ll take care of Lily for you,” Lucian replied, with a frozen expression.

“I’ll just bet you would,” Ryder snarled back.

So why did we go, you might wonder. First off, it didn’t help much that J screeched excitedly that we, meaning she, Ryder, and I, would, of course be there, all before I had the chance to blink. But in the end it wasn’t her big mouth that had made it final, but Ryder’s stubbornness. Somewhere in the middle of him asking me if I wanted to go and me denying it fiercely enough to raise questions, he figured out, probably at the same time I did, that I was curious. I wanted to see how and where Lucian lived. It was like what Winston Churchill once said about Russia: “It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma: but perhaps there is a key.” The reason for my poorly disguised interest was simple: Ryder was my Russia and I was kind of hoping that Lucian was the key. No way of telling how transparent my reasoning was to my boyfriend but once he’d worked out that, in my heart of hearts, I wanted to go, there was no stopping him. He was like a dog with a bone! So ... we went.

Lucian, it turned out, lived not far from the Hopscotch Café, in a quiet cul-de-sac that accommodated only one other house beside his own. I had spent most of my life in Rosemound, but couldn’t recall noticing either the street or his house, an attractive white split-level set in the middle of a sweeping yard that melted into the surrounding forest.

When Ryder, J, and I got there just after nine o’clock, the party was already in full swing. A couple of tiki torches marked the entrance, and row after row of vibrant Christmas lights outlined the porch and the two dormers above. Licks of flames, a few more torches, and a large open-fire burned out back, and Miley Cyrus was belting out “Can’t Be Tamed” from somewhere inside the house. There were so many people, it felt like the whole Rosemound High was there. It was more than enough to make me hesitate.

“This is going to be great!” J professed excitedly, hopping around Ryder and me like a little certifiable bunny.

Instinctively, I grasped Ryder’s hand harder.

“It’s okay,” he whispered in response. “I’ll make sure no one gets too close.”

Of course he knew I was scared out of my pants. Because he was Ryder and I didn’t need to tell him when something was wrong. I didn’t need to tell him that the number of people crawling around us, loud and too psyched to care about the permanent damage they were inflicting on their own eardrums, as well as ours, made me dizzy. He was Ryder. He knew.

There were a couple of kegs out back, and flickering candles everywhere. I saw Lucian the second we set foot in the backyard; he was by the fire talking with a couple of football players and, unlike everyone else around him, he wasn’t holding a plastic cup filled with what could only be beer. He saw me at the exact same time, and the second our eyes met over the crowd in between, he was already walking toward us.

J's face glazed over with pleasure.

Ryder tensed.

And Lucian ... well, he was just Lucian, dressed to kill, less preppy than usual in dark washed jeans and a white polo shirt, and smiling that private, soft, only-for-Lily smile.

"You came," he said, mostly to me, as soon as he joined our group.

"Of course we came!" J answered.

At least he had the decency to reward her eagerness, bordering on embarrassing obsession at this point, with a half-smile.

This was my first party so, naturally, I expected the worst. Someone could bump into me, accidentally pulling me to the ground, where I'd pass out from the prolonged contact. I'd have a seizure featuring abounding foam at the mouth from being so close to all the people. Lucian and Ryder could get into a fight and spill some terrible, dark secrets in front of the whole school. Mom could give in to her fear of my being burned at the stake by the party-goers in some creepy, *Children of the Corn* scenario, and she'd show up half-mad and, quite possibly, armed, to stop them.

The list was practically endless.

But none of it happened. Something oh-so-awkward did instead: J stalking Lucian, more or less, every single second of every hour, with the exception of those few hurried ones when she had to choose between visiting the bathroom or living through her own bladder bursting. After one such bathroom visit, joint, in the long-established tradition of female toilet-attending etiquette, she suggested enforcing another long-established female tradition commonly known as "the snooping around". What did it involve? Delicately put, invading Lucian's privacy or, in less delicate terms, sneaking into his room and shamelessly intruding on his personal space and belongings.

I wanted to be the sane, virtuous one and reject the idea right away, but the truth was that my own curiosity matched hers only too well. So instead of doing the right thing and walking away, dragging my BFF along, I took comfort in the idea that, at least I wasn't the only one being bad. J and I were in it together. Some excuse!

What I and my partner-in-crime found was that, unlike the rest of the house, a shrine to the glory of nondescript furniture and pastel undertones that triggered my gag reflex, Lucian's room was beautiful. The walls were painted orange, very radical for a guy, and the floor, or at least the bits that weren't littered with books, various gadgets, and numberless sheets of paper, was decked in a lime-green carpet. J and I both liked the mess: old copies of Dostoyevsky and Camus novels with annotations in the margins next to piles of Vangelis, David Lanz, and Amethystium CDs, framed prints of Bosch and Brueghel, loads of video games and sports trophies, including baseball, swimming, tennis, even a few equestrian ribbons. Seeing Lucian on a horse made me ask myself, would the wonders ever cease?

But while J was bursting with delight at all these delicious discoveries, I found myself frowning. There wasn't anything even remotely unusual about Lucian. This was the room of a boy with a little too much free time on his hands, maybe a bit lonely, but otherwise perfectly normal. There were no dark secrets connecting him to Ryder and certainly no skeletons in his closet, which was meticulously stocked with more preppy outfits than the Hollister store at the Mall at Millenia in Orlando.

We left the room with J blabbering excitedly about how *The Garden of Earthly*

Delights was one of her favorite paintings, too, and the fact that Lucian had a print of it above his bed was a sign that they belonged together. Also, that he had to be extremely smart, because anyone who could appreciate a Bosch triptych, a painting made of three panels, set side by side, she explained, obviously boasted a sizable brain.

I didn't see the "practically-a-genius" art lover in question when we got back and, as I was feeling ashamed of what we'd done, especially given the big fat nothing it had produced, I asked J and Ryder if we could all leave. My BFF quickly declined, hoping that Lucian might drive her home later, but Ryder welcomed my request with honest enthusiasm. Things were set, and I was just about to climb behind him on the bike, when an eruption of screams and shrieks originating in our host's backyard changed our plans.

From bits of conversation and yet more shrieking, we worked out even before arriving at the scene that there had been a snake attack. *A snake attack!* Not just any snake but a massasauga, a black rattler, something close to impossible. In Michigan, the massasaugas can only be found in some southern parts of the state, and nobody remembered ever hearing of an incident, let alone witnessing one, when such a reptile had ventured so far north. Except for, apparently, this one.

It took only a couple of seconds before I realized that the victim was J. Her shrill voice and flashes of her white dress as she twisted and turned in a frenzy, surrounded by equally loud boys and girls, made a picture that stopped my heart.

"It bit me! The freaking thing bit me! Oh my God, I'm going to die!"

The people around her drew back and gave her room to continue that crazed spinning, all the while shouting a million different things in a pandemonium that made it impossible to understand anything. Everything moved too fast, too loudly, too ... I tried getting to her, but Ryder pulled me back. His lips moved, but I couldn't hear him ... I couldn't ... I had to ...

"Stop moving, Jane!"

Ryder and Lucian both shouted it at the same time, their voices echoing each other and raised above the racket. In slow motion, I twisted and saw Ryder's face set as if in stone, and then he and Lucian locked stares above the crowd. A cold spell drifted over the people gathered there, and for a second

everything was still.

"Stop moving!" Lucian repeated. "Stop it, Jane."

People moved out of his way.

"Your blood pressure ... the more you move, the quicker the venom gets to your heart."

No sooner had he barked out that warning than she fell. Noiselessly, gracefully, like a magical princess from a fairy tale, she slipped into a heap of white silk and black curls.

"No!" Ryder hissed in my ear. "I can't let you."

I must have been struggling hard against his grip, a stupid thing to do because there wasn't any way to her with so many bodies barring my path. But this was only vaguely registering on the outskirts of my consciousness: Ryder's arms around me, crying, his words. Everyone was shouting out commands.

"Cut it open."

"Tourniquet."

"Suck the poison out."

"Ice the wound."

“Stop the blood flow.”

“No! Blood must flow.”

“No, people have died.”

“Gangrene.”

“Lost limbs.”

“Gone, she’s gone already.”

And then... quiet. Lucian kneeled next to her.

“Jane. Jane, are you awake?”

No answer.

“Someone call an ambulance, people.”

“It’s on the way,” a few voices echoed.

“Where is the damn snake?”

“Dead.”

Lucian’s ear pressed to her chest.

“Hell’s teeth! Heart’s almost stopped,” he whispered, but with the silence that had taken over the whole world, it seemed, everyone heard each word.

His eyes flew to me for a split second and my heart contracted painfully even as his lips fastened on her leg. He sucked and spat in a silence that hurt my ears. Nobody moved, or breathed, or even made a single sound. I heard the sirens roaring in the distance, then closer. And closer. But, by the time the ambulance was outside the gate, Lucian’s rhythm had slowed down a lot and his face was whiter than a sheet.

When the EMTs passed Ryder and me, there wasn’t just one limp body lying on the grass. There were two.

Miraculously, they both made a full recovery and were released from the hospital in time to make Monday morning classes. Nobody could explain the sudden appearance of the rattler in Rosemound, and the incident was even featured in the *Rosemound Gazette*, in an article detailing the dos and don’ts in dealing with a rattler bite. Apparently, sucking the venom out with your mouth wasn’t something anyone should try. Similarly, the overexcitement, complete with hysterical arm-flapping and loads of pirouetting was another big no-no. I should’ve kept her cool and Lucian should’ve used a Sawyer “Extractor” Snake Bite Kit to suck out the venom. Too bad we didn’t have one on hand.

Just like the doctors, who varied from those congratulating Lucian to those laying into him for ever attempting what he had, my own feelings were fairly contradictory. Had he really saved her life, or had he almost killed her? Why did his backyard, of all the backyards in Rosemound, have to have a freak black rattler snaking around the very night he threw a party? Had he avoided a tragedy, or had he very nearly caused one?

Who wasn’t conflicted about any of it? My BFF, of course. As far as she cared, his full name was Lucian Knight-in-Shining-Armor Bell and he could speak or do no evil. He’d saved her life, yet another sign that they were meant to be together. Duh!

The following week, we were lunching outside since it was warm enough to sunbathe, a weird occurrence in Rosemound this time of year. The courtyard was a lush green, surrounded by pine trees, with stone tables and benches scattered about, some of which were covered in moss. They were cold, but beautiful, and students always stepped on each other to grab a good seat.

Our current position wasn’t in the A-plus area, since that was reserved for seniors, but somewhere to the side and partially tucked away behind a thick tree trunk. I preferred

this table anyway.

Ryder had had to run back to the cafeteria to pick up an additional soda for J, since she'd gone through the first one in a single gulp. Lucian, strangely, was MIA and, with them both missing, there was nothing left to stop my best friend from pouring her soul out to me again, for the millionth time since the party. About the same thing.

"So I'm just going to say it, you know," she professed. "Walk right up to him and say, '*Hey! Why not go together? As friends, of course, no strings attached, no big deal. Just two people ...*'" She stopped, watching as my expression flopped into a frown. "You think he'll say no," she said, reading it.

My heart sank. In a white baby-doll dress, tied under her bust with a pink ribbon matching the one woven through her glossy black curls, in line with the Disney princess theme of the week, J had never looked younger. She reminded me of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. But her full lips pressed together in such a tight line, it made me want to bash my face into the table.

"I don't know," I answered quietly.

She perked up a bit. "He did say I looked good the other day. You know, when I was wearing that short blue dress."

I nodded. I remembered. Sadly, I didn't think Lucian did.

"And why wouldn't he say yes? I mean, the boy *saved* my life. Actually saved my life! If that doesn't spell 'fate' then I don't know what does. Not to mention that I know he hasn't asked anyone. And there are only three days left to prom."

I nodded again, swallowing hard. I had a few ideas why he'd say no. But how could I tell J that whenever I turned around, there he was. At the florist, begging me to accept the bunch of roses he'd bought for me. At the hair salon, offering suggestions on my new haircut. At the grocery store, recommending the freshest loaves available. At the hardware store, trying to convince me that he was a capable handyman and happily offering his services for free. I shook my head and let out a hard breath.

"This blows."

She agreed. "It really, really does."

"But hey, haven't you been asked by a million guys already? What about Mike Carter? Why not go with him?"

She pierced me with those deer-like brown eyes, so sad that my stomach churned.

"Look," she said softly, "I know he has a thing for you. The whole school knows it! But you've got Ryder, right? You're not interested. Are you?"

Her voice broke at the end and I hated that she doubted me. Because if she did, chances were someone else did, too, which meant I wasn't making it clear enough that I didn't care about Lucian like that.

"No, not the way you think."

Her eyebrows arched right up to the hairline. "But there is *a* way?"

"Things are weird, J. With Ryder, I mean. There's so much I don't know and even more that I don't get."

"So where does Lucian fit in?" She was calm, patient, trying to understand.

My shoulders rose and fell again. "He's part of it, somehow. I just think that if I could figure him out, then, I don't know, maybe I'll understand more about Ryder."

She toyed with the red apple in front of her, spinning it around and around. Her long, ivory nails glittered in the sun.

“Why don’t you just ask?” she questioned softly.

“What, and watch him keel over again? Nooo, thank you. Besides ...”

“What?” She eyed me uneasily.

“I think I’m afraid of the answers. For the first time in my life, I’m, you know, happy. I have a boyfriend I can kiss and touch and who loves me and wants me despite ... everything.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“You’re afraid of losing it.”

My mouth went dry. I forced some soda down.

“I don’t know what I’d do. I don’t think I could go back to being alone again.”

With a sigh, she cast me a tender, almost teary glance.

“You’re right. This blows big-time.”

“I’m sorry. But it’s not like I’m after Lucian in that way. It’s just that —”

“He’s totally after you exactly in that way,” she finished, smiling bitterly. “I guess it’s my own fault. Crushing on him when I knew the score.”

My chest tightened. “I’m sorry, J.”

“Bah!” She shrugged. “Not your fault. Sides, it ain’t over till it’s over,” she added, forcing a smile. “He’ll come around. No one can resist the Archer women’s charm for long.”

I actually agreed with that, but never got the chance to say it. The courtyard was suddenly stirring and everyone seemed to be running back inside the school. What the heck was going on?

Since she could do that, J grabbed some girl’s arm.

“Where’s the fire?”

“Ryder Kingscott is fighting the new guy in study hall! Up in the teachers’ gallery.”

“What?” J and I both cried out at the exact same time, bolting upward like puppets pulled by strings.

The study hall was this half-moon space, fitted with comfy couches and functional tables, built around a big projection screen often used for showing the “instructional” documentaries that imparted all the sex education Rosemound High was ever going to impart. It was on the ground floor, but there was a second entry on the upper level, leading into the balcony, where the projector was set. It was also where teachers sometimes lounged, keeping an eye on the students poring over their books downstairs.

J and I ran like the wind. She pushed, and I followed, through the loud, excited kids, both of us painfully aware of the names Ryder and Lucian being on everyone’s lips. The close proximity was vertiginous. What was he even doing upstairs, for Pete’s sake? The cafeteria was on the ground floor.

The double doors giving access to the teachers’ gallery were completely blocked. Students crowded the hallway, either trying to get in or to at least hear better. The level of noise was something nightmarish. And above the racket, Ryder’s voice bellowed.

“... and follow her around like the dog that you are!”

“And why not?” Lucian returned. “She’s the one bloody thing in this world that’s worth following!”

“You keep your paws off her!”

“Or what? What are you going to do if I don’t?”

Judging by the general gasping sounds and all the yelping, punches were being

exchanged inside.

“No way can I make it through all these bodies,” I shouted to J. “It will knock me out in seconds.”

She eyed the people blocking our way and then looked at me, a fierce expression on her childlike face.

“Hey! All o’ you gossip slaves!” she shouted, pushing and tugging at those closest to us. “Move out of Lil’s way or read all about your dirty little secrets in tomorrow’s *Rosemound Gazette*. Shift! Move it! Let her pass!”

I was shocked, and amazed. J never broke under pressure, because after seventeen years of living with Delilah, the girl’s nerves were absolute steel, but this was simply genius. Sure enough, a path was immediately cleared. Guess there were many dirty little secrets floating around out there and nobody felt like spilling them to me.

An eerie silence suddenly filled the gallery. People on both sides of me stared, carefully pulling back, avoiding my touch. Like I was a leper. Then I could see them. Actually, all I did see was Ryder’s bloodied face, a second before Lucian threw a punch that sent him flying over the railing. He fell.

“No!” I screamed, running over to the edge of the balcony.

Crying and shaking like a leaf, I peered down into the study hall. Ryder had landed on top of a table, in the middle of a close-packed circle of kids. The table was broken. Ryder was *not*.

Eyes readily popping out of my head, I watched him pick himself up from the pile of splintered wood. His face was a bloody mess and he was a little unsteady on his feet, but he was definitely standing.

His mouth twisted in a bloodstained baring of teeth.

“Is that it? Is that all you’ve got, mutt?”

My head whipped to the side, hand reaching to grab him, but I was too slow. With a snarl, Lucian mounted the banister and hopped it like there was nothing to it. He jumped into the empty space beneath and landed so gracefully, everyone gasped in one voice. It was like we’d ended up smack in the middle of a *Smallville* episode.

The students behind me pushed forward in one shrieking mass, trying to get closer to the railing and see what had happened to Lucian. In all the excitement they slammed into me, and because of the pain I lost my balance. They shoved, I screamed, and then I was falling.

Calling Ryder’s name.

Bracing for the impact, I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for a pain that never came. Something else did. Blue tendrils nested around me, wrapping my body in a soft cushion that vibrated lightly. It was like thousands of fingertips touched my bare skin all at the same time, sending wave after wave of electric shocks through my body. My skin tingled and wept with the richness of sensation. To feel so much, so suddenly, all at once was more than I could stand. Too much, but a good too much.

I opened my eyes and found myself in Lucian’s arms. The tendrils quivered harder, pulling me to him, urging me to wind my arms around his neck. To sink deeper into the sensation.

“Why can I touch you? Why is there no pain?” I asked numbly.

He cast me a wistful glance and his cupid-bow mouth twitched.

“Isn’t this just like old times?” he asked Ryder, his voice hard, the smile vanishing as

he spoke. "She falls, crying out your name."

"Take your hands off her!" Ryder hissed.

Lucian put me down, very slowly, very carefully, as though he was afraid of breaking me. I swayed on my feet as the blue tendrils between us withdrew. They left a hole behind.

"Face it, man," Lucian went on, the two of them almost nose to nose in front of me. "You can't bring her anything but pain. Can't do anything but hurt her."

Ryder's hands fisted at his sides, his body quaking with fury. "You've got some nerve. *You're* the one to talk?"

"Just let her go! She's not yours. She never was."

"Let her go so she can be with you?"

"She belongs with me. She always has!" Lucian growled.

"Like hell she has," Ryder countered, tensing.

The punching started again.

"Stop! Stop this! Stop it!"

They both ignored me.

"You can give her back her life," Lucian shouted, wiping his bloody mouth on his sleeve. "Leave. Let her go!"

"Why don't you leave?" Ryder shot back, picking himself off the floor and barreling into Lucian again. "She'll never have you, don't you get it? Go away!"

"Like I could go anywhere! I never had a choice, you bloody idiot. You do. You always did. Choose her life for once!"

"Wouldn't be much of a life with you in it."

They stopped, spearing each other with their eyes, both tense and bleeding. I inched toward them, intent on putting myself in between if that's what it took, when Lucian added in an undertone, "She feels the cold already, did you know that? I know because I do, too. We're running out of time."

Ryder turned to me, his silver eyes wide in fear. I dropped mine guiltily, and by the time I recovered Lucian was already walking away. Ryder looked like he could barely stand. I moved closer, still wary of his eyes.

"Is he right? You've felt cold lately?" he rasped.

I nodded, staring down at the tips of his boots.

"Oh, baby!" He inhaled a ragged breath. "I'm so sorry."

He dropped to his knees, wrapping his arms around my thighs, his head resting on my stomach. My fingers tangled in his soft hair.

All around us and up in the gallery, faces watched, every single one frozen. Ryder stayed kneeling. Nobody said a word. The scene was right out of *Hamlet*.

"The rest is silence."

CHAPTER: TWELVE



The rest was silence, alright, at least until classes were over. Ryder and Lucian both got suspended for a week. It wasn't clear if either of them would be allowed to show up at prom. J screeched her just-in-case dismay. The school roared with the fresh batch of hot gossip. And me, well, mostly I tried to do what I did best and make myself scarce.

When the study hall had emptied, leaving Ryder and me to our own devices, I asked about what had happened. "I don't want to talk about it," he snapped. "I-I can't," he added, somewhat softer.

Principal Turner had shown up then, all hot under the collar, and taken Ryder to his office. Later, I heard that he had Coach Billoughy escort both him and Lucian off the premises.

It was impossible to come up with something that could explain the whole shebang. But it looked like one, my cold spells equaled major bad news, and two, I had some kind of gruesome history with both Ryder and Lucian, one in which things didn't end up too well for me. Lucian's words had been: *Choose her life for once*. As if, at some other time, Ryder hadn't. As if he'd let me ... die? Even worse, as if history was about to repeat itself.

"But that's just crazy," J argued.

I was beginning to suspect she was in shock. She'd repeated the exact same words a billion times already. The end of our last period, history with Mrs. Flint, was fast approaching, and she still hadn't managed to change the tune.

"What, you mean crazy like seeing-into-people's-heads-through-a-simpletouch crazy?" With her fingers pressing on her temples, she squeezed her eyes tightly. "But wouldn't you remember dying?"

"Not if I, you know, *died*. You think you'll remember your own death?"

"Oh! Yeah, I see your point."

"Good, 'cause I don't. I mean, if I died, what am I doing here?"

J's arms flapped in the air, her brown eyes bulging.

"Holy cow! Do you think you're dead?"

This was beyond insane!

"Do I look dead?"

She calmed down. It was like watching snow melting.

"So, what are we talking about, then? Reincarnation?"

"Still doesn't explain why Ryder and Lucian both seem to remember things I don't. Like this whole history between us that no one's talking to me about."

She grunted unhappily. "It's got to be something magical, though, right? Unless ... do you think they're vampires or something? You know, live-forever dudes?"

"They're not vampires, J," I snorted.

"What, then?"

My head hurt, as though an army of evil drumsticks had taken over my neurons, diabolically using them as drums.

"I don't know. Don't know what they are, what I am, what the deal is; I don't know a

single thing! And the idea that Ryder may have hurt me sometime in the past, an alternate reality or whatever —”

It was her turn to snort. “Please! Ryder would never do that. He’s mad about you.”

She fell silent and I heard her wrestling a broken breath.

“They both are,” she added quietly.

I frowned. “How do you figure? Just because they almost killed each other in study hall?”

“Well ...”

“But they did it while accusing each other of hurting me in the past and screaming how they’re about to do it again! That’s not being mad about someone, that’s just plain mad.”

In response to the noise I was creating, Mrs. Flint cast me a sideways glance. With my self-control wearing a tad thin by now, I ended up almost snarling at her, which apparently was just the thing to get her to reroute the scrutiny. What a strange effect I seemed to have on people, of late.

J insisted, “But you trust Ryder, don’t you?”

“With my life. Which is why I can’t figure out any of it.”

“You need to talk to him.”

“I’m planning on it.”

Of course, I’d tried that already, with squat to show for it. I thought back on our first date, the beach house and that weird speech he’d given me then, the one I had tried long and hard to decipher and failed. Some of it sounded more rational now. In a very irrational way, obviously.

I rushed out of the classroom and down the stairs like a tornado and everyone got out of my way. Whatever. I couldn’t find it in me to care at the moment. Let them talk.

“If it isn’t Little Miss Popular. What a waste!” Rosalie Miller called after me from the middle of the lobby, where she stood with her hands on her hips. “The hottest guys in Rosemound High fighting over you?” She spat out the pronoun in disgust. “I swear, there’s something seriously wrong with the world.”

I stopped in my tracks, despite J’s begging me not to, and turned around slowly. Everyone was watching.

“You know, Rosalie, Lucian said that even if you lost twenty pounds he’d still not take you to prom. Something about you giving him flashes of pigs and bacon.”

I smiled angelically. Her delicate Nordic complexion turned cranberry-red.

“Freak!” she hissed.

“Whatever.” I turned on my heel, pulse booming in my ears.

“If you weren’t a witch, Ryder wouldn’t look twice at you. Everyone knows you put the whammy on him.”

My blood ran cold. I faced her again, and when I opened my mouth, what came out of it startled even me. It sounded like a litter of snakes.

“But I *am* a witch, Rosalie. Want a demonstration?”

She blanched, dropping her eyes and stumbling away without another word. The rest of the crowd scattered with impressive quickness as well.

“Smooth, Lil, real smooth,” J scolded.

I didn’t answer, too shaken up to summon any words. Never in my life had I done such a stupid thing! Why, in the name of all things sane, would I publicly label myself

the very thing I dreaded being viewed as? Given the level of anxiety and various phobias my mere presence caused among the nice townsfolk, there was a distinct possibility that after this I was going to be chased out of town. With torches and pitchforks. Fantastic!

With my ride famously thrown out of school, the chore of driving me home fell on J. Our plans for the day, involving modeling prom attire for each other, had been kicked out of the realm of possibility about the same time Ryder got kicked out of school. My poor BFF! Her dress had only just arrived and she'd been dying to show it to me.

"Er ... I guess I'll take a rain check on that whole me giving you a ride thing," J told me as we approached her cherry-red Pontiac Vibe.

"What? Why?"

She nodded, indicating somewhere behind me. When I looked, there was Ryder, with his back turned to us, waiting by my own car, which, unless I'd suddenly been taken over by amnesia, I was sure I'd left at home. He was on the phone, gesturing wildly. His bike was nowhere in sight.

"Call me later," J said, "to tell me what happened. Good luck."

I mumbled something that hopefully passed for consent and glided to him, my feet barely touching the asphalt.

"I don't care if you have to fly over!" He was shouting into his phone in a harsh tone I'd never heard before. "I need those papers tonight. No, absolutely not! Under no circumstances! I do not care how," he hissed. "Get it done!"

He snapped the cell shut, still cursing softly under his breath as he spun around and caught sight of me.

"Hi, baby," he greeted me, and that softness I was familiar with crept back into his voice. Maybe he only talked to me like that?

"Aren't you supposed to stay off school grounds?"

I was enfolded in his arms a second before the blue tendrils started yanking at me again. Lucian was close by, too, I gathered, and decided not to care. Ryder was warm and soothing, all around me. He'd taken a shower; his hair was still damp and his leather-and-pine scent was mixed with a trace of citrusy soap. He smelled like everything I needed now, familiar and calming, and I melted into the embrace.

When he reluctantly disentangled us, the first thing I noticed, and was shocked by, was the smoothness of his golden skin. Not a single scar marred his face, not even a bruise. Stranger still, in the sunlight, even his eyes gleamed amber, like those of a wolf. Yet he looked tired.

"I went by your mom's shop," he said, fingers slowly trailing my cheek. "She gave me the keys to the house so I could pick up the car. I thought we'd have a picnic."

He forced a smile, one I could tell required an effort. There was something between us, a thickness in the air, an avoidance in our eyes. Like a silent scream or a black hole.

"A picnic? What about work? And I've got a research paper that's due —"

"Please, Lily," he asked, in such a strangled voice that my eyes stung with tears. "We need this! I need this."

The tendrils pulled at me harder. How could electricity be so soft? Obviously, I was losing my mind.

"Um, yeah ... okay, sure."

I bit my lip, both dying to speak and to keep my mouth shut. Wanting to know and wishing I never did. Lucian's pull increased a notch and my body reacted to it by giving a

small shiver. But he wasn't anywhere that I could see.

"Are you cold?" Ryder asked in a smothered voice.

In an instant his face drained of color. If I'd said yes, it would've knocked him off his feet. Oh, this was bad! This was bad with a capital *B*.

"No." I let it linger. "What does the cold mean, Ryder? Why are you so scared of it?"

He inhaled raggedly. "Doesn't matter. Please, let's just go! Let's make the best of this day."

Was it me, or did that really sound like a condemned man's last request?

He wanted to drive and I didn't mind. On the backseat, a basket chock-full of food and drinks sat next to a folded tartan blanket. This was incredibly sweet, I thought; so why did my mouth taste so bitter?

I almost sat on the book he'd left on the passenger's seat, a battered copy of *What Dreams May Come*. I picked it up and held it close to my face. It smelled of him.

"Tell me about this story," I asked softly, staring out the window because it hurt too much to look at him right then. I wasn't sure why.

He coughed, as if to mend his voice, and it seemed like such a strange, grown-up thing to do. "It's about a man who, after dying in a car crash, wakes up in heaven and learns that, in the meantime, his wife killed herself and she's in hell."

"I thought you said once that this was about love."

"And sacrifice. And being unable to live your other half. The things we do for love and the unlikely rewards we may reap as a result."

I gulped uneasily. "Go on."

"The main character, Chris, wants to rescue her from hell. So he descends and tries to convince Ann of what's going on. See, she doesn't know she's dead. She has no idea she's in hell. She doesn't remember ..." His voice broke.

With a sharp snap, my teeth clenched shut. The heroine couldn't remember, just like I couldn't remember. Was there a connection? Was this why he liked the book?

"In the end, he gives up heaven altogether, choosing to stay in hell instead. To be with her."

"He does?"

"Yes, though he never gets to follow through. Because of his sacrifice, Ann is reborn back on earth. So Chris returns to heaven."

"Oh! No happy ending ... sort of bittersweet."

Like us.

"On the contrary. Think about it; they start off with one in heaven and the other in hell. Like oil and water, they can never mix. But when Chris rescues her, he changes it. Ann is reborn on earth and, toward the end of the book, he's also about to be born again, which puts them both on the same plane. They've already been in each other's lives many times before, so chances are they'll find each other again."

I smiled. "Subtle. Hope."

"Yes, that's exactly why I love it. It's a great story of hope. Chris's quest, his resolve, the willing sacrifice ... to me, that's love. So ... absolute that it breaks unbreakable bonds. It's hopeful. It gives me hope."

Hope. A word he kept repeating. Was he trying to tell me something?

We hiked part of the way, hand in hand. And, of course, Ryder could carry a picnic basket and still pull off the cool, nonchalant look without breaking a sweat. Even now,

after dating a while, my breath often caught when I glanced at him and my mind usually became a misty place. One smile from him and the world faded away. Nothing mattered but Ryder. He was all I knew.

“I love how you look at me.”

We’d stopped next to a creek and I was already lazing on the blanket, watching him spread out the feast. Salads, cheeses, crackers, blueberry pie, strawberries, and fresh cream. Quite the decadent blowout.

“And how’s that?” I asked, blushing on cue.

His lower lip curled in that mischievous way it did.

“Like you’re having a hard time deciding between my lips and this blueberry pie. And I know nothing comes between you and this pie.”

I giggled. “Very observant. Wonder which one will win?”

He lowered himself onto the blanket. Slowly, giving me time to grow aware of his lean, long muscles bunching and stretching under the black T-shirt. There was so much mischief in that sinful mouth alone! It made me groan in resignation. It was hard to remember how to breathe, let alone the list of questions my mind was supposed to supply.

A hand slipped under me and he pulled me against him, his eyes never leaving mine. So gentle, so heartbreakingly gentle. Around us, the sounds of the forest were slowly dying away. The wind rustling the leaves, the water tinkling on the rocks, the birds chirping their songs, everything was scattering. Everything was dissolving, until there was nothing but silver eyes. And my own breath.

He tasted my lower lip slowly, teasing me with teeth and that wicked tongue until I moaned and whispered his name again and again, like a prayer. It broke me up inside and pieced me back together all at once. My sadness, the doubt and anger, my fear he simply took it all. He made me forget.

“Aw, Lily. You taste like one of those lazy summer days, sweet with the scent of ripe peaches, baby.”

He pulled back, eyeing me so intently I trembled.

“I love you. Always and forever, never forget that.”

“I love you, too,” I answered, but even as I said it a hole gaped in my stomach.

He set my head in his lap and began feeding me small bites of food. There was something so delicate and tender about his gestures, it shattered me inside all over again. It pushed me over the edge, to where I couldn’t put it off any longer.

“But I will forget, right?” I whispered, watching his eyes emptying of life. “I mean, that’s the point. I will forget. You, us, today, I won’t remember any of it.”

“You can never truly forget your home. And believe me, Lily, I am your home. You belong to me. Just like I belong to you.”

He wasn’t looking at me anymore, but into the forest, somewhere far away. Nothing moved in him. Did his heart still beat? At first glance, he seemed almost cold, unfeeling, but it was just veneer, keeping what lay under the skin together. Because inside, beneath that stiff façade, he was falling to pieces. How did I know it? How do you know to breathe? You just do.

“Why do I get cold?”

I pulled myself up and crossed my legs under me. But I couldn’t go too far from him; my knees still touched his thighs. He was leaning back, propped up on his arms, beautiful

and still as a sculpture. Sunbeams danced in his dark hair, splashing it with sapphire flickers and making his bronze skin gleam softly.

"It's a sign. A bad one." He shuddered.

"But what does it mean?"

His eyes fixed on me, changing color so fast it was mesmerizing.

"That we're running out of time."

My pulse moved to my throat. "Us? Or just me?"

A spent smile peeked briefly at the corners of his mouth.

"If there was ever a 'me,' Lily, none of this would have happened. But there is no 'me.' Only 'us.'"

"I don't understand." Understatement.

"I know. I wish I could explain better."

I pushed my fingers through my hair roughly, grunting my frustration out loud.

"Okay. Let's try this a different way. Am I in danger?"

"You were in danger from the moment we met."

No hesitation. No flinching. He'd given it to me as straight as it comes. My mouth went dry.

"From you?" I asked in a small voice. "Am I in danger f-from you?"

He didn't hide from my very explicit question, but his eyes turned muddy gray, shadowed and deeper than a patch of midnight darkness.

"We always hurt what we love most."

My reaction came in fractured, lurches and surges, like puzzle pieces that didn't quite fit together. Didn't quite fit in my head. Emotions whipped through me too fast to grab hold of just one. I jumped to my feet, shaking, my hands balled into fists.

"Okay, you know what? That stupid saying comes from a lame 1940s song by Doris Fisher and Allan Roberts, and it means exactly squat!" I was babbling again. 'Cause you could count on me to do that at the worst possible times. "It ain't freaking rocket science! Either you love someone or you don't, you can't do both. So, which is it?"

He'd gotten up, too, and was staring at me with a calm that was so much more alarming than my blow-up. What was going on, for crying out loud?

"I have never loved anything else."

Well, that cleared it all right up!

And, to top it off, his face grew harder, his features smothered under that tragic air he wore every so often.

"Don't brood! I've had enough of the tortured, brooding-Ryder. Just spell it out. What's going on? The cold? Lucian? You two performing Cirque du Soleil stunts and walking away with your bones intact? What does it mean?"

With one heavy breath, his shoulders fell. My heart sank, too, as if our bodies were linked in some way.

"See? This is exactly why I stayed away for a whole year. Because he's right, all I ever bring you is pain." He paused, then asked very softly, "If I could tell you, don't you think I would?"

I stood there, watching, with my mouth open.

"All those flashes and the déjà vu feeling I get when I'm with you, they're real, aren't they? And the way I can sense Lucian, that electric string pulling me to him, that's not in my head, either. It's all real! Ryder, where does it come from? Why can't I

remember either of you? How are we connected?"

"You feel pulled to him?" he whispered, not mad, but blanching. Crushed, he was crushed like a piece of ripe fruit brutally stamped on.

Tender knots clogged my throat. "I don't want him," I said quietly. "You're the one I care about."

He didn't pep up. The strands of windblown hair covering his forehead couldn't hide the hard lines crumpling it. He was mad and sad. Hopeless and steely. Something bad was about to swoop in on us and he was wrestling with that knowledge. From where I was standing, it looked like he was losing the battle. It didn't make sense; you can't be a loser *and* a winner. And I don't care what that stupid song says, you can't deliberately hurt someone you love. Very conveniently, I chose to ignore the voice inside my head shouting, *Get real, Lily! People do that all the time.*

"Remember what I told you about the one crucial event in people's lives? How it sets the course of everything that happens from then on? The ripples that follow?"

I nodded. Of course I remembered the cryptic speech he'd given me back at the beach house. I'd spent many hours since trying to crack its code. I was now ready to report that translating an extinct language had to be infinitely easier.

"It's why I like the book, why I find it so hopeful. Because the character actually changes it. He sets a new course for his wife's life."

Lightheaded, that's how I felt. Tired of his brainteasers, of all the double entendre and the mystery. Being stuck in this cursed rut wore me out.

"Our lives today may seem like more than ripples, but trust me, they always lead to the same bottom line. You think things aren't written in stone, but you're wrong, Lily. You cannot change what has already happened! You can only make the best of what you've been dealt. And if you're lucky, maybe one day you'll take that road to hell and somehow wake up in heaven."

He paused, dithering, unsure if he should come closer or not. The worst thing was that I felt just as confused.

"I can't promise you heaven, baby, but I swear to you I'll do the best I can. Until the day I die, I'll never stop trying to do all that I can. But, please ... understand! My choices, same as yours, are very limited."

To keep from bursting into sobs, I clenched my teeth hard. Why was this happening to me? Why couldn't I just be like stupid Rosalie Miller, just this once? An idiot, sure, but a blissfully normal one. But no, I had to be magical. So magical, in fact, that I couldn't be around people. And special! But not in a juvenile-genius, or even in that lame most-likely-to-become-a-model, way, no.

I had to be freaking Harry Potter in a world that treated Harry Potters like the plague.

Just when I thought the powers-that-be were giving me a break and letting me have Ryder, wasn't it just like my pathetic life that he'd turn out to be potentially dangerous? That he could, apparently, love and hurt me all the same? I hated that dumb song! Hated, hated, hated it!

"Not good enough," I whimpered.

But I didn't walk away. I chose not to. Because, newsflash: real life sucks. It's not like in the movies or the books, not at all perfect. More like perfectly flawed. And since my life had no intention of cutting me some slack, I decided to do that myself. In the end, we're all so busy thinking, analyzing, and trying to make things fit that we forget to just

feel. As it happens, I didn't feel like going anywhere.

"I know," he agreed quietly, and this time there was no more hesitation. He closed the distance between us and I let him. "I'm sorry," he whispered in my hair.

And he was, I knew that with every pore of my being. But even as his arms surrounded me, my mind was wondering, *Am I inside a shelter or a trap?*

Until I shut it out. I was in Ryder's arms. Just Ryder's arms. The boy I loved to bits: the good and the bad, the awesome and the weird. The whole enchilada. The same way he loved me.

We spent the rest of the day the way he'd asked me to, enjoying it. Laughing and kissing and eating and fooling around like children. The bad? Yeah, it was still coming.

But it wasn't here just yet.

CHAPTER: THIRTEEN



It was twilight by the time he pulled up in front of my house. No lights were on inside, so Mom was still at the shop. The drive back had been a quiet one, and now that we stood face-to-face at the foot of the porch, the silence grew almost awkward. Typically, this would've been the moment when I asked him to come in. It wasn't because I had homework and house chores to deal with that kept me from it. I would've happily blown everything off for a few more minutes with him; I usually did. Normally, we got home just before Mom did and spent that little time, when the sounds of the world became hushed, fading together with the drowsy sun, just lying on my bed in a tangle. Not moving, not making out, not talking. Just being with each other. Nothing would've made me happier right then.

But ...

I hadn't said much on our way home for a reason. The chill was back; I had been wrestling with it for the past thirty minutes. So far, so good, in the sense that, after shuffling the various energies inside me, I'd managed to contain it. I kept it from spreading. However, my smoke screens were wearing thin and I knew it would be only a matter of minutes, if that, before my teeth started chattering. Just as I knew that if Ryder saw me like that, if he understood how bad the cold had become, he'd suffer a pain far worse than mine, chill or no chill.

"Don't frown, baby," he pleaded quietly, running his fingertips over the worry lines my forehead must've shown.

I forced a joke. "Worried about my future wrinkles?"

His eyes flashed with something akin to despair.

I stiffened, losing my grip on the chill, and the first shiver rocked my body slightly. To cover it, I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing my lips to it and my body against his.

But he was millions of miles away.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, unfocused eyes sweeping my face cursorily. "I can't come in tonight. There's something I need to handle."

It should've filled me with relief. I wanted him gone while the chill passed, didn't I? But he was doing more than leaving; he was pulling away somehow. From me. I sensed it, but as the second streak of quivers blasted through my inner shields, I was forced to admit that now wasn't the time to get into it. I had to let him go and run inside before my carriage turned into a pumpkin.

So, through gritted teeth bared in a tight smile, I said, "Sure. No biggie."

He was distracted, I decided, even as his soft lips brushed mine again, still tense, very different from the kisses our picnic had been strewn with. Then, with the promise to see me in the morning, he was gone.

I barely dragged myself inside the house, my feet as heavy and cold as my heart. By the time I made it up to my room, I was dealing with a full-blown seizure and jerking uncontrollably.

Warmth, I need warmth, the last barely functional part of my brain chanted. I

crawled over to my closet without turning on the lights, losing my bag as I went. The curtains were fully drawn and my room was dark. I welcomed the darkness because it'd always been my friend, soothing and giving me strength, much like my own customized brand of mystical Red Bull. I drank it in eagerly, hoping it would make the cold less paralyzing.

Standing in front of the open closet, I fumbled for some sweats to pull over my jeans and the heaviest sweater I owned. But it was too late. Every inch of me trembled so violently that it was clear I had no more control over my motor functions. Fingers curled into arthritis-plagued-like claws. My teeth *clunk-clunk-clunked* so badly my tongue was dangerously close to being amputated. My knees turned soft and failed me a second after the muscles in my legs became jelly. I fell in a mound of boneless, shaky mush.

Then the blue tendrils came ...

Close. So close. Soothing. Warm. Could Lucian be in my room? Nah! How could he

My mind never got to process the end of that thought. I tumbled into darkness.

It would have been hard to say how long I stayed lost, drifting through that amorphous nothingness. Maybe moments, or maybe years. I didn't like it. As part of the freak-package, my mind never really checked out, not even when I slept. Some part of my consciousness remained active. Even in my sleep I was aware. Not now, though. Now, all I felt was lost, disoriented, and alone. It scared the daylights out of me.

"Come back, Katherine," a voice called from afar. "Come back to me, pet. Follow my voice. Come back to me!"

Ryder! His voice was weak and, for some reason, he was calling me by another name, but I was sure it was him. My stomach tightened painfully. He was searching for me. He had come back for me. I had to find him! He'd be worried and scared and ...

With an effort that put Olympic weight lifters to shame, I pried my eyelids open. And yes, I was in his arms. He'd gathered me at his chest and I was resting there, snug as a bug in a rug, still shivering, but nowhere near as badly as before.

But ... wait; in the moonlight filtering through the curtains, his skin wasn't golden but pale, almost silvery. Likewise, unless I was seeing things, his eyes were blue. I tried rubbing my face in an attempt to guide my eyesight into functional mode again, but the nerves and muscles in my body took no notice of my needs. As a matter of fact, my arms seemed awfully busy being coiled around his neck; they had no intention of giving one inch.

"Lucian," I cooed, not by choice. My darn voice was broken, too.

"There you are," he said, smiling down on me.

His energy, those electric threads pulsing between us, fought my chill. I sensed it, hundreds of fingers, like candle-snuffers, extinguishing every last one of the freezing, sharp ends skewering my body. The cold was a living thing inside me, it groaned and twisted and struck back, but the blue tendrils were alive, too, and they kept on battling fiercely. In the meantime, I was a crippled mess.

"Why did you come home alone? You were already sick when you got here. Where is he?"

"C-couldn't I-let ... him see m-me ... like th-this."

"Why not?"

"D-don't want ... h-him to ... s-suffer."

“Him.” His voice was as frigid as my chill. “What about you? What about me? Why should his suffering take precedence over yours? Or even mine? You can’t be so naïve as to think you’re only hurting him.”

My vision had cleared enough to make out his face and I could see that he wasn’t just angry, but also decisively scared. For a while, neither of us spoke. Eventually, the chill began to slowly die away and I jumped at the opportunity to let go of him.

“What are you doing in my room, Lucian?”

“I felt the cold rising. I had to come and help.”

“How? I mean, how *can* you feel it?”

I scrambled to my feet, still shaky, using the closet’s open door to pull myself up. He followed suit.

“You and I aren’t strangers,” he answered through clenched teeth. “No matter how much you want to deny it.”

“Oh, I see. We’re not strangers, so of course it’s okay for you to lurk in my room.”

I didn’t want to sound so harsh. He had helped me. Without him I would’ve still been lying on the floor, out for the count. But I was so angry! Angry that it had been his arms, and not Ryder’s, yanking me back into the land of the living.

He laughed at my reaction, soft and tantalizing.

“So how was your day, nice? It’s getting late and you’ve been gone for hours. Sure you’re alright?”

His voice was silky, musical, and that smooth mask he always wore and called it facial expression had already snapped back on. I tried ignoring that Raisin, the little traitor, kept rubbing herself against his legs, purring contentedly.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yeah, I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Just because I nearly died, frozen to death by a metaphysical chill? Bah!

He reached over to my desk and turned on the lamp. When the light spilled inside the room, his presence and everything else suddenly felt more real somehow. However determined not to, I succumbed again to light shivering, of the non-mystical variety, involuntarily wrapping my arms around myself.

“Are you still cold?” he asked, opening his arms. “You’re always welcome to second helpings, you know.”

I blushed, remembering how I’d nestled there, next to his chest. “Good to hear. I’m warmer already; a little hot tea and I’ll be good as new.”

He gave a low chuckle. “You’re very brave, aren’t you? I like that in a girl.”

“So let me get this straight. If I weren’t so brave, you’d back off? ’Cause I’m willing. I’ll play the damsel in distress for you, if that’s what it takes.”

He made a clucking sound with his tongue.

“You really are the damsel in distress. You just can’t see it yet.”

Evidently, my waspish tongue wasn’t enough motivation for him to back off. On the contrary, he was throwing himself into the verbal sparring with the same unhealthy enjoyment as always. One graceful, long stride and the space between us was closed. He smelled of ... what the heck was that, fresh-baked cookies? He had on yet another one of his preppy Lacoste, or was it Calvin Klein, getups: chinos, white shirt peeking from under a V-neck sweater topped off by a navy blue blazer, and radically paired with a head of fresh-out-of-theshower, less-blond-than-usual hair.

“I got here a few minutes before you did,” he said, in answer to my raised eyebrow.

"I wasn't going to let myself in, but your cat sounded hungry, so I thought I'd feed it."

Ah! That explained why Raisin was cozying up to him. The little feline traitor would sell her own mother for food.

"So then you thought, what? Oh, I'll just give myself a tour of the house."

He pulled a face, tilting his head to the side and looking entertained. Like I was putting on some hilarious one-woman-show for his benefit. I rolled my eyes, annoyed.

"What do you want?"

"To warn you."

Now we were getting somewhere.

"What about?"

"Your ... boyfriend." He spewed the word like it was dirt soiling his mouth.

There was nothing paranormal about the sudden trembles that zipped through my body blindingly fast. Magic was never as sharp or as sudden, not to mention, it didn't usually make me fantasize about insane things, the way I was doing now. I visualized the police unexpectedly raiding my house for drugs, illegal immigrants, or nuclear missiles, or anything else that might lead to them arresting Lucian. But of course no one came. No one would, either, at least not in time to keep him from opening his mouth.

"He's not who he claims to be. You're in danger! And I let this go on long enough. It has to stop."

Now I was imagining myself sewing his lips together like in one of those cool horror movies. I could probably pull it off with a flick of my wrist, too, if I were willing to dip into the darker side of my powers. That, however, was something I never had done, nor would I ever consider. But, heck, even pouring hot wax in my own ears, to seal them shut, seemed disturbingly appealing right about then.

"I don't want to hear this," I said instead. "Get out or I'll call the police!"

He smiled sadly, his eyes glimmering moist in the dim light. When his arm rose, his hand aiming for my cheek, I withdrew as far as I could, pressing myself against the closet door.

"Do *not* touch me again!"

"Forgive me. But I just don't know of any another way to convince you of the truth."

He let his arm fall, but I never got the chance to exhale in relief. Proving scarily twinkle-fingered, his other hand grabbed mine in a blur of movement. Shockingly, a wave of excruciating pain electrocuted me. His life poured into my mind all at once and I screamed. Not just in pain, but in despair, too.

Because it really was that bad.

CHAPTER: FOURTEEN



After the pain died down and my vision cleared, reality grew slowly concrete again. Soon, my brain awoke, albeit groaning and creaking like an old piece of machinery in dire need of oiling.

Where was I?

A strapping man sporting a pointed beard complete with dark mustache and dressed in bizarre clothing — an actual cape skillfully arranged on his massive shoulders and knee-length leather boots decorated with big jeweled buckles — shot me a reproachful look from next to an enormous fireplace. The thing was so big it could've accommodated Santa plus a few truckloads of toys without any problem.

"I say, Lady Katherine, are you woolgathering again? Are you feeling alright?"

Aha! So it wasn't just the decor and the costumes that belonged to the Stuart period, but the people, too. British accent, fancy clothes, old-fashioned speech: I was getting the full ride. Still my treacherous lungs wouldn't cooperate! I could hear the scream building up in my throat, grating the inside of it, and yet when I opened my mouth, nothing. In fact, all I heard was the sound of a not-entirely-unfamiliar voice, even and cool.

"She is perfectly fine, Father. Merely suffering the aftermath of a poor night's rest."

I didn't hear the towering man's answer, on account of dealing with the latest shocker. It turned out that the calm voice belonged to a girl attired in a dress that looked heavy and uncomfortable, the fabric laden with floral patterns and the neck adorned with a large lace-trimmed collar. Like her father's, her curls were jet-black, falling freely around her childlike face. And while the voice sounded somewhat different, probably because of the pronounced British accent, that girl was J.

She was ... painting? In fact, we both were, I now saw. Each of us was standing in front of an easel, apparently working on the same subject, a portrait of the man by the fireplace. Except, one, I didn't paint. And two, I especially didn't paint wearing a bulky, old-fashioned dress you wouldn't even catch me wearing on Halloween.

What the heck was going on?

My voice was still missing when the image around me became blurred. Suddenly, I was in some other room, with J pacing around me and talking fast, chipper, and with the same unbelievably pronounced British accent. The ceilings were high, the furniture and curtains looked heavy, antique yet new. The floor was covered in places by animal skins, a very disturbing sight. Both J and I were again dressed in weird clothes. Judging by all that, plus the fact that I didn't see any modern fixtures, and I mean no TVs, no computers, not even a light switch, simple logic seemed to point toward the very illogical conclusion that we had somehow traveled back in time. This had to be the past. And while J seemed to actually belong here, since she walked, talked, and moved like she owned the ... whatever century this was, I was definitely out of my depth. I may have been in my own body, but I was hardly the one driving it. I couldn't even get it to speak, the worthless thing! Then again, maybe I wasn't supposed to talk. Maybe I was here to observe, not intervene.

But the biggest two questions were: how and why would Lucian bring me here?

“... upon my word,” J wrapped up her discourse, pausing in front of me, hands on her hips. “That is the whole truth. What do you reckon I should do, then? Should I talk to Father about it beforehand or trust that William can handle it alone?”

She returned to her pacing without waiting for an answer.

“Father will be none too pleased, of this I am indeed certain.”

Listening to those words coming out of J’s mouth was so bizarre it made me think of Eugene Ionesco and the Theater of the Absurd plays. Yet, here we were, in a manner of speaking, and J really was a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century British damsel who had exchanged the dramatic yet tasty makeup for ruffled dresses in colors and patterns my twenty-first-century J would never be caught dead in.

She stopped abruptly and more or less flew over to where I sat, curling up at my feet in a colorful pile of skirts, her brown eyes twinkling with a manic fire.

“Oh, Katherine!” she exclaimed, and her arms locked around me, head plopping in my lap. “Father won’t care about the difference in our stations. He’ll understand, won’t he? Oh, he will, say he will, for I cannot live without my William! I do love him so! I cannot imagine being without him. But I shan’t speak of it, for it won’t come to pass. I shall make sure.”

Then she was off again, back to marching up and down the room, her mouth and legs moving in the same turbocharged, amped-up tempo as before. It was hard to believe anyone could move like that without the involvement of caffeine or Coke, or a combination of the two, in industrial quantities.

Then the massive gilded door to my right opened and a servant entered. Apparently, in this century, J and I were filthy rich. The man announced in a nasal, overly affected tone, “I beg your pardon, Lady Elizabeth, but you have a guest. Sir William Kingscott. Where shall I show the gentleman? The library, perhaps?”

“Don’t be daft, man!” she countered sharply. “I should like to receive him right here. Make haste!”

The stocky, stiff-upper-lipped manservant gave a bow. “Very well, milady.”

My head was a beehive, buzzing as though with a thousand infernal bees. William Kingscott? Ryder, here? Hundreds of years ago? No, absolutely not — impossible! It had to be some kind of mistake.

And a mistake it was, indeed, because when the gilded door opened again, it wasn’t Ryder that came through it. It was ... *Lucian*. Wait, Lucian’s name was William Kingscott? What? Why? How?

He glided across the floor almost without touching it and stopped in front of J, gazing at her with intensity.

“Lady Elizabeth,” he breathed quietly, before his lips made contact with the back of her hand.

And, lo and behold, my fierce-tempered, warrior-natured best friend actually blushed! The sweetest Kodak moment, and my camera was back in the twenty-first century.

Then Lucian’s eyes met mine and everything changed. A fire was kindled and the blaze ate at me from within. Sweat coated my palms and air, sticky and solid, clogged my throat. He was the same old Lucian, and yet seeing him now was something of an epiphany. I simply couldn’t look away.

Golden curls surrounded his chiseled, perfect face and I found myself wondering

about their softness. Holy moly, what was I doing? Even if he'd only stepped off the *GQ* cover, why should I care? How could I, ever?

And just before the image around me became fuzzy once more and the scene got switched again, it occurred to me that he stared at me the same way I did at him, incapable of glancing away. Or at anyone else, including J, the girl whom I'd listened to professing her love for him with enough passion to set the world on fire. J, who in this time, was my ... sister, maybe? Which meant — wait, what did it mean? Was I after my sister's boyfriend? What kind of dysfunctional hussy was I in this century?

When it became possible to see past the haze that concealed my surroundings momentarily, the scene was a very different one. The music, the company, as well as the incredibly elaborate threads, seemed to strongly suggest that I was at a party. Not just any party, either, but a masked, um, ball? Whatever the location, it was cathedral-majestic: arched ceilings, intricately ornate niched walls, lots of candelabra and mirrors, shiny marble floors, the works. As for me, I was all dolled up in a garment so extravagant it was probably worth enough to feed a small country. The dress was lime green, cut so low in the front that my breasts were basically out strolling on their own. My red ringlets were mostly pulled up into a high chignon and my neck was adorned with a really heavy necklace made of big red stones that looked like rubies.

Before I could even attempt to get a sense of what was going on, I was already dancing with someone whose blond curls made my stomach take a steep tumble. Even from behind the cat mask hiding half his face, I still recognized him easily. Lucian again. And let me tell you, for someone who had never taken a single ballroom dancing class, I could sure twirl. How did I avoid getting dizzy and subsequently throwing up? Deepest of mysteries.

Just like in an old movie, he whirled and spun me around until we pirouetted right out of the ballroom and onto a large terrace, which was conveniently deserted. Still he didn't stop, but tugged at my hand, ensuring I followed him into the dark garden below. The night was chilly and the moon stayed out of sight. It wasn't exactly the best time for a stroll in the garden. Then I was pressed against a tree trunk, the coarse bark poking painfully into my back through the dainty fabric of my dress, and he was kissing me. Worse still, my lips were kissing him back!

And that's how I, Lillian Marie Crane, gained instant and unexpectedly deep insight into the subject of demonic possession. Yep, I could've easily explained the phenomenon because it was pretty much how I felt. My mind screamed, *No! J's boyfriend! Hands off, you tramp!* My body was happy, happy, happy and eager for more. My mouth still wouldn't speak for me. And my instinct warned in increasingly fortissimo bawls that this was still Lucian and whatever was happening had to be wrong on many, many levels. My inner voice, the twenty-first-century one, shouted, *Run!* Only, of course, I couldn't; I was trapped.

"I love you!" Lucian told past-me.

"I love you, too, William, but ... Elizabeth ... We cannot ... we mustn't..." My mouth spoke on its own.

He shook me by the shoulders. "Do not ... Please, I beg of you! I cannot live —"

"I cannot, either!"

The kissing resumed, now even fiercer because of the new, raw, desperate edge attached to it. There were no blue tendrils, nothing pulling me to him the way it did in the

real world. And that only shocked me more, because, even without them, when his mouth left mine something inside me broke.

Fortunately, since I was seriously freaking out, the scene around me disintegrated again. When the mist around me subsided, I realized that the next episode was set to take place in the woods. By then, it'd become pretty clear to me what the storyline was. Two girls, one boy, a world of possibilities? Not even close! More like two sisters, one boy, the perfect formula for a tragic, disastrous outcome. Tristan and Iseult. Romeo and Juliet. Cathy and Heathcliff. It seemed to me that, more often than not, star-crossed lovers had a real knack for ending up dead. So, was this it? Was I about to ... die?

More importantly, how did Ryder fit in with it?

Past-me and Lucian were talking, but I chose not to dwell on how terrible that made me feel. My insides were torn apart by emotions I prayed never to know again, in this time or any other. Past-Lily loved him with an uncontrollable, all-consuming, honest-to-God passion. But she also loved her sister just as dearly. Being caught in between was pure agony for her, and me, since I was trapped in the same body; it left her, and me, bleeding on the inside. If this was what love was all about, then I was suddenly grateful for the boyfriend-less status I had enjoyed before Ryder. Because I'd rather have my fingernails pulled out one by one with pincers than live through what past-me was living now. Who knew love could be so destructive?

"She knows!" past-Lily sobbed. "I know full well she does. Oh, William, we shall both be damned for what we have done!"

"Damned? Why should we be damned for falling in love, Katherine? It wasn't our plan, and it certainly lacked all malicious intent, you know that."

He tried pulling me into his arms, but my body dodged it. His beautiful face grimaced in pain and his hurt was my own.

"I shall not feel regretful, Katherine, I shan't! We are but lucky and blessed for having found each other. We belong together, my heart!"

Eventually, he managed to get his arms around me, lightly kissing my forehead and murmuring soothingly until I stopped fighting. Our closeness started to feel right somehow, even familiar in some respects. We simply fit together, although we shouldn't have, and I, the twenty-first century Lily Crane, didn't want us to. And then, from the pile of sweet nothings he whispered to me, trying to calm me down, I plucked something I'd heard before.

He said, "Girl with hair of fire and eyes filled with spring ..."

And that's when all turned hazy. Ryder's words coming from Lucian's mouth blurred the line between them and drowned my own perception, until there was no distinction to be made. Nothing but lips and skin. No room for guilt, no conscience, nothing but a sweet, numbing need.

My lips, *I*, kissed him and it felt good, familiar, something I'd done before. What was the point in questioning it?

There were signs announcing her arrival and they turned my body colder than a corpse. Steadily she came and I sensed every step of her nearing: the air becoming hotter, the leaves and branches trembling, the daylight cowering behind tree trunks. Still, I almost collapsed when I first spotted J. Lucian pushed me behind him, as if I were some dainty little thing in need of protection. Was I? From my own sister?

"You snake!" J shouted. "And you, Katherine, my beloved sister. You, my own flesh

and blood. Damn you! Damn you both to hell!”

She turned her eyes to the sky, and at last I understood why past-me was so scared. This J-from-the-past person wasn't a simple girl. She was powerful. Powerful in a way I couldn't quite remember and yet feared more than anything in the world.

“By the blood of my ancestors, O, ye vengeful halflings and elementary spirits, I call upon thee! I seek retribution! Blood, to be paid in blood, a hundredfold. Hear my plea! A curse. A curse upon them both!” she shouted.

“No!” past-Lily yelled.

My body broke into a run, but it was too late. Around me, the forest came to life. The trees and the ground stretched and groaned, thirsting for the reward she had promised. Sense wriggled into my mind in bits and pieces. J was a witch; she commanded enough power to wipe out half the world ... my blood ... I was going to die.

“Elizabeth, what have you done, sister?” past-me yelled.

There was no answer. I stumbled and fell just as the skies above me opened in a magnificent display of lightning bolts and thunder claps, at the center of which stood ... Ryder.

Almost too beautiful to look at and bathed in blinding silver light, he descended from high above, riding the lighting. A second, two ... he struck.

I died.

CHAPTER: FIFTEEN



It was such a relief to find myself back in the twenty-first century, alive and in the middle of the familiar decor of my own room, even if I was still holding Lucian's hand. The contact made me shudder, so I pulled free of him and stepped away, focusing on concealing the really embarrassing gasping sounds that showed exactly how freaked out I was. "I'm sorry." "What was that?" I rasped, my voice like pebbles scratching metal. "How did you do that?"

I wanted to be strong and poised to fight him and everything I'd seen, but my legs shook horribly. So I plopped down on the nearest chair and clamped my hands together in my lap. My head rang as if a million vibrating cells huddled together in my cerebrum. When Ryder had talked to me about hurting the people you love, I just assumed he was referring to breaking my heart, not cutting it out of my chest! No, this wasn't really happening. It was a mistake ... lies ... something —

"You can normally see into a person's past, can you not?" "Not like this, I can't. This was another lifetime. And I wasn't just watching it, I was actually there. How did you do that?" He let out an exasperated grating sound and made a gesture to move closer. When I instantly recoiled, he stopped, his expression edged with hurt.

"You still don't trust me? Not even after what you've seen?"

"But that's just it! I don't know what I saw."

Groaning again, he said, "You looked into your own past, Katherine. I don't know how I'm able to take you there, though I do have some theories. I think we're ..." he hesitated, "intertwined. That's how I can control whether or not my touch causes you pain. Why I can show you the things you don't remember anymore. And it's also how I can feel and soothe the chill inside you.

Our lives, our destinies, are intertwined."

I frowned. "Intertwined?"

He nodded, and now, for the first time, I noticed the dark-bluish circles under his eyes. He looked so drained! Images of what I'd seen in the past, fragments of how it felt to be held by him peaked on top of present-day reality and something writhed in my chest. I reminded myself that, despite the reassuring things I'd recently discovered at his house, I didn't trust Lucian. That, especially after witnessing the fight between him and Ryder in the afternoon, I had absolutely no reason to believe one word coming out of his mouth. I chanted it in the back of my head like a litany and hoped it would be enough to keep me from losing my way.

"Four hundred years ago, we fell in love," he said softly. "We were meant to be together. Soul mates!" he added fiercely, blue eyes glimmering like those of a Siberian husky. "I think because of that I can take you back in time. That and the hex, of course."

"Hex? What hex?"

He eyed me uneasily.

"I was supposed to marry your sister," he sighed, staring at the ceiling. "We didn't mean for it to happen, didn't intentionally set out to hurt Elizabeth. Not to mention that I, for one, had no idea she was a witch. When she found us out, she conjured up a monster."

“Ryder,” I whispered, remembering him descending from the sky. Remembering his killing blow.

My torment, my relief, my curse, my blessing. That’s how he’d described me once. But what did it mean?

“Your sister used her magic like a homing device when she called on him. And she loaded you with the essence of her power. Each time you come back, so does her magic. Basically, she painted a fluorescent bull’s-eye on you. So the hunter can always find you, because he’s drawn to the power that summoned him in the first place. The magic, which is now yours to wield, calls out to him ... so he can hunt you again. So I can watch you die. Again and again, the way your sister wanted it. This is the hex.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but only air fizzled in the back of my throat. My body was an anesthetized hollow, I couldn’t feel where I started and where I ended anymore. I couldn’t even hear my own heart beating; was I dead already?

Shoulders hunched, face drawn, Lucian was an echo of my own unrecognizable self. He had a haunted look in his eye, and not a trace of his usual contempt seemed to have survived his confession. Only sometimes when he would stare at me across a crowd had he seemed as tender. Never as lost, though. I could tell he would have liked to come closer, but didn’t want to scare me again. The weirdest thing was that I couldn’t decide if that made me happy or sad.

“What do you mean, I come back?” I asked eventually.

He tensed, but his eyes grew warm like the summer skies.

“I don’t know how you do it,” he breathed softly. “You just do. Roughly once every century. You came back first at the end of the eighteenth-century, then in 1898, and again, now.”

Was this real? Impossible to say at this point. But feeling was creeping back into me. The ringing in my ears hurt in a very non-dream-like way, which seemed to indicate that I was fully awake. Lucian standing only three steps away felt real enough, too, in a vaguely unsettling and confusing manner. But the rest of it?

How could I have been so wrong about Ryder? How could something that felt so good be, in fact, so wrong? Unless it wasn’t; unless Lucian was lying. But how did he take me back into the past, then? Maybe the images I’d seen, what he wanted me to think was my past, were actually fake. But ... how?

Only one answer fit the bill. Magic. Maybe Lucian was a sorcerer? He didn’t feel like one to me.

Was he actually telling the truth?

On and on I spun around in circles in my mind until I was dizzy and spent. Which one of them was the liar? Who was I? What was the truth? Was I about to die? If so, and if Ryder really was my intended hangman, how come he hadn’t tried to hurt me yet? God only knows I’d given him plenty of chances to go for it.

It didn’t add up. It didn’t make sense.

“Why can’t he talk about it? I mean, he tried to tell me who you were and he kind of choked on it.”

He smiled, but it was sad and lifeless.

“There are many limitations to what he can and cannot do because being part of the mortal sphere isn’t a natural phenomenon to him. You see, the hex only summons him here just long enough to do his job. Only long enough to take your life, after which he’s

supposed to return home. But his home world is such a nasty place no one in his right mind would ever willingly choose to live in it. So he's found a way to avoid that. A little taste of your power, before you die, is all he needs to remain in the human world even when he's not hunting you. Live here permanently. One taste of your power gives him enough leverage to hang on and play house with the mortals for another hundred plus years.

Until you come back again. Point being, since it's been a while since he's tasted your power, I think he's weaker."

He paused, looking thoughtful for a moment or two.

"If that's even the case," he drawled. "He could just be playing tricks on you or on your mind. He can be a very cruel creature, the halfling."

The word didn't sound familiar. "Halfling?"

Lucian smiled again. "Yes. Half-angel, half-mortal."

I choked and coughed violently. Angel? Actual angel? Halo-of-light, knee-high-gladiator-sandals-wearing, harp-playing ... *angel*? Because in my mind, all angels played the harp and walked around on downy white clouds sporting knee-high gladiator sandals. Or Birkenstocks; occasionally, some of them donned Birkenstocks.

"Can I sit down?" he asked.

Wrapped up in dumb amazement, I nodded absently. After gracefully sinking into a chair, he proceeded to quote the Bible for me, something that only proved once again how nuts my life was.

"And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose."

"Genesis," I replied automatically.

Nodding, Lucian said, "That's right. Genesis six, verses one and two. It tells of a special class of angels, called watchers, who were sent into the world to do just what their name implies. Watch."

I had the overwhelming need to hear my own voice. Maybe to convince myself that I was actually here, alive and hearing all this. My brain pulsed like a supercharged electric circuit. My neurons smoldered; a short circuit was imminent!

So I whispered, "But they didn't just watch."

Yep, it really was my voice; I discreetly pinched myself on the arm, too, just in case. The burst of pain confirmed that this was all real and happening right now.

Lucian shrugged, a curiously amused look passing over his chiseled face. He raked his fingers through the cropped hair, growing slightly more at ease. I, on the other hand, couldn't relax an iota.

"No, they didn't, in fact. The way you and I fell in love, even though we weren't supposed to, so did the watchers. They fell for the beautiful mortal women. Even worse, they then taught them all kind of things they weren't allowed to share. Astronomy, botany, magic, the arts that mortals were forbidden from messing with."

He paused, glancing at the back of his hands, as if checking the state of his nails. There was something very graceful about his hands. Or was it that skin of his, perfect, smooth, and petal-soft-looking?

"What's more, by mating with them, the angels gave these women some extraordinary skills."

Of their own volition, my eyelids fluttered closed. “Magical skills,” I choked out.

“Correct. That’s how the first witches came to be in the world. Of course, the process was a bit more complicated than that. Not all women were as strong or as naturally gifted. Some died, others went insane, some conceived.”

“The halflings.”

Again he nodded. “Yes. Legends claim that they were giants and monsters and that God asked the archangel Michael to pursue and capture them. That they were locked away in a mystical prison, there to await their judgment day and be thrown into hell. But ...” he heaved a sigh and gave me a direct, overwhelmingly intense look, “not all the offspring were monsters. The strongest women, those most talented magically, gave birth to these halflings. Human, almost ordinary-looking on the outside, but blessed with their father’s powers inside. Cold, detached, fearsome beings. Unlike the rest of their kin, unlike the monsters, the halflings committed no sins warranting their imprisonment. So they were allowed to roam free, in a manner of speaking.”

I swallowed the knot in my throat. “You mean, they live among us?”

He shook his head and smiled at the unexpected alarm in my tone. “Not exactly. Since they had a foot in each world because of their ancestry, they were tasked with guiding the souls of the dead between realms. Basically, they became trapped between heaven and earth, able to see into both but unable to be part of either.”

“Cruel,” I whispered, without thinking.

“Not the best of fates,” he agreed gloomily.

I cleared my parched throat and went back to frowning. “I don’t get it. If he’s supposed to be trapped between worlds, how come he’s here? And why hasn’t he made his move yet?”

“One of those few women who birthed the halflings was particularly magical. Very gifted and therefore very powerful. Because of it, her power didn’t die with her but was preserved and inherited by some female descendants in her bloodline.” He gulped breath. “This particular bloodline has authority over the halflings. Some of the women descending from this line can summon and even bind halflings to the mortal domain for long periods of time.”

I may have been half-mad with what my ears were hearing, but slow, I was not.

“You’re talking about my bloodline, aren’t you?” I asked, sounding too tired to even break down. “Which means that my sister, she ... oh no! My powers ... I ... she ...”

With my head wobbling on my shoulders as if my neck couldn’t support it, I fought the pieces falling into place, stubbornly denying the sense they made.

“I’m sorry,” he soothed. “Elizabeth, your sister, inherited a large and rare amount of power, even for your kin. And instead of setting it free, by either passing it on to a daughter or by ... well, dying, she encased it all in you. While the hex lives on, so does her power. Undiluted by time, untouched by external factors, fearsomely pure. When she called on the halfling, your blood was already brimming with her magic. And she used it, she used your blood, to root him to this world.

“Not permanently, as I said, but she opened the door for him to come back each time it’s time to hunt you again. The rest ... I already told you he’s worked out for himself that a little magical pick-me-up from you is enough to keep him here even when he’s not hunting. And each time he snacks on your power before killing you, his grasp on the human domain is renewed. He gets more than a century, again.

“He can’t stop hunting you, because the hex binds him to it. Refusing would get him instantly sent back between realms, in terrible agony. And still it wouldn’t save you. The chill you’ve felt lately is a fail-safe, set to kick in if the hunter is unsuccessful, and it would kill you in a very unpleasant, lengthy manner; not that it will ever come to that. The hunter will never fail because returning between realms is something he’d never consider of his own free will.”

He blew out a grating sigh.

“He’ll never stop, Katherine.”

My torment, my relief, my curse, my blessing. My warden and my freedom.

The unusual description, Ryder’s own words. My neural synapses were on fire. *Snap! Snap! Snap!* Like firecrackers, the connections popped up, bombarding my mind with facets of reason and logic, generating something I only vaguely remembered. Sense. In spite of my will, there was sense. I could squeeze my eyes shut all I wanted; short of performing an emergency lobotomy on myself, I couldn’t *not* see it.

SNAP! Torment. To live was to hunt me. Human or not, that had to be at least ... inconvenient.

SNAP! Relief. I was the one who could give him what he wanted. I could keep him in our world.

SNAP! Curse. The hex was binding and it stretched out forever.

SNAP! Blessing. Even if he was initially summoned to our world to take a life, he ended up making a life for himself here, between hunts.

SNAP! Warden. Unless he got access to my power before I died, he was forced to return home for over a century. From his point of view, I held the keys to both worlds, his and ours.

SNAP! Freedom. Between hunts, he was just that. Free, in a world he loved and wanted to be part of. As long as I put him in it.

“As for why he hasn’t tried anything yet, you have to understand that he cannot get near your power by means of force. It has to be a willing offering on your part. You have to give it to him voluntarily.”

My throat closed up. It felt as if I spun around on the world’s most infernal carousel. I couldn’t make it stop!

But Lucian didn’t seem to notice.

“He’s toying with you because he needs you to fall in love with him. He wants you to trust him. He needs you to care.”

He faltered, resuming much softer.

“You see, it’s not only that the hex forces him to kill you, it’s that you have to die loving him. Loving him enough to willingly give him a part of you, of your magic, even knowing that he’s about to take your life. In the face of your own death, he’ll need you to think of him first. And who’d do such a thing but someone deeply in love?”

Good point, my brain foggily agreed, shutting down. The only thoughts that remained flew back to the beach house and Ryder’s long fingers, slipping bits of food in my mouth. *Can I feed you?* he’d asked me then. Had it been a prelude to what he expected me to do in return? A dress rehearsal, with our parts reversed? Did he want me to literally feed him *life*, before I died?

“Whatever you might think is going on between you and him, you’re wrong. There’s only one scenario, Katherine. You offer, he takes; he sheds your blood, you die. Again.”

CHAPTER: SIXTEEN



It was impossible to manage basic thinking with him breathing down my neck, so I sent him away. He left quietly, a grim air shading that flawless face and tinting his eyes muddy-charcoal. But when the door closed behind him, it was still only a door. It didn't slam into me like a discus flung at my head by a giant thrower, the way it felt when Ryder left the room. If anything, watching Lucian go filled me with something similar to relief. But why should that be? He hadn't done anything to me, so why should I feel relieved at seeing him split? After all, if I was going to believe his story, he was my soul mate, the person for whom I literally died, repeatedly. Surely I should've felt something for him. Something other than relief at watching him leave, that is.

The phone rang, and the shrill sound had me jumping higher than a basketball through the hoop.

"Hi, Lil. Whatcha doing?"

"Oh, hey, J. Nothing much." Other than contemplating that I'm about to die for stealing your fiancé four hundred years ago, when you called on a nasty angel to slaughter my derrière, time and time again. "Guess what's up," she giggled. For someone who very nearly died only a week earlier, she sure sounded chipper these days. "Delilah joined Greenpeace and left to save the whales in the Bermuda Triangle, where she disappeared without a trace?"

"Fat chance. She has a new boyfriend, though."

It wasn't more than a couple of days since she'd been dumped again.

"Already?"

"Yep. Biker named Beau. The man has a lazy eye and talks with an accent, so you don't understand half of what he's saying. Something for which I'm actually grateful."

"Hmm," I agreed absentmindedly.

I didn't seem to notice me drifting. "Anyhow, that's not it."

"It, what?"

"What's happening is not a Delilah thing."

I tried to focus. "Okay, what kind of thing is it, then?"

"A Lucian thing."

"Lucian? Lucian Bell, Lucian?"

"No, Lucian, the werewolf from *Underworld*. Of course, Lucian Bell!"

Something inside me stilled. "What about him?"

I heard her take in a breath before effectively erupting like a volcano belching out excitement. "I did it! I asked him to prom! To which, FYI, it's been decided that he should be allowed to put in an appearance. And he said yes!" More psyched screeching followed.

"He said ... yes?"

"Uh-huh."

Without stalling or even hesitating, I confronted my feelings very openly. Was there the smallest hint of jealousy? Nope. Nada. Zilch. Absolutely nothing. Other than a vague concern for J caused by her unhealthy obsession with Lucian, the news left me cold.

“And what led to this wonderful development?” I asked, mainly on autopilot.

“Okay, so after you and Ryder left — oh, by the way, how was your day? Did you talk to him? Is everything okay?”

“Complicated question,” I said, without stopping to think.

“Complicated how?”

Hmm! “Can’t really say yet. Things are pretty much crazy.”

Crazy was the best word, I decided. Yes, we’d spent a beautiful afternoon together and I’d returned home as sure of my feelings as any seventeen-year-old crazy-in-love with her boyfriend could be. Same boyfriend who, it turns out, might care about my heart for more practical reasons. Carving-it-out-of-my-chest practical. It put a whole new spin on my crazy-in-love-and-sure-of-it spiel; peel away the ending and I was left staring at the most honest spelling of the facts. Crazy.

“That bad, huh?” She paused. “That’s it! I’m coming over. I have news, you obviously need to talk, and Mom is out with Beau so my dinner looks a lot like peanut butter and jelly right now. So I’m coming.”

No room for arguing. “Alright.”

“Be there in ten. See you soon.”

“I’ll be here.”

She hung up, leaving me approximately ten minutes to decide exactly what or how much of it to share. Not that I was in the mood to share any of it yet. My immediate ambition centered on finding Ryder and asking him all those hard questions. Was he really a supernatural hit man? Could he actually ... hurt me? Had it all been just lies between us?

But this was still *Ryder* I was talking about. Even if there was a lot going on between us, crazy-complicated and weird, I didn’t think that lying to each other was also part of the deal. Maybe not being able to tell me certain things, but not lying to me. Not toying with my feelings. Not plotting to kill me, for crying out loud! I tried to breathe over the pain in my chest, where it felt as if a knife was being slowly twisted, right in the middle of my heart. But I couldn’t breathe! The thought that Ryder, *my* Ryder, could ... No! I couldn’t fall apart. I had to fix this somehow. Get to the bottom of it and then fix it.

A lifetime of keeping a tight rein on my emotions came in handy. I gritted my teeth and made myself breathe, slowly, until my pulse returned to normal. Okay, this would all be o-kay, as long as I kept it together.

I went back to what I knew, eventually concluding that only one of two things could be true. Either I really was less intuitive than a block of rock, or Lucian had lied and tricked me. Somehow.

Replaying the many conversations Ryder and I had had, reflecting on the time we had spent together, and thinking even further back, to those long months when I had watched him from a distance, only left me more confused. Some of the things he’d said to me flat-out confirmed Lucian’s story. Hadn’t Ryder himself confessed to liking that book because of the main character’s sacrifice? Because he chose hell over heaven, for the sake of his wife? Hadn’t he said that, to him, that was the absolute expression of love? Maybe that’s how he saw the world. Maybe he expected me to take care of his needs, gift him with another hundred plus years in our world, and then go quietly, thus proving my absolute love for him.

But it didn’t add up. Ulterior motives or not, he did love me. I was as sure of it as I

lived and breathed. If he really was this halfling, my intended executioner, how did his feelings for me play into it? Only a glutton for punishment would do that to himself. You can't love what you know you're meant to destroy, can you?

And how come I hadn't caught him doing anything, um, angelic? He was never ordinary, but an actual celestial being? Wouldn't I have felt something? But, why would I have? It wasn't like I belonged to some exclusive Non-Humans 'R' Us Supernatural Club where I sometimes lunched with a bunch of angels and archangels. Even with my powers, which I'd only ever gingerly poked at, how would I know what an angel feels like?

Bottom line, did I really believe he could be a killer? The boy whose touch healed the cracks in my soul? No. Absolutely not. But was I being objective? Hadn't I watched and felt him take my life? Would I even believe it if he did it again?

Hard questions. A vicious battle broke out over the disagreement between what my mind "saw" and what my heart claimed. It ripped my soul to shreds. I'd never asked for my powers. Never complained about having to live like a pariah because of them, either. I had been brave and sensible and careful. And my reward consisted of what? Death? Before turning eighteen? At the hands of the only boy I ever loved? No, it couldn't be. The Universe was better balanced than that and karma wasn't just a theoretical concept. It didn't work like that, did it?

With no clear idea of how long I'd spent trying to figure things out, mainly as a means of keeping myself from falling to pieces, eventually it occurred to me that, despite the late hour, both J and Mom were still MIA. Numbly, I snatched my laptop and crawled downstairs.

First things first, I resolved, grabbing the phone with unsteady hands. My fingers trembled so badly that it took several attempts before actually dialing The Enchanted Forest Occult Emporium. It rang only once before Mom's musical voice answered.

"Enchanted Forest Occult Emporium, where we make your worries magically disappear. How may I be of assistance?"

"Hey, Mom, it's me."

"Lillian Marie!" she replied, with alarm in her tone. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing, I'm fine," I lied. "But it's kind of late. Aren't you coming home?"

There was a beat, followed by a smothered groan.

"Didn't I mention the cleansing Miranda's covenant was going to perform tonight?"

I ground my teeth. Miranda was a Wiccan priestess, head of a small practitioners' group with whom Mom loved to assemble socially and get chanty every now and then. Trouble was, of course, that whenever that happened the meetings took all night, which, among other things, also meant I was forced to get my own dinner. If only Mom had told me her plans before J made her decision to drop by. Now my BFF expected a nutritious meal, which I somehow had to produce myself. Fantastic!

"No, Mom," I said grumpily, "you didn't say anything about a cleansing."

"Honey, what's wrong? You sound, I don't know, strange."

Automatically, I repeated, "I'm fine. It's just that J's coming over for dinner, and I guess now I'll have to cook it."

"Ah!" She sighed. "Life's tough, honey. Go for pasta, it's quick and tasty."

Cooking, sure. Why not? What better way to greet my imminent death than by boiling spaghetti? The world falling apart around me, my boyfriend out for my blood ... it didn't have to matter. I had spaghetti. I could *pasta-fix* my way through it.

“Honey, I’m sorry. I really thought you knew about tonight. I promise to make it up to you, though,” Mom chirped.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumbled. “Have fun with the girls, and say hi to Miranda.”

“Will do. Bye, honey.”

“See you.”

The line clicked and then went dead. After a halfhearted look around the kitchen, I had to admit Mom was right; pasta seemed like the obvious choice. Penne Arrabiata, probably, since it was easy to make and spicy enough to appeal to J.

Just as well that I could cook the sauce with my eyes closed, considering that my mind paid zero attention to what my hands were doing. I found myself smiling at the realization that what had sparked all the trouble was in fact a forbidden love story. Apparently, some great-great-great-great-grandmother of mine had fallen in love with an angel, and vice versa. It was because of their liaison that I was in this position today. And maybe I shouldn’t have smiled, but I’d always been a sucker for doomed romances.

It was only now that the implications of it dawned on me. My ancestor had a thing for an angel; as a result, she’d become a witch. Her magic, the one he — the angel — had gifted her with, was passed down through generations and, due to the hex, most of it lived in me now. Only it wasn’t magic at all, now I understood. It came from him, from the angel. It was divine at the core. That meant ... was I part-angel, too?

Tiny blue stars floated in circles before my eyes. This was *so* not happening to me! No, I must have gotten it wrong! It couldn’t be, could it? I stopped my brain from taking yet another leap, firm about the need for researching the issue first. What did I know about angels? Pretty much a big, fat nothing. Research would save me, no doubt. It would prove that Lucian had lied, or that I was wrong in assuming that my powers had anything to do with rebel angels mating with mortal women and one of those being found on my own family tree. Hopefully, it would prove that it was all nonsense. Otherwise, I didn’t love my odds. “Sins of our forefathers” and so on; it put the whole karma concept in a completely new light. Maybe I was being punished, just not for my mistakes.

Leaving the sauce to simmer quietly and the water in the pot working toward boiling, I moved to the table and powered on my laptop. An irritating little voice in the back of my head kept whispering things I didn’t want to hear. Things about not thinking with my head but my heart. Things about not seeing straight, not when it came to Ryder.

“Shut up!” I shouted to no one, struggling to focus on the search engine window that had popped up on my screen.

Unable to decide on the best phrasing for my Internet search, I paused and wavered for a while. With unsure fingers, I typed in *Genesis 6:1–2*. Mostly religious Web sites filled up the first page of results, so I moved on to the second one. It didn’t take long to figure things out.

As expected, the passage turned out to be controversial. As far as I could tell, the hot potato was the phrase “sons of God.” Two different opinions emerged. Most sources argued that these “sons of God” were not angels but regular humans, which, of course, made the subsequent relations with the mortal women much less scandalous. While all this sounded nice and tidy, there were a few voices claiming the contrary. Unfortunately, their version of the truth confirmed Lucian’s story, word for word.

That meant ... uh-uh, I couldn’t even get myself to consider what it meant. A monumental pile of trouble, basically. And I stood smack in the middle of it.

CHAPTER: SEVENTEEN



"From the illicit union," one Web site stated, referring to the mating between the rebel angels and the mortal women, "resulted the offspring, which was often called an abomination. The giant monsters were meat-eaters and when they were done consuming the devils and fiends who dared oppose them, they turned against each other."

No mention of the halflings, but the news was hardly comforting.

"And God, after growing tired of their cruel mischief, had sent His most trusted lieutenant to deal with them. Michael, the archangel, came down ... rounded them up ... bloodshed and carnage ... thrown into the infernal regions ... there to await their final judgment day."

Once I got the hang of reading between the lines and steering clear of religious Web sites denouncing the idea of angels and humans getting chummy with each other as a sham and leaving it at that, I was able to turn up plenty of info proving that at least part of Lucian's story checked out. How did I feel about it? Curiously, there was some relief. For the first time in my life I had an actual explanation for the freak in me, and unlike what I'd often assumed, it wasn't anything bad or obnoxious. While it didn't change who I was, it did, however, provide some answers. Responsible for my powers were those few drops of angel blood laced into my own, which, when you thought about it, was kind of awe-worthy, save for the part where I had to die because of it.

It was really late by the time I finished researching Lucian's claims. I'd had the sense to turn off the heat under the sauce at some point and the penne were still waiting to take a dive in the pot of water that was bubbling gently.

But where was J?

No sooner had I reached for the phone than the front doorbell rang. Not once, not twice, but in a continuous, jarring wail that made me want to rip the darn thing right out of the wall.

"Alright, alright. I'm coming."

Even as my fingers curled up on the doorknob, I sensed something was wrong. My pulse quickened and the hairs on my neck bristled. With good reason, too, because as soon as I opened the door, J collapsed into my arms. Her face was stained with dried blood; her eyes struggled to stay open, but the eyelids kept flopping closed; her breathing was ragged and weak.

"J!"

Her weight almost toppled us both to the floor, and dragging her over to the fainting couch by the phone stand took some doing. She kept mumbling something, but the words were so slurred it was impossible to make heads or tails of what she said.

With one hand I brushed away some of the blood-smeared hair covering part of her face. Under it I found a large, gaping cut, dirty and still bleeding. With the other hand, I grabbed the phone and dialed 911.

"Yes, hello?" I fought for control of my voice. "My friend is hurt!"

While I did my best to explain the situation to the woman on the line, J's head wobbled from side to side, but she still couldn't keep her eyes open. Her lips continued to

move, weird sounds and hisses coming out in a jumble that may as well have been ancient Sumerian to me.

But then, just as I set the phone down, she whispered clearly:

“Ryder. It was Ryder.”

I heard sirens in the distance, and visions of armed police officers seizing and manhandling Ryder danced in front of my eyes. Ryder in handcuffs ... Ryder locked up ... Ryder bleeding. I didn't stop to think about it; I just reacted. By doing something colossally stupid.

I lied.

“You're wrong, J. Ryder was just here. He only left a couple of minutes ago.”

It made it final. I really had gone off the deep end.

CHAPTER: EIGHTEEN



While waiting for J to be patched up, and then, as I lied some more, to Sheriff Robinson, no less, I fought the uncontrollable urge to find a priest and confess my sins. Pronto. “Guilt” didn’t stretch over a fraction of how I felt. Worse still, I couldn’t understand what on earth had possessed me to do it in the first place. But there wasn’t a single cell in my body that doubted the truth. Even as I watched my best friend being hooked up to an IV and swathed in bandages, I did not second-guess myself. Ryder couldn’t have done this! Exactly how I knew it ... well, if it had only been that simple.

See, it was like this: when J had fainted in my arms, I’d seen what had happened. J was driving and was just about to make that last turn to my house when a deer jumped in front of the car. Even weirder, it wouldn’t move. Darn thing, all cute and harmless, just stood there, effectively blocking her way. So J got out of the car and walked over to it, at which point she was grabbed from behind. A wet cloth covered her mouth and nose, smelling sweet, like alcohol and acetone, and almost immediately she felt woozy. Still, she had struggled, even managed to swivel, but then somehow plummeted to the ground, where, unfortunately, her forehead smacked against a sharp-ribbed rock. But just before she lost consciousness, she managed to catch a glimpse of her attacker. It had been Ryder, I’d seen it clearly.

So why in the name of all things sane did I protect him? Why did I lie to my head-bleeding best friend and to Sheriff Robinson about Ryder’s whereabouts during the attack? After all, seeing is supposed to be believing, right? And I had seen Ryder attacking J, no doubt about it. But ... there had been a subtle, almost unnoticeable difference between all the other images I’d glanced at and the one showing Ryder’s face. It was almost like a veil, a fine sheet of mist overlaying his features. Did I imagine it? No, absolutely not. But did it mean anything? No idea. Should I have lied to everyone on account of it? No, no, and also no; consequently, my urgent desire to locate that priest and confess what I’d done.

I left the hospital after J drifted off to sleep, which didn’t take too long thanks to the painkillers she’d been given. The damage consisted of a couple of bruises plus that nasty cut on her forehead, and the doctor thought she was going to be okay. He’d keep her overnight for observation, though. That was actually a comforting thought, considering that I hadn’t managed to track down Delilah. It was better for J to be in a place where she’d be watched around the clock than to attempt convalescing at home, in an empty house.

As for *my* house, it was, simply put, out of the question, since I wasn’t headed there at all. No, I was on my way to the McArthur cabin, and by gods, I would get answers! Or there would be blood. Of course, if I was wrong about Ryder, there would be blood, alright. Most likely my own.

“Don’t be an idiot!” I scolded myself. “Why would he want to hurt J? Could he ever do something like that?”

Naturally, nobody answered me. Nothing but the steady purr of the engine cut through the silence surrounding me. The darkness had staked its claim fully over

Rosemound, which seemed strangely deserted. Stopping by the Enchanted Forest Occult Emporium and bringing Mom up to speed was probably a good idea, but I just couldn't postpone seeing Ryder. Not one minute longer.

So I drove too fast, torn apart by doubts, wondering if I was in fact rushing to my own death. But I hurried anyway. It made me think about those stupid horror movies where it's so obvious that if the girl goes into the dark room, she'll be hacked to pieces, but she goes in anyway. Was this it, then? Was the McArthur cabin my dark room? Was Ryder my Jason Voorhees?

"No!" I cried out again, hitting the steering wheel in frustration. "Remember how you feel when he kisses you! Could a murderer make you whole? At peace? Happy?"

Blinking back tears, I tightened my jaw and smothered the rest of the useless argument. Killing myself over working out what was going on was a huge waste of time and energy. After all, I thought, glancing at the woods outside the car window, this wasn't even a *Friday the 13th* kind of deal. This was definitely a *Blair Witch Project* thing — no real answers, only cold sweat. And, well, everyone knows how that movie ended.

Shivers surged through me almost as wildly as whenever the chill came back. Who knew fear could be so cold? Once I was parked next to the cabin, my heart raced in my chest like an Arabian stallion. Clenching my teeth, I killed the engine abruptly. I took a deep breath and wiped my clammy hands on my jacket.

Climbing out of the car, I moved toward the front door with a determined step. If only I'd felt as certain inside. To my right, adjacent to the main cabin, was an open shed, in which I saw Ryder's bike. Good, he was home.

With fingers curved so rigidly they looked like eagle talons, I tapped on his front door lightly. Once, twice, three times. Superposed images of him swirled in my head.

Him bathed in blinding silver light.

His eyes ... the killing blow.

His lips on mine.

The world dissolving into his kiss.

Him scowling at me in the cafeteria, as if warning me to stay away.

My warden and my freedom.

You own me, all of me.

They spun around in my mind, faster and faster, until I wasn't just scared but nauseous, too.

Then the door opened.

And it all went away. Everything seemed stupid and cheap somehow, and it simply vanished. I looked into his ever-changing, soulful eyes and realized that, once again, he had taken the hurt away. This time, without even saying a thing; just being there, just being him, was enough.

And, boy, was he a sight! Rocking a white wife beater and faded jeans, he was also barefoot and had couch-hair. I couldn't take my eyes off him, couldn't breathe, couldn't move at all. He screamed "home" to me. I was home! I'd made it.

So, instead of doing what I'd come here to do, I, like the perfectly sane, balanced creature I was, threw myself in his arms before either of us could utter a single word. And even if it lasted only a few moments, the contact chased away all that was eating at me. My fears, and Lucian, even J's attack, it all went away for a short while. Until ...

“Ry, is everything alright?”

The voice, tuneful and distinctly feminine, came from somewhere behind him, inside the cabin. And as my eyes snapped open, his arms tensed around me, as if in anticipation of having to hold me back.

“This is not what it looks like,” he whispered in my ear, pulling back just a little then. Sizing up my reaction.

Me? Everything was happening in slow motion. I braced my hands against his chest and pushed, fighting to break free from him, all the while twisting and turning, struggling to find an angle allowing me to see past him and that tall frame of his.

And then ...

She came to the door, pulling it open wider, allowing my eyes to take in all the details they could stand. Strangely, it wasn't the fact that she was barely covered by those shorts and cami that bothered me most. It wasn't even that she was leggier than a dream-Barbie-type. Or that her long blonde hair was shinier than any TV commercial variety and her eyes were so blue they made the Caribbean waters seem washed out by comparison. No, it wasn't the fact that she was model-gorgeous that got to me.

It was that she had couch-hair, too.

“Let me go!” I growled.

“No. Not until I can explain.”

I finally dared glancing up into his eyes. The lavender coiled while, at the center, the gold glimmered hypnotically. The storm clouds were back again.

“I should've called,” I said in a calm voice. I had no idea where it had come from.

His expression grew tighter and his lips thinned as he took in the adjustment.

“This is Mary Kate Davis,” he said, and the tightness bled into his voice. “My lawyer.”

Oh yeah, his lawyer, my tail! Though I didn't actually say a word, my face must have given away plenty because he increased his hold on me by a notch.

“Trust me!” he pleaded.

Uh-uh, not anymore. Not in this life.

“You must be his Lily,” Blondie intervened.

I didn't see that coming. How did she know my name?

It was then that Ryder finally let go of me. Running? Yeah, fabulous idea, if I were twelve, which unfortunately I wasn't. So I stayed put instead and took a closer look at Blondie. Yep, she was still gorgeous, but had very fine laugh-lines in the corners of her eyes. How did I miss those? So either Ryder was pulling an Ashton or he was telling the truth. Because one thing Blondie was definitely not was a teen. Then again, shorts and skimpy top was hardly what I called lawyer-wear.

“Gosh,” I said sharply. “Never would have taken you for a lawyer. My Dad's a lawyer. He likes to wear suits.”

She laughed at my remark and it sounded so warm and velvety, I immediately thought of melted chocolate. Gee, didn't he know any other, um, lawyers? This one lived and breathed sexy.

“Typically, I do, too,” she replied, in the same tuneful, polished voice that matched her laughter to perfection. “However, as regards the situation at hand, I came all the way from New York to see Ry. So this,” she pointed at herself, “is my way of putting my feet up after a long journey.”

Hmm! My eyebrows rose sarcastically.

She ignored that and continued. "It helps, of course, that Ry and I go back longer than I care to admit."

Okay, I'd had just about enough of this nonsense. "Lady, how long could you go back? He's seventeen."

She laughed again, her eyes moving from me to him. "I think I understand now. She's got moxie."

"Yes, and I can also turn you into a toad by wriggling my nose! Want to see?"

More soft peals of laughter. Well, wasn't she a bundle of annoying pain-in-the-neck.

"And by the way," I added, seething, "his name is Ryder. Not Ry, Ry-der. Think you can remember it, or should I put it down on paper for you?"

The first signs of anger glinted in the perfectly blue eyes. "Actually, it's William," she said.

My jaw fell. How did *she* know that? Did she also know there was another fella haunting Rosemound and claiming to also be William Kingscott?

"And I wasn't making things up. We really do go back a long time."

"Obviously, you and I have a different understanding of the long time notion. You do know he's seventeen, right?" I insisted, staring her down. Or trying to.

"Yes, you're right. He's seventeen." She paused. "For many, many years now."

The "huh" never made it out of my mouth, on account of Ryder finally putting his foot down and breaking up our catty blowup.

"Okay, enough!" he shouted, so sharply that both Blondie and I blanched.

What was going on? This ... this ... woman, who was obviously pushing ... thirty? forty? — hard to tell in the Botox Age — and claiming to be a lawyer, had just been shouted at by a kid. And in reaction she lowered her eyes guiltily, and then apologized?

"I'm sorry, Ry. Please forgive me."

Ryder groaned audibly, shaking his head and suddenly looking more mature than any seventeen-year-old should. And yes, taking this long to see it singled me out as extremely slow on the uptake, but it wasn't until now that it occurred to me that she might be telling the truth. That maybe he wasn't seventeen after all. All those little things that set him apart from other boys, like the way he acted, the things he cared about and the ones he didn't, that very mature vibe he gave off all the time ... why didn't I see it before? Boys my age cared about Xboxes, naked girls, and parties. They were shallow, self-absorbed, and impatient. They just didn't behave like Ryder. But ... maybe halflings did. In fact, immortal creatures whose lineage went back to actual angels surely did. They could've had gorgeous older women begging for their forgiveness, too. They could've fallen off balconies and not break anything. They could've touched me without causing any pain. They could've made me think and feel whatever they wanted. Whatever they needed me to. They ... they ... he ... it all fit.

Lucian had been telling the truth. Ryder wasn't human. He really was the halfling whose mission was to stalk me through the ages and con me into offering him another hundred years in our world before he traditionally, um, killed me. Gulp!

CHAPTER: NINETEEN



For the second time tonight, I wanted to flee. Run as fast as my legs could carry me. But once again, my stupidity somehow won over the self-preservation instinct. Or was it the shock? How did I get here? How did I land myself in a spot where my life was in danger from my own boyfriend?

Because he's not really your boyfriend, you moron! I shouted in my head. *He never was. He's a supernatural creature whose job is to make you care about him. To trust him. Give him a taste of your magic, a little pick-me-up before ... before he ...*

I inhaled deeply, then let out a broken sound that matched the level of my terror like a nerve-racking dream. My eyes ran between the two of them, wanting to speak, but totally failing to remember how. There were no words left. Nothing. There was nothing.

Blondie spoke first. "Why don't I slip into something less casual and hit the trails for a while? I hear walking in the woods at night has therapeutic merits."

Ryder didn't answer. He just looked tired, his face sharper, more angular, than usual. Her suggestion was met with a total of zero interest, maybe because all his focus seemed to be aimed at holding my gaze. Without wanting to, I drew back a step and then wondered if he would pursue me. Had I decided to make a run for it yet? I couldn't remember. It was as if someone had taken my brains and dropped them into a high-speed blender. My mind was a tangle of dead ends.

"You don't age, you ... you don't die," I finally whispered, taking another step back.

Almost as if someone had spilled ink inside them, his silver eyes turned dark. Guarded. I tried deciding if he was mad or sad; I couldn't. My heart all but roared in my chest. The way he looked right now, with that hair messy, his face tight, and the dusky eyes, would be etched into my memory forever. This was how I'd remember him, I thought, because this was the last time I'd see him and he would still be only Ryder. Past this point ...

He didn't answer, but his eyes closed slowly, in silent confirmation, which to me carried the finality of a death sentence.

And something snapped inside me. Like a dead branch, from a dead tree, my heart came apart with a *crack*. Memories of him, of us, of lips, and hands, and silky golden skin exploded into a lovely, painful jumble behind my closed eyelids, and inside, and all around me, coming apart as if in a cubistic Picassoesque jigsaw. Pieces of him, and of us fell hard and crushed me, the strength of their blows carrying deep inside. They tore me apart. Lies ... they had all been lies! None of it mattered; none of it meant a thing. Lucian had been right all along, all Ryder had wanted was to gain my trust so he could use it for his own purposes. To stay in our world. I was an instrument to him. Nothing more.

"You lied to me," I said, in a weak, throaty whisper.

After a short beat, he replied, "I know. I'm sorry."

I couldn't listen to this. I couldn't hear any of it. My chest felt like glass, shattered into millions of pieces. All of it hurt.

So I turned around and ran.

Or, I tried to. I made it as far as my car, but before I could open the door, he was

behind me. His arms braced against the car door, on each side of me, and his body weight pressed me into the cold metal. I didn't fight, too frozen to attempt it. His mouth hovered above my ear, hot breath raising goose bumps across my neck. Behind me, above me, he towered, surrounding me in him. I should've been terrified, and on some level, in that itty-bitty part of my brain that was still working, I probably was. But mostly I just wanted to lean back into him. Mostly I just wanted to turn and put my arms around him and hide my face in his chest. Insane, I know.

"I hoped you wouldn't find out yet," he whispered.

Well, duh! Wouldn't that have made everything easier! If I never saw it coming. Never saw *him* coming.

"I didn't want you to suffer, Lily. It's pointless. It won't change a thing anyway. We are who we are and the end is always the same."

Tears leaked out. I squeezed my eyes, trying to strangle them. Pathetic. I was such a pathetic, lame-brained loser. Even now, as he was basically confessing to it, telling me that he'd take my life no matter what, my stupid heart still ached for him. Was I crying because I would soon die? No, that would've made me relatively normal. But once a freak, always a freak. My tears were for him. Because he'd lied to me. And because to die was to lose not my life, but him.

"Let me go," I sobbed. It sounded soft, lacking resolve.

His body was so warm against my back! So familiar and real and strong. I could swear his heart was pounding so hard, it almost drowned out the sound of my own.

He sighed, deep and painful. "Don't I always?"

And he moved away.

I didn't look back. I didn't say another word. I just got into the car and concentrated on reversing without hitting any trees. It gave me a good excuse to look back and hide my tears from him. Enough was enough already! He wasn't my boyfriend. He wasn't even my friend. And maybe I wasn't ready to hate him yet, but by gods, I wasn't going to show him that I loved him, either. I needed to think, get away and think. Where do I go from here?

Was there any way to avoid dying, now that I knew what the deal was? Lucian's words came back to me: *There's only one scenario, Katherine. You offer, he takes; he sheds your blood, you die. Again.* But what if I didn't offer? What then? Would he kill me anyway, even before landing his magical pick-me-up? Before I gave him another century in our world? Without snacking on my power, he'd be forced to leave the mortal sphere after doing away with me. He'd have no choice but to return between realms. Until I was born again, which would bring him back, too, along with a new chance at trying all this again. But would he kill me even if I refused to hand him the keys to the proverbial kingdom beforehand? Yes. Yes, he would, because the hex forced him to. And even if he failed somehow, there was always the fail-safe. The chill. I died no matter what.

End game.

I pulled up in front of my house not a minute too soon; tears blinded me to the point where wrapping the car around some tree was only a matter of time. Crossing my arms over the steering wheel, I plopped my head on them and spent the next who knows how long sniffing and whimpering until my throat grew sore and the tears ran dry. Eventually, the storm inside me died out. With the modest composure, yet another wave

of unanswered questions poured inside my head, faster and heavier than torrential rain.

Why would Ryder go after J?

The images I took from her mind, had they been real? Because I did “see” him, through her eyes, grabbing her. Maybe it was just me not wanting to face up to the truth. Had it all been just autosuggestion?

No, I didn’t imagine that foggy film clinging to his face; in J’s memories, his features were blurred. It meant something, because normally whatever I picked out from someone’s mind was clear, easy to understand and follow.

Even when the person I was touching had trouble remembering it with clarity, my perspective lacked any and all vagueness.

Except for, maybe ...

Adrenaline zoomed through me like fire. Because, come to think of it now, I had dealt with that same kind of “blurry vision” once before. Earlier tonight, in fact, while holding Lucian’s hand and peering into my own past. It wasn’t like the whole thing had been hazy, no, only some of the “scenes” featuring Lucian. But this wasn’t an exact science and, besides, what he’d shown me wasn’t your dime-a-dozen, quick peek-a-boo into what lies beyond your neural synapses. We were talking about another lifetime. So I’d written off the random blur as some weird side effect.

But had it really been that, a side effect? Maybe. It had been a strange night. Or maybe I was losing my touch. But, whatever it meant, if anything, I didn’t have the energy to prod at it more. Accepting the truth about Ryder hurt so much, I would’ve done just about anything to prove it wrong, which was probably what I was doing. Grasping at straws.

After finally killing the engine, I crawled out of the car and into the house. Wasting the night away cramped in the seat wasn’t going to solve any of my problems. The grandfather clock opposite the staircase told me it was just after one a.m. My shoulders fell heavily, weightier than marble. I felt smothered by the quiet. Why did Mom choose tonight, of all nights, to get cleanse-y with her friends?

Then I noticed the smell. Something was definitely burning! Charging into the kitchen, I was greeted by the sight of two blackened pots. I’d forgotten to turn off the stove. Going through the motions at high speed, I plunked the ruined cookware in the sink and then opened the windows as widely as they went. Coughing and holding back fresh tears, I collapsed on a chair. For the longest time I just sat there, limp, too spent to move, too beaten to try. Ultimately, the night chill nudged me upward, and after bolting the windows shut, I came across my laptop. One tap on a key and it was back from sleep-mode, revealing the last Web page I’d been navigating. Right, angels and angel-like fiends.

Grimacing at the insanity that had taken over my life, I tried to breathe over that fear in my throat. The fear that tasted more bitter with every second that rolled by. Claustrophobia hit next; the walls were closing in on me. I needed to get out of there!

It was coming up on two thirty a.m. when, after grabbing my laptop, I ran out of the house again. I drove to the hospital in complete silence. Around me, Rosemound sprawled across hillocks and dwindled into the same woods I’d spent most of my life exploring. Yet I couldn’t remember a single time when everything had seemed so still. As if waiting for something. Something big and bad was on the way and my beloved woods could feel it, too.

Because of that dark, gloomy feeling, I was happy to pull into the well-lit parking lot of the Rosemound Clinic. As expected, this being Rosemound and all, nobody inquired about my business there at such a late hour. Just as well. Not even the National Guard could have stopped me from spending the rest of the night at J's bedside.

She was asleep. Still hooked to a monitor and a couple of IVs, but breathing softly, peacefully. Relief enveloped me like a down comforter and I crashed on a floral-patterned love seat in the otherwise entirely white room.

It couldn't have been more than a few minutes. I'd only just opened the laptop, my eyes drifting once more over the angel info, when a silky male voice made my head snap around so fast that it hurt.

"Angels, huh? I hear it's a fascinating subject."

Smiling, blue eyes twinkling alertly despite the late hour, Lucian sized me up steadily. I sighed in resignation.

His smile only grew wider in response.

CHAPTER: TWENTY



Lucian was his usual drop-dead gorgeous self. In yet another one of his typical getups consisting of slacks, pale-pink shirt under buttoned vest, royal purple slim tie, and the unfailing British-inspired blazer, he looked rested and fresh. In the corner of his mouth, a thin bluish scar was the only sign that some twelve hours earlier he'd been in a fight. He was an interesting visual, I reluctantly admitted, and it had nothing to do with his innumerable preppy outfits, however awesome, and even more awesomely modeled. His charm was in those perfectly balanced features, in the light blue eyes glinting with mischief, and tricks, and secrets, and loads of other monkey business, and in that arrogance you'd expect from some eighteenth-century British lord, but not from a seventeen-year-old American teen. That fit, I guess, since apparently he really *was* a British lord, albeit a seventeenth-century one. To sum up, he was a package alright, a pretty impressive one. But it didn't make any difference to me. "What are you doing here?" I hissed, trying to keep my voice down, not wanting to disturb J. "It's three in the morning." "I know that," he answered smoothly, picking an imaginary bit of lint from his expensively clad shoulder. "I've been here for hours."

He didn't actually say the words, but the pointed silence at the end stank of blame. Obviously, he thought I should've stayed with J, too; I was being judged. Oh, goody! Just what I needed in the middle of my whole life coming apart.

Having a conversation with him about it, however, wasn't something I was willing to try next to J's bed. So I stood up, motioning for him to follow me, which he did, in blessed silence.

Barely giving him the chance to shut the door behind us, I exploded, "I'm not going to even ask how you knew to be here, but just to be clear: what I do, where I go, and whose bedside I choose to watch over is none of your business!"

Got it?"

"Bedside watching, your business, got it," he nodded.

He thought this was funny. How wonderful!

"Once more," I said, crossing my arms over my chest, "what are you doing here?"

My tone, sharp as a razor, passed him by. With a Cheshire-cat smile, he gestured vaguely to my right and the row of couches lining the wall. "Why don't we sit down?"

If I hadn't been so dog-tired, I would've said no, and that only rattled me more, because ... exactly what did I have against him? He hadn't done a thing to me. Otherwise, he was jaw-droppingly hot, unusually articulate, and interested in me. Could I say that about someone claiming to be my *soul mate*? Not to mention those blue tendrils and their electric-soft, deep-massage effect on me which was only growing sweeter the closer he and I got. But ... he wasn't Ryder. My Ryder, who was planning my death. Shouldn't I have felt glad he wasn't Ryder?

Ah, Ryder again.

And, my oh my, if whatever had snapped inside me didn't hurt just the same. Was it ever going to heal? More importantly, would I live long enough to feel it happening?

"You look tired, Katherine. Are you okay?"

“Stop calling me that!” I barked.

Katherine was the girl who’d started all this. She was me. But as long as no one called me Katherine, there was still some distance between us. I still had time.

He leaned over his knees, propping his elbows on them, and knitting his fingers under his chin. His eyes never left me.

“You’ve talked to him, haven’t you?”

I passed my hands over my face roughly, scratching, needing the jolt of pain to keep the tears at bay.

“I’m sorry, pet,” he said softly.

“How come you’re here?” I asked, now with some civility, though still wary of looking at him.

There was a carefully maintained distance between us and I was fine with it. And with not staring at him directly. It made me mad because it was stupid and meaningless, but we can only do what we can do. And I couldn’t do more right now.

“I know someone who works in the hospital,” he explained. “She’s a nurse and I was visiting her when I heard about J. When I realized that nobody was sitting with her, I decided to hang around.”

What he’d done was oh-so-sweet, but I ignored the relevance of that because, while he was dripping sweetness, politeness, and good intentions, my Ryder was shrinking into quite the opposite. Instantly, I found myself mad again, something clearly conveyed by the humph I let out with deep feeling. And no, I shouldn’t have blamed him for turning out to be everything I always thought Ryder was, but my feelings couldn’t be helped.

“Aren’t you the friendly ...” the best insulting noun eluded me, “whatever! You moved here, what, only weeks ago? And already you’re best friends with everyone in school, while still finding time to date a nurse. I mean, what’s up with all the networking? You rounding up constituents, just in case you might want to run for mayor?”

A smothered chuckle drowned out the end of my question; as usual, he found me amusing. “Why, Katherine, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re jealous.”

“Dream on, Mr. Popular. And my name is Lily.”

He was suddenly somber, eyes boring into mine the way they always did, as if that endless blue was suddenly solid. Fingertips. He probed with his eyes, but my skin felt actual fingers gliding across it. The blue tendrils gave a new tug and I answered by moving a bit further away from him. I was running out of breath.

Silkily, he said, “I don’t have to dream anything, *Katherine*. I remember a time when you were jealous if I so much as glanced at someone else.”

Despite good efforts, my treacherous body still reacted: a spell of buzzing warmth pinching at my muscles until they twitched. Even his voice did something to me, something physical. Snaking around me like a caress.

I coughed without needing to, to mend my voice, which was just fine. “Was that before or after we betrayed my sister?” At his lack of answer, I pushed again. “Go away, Lucian. Just go back to wherever you came from. Leave me alone.”

“I can’t,” he responded, his voice so sad, so full of longing. “I ... feel for you, Katherine! I need to be where you are. With you.”

People in the Republic of China must have heard my jaw snapping.

“Well, you have a funny way of showing it! J told me you were going to take her to prom. Now, you have a girlfriend working here. I mean, exactly how do you need to be

with me?”

His expression stayed exactly the same, almost as if he hadn't even heard me. Sort of blank. And that skin; holy smokes, how could anyone have such perfect skin? A little pale, true, but flawlessly smooth and *so* soft-looking. Ideal. Like ripples of silk, beautifully laid over the strong bone structure underneath, molded perfection. A tad cold, just like his eyes got at times. Where Ryder's tanned skin was as if coated in gold, Lucian's, on the other hand, was sheer alabaster. They were perfect opposites. Maybe that's why I couldn't really like him.

“The nurse in question is actually our landlady. I was here dropping off some mail. As for the rest, why would you care who I take to prom?” he smirked.

“Oh, I *so* don't! But J's my best friend. And she's got this ...” I bit my tongue, however late.

“Thing for me?” He finished what I wouldn't.

“I just don't want her to get hurt,” I answered coolly. And immediately winced, because I was too late in making that wish.

“Need I remind you that I was the one who saved her life, just last week?” he asked, eyes gleaming like those of a wild animal. “Why would I hurt her? I like J. She's amusing.”

“I swear,” I started threatening, my hands balled into fists, “if you break her heart, I'll give you hives or something!”

He laughed joyously. “Hives? Really, you'd do that?”

“For breaking J's heart? You can bet your —”

“I couldn't care less about her heart,” he cut me off, all of a sudden back to being grave again. “The only heart I ever cared about in this world is yours.”

I scoffed dismissively.

“I took an interest in J for practical reasons. You see, she really *is* Elizabeth, your sister.”

“What?”

“Come on, Katherine, haven't you noticed the physical likeness?”

“Yes, of course I did, but —”

“I imagine she still feels the pull of the magic that was once hers. Providing she's reborn at the same time as you, she couldn't possibly resist it. Your power would lure her to you. To it. Kind of like a lasso. Like rope.”

“Like the tendrils between us?” The question slithered craftily out of my mouth, and biting my lip right after didn't change a thing. The words floated between us for a while, like the proverbial elephant in the room — a flying one, let's call him Dumbo — while I, like a coward, kept my eyes glued to the floor. How could I be so inept?

“Tendrils?” he asked quietly. “Are you drawn to me?”

There was no admitting it, not now, not ever, but for some reason, when I opened my mouth and tried to lie, nothing came out. And he took advantage of it, moving his open palm over one of my hands, which were clutching the edge of the couch so hard that my knuckles were white. Soft warmth, prickling gently, spread through my whole arm. It felt good, so good, I couldn't even imagine not reaching out to take his hand.

“Stop fighting it, Katherine,” he whispered.

In response, I swatted him away with a loud smack. That instant my hand touched his was liquor-filled candy, the kind wrapped in the thickest dark chocolate. I always

hated the chocolate, while still wanting the filling. The bitterness of the chocolate made me grimace, but the filling tasted that much sweeter because of it.

"Don't try to touch me again, Lucian. I'm serious."

"Or what, you'll give me boils?"

For once grateful that instead of pressing the issue he'd gone right back to poking fun at me, I hurried to change the subject. "So, what are you saying? That J is a witch?"

"Nope," he answered with confidence. "I spent enough time with her to be sure of it. I've come across animals with a greater paranormal ability. She's just a shell."

I shot him an arctic glare. "Shell? J is no —"

"I just meant that she only looks like Elizabeth, that's all," he said, hands held in the air. "Completely different soul. Better one, too, probably."

His answer should've squashed my anger, but it didn't.

"How do you know these things?" I barked again. "I mean, what are you? Do you die with me, too, and then come back? How does it work with you?"

But with each new word my voice softened, growing hushed and indistinct, until I ended up speaking so softly I could barely hear myself. One second I couldn't stand looking at him, the next it was almost as if I cared. It was enough to drive anyone mad.

"No," he answered dryly. "I don't go away when you do. Part of my punishment is to wait for you. I suppose you could say that I'm trapped outside time somehow, because the flow of it changes everything and everyone except me. I'm only in the world because you are. My purpose is to wait, search, and find you every time you return. Only to then lose you all over again."

Without wanting to, I flinched at that. At the sadness beneath his words, at the loneliness, the pain glimmering dully in his eyes.

"What's the matter, Katherine?" he asked quietly. "Hard to decide if you care?"

Words, clipped by alarm, made it past my lips before either of us could blink. "I *can't* care! I don't even know you."

That sounded pathetically weak. I tried harder.

"You claim to be William Kingscott from way back when, but you call yourself Lucian Bell. And what about your parents? How can you have —?"

"I've been alive for almost four hundred years!" he bit back, the unflappable air shattering at last. "I can't go by that name all the time. It would raise questions. And there are no parents, obviously. Just a carefully maintained lie."

"And why is Ryder called William Kingscott, then?"

"How should I know? Twisted sense of humor?"

I shook my head stubbornly. "But you, I mean, I don't know you," I repeated lamely. "You came out of nowhere, with your claims and the historical trips to cuckoo land, and now my best friend is lying in a hospital bed."

"You blame me for J, too?"

No, of course I wasn't. He'd had nothing to do with it. So I wasn't making any sense. So what?

"But that's not why you're so mad at me, is it?" he asked, calm again. "You're mad because I forced the truth on you. Your life was great before I opened my mouth. It's me who ruined everything, correct? I'm the one who told you the truth about him, so instead of blaming him, you've decided to hate me. Don't deny it!"

I bit back a whimper, resenting his insight, the fact that he was flat-out right, and that

he'd actually gotten there before me. And, as always, being attacked only turned me that much more aggressive.

"Everything *was* great before you showed up in Rosemound! He's been here for twelve months and never even glanced in my direction until recently, let alone done something to hurt me in any way. And now, what, he's after me? And you ... where were you? This story of yours doesn't make sense. I mean, shouldn't I feel something for you? After all, I betrayed my own sister for you. I died for you so then ... how come I don't ..."

Since I couldn't finish, he, ever so considerately, did it for me.

"Love me? No, Katherine, that's not it. What bothers you isn't that you don't love me. It's that you do love him."

I felt compelled to meet his eyes, and when I did, to my surprise I found that even more than hurt, he seemed furious. Fingers raking through his hair, he speared me with a look devoid of life. The lips pinched in a line made his cheekbones stand out. He was beautiful, but also a bit scary, now that he was mad.

"He's had some tricks up his sleeve, Katherine," he hissed. "He's made it very difficult for me to find you this time around. But I got here as fast as I could." He paused. "As for why he hasn't made his move yet, as I said, he needed to gain your trust. Your love. Only then can he hope to get access to your power." He let out a sharp breath. "It looks like he's succeeded. There isn't much you wouldn't do for him now, is there?"

I tried. "That's —"

But he cut me off. "Tell me, sweet Katherine, what would you do if he asked you for a taste? If he explained that, without it, he'd be condemned to long, long years of hardship? Trapped in between realms, one foot in each world yet part of neither?" One eyebrow rose disparagingly. "Hmm? What would you do? Say no to him?"

In spite of wanting to dismiss the idea on the spot, I found myself hesitating.

"That's what I thought," he continued, standing abruptly.

He gave me another sideways glance, eyes gleaming with cold anger and something akin to disappointment.

"Like it or not," he added in a low, subdued tone, "I am the one for you. The very fact that I have to stand here explaining this to you ..."

Now he looked really hurt. Confusing! Hillary-Clinton-landing-in-Bosnia-under-ghost-sniper-fire confusing.

"Our love wasn't just some love, Katherine. Divine intervention was involved. Our lives ..."

My throat pulsed with the ache of gulping too hard. "I —"

He held up his hand, brusquely. "Don't! I don't want your pity. I ... I'll go find us some coffee, okay?"

Not waiting for an answer, he turned on his heel and was suddenly gone. Leaving me all alone with mixed feelings and my doubts.

I sat there thinking dumbly, *Why, if I haven't been the busiest bee today!* So, apparently, I was a bona fide witch, with a lineage going back to a group of rebel angels. I was also a treacherous vixen who had stolen her own sister's fiancé. And I was cursed to be reborn again and again, only so that my long-lost lover could watch me die. Not to mention that I'd somehow gotten my best friend involved in the weird maze that was now my life and, as a result, she was now in a hospital bed. And, of course, I was in love with

the halfling charged with killing me, but I had no clear, concrete feelings for the boy who had followed me through the centuries because our lives were, as he'd put it, intertwined. Because the hex and our actions from four hundred years ago had bound us together. Forever. But no, I loved Ryder. All I felt for Lucian was regret. Living the way he had was a tragic way to go on, especially for hundreds of years.

I should be shot! I decided. *By real Bosnian snipers.*

When I'd woken up yesterday, figuring out my own identity wasn't even a blip on my radar. Today I had no idea who or what I was anymore. Only one thing hadn't changed: my feelings for the creature destined to kill me.

Yes, I was still sure of my love for Ryder, but it didn't change anything. I was still going to die. At his hand.

CHAPTER: TWENTY-ONE



Balancing a steaming cup of coffee on top of a Drake's apple pie in one hand and a pack of Austin peanut butter&cheese crackers under a second cup of coffee in the other, Lucian gave me a sheepish smile. "Sorry," he shrugged. "I know this doesn't exactly qualify as food, but the cafeteria is closed and I thought you might like something to eat."

I pushed my laptop away. After a good amount of poking around the Web, I'd finally stumbled on an article featuring halflings. The source, obscure, I'll grant it, claimed that the creatures in question, much like the "full" angels, had their name tattooed on their backs. One symbol, impossible to pronounce by a mortal, burned between their shoulder blades, at the very spot from which their wings would sprout. If anyone should call the halflings, or angels, by their real name, that is, reading the *unreadable* symbol etched into their skins by the "primordial fi res of Creation", a magnificent pair of wings should burst from the center of that tattoo. More food for thought. Did it mean that Ryder's name wasn't even Ryder, since, apparently, William was bogus, too? Did he really have a weird tattoo on his back that, when read properly, suddenly made actual wings shoot out?

Forgoing the food for thought in favor of some real nourishment, I accepted Lucian's offerings with much sincere gratitude, now embarrassingly aware of my not-so-discreetly growling stomach. He sat on the couch, careful not to touch me, and sipped his coffee in small gulps while staring into space.

"You could go home, you know," I suggested between mouthfuls.

"So could you."

I gulped some coffee, pleasantly surprised that it wasn't half as bad as expected. Still, an unpleasant taste swamped my mouth. "Why would he go after J?" "You're joking!" he exclaimed.

I only wished. "J said so herself."

The effort to understand lined his high forehead, but with little to show for it, from what I could tell.

"I have no idea," he admitted. "She's your best friend, but other than that she's irrelevant. To him, to us, to the whole situation. She looks like Elizabeth, but only on the outside. She's not magical. It doesn't make sense that he'd view her as a threat."

Good argument. Because so much in our lives made such perfect sense lately!

I drowned the sarcasm in more coffee, forgetting to be careful and scalding my tongue in the process. "Aw! This is all —"

But my grumble was swallowed up by the screechy ringing tone emerging from J's room. We both bolted upward at the same time, though neither of us actually made it inside the room because of the medical staff barring our way.

"Wait here. Let us work," a nurse said, in response to our frantic jumble of questions. The door shut in our faces.

"What's going on?" I turned to Lucian, frenzied.

"I ... I don't ..." He kept shaking his head, eyes widened and wild, glistening like a pair of almond-shaped tears.

With our noses pressed against the window, we watched the doctor and the nurses

trying to help J. The high-pitched sound stopped. She just looked asleep, but the knot in my stomach told me otherwise. Cold sweat trickled down my spine as I waited, motionless, for someone to explain what was happening. The whole thing seemed unreal. But it wasn't. Something horrible was going on. And it was all my fault.

Minutes, or maybe hours, later, a verdict was passed on. The injury to her head had been more serious than it first appeared; she'd slipped into a coma. My best friend was in a coma!

This time, when the first tremors zapped through me, I welcomed the chill. At least the cold was something I'd feel. The guilt, knowing that J was now lying there senseless simply for being my friend, chewed at my insides like a hungry termite colony. It left me desensitized and vacant.

"Again?" Lucian was stricken by the sight of me quivering again. "Twice in the same night?"

I shrugged, my teeth already chattering like castanets. Olé!

"Katherine," he went on, sounding frightened, "has this happened before? Twice in the same day?"

"N-n-no." It was doubtful I would've survived if it had.

He nodded and then swept me into his arms without asking for permission.

"Wh-wh-what ... ar-are you —"

"I won't bloody have you pass out again! I'm sorry if my touch repulses you, but I will not let you suffer."

He may or may have not said that last thing, it was hard to say at this point. I fought to keep my eyes open. His energy and those tireless blue tendrils linking us were already working their magic. It was as if I'd stumbled on an open fire after blundering through snow and ice for days. My body relaxed instantly, growing sluggish and soft. Fingertips, tens, hundreds, or maybe thousands of them, yanked me back into feeling, inch by inch, artery by artery. And the more it lasted, the harder it got to consider shrugging them off. Maybe if I just closed my eyes for a second. I could do that, couldn't I? Just a little nap. I'd be safe with him.

Wherever it was that he carried me to.

* * *

A new scent, vaguely sugary, welcomed me back into the land of the living, and I knew right away that Lucian had to be somewhere nearby. He always smelled good enough to eat. I opened my eyes to find that we were still in J's room, where I lay sprawled across the floral-patterned couch, with my head resting on his folded jacket. I noticed his tie slung over the metal end of J's bed and then I saw him. Hands deep in his pockets, lingering by the window and staring out in the darkness motionlessly.

"You still cold?" he asked, without turning around.

I had to mend my voice before answering. "No. Thank you."

He didn't move. I did, though, using the back of the couch for support and grimacing at the aggressiveness with which my muscles objected. Still, he didn't turn around.

"Something fascinating out there, in the darkness?"

"You called his name," he said in an undertone. "While you were dead to the world, you called for him."

My mouth opened, but no words came out. Something about his fallen shoulders

made me choke on whatever argument I was about to slap him with. I wasn't just tired of fighting him, I was beyond tired. Tired of having to figure things out. Tired of the hurt it brought me.

So I didn't answer, shifting my attention instead to J's bloodless face. She was breathing through a tube now, seeming as fragile as the first spring blooms, her skin almost translucent, so alarmingly frail. Tears rose in my chest again.

He was the one to break the silence. "I've been thinking. This is very strange."

Surprise overtook me when he finally turned around. With his vest unbuttoned and hanging loosely over his half-opened shirt, he was a very different sight from the Lucian I'd come to know. It felt as though there were no constants left in my life; everything was changing fast, and trying to keep up was exhausting.

I wiped away the tears and croaked, "What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about J. That she should suddenly get worse. I wonder if maybe the reason behind it has something to do with the nature of her injury."

Alertness flooded me. "Meaning?"

"Well, she was hurt by a supernatural being. Maybe what's happening to her now isn't physical but mystical."

I licked my lips nervously, not liking the sound of that. "And what does that mean? She'll never ..." I gulped hard, "wake up?"

"It's a possibility. Unless —"

"Unless?"

He shifted his weight, wavering.

"Katherine, you're the most powerful witch in the world. Your blood is consecrated. If anyone can heal a mystical injury, you can."

He spoke with his trademark calm, but underneath there was a buzz. Like an electric charge. Like he was treading on tiptoe when what he really wanted to do was run. Maybe he was trying not to scare me, which would've been both smart and considerate, because it really was scary, the way everything came back to my blood. Ryder needed it to stay in our world. My candles needed it to work. Now, my best friend needed it to find her way back to me. It was my blood that made me special. Freakishly special. It was why I could help people in ways no one else could. It was also what would get me killed. My blood ... Elizabeth's blood. Our blood. Yeah, it sounded just about right.

I held my breath. "What do I do?"

Eyes bright as if from a fever, he squared his shoulders and answered in a staccato rhythm. "That, I do not know." I opened my mouth to protest, but he went on before I could speak. "But I would imagine that you'd have to prepare a potion of some sort."

"Like I do with my candles," I said, catching on.

He looked confused. Duh! He didn't know about the candles.

"Mixing blood with plants and wax," I explained.

"Possibly."

I glanced out the window where the day was gently but noticeably breaking. "Shoot, it's morning already."

"So?"

"So, I can only work at night. I probably have the plants I need at home, but the mix only works if I prepare it at nighttime."

"So, tonight, then."

My eyes drifted over J's face again. "Tonight."

He kept on staring at me, as if there was more he wanted to say, but couldn't.

"What aren't you telling me?"

His poker-face crumbled and something strange moved in his eyes. A cold fire. Something fierce.

"You have to be careful, Katherine," he urged. "What you're about to do is exactly what he needs. A willing taste of your power."

An invisible hand grasped me by the neck and I couldn't breathe. "Come again?"

The composure slipped away completely, leaving him exposed, undeniably scared. Doubtful. But eager, too, somehow. "He will feel your spell. He'll be drawn to it. To you and to the blood. And if he gets that one taste of your power ..."

The rest was left unsaid. But I got it. If I was going to save J's life, it would most likely be the last thing I did.

"Isn't there a way to keep the potion from him?" I asked softly, already resigned.

With a sigh, he came to stand before me, speaking low, gently, as if I were a fragile thing. As if his words could shatter me.

"In the past, any spell you've ever worked, one that involved your blood, that is ... I don't know how to explain it to you. A great burst of power is released when you willingly bleed yourself with the intent to save someone's life. Potent forces are at work. You're about to go against the Grim Reaper, Katherine."

I trembled, barely swallowing the whimper in my throat.

"The pure intent, altering destiny, the willing offering ... We're talking about a powerful trifecta of forces, welded together by hallowed blood. Simply getting close will be enough for him. He doesn't need to physically sip the potion because your power will be everywhere. In the air. In the trees. In the ground. Everywhere within a mile radius." He paused. "You won't be able to keep it from him."

The floor seemed to slip from under me. I grabbed on to the edge of the couch and closed my eyes for a second, willing the world to stop spinning so fast. When I opened them and peered at my best friend's frozen face again, I saw more than just that horrible tube coming out of her mouth. I saw sense.

"So that's why he went after J. This was his plan all along."

"Looks that way, doesn't it?"

I laughed a broken laugh. "I guess my time's up."

"Not if you don't want it to be. You can still ... You don't have to cast the spell, you know. Delaying it should keep you safe. At least, for a while."

If there were any energy left in me, I would've used it to scowl at him. "This," I said instead, pointing at J, "is all my fault and I can't let her pay the price for it. I can't stand seeing her like this! I'm going to die anyway. The least I can do is to give her back her life before I go."

Even if it by doing it, I was removing the last thing standing between me and certain death.

CHAPTER: TWENTY-TWO



I left Lucian at the hospital and, after promising him to be careful and run the other way if I saw Ryder, I set off to spend my last day on earth. I should've been terrified; I was only scared. Nobody knows when he, or she, will die; I guess it's the unknown that scares everyone so much. Hardly my case, though; I had solid knowledge of both the "when" and the "why." Sure, it was all insane to some extent, but there was meaning to be drawn from it. Not only would I not die for nothing, unlike most people, but it wouldn't even take me by surprise. And, as an added bonus, I was going to check out the same way I'd lived: with a big supernatural bang. Morbid? Probably. But then, who wouldn't turn a little morbid with less than twenty-four hours left to live?

Before heading home, where Mom was probably wondering where I was, I swung by J's house again, hoping to find Delilah and send her to the hospital to be with her daughter. But she was still nowhere to be found, the useless bum. And since she didn't work on Wednesdays and Thursdays, checking out the diner where she waitressed, not for the money, but because it was a good place to shop for the endless supply of boyfriends she required, was a waste of time. My only choice was to try her at home again, later on.

After that, I went straight home. The new day was dawning sunny and pleasant, but I did my best not to notice it. The last thing I wanted was to break down in the middle of the road over how blue the sky was and how green the grass, over how I'd never see either of them again. I may have been numb with the shock and grief, but I hadn't completely lost my mind yet. I knew it was either keeping myself in check or morphing into a total nut case and ending up in the nearest madhouse. *That wouldn't do anyone much good*, I thought with cold practicality. Because as long as there were still practical things I could grab hold of, it was still good. Practicalities kept me anchored to life. They didn't let me go nuts, or worse, think about him. About what he had done to J. About what I was forced to do in order to clean up his mess. And what was coming right after.

So I drove slowly, carefully, with the radio playing low in the background, the same way I'd done hundreds of times before.

I found Mom in the kitchen, whipping up some waffles. Raisin was curled up next to the stove in a ball of black fluff that purred contentedly. Enya's calming voice came from the CD player on the counter. Mom, a blonde vision in soft flannel pajamas dotted with daisies, hummed in tune with the song while gliding back and forth between the stove and the kitchen island. The waffles smelled great. The sun, a glowing red ball, sent bright lances of light through the trees and our windows, drawing funny shapes and patterns on the shiny floor. Mom looked beautiful and happy. It all was picture-perfect and I branded it deep in my heart. This was exactly how I wanted to remember our lives. Simple, here and now.

"Morning, Mom," I called from the doorway.

"Good morning, honey," she chirped joyfully. "You're up earl — Wait." She stopped, frowning. "How come you're dressed?"

Wasn't that just like my oblivious mom? She hadn't even noticed I wasn't in the

house.

“Didn’t you see that my car was missing from the driveway?” Smiling, I walked over and wrapped my arms around her tightly, inhaling deeply that woodsy scent that, for me, would always be my mother. Images of her latest twelve hours assaulted me on the spot, but I ignored the sharp pain in the back of my head. In fact, I smiled. She and the girls had had one too many margaritas last night; Miranda looked especially funny while singing the national anthem.

Regretfully, but too nervous not to, she pulled away. “Lillian Marie, what are you doing? What’s wrong?”

Her beautiful face showed none of the signs a night of drinking with friends was supposed to leave on people. No dark circles under her eyes, no pronounced lines anywhere. She was just Mom, as fresh, young, and gorgeous as ever, but worried, her mouth puckered in a tight little frown as she checked to see if indeed I was in one piece.

“Relax, Mom,” I said, with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “I’m fine. And I’m not the one who was a naughty girl last night. Margaritas, huh?”

She flushed, relaxing a notch, though she still didn’t move. My chest tightened as I took in her concern, the way her eyes ran over the length of me, searching for signs of damage. She loved me more than anything in the world. How she would cope with what the future was about to bring, I couldn’t even imagine. My eyes were watering again. I blinked and turned my back to her,

walking to the fridge and pretending I was thirsty.

“What’s wrong, honey?” she asked again, softly.

I had to tell her about J. But how did I do that without looking at her? Because meeting her eyes without bursting into tears seemed impossible. Setting my teeth, I turned around slowly, picking a spot just under her chin and carefully avoiding looking above it.

“Is it Ryder?” she probed.

My arms stiffened along my body, hands becoming fists, nails cutting into palms. I swallowed the bile in my throat. “No, Mom. No, it’s ... well, it’s J.”

My explanation filled her with relief and her chest dropped, as if she’d been holding her breath; J’s problems weren’t usually life-or-death territory. I opened my mouth to tell her the rest, but the phone rang, and, with an apologetic glance in my direction, she moved to answer it.

“Good morning to you, too, darling. How are things?”

Dad.

“Actually, Lillian Marie’s up, too, so I’ll put you on speaker, okay?”

She did so before I could attempt to pull off an emergency exit.

“Morning, kiddo.” Dad’s voice filled the kitchen. “And how are my girls this lovely day?”

Fortunately, Mom had returned to her waffles, which gave me the chance to wipe my eyes quickly. Hearing Dad’s rich voice was more than I could take.

By some miracle, I managed to answer in a steady voice. “Hi, Dad. We’re doing fine. How’s life treating you down there?”

“Not complaining. Been busy with this new client I told you about last week.”

“The embezzlement guy,” I recalled automatically.

Dad laughed his low-pitched laugh. My heart sank.

“That’s the one. So, how about you? How’s school?”

“Well, I sort of bombed an algebra test.”

Mom glanced at me in surprise, and I lowered my eyes out of habit before I remembered that it didn’t really matter whether or not I passed algebra.

“Algebra, huh? Well, maybe your old man can give you a hand with it this weekend.”

“Dad, no offense, but you’re a lawyer. What do you know about polynomials?”

He laughed again. This time, a couple of tears broke the dam; I hurried to wipe them away.

“Such smooth flattery,” he replied. “I’m overwhelmed.”

Sarcasm. His specialty.

“How’s the weather up there?” he asked.

“Still unusually warm and beautiful.”

“Good, good. Listen, I’ve been thinking, why don’t we go camping this Saturday? I feel like I’m not spending enough time with you two. Especially you, Lily. We’ll have time to get on those polynomials then.”

My throat constricted. “Camping? On Saturday?” I repeated like a robot. “Sure, that’ll be fun. Got to go now. Bathroom. Love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, kiddo. See you tomorrow night,” he added, as I, more or less, ran out of the kitchen.

Behind me, I could hear Mom taking over the conversation. She’d tell him everything she’d done since yesterday morning, since he’d called last. They always talked in the morning, for what seemed like hours. Even with the challenging living arrangement, they were still crazy about each other. More importantly, I told myself, staring back at my image in the bathroom mirror, they had each other. They’d be fine. They had to be! But J, she didn’t have anyone; her joke of a mother didn’t count for much. If she never woke up, who’d cry for her? She had no one but me. She really was my sister, the one I never had in this lifetime, and she was my parents’ second daughter, too. The three of them, they would lean on one another, I told myself, nodding repeatedly. They’d be fine. And I would be, too. Saving her was the right thing to do. As for the dying ... well, that couldn’t be helped.

I watched the tears coursing down my cheeks like never-ending, hushed streams. I didn’t whimper. I didn’t make a sound. When I was ready to face Mom again, I splashed cold water on my face, brushed my teeth mechanically, and breathed in deeply. Then I headed back into the kitchen.

She was already sitting down to eat. “Oh, good, I was wondering where you were. Your breakfast is getting cold.” Then she saw my red eyes and jumped right out of the chair.

“That’s it. Lillian Marie, you’re going to tell me what’s going on and you’re going to do it right now!” she squeaked in that mousy voice she always got when she was scared.

I let it all out in one breath, “It’s J, Mom. Something happened to her last night. She’s in a coma.”

The news knocked her back into the chair, her face instantly ashen; the tears wasted no time in starting to flow. Steeling myself against the new burst of pain, I put my arms around her and held on for as long as I could. Secretly hoping that some of my strength would seep into her. She would need it even more than I.

Luckily, she wasn't as fragile as she looked. It didn't take long before she sprang into action as if propelled by dozens of Duracell batteries because, like me, she burned with the need to do something about it. Something concrete. Of course, she being herself, that translated into putting together a bundle of healing crystals, incense, some of my candles, and such and heading to the hospital, intent on murdering whoever dared forbid her to fill J's room with her Wiccan paraphernalia. God help the fool who crossed her!

Before she left, she also made sure to call Principal Turner's office and let the school know what had happened. As for me, I was ordered to sleep for a couple of hours, after which I was to check my stock of healing plants and figure out some miraculous mix for a new batch of candles, designed specifically to help J wake up. Mom had always had supreme confidence in my powers, and with good reason, too. I once brought back a neighbor whose heart had literally stopped for a minute after drowning in a water hole in the woods. The candles, laced with my special blood, actually worked miracles. The potion I'd put together for J would, too.

But I guess even miracles come at a price. And God knows I'd had my share of them! The lives I'd saved, the people I'd healed, the families I had brought back together — my whole adult life had been about sowing hope where before there was none. In my own little way, I had tried to and actually did make the world a better place. I even got to kiss a boy. Miracles ... I rejoiced in them so completely.

But nothing comes free of charge; the world would tumble into chaos without that kind of balance. Part of me wasn't even that surprised that it was time to pick up the tab. If I squinted, I could almost see the fairness of it.

CHAPTER: TWENTY-THREE



Even as Mom flew out the door, I decided against spending my last hours sleeping. Checking my supplies, though, was advice worth taking. The inventory revealed ample quantities of lavender, sage, frankincense, carnation oil, eucalyptus, various berries so, pretty much everything I needed. Fresh pine needles and some spring water, I listed in my head, and it would be all set. Actually coming up with the mixture? There was never a magic formula for me to follow, no written instructions in some musty old book kept hidden in the attic. There was only me, my mind, and my blood. They'd always done nicely; hopefully, they wouldn't let me down now, either.

One thing I always did before putting together a new formula was spend some time alone. Also, I burned a little incense, usually frankincense and benzoin, because it helped clear my mind. Supposedly it boosted psychic abilities, but I didn't know about that. Mostly, I just liked the way it smelled.

Up in my room, while loading the silver incense censer with the little aromatic chunks, I found myself smiling. The incense burner had been a birthday gift from Mom. My sixth birthday, to be exact. I swear, if it hadn't been for Dad, I would have never even seen a Barbie!

Tears came again. I shook my head, willing them away. The incense fumes helped, as did deep, even breaths. I shed my clothes mechanically, trying not to think about how, if I left them all over the room, for once it wouldn't matter. But no, I was meticulous about folding them, setting everything in its usual place. More tears came. At times, the air didn't seem to go deep enough into my lungs; it hurt, just trying to breathe.

While the long shower washed away the tears, it didn't do much about my fear, which I was secretly hoping would leak down the drain, too. When it was time to put on some clothes, I stood in front of the closet thinking that nobody had ever written a book about the appropriate wear for the day you died. I tried to find my thoughts funny in their morbidity, but no smile came. I guess there really wasn't any funny left in the funny girl, after all.

But as I reached for some jeans, I stopped. *No*, I thought, shaking my head, *none of this today*. No jeans, no hoodies, no roomy, boyish gear. No more trying to be invisible. It was my chance to let the world see me as I was, a girl and a witch, neither of whom seemed to have much of a future, unfortunately. What was the point in hiding anymore?

Trouble was, of course, that I didn't own a whole lot of girly clothing. Heck, I usually didn't stray much from browns and grays. But, as fate would have it, a few weeks ago Dad had bought me a dress, something he thought I might like to wear to prom. It was no extravagant evening gown, since he was clear that I'd never come near anything like that. Red and soft to the touch, it was a simple spaghetti strap frock, with a tight bodice and a flared skirt that ended below the knees. Very 1950s. Okay, so maybe in the 1950s it wasn't meant to be worn over a T-shirt and paired with canvas sneakers, but still, a dress is a dress, right? I even used a little mousse on my hair before blow-drying it and was rewarded for my effort with a head full of beautifully defined ringlets, falling almost to my waist.

The mirror showed me the girl I could've been. A trace of the woman I could've grown into. Peaches and cream complexion, emerald green eyes, a willowy body crowned by long, wavy hair. What do you know? I could almost glimpse the girl with hair of fire and eyes filled with spring, and, in doing so, the ghost of Ryder's words made me flinch. My lower lip trembled and I bit it hard. The pain was good; it almost drowned the one in my chest. "There," I whispered, smoothing my skirt. "Pretty as a picture."

That's when I first heard the bike. The rumble of the engine grew closer and closer until I could hear it just under my window, where it stopped. Three seconds later, the doorbell rang insistently. I didn't move. The girl in the mirror looked transfixed, her eyes widened and glistening with unshed tears, hands nervously kneading the folds of the skirt, mouth opened in a soundless sob. I barely recognized myself anymore.

When I didn't answer the door, he called, first the home line and then my cell. Again and again and again. At least now I knew how he could get reception up here; it had to be a halfling thing.

"Lily, come out," he called from the porch.

I collapsed instantly, then somehow crawled to the darkest corner of the room, where I curled into a ball.

"I know you're in there. Come on! We need to talk."

Whimpering, I bit my knuckles and pulled my knees tighter against my chest. My heart boomed in my ears.

"Lily, baby, please! This is important. We're running out of time."

I shook my head, crying, reality reduced to the saltiness of my tears. *He'll go away, he'll go away, he'll go away*, I chanted, rocking myself back and forth. And it was then, while hiding, crying, and shaking in that dark corner, that I finally admitted the truth. The one I'd felt crawling under my skin, pushing to come out, demanding to be acknowledged. Anger swept through me, even more bitter than the tears. Because it wasn't fear that kept me cowering in the dark, unwilling to face him. No, I wasn't stupid, I knew he needed me. Until I bled myself to save J's life, until I worked my mojo, he wasn't going to touch one hair on my head. He had to first be sure that he would be granted another hundred years in our world. Before I did that for him, he couldn't risk hurting me.

So why was I hiding? Because I was ashamed. Ashamed of still having every cell in my body reaching out to him. Even now, a few hours away from the moment when he'd end my life, my body and soul mourned not my imminent death, but the loss of him. Even after everything he'd done and all he would do, to J, my parents, and to me, I still craved his closeness. His touch and the peace I felt when he kissed me. I craved feeling unbroken again. Made so by him.

See, I wasn't hiding *from* him; I was holding myself down from running *to* him.

They say the truth will set you free; what a load of horse poop! My truth filled me with everything but freedom. I felt ashamed and guilty because by still loving him, I was betraying J, my parents, and everything they had taught me to be. I hated myself so ferociously it even scared me. I felt all kinds of things now, but free? No, not that. Quite the opposite. The truth was that, even if he hadn't hurt J, even if he hadn't backed me into a corner, I still would have given him what he needed: my blood, my power, my own life. When push came to shove, I never would have said no to him. Never would've stopped loving him, either, not even as I drew my last breath. Tonight, as I walked into the

unnecessary trap he had so cleverly set up for me, I'd go on loving him still.

I was exactly where he needed me to be. In his power.

He called my name for such a very long time. Eventually he stopped but it took a while before I heard the bike being revved up. Then he was gone, but I still couldn't crawl out of my hiding place. How could I face Mom now? How could I stare into my best friend's intubated face again? I didn't deserve to be anywhere near them, didn't deserve either of them. Their pain, present and future, was my fault, and I couldn't even muster the decency to hate the person responsible for it? How stupid can a person be? How ungrateful? The poster-child for dysfunctional, that's who I was.

I paced in my room until Raisin got too frightened to stick around and scurried out. Emotions shot through me blindingly fast, always changing, using up all my energy. A part of me, what I always thought was my instinct, still argued with my mind, refusing to accept the truth. In the face of so much overwhelming evidence, his own confession included, something in me still wouldn't believe that Ryder was the bad guy, that he had lied and deceived me. I couldn't accept that he had played with my heart like that: coldly, keeping his eyes on the prize, and caring only about his own interest. My instinct rebelled against it, which, I guess, really did make me less intuitive than a rock.

The walls were closing in on me again. I needed to leave the house! I had to go back to the hospital and burn the remaining daylight with Mom and J, feed on their love to keep my heart pumping and my brain from disintegrating. To keep the walls from absorbing me. I couldn't be dust, not yet, not before setting things right for J, at least.

The cracks in my composure widened. My self-control was failing. I watched my hands; they shook. My breathing kept catching; I was almost panting. Was it a panic attack? Did I need a brown paper bag?

I was losing it big-time, which made clearing out of the house a really good idea. Being with Mom and J would help me hang on.

As fast as my worn-out feet could take me, I dashed down the stairs, regretful for not having taken Mom's advice to rest for a couple of hours. Grabbing a light denim jacket from the hall stand, followed by the car keys, I pulled the front door open so abruptly that the hinges creaked, moaning in protest.

And I came face-to-face with Mary Kate Davis, the — ahem — lawyer.

"Hello, Lily. Mind if I have a word?"

CHAPTER: TWENTY-FOUR



In her defense, Mary Kate looked very lawyer-like this time in a black pantsuit and silky white shirt. Of course, the thing was so beautifully cut that the effect was, once again, jaw-dropping. As for the Christian Louboutin stilettos, well ... you get the picture.

"A word?" I scowled at her. "You mean the kind that involves talking? With each other?"

She smiled. "Yes. It won't take long."

Blocking my exit, her long feet planted firmly on the ground, she obviously had no intention of giving up. I curbed the desire to slap her where she stood. "Fine, then. Talk." "Inside?" she asked, arching one expensively groomed brow. I humphed, but was forced to submit and step aside. I *so* didn't need this! There was no need to show her in; she moved across the hallway and

into the living room as if she owned the place. Then, after a quick look around that made me glad for Mom's impeccable taste in designing the interior of our home, she perched herself on an armchair, crossing her legs with the grace of a crowned head. Annoying to no end.

Feeling stupid standing, I flopped into a chair, too. No grace of any kind was involved in the feat.

"I came to set things straight," she said.

Right to the point. I appreciated that.

"No need, Miss Davis."

I intentionally used her surname to underline the age difference, between us, and therefore between her and the age Ryder showed. But she didn't even blink.

"I don't care one way or the other," I lied.

"I'm not sleeping with Ry."

Dang, she was direct. It was hard not to blanch.

"Like I said, I don't care."

"I'm going to tell you a story, Lily," she went on, as if she hadn't heard me. "One that I shouldn't share with anyone. Thus, should you decide to repeat it, I will deny ever saying a word."

My, my, wasn't this straight out of *Spooks*.

"My family, we've been lawyers for many generations. And when I say 'generations,' I mean it goes back more than a couple hundred years."

Well now! I guess that explained the aristocratic vibe she wore like some expensive perfume. She was old money. Of course, I grunted inwardly.

"William Kingscott ... Ry," she smiled as she repeated her pet name for him, "has been our client from the very beginning."

Now she paused. For effect, maybe? When I didn't react in any way, her expression tightened. What did she expect? Hadn't she trumpeted it last night already, loud and clear?

"We don't know what," she flushed, and then corrected herself, "*who* he is. What we do know is that he's a decent person. A very generous client. Someone who, despite

having always been worth a fortune, prefers to lead a very low-key life. He gives large amounts of money to charity. And, as far as we know, he's never hurt a soul."

Guess it paid off being a half-celestial being. I wondered if he could make money appear just by thinking about it. I pondered and wrestled with the notion of his giving money away. Did he have to be so unlike any normal bad guys I'd ever heard of? It was as if he tried to confuse me on purpose.

I challenged the last part of her statement. "How do you know he's never hurt anyone?"

"Well, due to his extraordinary circumstances, he was considered a high-risk attachment, so we've had him under surveillance for a long time," she said, softer. "Just between you and me, I'm not entirely convinced he isn't still watched, even today." She paused, then added almost apologetically, "My father is a particularly thorough man."

An enthusiastic snort lurked in my throat.

"There are quite a few unusual things about William Kingscott, Lily. Despite living so modestly, he lives fully. Very actively. My family has tracked him down everywhere from Tibet to India, from South Africa to Eastern Europe. Everywhere there's a tsunami, an earthquake, a tornado, or generally where there are people hurting, he's there. Always on the front lines, offering more than just money, the kind of relief one can only give with one's own hands. Sometimes, he'll disappear to some reclusive monastery, but he'll never rest longer than a couple of months. Then he goes right back to it again."

How nice of him to try to save everyone's life! Except mine, of course. I mean, what was this about? A lousy attempt at tipping the scales? A "kill one, help one hundred" sort of deal? Did he think that by helping other people, he'd be forgiven for killing me every so often?

"Yeah, yeah," I snorted. "He's a Boy Scout, I get it."

"Not a Boy Scout, but a very intelligent, caring person. Do you realize he possesses at least half a dozen legitimate degrees? That he's a lawyer himself? A doctor and a —"

I stopped her with a flick of my hand. "Get to the point already."

Her Caribbean-blue eyes measured me in a way aimed at making me shrink.

"Fine," she replied icily. "You want the short version, here it is. In our opinion, two things make William Kingscott truly extraordinary. One, he doesn't age. And two, our records show that three times during the past centuries he made legal provisions that, in the event of his death, everything he owns should automatically go to a woman. Marion Frost was the first; Sarah Manbeck came next. Can you guess who the third beneficiary might be?"

My mouth was instantly dry. "Me."

She nodded. "Yes, Lily. You."

Silence fell between us, but it was charged. She was fishing for a reaction. I was determined to give her squat, even though my head was spinning faster than Linda Blair's number in *The Exorcist*. That Ryder would make arrangements for his money to go to someone before my final countdown made sense. By now, I was clear on how it worked. Tonight had happened before; those other two women, Marion Frost and Sarah Manbeck, were both me, from different times. And, just like tonight, Ryder had probably wondered which way I'd go. Would I offer him the magical pick-me-up that would last him another hundred plus years in the mortal plane, or would I deny it and therefore send him home, between realms? He'd wondered about it, hence the need to set his financial affairs in

order. This was all crystal clear.

That he would choose me, the one responsible for his early return home, as his heir wasn't as self-explanatory. Was it guilt? Another act of contrition, just like his humanitarian work? Because no matter what happened to him, whether he stayed or left our world, it didn't change the fact that I would still die. So why leave me all that money? Maybe it was set to go to my parents, like some sort of I-killed-your-daughter-here's-a-bunch-of-money-in-return consolation gift? Surely not. He wouldn't be so callous, would he?

"That's the reason I'm in Rosemound now," she resumed. "To finalize the paperwork. Would you like to know how much you'll be worth, in the event of Ry's death, Lily? It's quite an impressive figure."

I didn't think. I just reacted. Fiercely. "He's not going to die!"

She pierced me with an ice-cold stare. "Oh, I'm quite certain he won't. You see, Lily, there's a pattern here. He barely knew Marion Frost and Sarah Manbeck. The same way he barely knows you. In fact, Marion Frost became engaged to be married while Ry was her ... acquaintance. Just as in your case, he acquired a home somewhere close to each of them, approximately one year before their eighteenth birthday. And while records show that he knew these ... girls, he wasn't truly a part of their lives. It almost seems as though he was there to watch them. From a distance. Contact was minimum."

"There's been plenty of contact between us, Miss Davis." I forced a smile.

She ignored me. "So why should he leave a fortune to either of them? Curious, to say the least. But do you know what's even more curious, Lily?"

I rolled my eyes. "They both died and Ryder got to keep his dough," I said dryly.

Her frostiness melted into surprise. "That's right," she whispered. "They both died violent deaths."

I stared at her across the coffee table, but I knew my face was stony. Whatever she was hoping to learn by springing this on me, she wasn't going to get it. "Is there a point to this story, Miss Davis?"

She frowned. Then, piece by piece, her composure returned. "Don't insult me by pretending you don't see it," she enunciated. "Are you ..." she faltered, "dear God, I can't believe I'm going to say this." She inhaled once. "Are you about to die?"

Sadly, I flinched. "How's this any of your business?"

There was a pause, as if she had suddenly run out of the right words. But she recovered. "I'll be blunt, Lily. The other two girls died within days after Ryder named them heirs to his fortune."

My eyebrows curved in a silent "and?"

Her jaw flexed, delicate bones moving under her even more delicate skin. She looked like a rose, but it was clear that she was steel-tough inside. "Despite our surveillance, it's not clear if ... Well, it would rather seem —"

"Miss Davis, I'm busy. Spit it out already."

She was quick to oblige. "Is William Kingscott a killer?"

I could almost smile at this point. "I'll answer that, if you answer me this. What's your interest in him?"

She met my eyes squarely. One word came from her mouth, clipped and firm, "Personal."

Aha! I knew she was after him, the old tramp.

I felt my lips thinning with anger. Jealousy. And many other equally unpleasant emotions that burned inside my eyes like poison spills. And then, somehow, my mind pitched in, too. Yes, Mary Kate Davis was beautiful, sophisticated, and smart. But man, was she cold! There she sat in front of me, having worked out for herself that I was about to die, but all she cared about was her own interest. She was only concerned with understanding if the person she had the hots for was a killer. I forced myself to see beyond tonight, beyond what would happen, beyond my death. Did I want Ryder to be alone? My heart broke with it, but the truth remained. No, I didn't want that for him. I knew from experience how much loneliness sucked. But did I want him to get involved with a shark like Mary Kate Davis? Not in a million years.

My lips pulled back to reveal clenched teeth, which I bared at her as I hissed, "Ryder is my boyfriend. I love him very much. And that's the only answer you're going to get."

I stood. "Now, if you don't mind, I have things to do."

Her nostrils flared with anger, but I couldn't have cared less. Mary Kate Davis was the least of my problems. I saw her to the door in loaded silence and then hurried to shut it behind her without saying good-bye. Only then did I allow myself to slip down to the floor and really face up to the latest info. Finding out all those things about Ryder left my chest heavy with the knowledge, and with even more contradictory emotions. My killer was truly an angel. An angel of mercy, as far as the rest of the world was concerned.

How could I hate him?

How could I not?

CHAPTER: TWENTY-FIVE



Outside J's room, Mom hollered like a banshee. "No, I will not wait a moment! In fact, I'll tell you what, why don't I call my lawyer and have him deal with this? In court. This is religious discrimination and I will not stand for it!"

At the receiving end, a doctor in his fifties, probably the dad of someone from school, more nervous than a pimpled boy on his first date, kept patting his sweating forehead with a white tissue. "Mrs. Crane. There's no need for this."

It looked as if I'd arrived just in time to put a stop to the impending doom.

"Mom," I called, hurrying along the off-white hallway. "What's going on?"

In her lemon-yellow dress and with the blonde hair falling to her shoulders in a beautiful mess, Mom was a patch of sunlight. But her eyes, shooting angry darts at the doctor in front of her, added something that was definitely outside the sunny spectrum.

"Ah, Lillian Marie, good!" she cried, by way of greeting. "You must bear witness to my persecution." "Persecution?" the doctor repeated in shock. "Really, Mrs. Crane, I hardly think —"

"Oh, I know what you think!" she bit back.

The crisis wasn't, in fact, a crisis. Not entirely surprising, it was about Mom's incense, and the crystals, and the candles she'd been burning around the clock inside J's room. Her attitude may have had something to do with it, too, not that I was going to call her out on it. But the hospital refused to put up with it anymore. She didn't back down, arguing religious freedom to justify the use of the items in question. In reality, Mom was a temperamental drama queen, but never mind that. Less than ten minutes after my providential arrival, things were settled. How? Through meaningful conversation, a sometimes alien notion for Mom. The hospital gave in, as long as we agreed to burn no more than two candles and one incense stick at a time, and keep the window open and the door closed. Reasonable, right?

My BFF's condition hadn't changed. Her vitals were fine, but the brain activity was scarce. She looked peacefully asleep, even if her color had never been so ashen. The tube through which she breathed made it hard to stand watching her, though. It hurt too much.

Mom and I sat by her bedside in silence for a while. Then she went hunting for food and I got to eat my first real meal in ages, a surprisingly tasty steak sandwich procured from the hospital cafeteria. But even as I ate, I could tell that Mom had something she was itching to say and get off her chest.

"What, Mom? Spit it out," I prompted, too tired of waiting for her to make up her mind.

Sitting beside me on the little couch, she squirmed, her eyes fluttering back and forth from J's still face to mine.

"This boy I found here," she said hesitantly.

"Uh-huh. Lucian," I provided, with my mouth full.

"Yes. Who is he?"

Er ... my soul mate?

"A friend. Why?"

There was a pause. "Ryder came in, too."

My jaw locked tightly, the bite of food in my mouth lurching down my throat in painful knots.

"They got into a terrible fight," she went on, eyes searching me attentively.

I busied myself with the paper towels in my lap. "What kind of fight?"

Her shoulders sank. "They went outside, so I didn't catch all of it. But I'm sure it was about you. I heard your name a few times. Also, someone named Katherine?"

I could only nod. Exactly how much had she heard? Did she know? Was she fishing for confirmation?

Anxiously, she let out a whole string of questions. "What's going on, Lillian Marie? Who is this Lucian boy? And how come you've never mentioned him before?"

I choked on the soda and then fell into a wild coughing fit. "He's just someone from school, that's all," I offered vaguely.

Her brows puckered in a frown. "Really? So why would he tell Ryder, your *boyfriend*," she accentuated sardonically, "that he'd been wasting his time? That he'll never really have you? What's this about, these ... these ... claims of ownership over you? From a boy who, you say, is just someone from school? What about Ryder?"

As I lived and breathed! For the first time ever, she was pulling the Mom-card on me; wasn't her timing just impeccable? I set my plate down and then clamped my hands together on my knees, resolved to treat the moment with all the monumentality it deserved.

"It's complicated."

Since she met that with a hearty snort, I tried harder. "Ryder is my boyfriend."

With a hurt look on her face, she averted her eyes, glancing at J's bed again.

"Personally," she said quietly, "I have no taste for these displays of macho claptrap. Then again, they're both awfully young, aren't they? I suppose some concessions are in order." She paused. "Especially since I do like them. Both. Ryder, and Lucian. What's bothering me is that I'm not sure if ... well, I just hope that you're being honest with me."

I swallowed. "I never lied to you, Mom. Ryder is my boyfriend, you know that. I love him," I admitted, my heart breaking.

Her head snapped back to me with an audible *crack*. By the way her eyes were nearly popping out of their orbs, she was shocked. "Love him? That's a really big word, Lillian Marie."

If only she'd known how much bigger the implications truly were. But it didn't change anything; the heart knows what the heart wants. "Yes, Mom, I know."

We stared at one another for a long moment, her expression changing slowly, slackened by something that could've been incredulity. Like I'd just grown another three inches in her eyes. "Of course you do, honey. Of course you do," she said, promptly standing up and walking out of the room.

My guess was that she went straight to the ladies' room for a good cry. When your only daughter openly admits to loving a boy for the first time, shedding a few tears is a given for any mom, I figured. And again my chest strained to burst open with tears. Mom had never been especially strong, and what was coming would hit her the hardest.

She didn't hurry back, which gave me time to get reacquainted with the couch where Lucian had deposited my passed-out self earlier that morning. And just like before, I

found that once you moved past the dizziness inflicted by the awful floral pattern, the couch was actually comfy. Not surprisingly, given all the physical and emotional burnout, soon I was a goner. Probably snoring like an army of sinus-challenged senior citizens, too, the way Mom claimed I did when I went to bed very tired.

Proving again how all the forces of the Universe had banded together against me, I slept, but didn't rest one bit. My would-be power nap was a tangle of images and electrifying, guilty sensations. I dreamed of baby-blue skies filled with hovering musical notes. Of angry storm clouds spiraling and twinkling lavender and gold. Of moonbeams playing in dark strands of hair. Of golden skin, plump lips, and kisses that left me breathless and aching for more. I dreamed of him. My own beloved killer.

And then, of her. My own beloved sister.

I was in a high-ceiling, white room with no windows. It should've been dark, yet I was surrounded by a porous white light that felt muggy against my skin. A claw-foot bathtub, empty and out of place, was resting on the bare floor, a few feet away. A single red rose, the vibrant color in striking contrast to the pristine decor, only brushed my bare feet. With one hand, I gathered my floaty white skirts and kneeled, so I could pick it up. The stem was long and smooth, with no thorns or leaves sprouting from it, so I was startled when, all of a sudden, a prickle stabbed my finger. Straightening up, I watched the single droplet of blood falling to the marble floor, marveling at how it seemed to swell and slash through the strange, spongy light, creating a vacuum as it dropped.

"It's the blood," I heard J's voice say. "Where it all starts and where it ends."

She was in the bathtub, now filled murky water, and she was clothed in one of those old-fashioned nightgowns women used to wear when they took a bath, back in the day. Her face, as white as the room, was streaked with runny black mascara.

"J?" I tried to move, but my body seemed stubbornly locked in place.

She wasn't looking at me, but straight ahead at nothing and, as I watched, the water in the bathtub began to thicken and change color. The murkiness became rust and the rust grew richer and redder until she was floating in ... blood.

"Holy...!" I gasped. "J, what's happening? What is this?"

The horrible image in front of me sucked all the air from my lungs and I panicked, choking and straining to regain control over my body. Still I couldn't move an inch.

In the blink of an eye, she stood before me. It was as though reality had been fractured for a second, like the film of what was going on had been clumsily cut and then spliced together again, but in the wrong place. Static buzzed in my ears and the white around us turned to gray.

She looked down, her nightgown dripping water, her black hair hanging in wet tangles around her face, which was once more smeared with black mascara. The blood was gone.

"J?"

Without looking up, she folded my hand into her own, which was ice-cold, and then the room around us disappeared and we were somewhere else. I recognized the stream; it was where we sometimes went if the weather was nice, when we were down, or tired, or simply bored. In the real world, we both loved this secluded patch of forest.

I noticed that our clothes were also different. Normal, or, in J's case, as normal as they would ever be. I knew the one-shoulder Grecian dress with flimsy layers of chiffon, which she kept gathered in her lap now, as her feet dangled in the stream.

“Sorry for the *Ring* theatricals,” she laughed. “Sometimes it’s hard to control the setting, you know?”

“No, I don’t know!” I argued, grabbing her wrist and shaking forcefully. “What’s going on?”

Her smile died and she turned away.

“J?” I pressed.

“Hey, check this out.”

Suddenly, we were on the grass, with a spread of various food items between us.

“Isn’t it cool?” she asked, biting into a Twinkie.

But I found it hard to share her glee.

“Where are we, J? How are you...? Is it you that’s doing this?”

“Duh!” She laughed again, snapping her fingers. The canopy of trees above us grew thicker, so no rays of sun penetrated it anymore. The shadow felt soft and restful.

“I like it here,” she declared.

The food disappeared and we were standing now, nose to nose, staring at each other.

“What do you mean, you like it here? Here, where?”

She shrugged. “His domain, his mind; I’m not sure which.”

“His ... who, you mean, Ryder’s?”

A spooky gust of wind howled through the trees and she snatched my hands, pulling me closer.

“He’s not who you think he is!” she hissed, her eyes burning fiercely.

“I know —”

“No!” she interrupted, squeezing my fingers so hard I winced. “You mustn’t do it! You mustn’t get me out.”

“Mustn’t?” I repeated, confused. “Listen, J, it’s alright, I know —”

“Katherine,” she cut me off softly.

One glimpse of the old-fashioned clothes we were suddenly wearing and my heart jumped, because I realized she wasn’t J anymore. I was standing in front of my sister.

“Elizabeth,” I whispered.

Tears trickled down her face and she stared back, into my eyes, with a sadness that felt like the oldest thing I’d ever come near.

“Forgive me, sister,” she sobbed. “I did not know ... I did not mean —”

“Forgive *you*?” I gasped, pulling her into my arms. Her body jerked as she wept.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Elizabeth. You have to forgive me. I am the one who —”

“Shh!” She stopped me. “What you did was human, something that has happened and will happen, time and time again. But what I did was unpardonable! An aberration, the vilest of deeds. I deserve my fate fully.”

“No.” I pulled back. “I’m going to take you out of here. I’m going to wake you up.”

She shook her head. “Then he will win again.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll die either way. The chill ... is already here.”

My words hit her like a blow and she staggered backward, unsure on her feet. For a few long moments neither of us said a thing while the wind picked up, roaring through the bending trees like a beast, stripping away leaves and branches. Our long, burdensome dresses billowed and flapped around us like flags signaling surrender.

“So be it, then,” my sister cried over the tempest heaving around us. “But, this time, you shall be ready for him. Come! There isn’t much time.”

She took my hands again, gripping hard, her eyes darting around the stormy forest like those of a haunted animal. Like prey. Afraid.

“What’s going on?”

“I haven’t much left, but what I have I give to you, freely and with all my heart.”

Her head went up and she cried out, “Blood of my blood, hear me! Find her. Open her mind!”

A grayish-white light covered her like a new layer of skin, pulsing and humming as if it were alive. Next, as our eyes locked again, I watched the light moving, pouring into me, and felt it charging me with liquid fire, and knowledge, and secrets I had no hope of unraveling. Power. Magic, of what it had been, and was, and what might come to be again, it all poured and flowed inside me.

Her cheek touched mine briefly. “Forgive me, sister,” she whispered.

“Bu —” I wanted to protest, but by the time I pulled back, Elizabeth was gone and I was staring again at my own, one-hundred-percent twenty-first-century best friend.

J grinned her impish grin and winked at me.

“We are *so* kicking his butt now!” she exclaimed, high-fiving me.

The smacking sound woke me up. When my eyes opened, the dream hovered on the outskirts of my consciousness for a split-second and then it was gone. I couldn’t remember any of it.

While I wrestled the feeling of having lost something very important, I failed to notice the sun going down. Eventually, though, it hit me: it was twilight, and that meant ... A hole gaped in my stomach.

“Hi, there, sleepyhead.”

A big part of me still buzzed with a strange mix of emotions stirred by the dream I could no longer recall. Hearing Lucian’s voice hit me like a cold shower; every muscle in my body tensed, unhappy with the intrusion. He sat across the room, on the other side of J’s bed, his long legs tossed in a careless pose in front of his chair.

I stretched to chase away the stiffness in my body, yawning none too discreetly. “Been there long?”

“I came to check on J. Your mom had some stuff to do at the shop and I didn’t want to leave you alone.”

He shrugged, and the gesture rendered him vulnerable somehow; it was as if he tried to lessen the meaning of his own words, but couldn’t quite get it right. So the words dangled there, suspended between us, the way he was suspended outside time. He cared, which, to me, was mystifying. What was I supposed to do with this knowledge?

“Er ... thanks,” I said uneasily.

Growing aware of my dress showing more leg than I was comfortable with, I rearranged myself into a less casual position. I smoothed the folds of my skirt, fumbling with the fabric longer than necessary. The silence was ohso-awkward.

“Katherine, I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“For what?”

“Because I didn’t find you earlier. For not getting here sooner. The last thing I ever wanted was for him to get this close to you.”

I shrugged as casually as I could. “Water under the bridge.”

He sighed. “If only —”

Luckily, whatever he wanted to add got canceled by Mom’s arrival.

"Oh, good, you're up," she pronounced, as soon as she came through the door. "It's time," she went on, nodding toward the windows, where, in the meantime, the sun had slipped fully below the horizon.

I rose, wishing that my knees wouldn't shake so hard.

"Yes, it is."

"I went by J's place on my way back," she reported while I grabbed my jacket, chewing on my lip so hard it almost bled. "But Delilah still wasn't there. I left a note in the door, but I'm not holding my breath. I don't think she'll be back until tomorrow night, when she needs to work."

With a stiff nod, I scrutinized her face with all the purpose of wanting to forever burn every single line into my memory. Her mouth froze in a silent *O*.

"Honey, what's wrong? That look in your eye ..."

Bracing myself against the inevitable rush of pain, I pulled her in a hug. Almost crushing her ribs in the process was just one of the perks. "I love you, Mom. You're the best."

After a few seconds, while the surprise beat her reaction speed, she forced me away. Gently, but without offering any room for protest.

"Enough, Lillian Marie," she reproached in her sternest of voices. "I know how painful the contact is for you," she added, softer, eyes sweeping my face with concern. But it was doubtful my expression betrayed anything; my best poker-face was firmly plastered in place.

"Don't be nervous, honey," she said, now in her usual trilling tone. "You'll do fine. The candles will work, they always do. By tomorrow night you and J will be ready to take Dad up on his offer and we'll go camping. You'll see."

I nodded as if agreeing with her, and even though it was hard to, I smiled. With one last look at her and then at J's pale face, I turned around, ready to leave, when I noticed Lucian waiting by the door. He didn't tower anymore, which was a ridiculous thing to think, considering that he couldn't have shrunk in the last few hours. He was the same athletic, tall guy, but something inside him seemed broken. If possible, he struck me as ... fragile.

The change gave me the urge to bash my head into the wall before me. On the one hand, there was guilt at not feeling anything in return for him. On the other, there was even more guilt at considering it. Wasn't I being unfaithful to Ryder by experiencing regret at not having feelings for someone else? And no, I didn't owe Ryder anything, but my mentally challenged heart didn't care about that.

"I'm coming with you," he announced, blue eyes glittering sharper than usual, all stubbornness.

No-freaking-way, I wanted to shout, but settled for muttering quietly, "I work alone, Lucian. Having someone around messes with my focus."

If I'd had a scintilla of luck, he would've given up then. Except, luck? Me? Huh! "Then I'll take you home, at least."

Argh! "I have my car."

His lips pressed together tightly, but not nearly tight enough to stop the frustrated groan that squeezed past them. "I need to talk to you," he insisted.

Behind me, I sensed Mom fidgeting, watching the scene without even pretending not to. It was only a few hours since I'd declared that Ryder was my boyfriend, and Lucian's

behavior now painted me a liar. It was my turn to groan; I didn't want Mom to suspect me of having lied to her. Not wanting to prolong the moment, I exhaled a cloud of annoyance and gave in.

“Okay, then. Let's go.”

At last, with that, I left my best friend's room.

And went to meet my death.

CHAPTER: TWENTY-SIX



Until we were out of Rosemound Clinic, neither of us said a word. In what looked like a pattern by now, the silence between us was deafening. It was dense, like blocks of concrete raining down on us.

Finally, just as we stepped into the parking lot, he paused, planting himself in front of me, leaving me no other choice but to follow. Around us, the shadows of dusk were growing thicker and the lights normally illuminating the lot hadn't been switched on yet. But even in the dim light I could see his blue eyes glowing, turning charcoal, seething. He was angry. Oh, good, just what I needed.

"What?" I asked, dropping my gaze because his pulsed with too much feeling. Holding it was too intimate.

"I'm not ready," he answered in a tight voice.

"Ready for what?"

"To do this again. Lose you. I can't ... it's ... I need more time to ..."

Tears bubbled under the fierce tone. I looked at his face then, at those chiseled features reminding me of Greek statues and Olympian gods. Every inch of him was perfectly arched and full and lean. His eyes ... a color should've been named after his eyes, maybe in French: *le bleu de Lucien*. He was devastatingly beautiful.

How could anyone look at him and not feel the smallest of sparks? I shook my head, resigned. Freak girl, what can you do; *I* had to be the one immune to his charms. Yeah, he was hot. So what?

"I'm sorry," I mumbled awkwardly. Absentmindedly picking at my fingernails, I almost missed his hand closing in and only avoided it by a whisker. "How can you give me the cold shoulder? Even now?"

He was hurt, but even more so, his expression spilled over with disbelief. Like he couldn't quite understand how a girl, *any* girl, could possibly not want him. I stifled a snort. It figured; someone like him, looking the way he did ... his ego was probably as big as Asia.

But I answered evenly, resolved on spending my energy on better, more important things. "I'm not giving you the cold shoulder. I just don't want you to touch me, is all."

Bad enough that the blue tendrils, alert as always, pulled at me with the leverage of an eighteen-wheeler. It was *so* draining to keep backing away from him, when all my body wanted was to give in and let that electric yarn knit us together.

At that, he gave me a strange look, no longer mad, or surprised, or hurt. In fact, I couldn't guess at all what was going through his mind. Whatever it was, though, he seemed determined to see it through. "You can stop the pain, you know," he said, completely off-topic. "Your blood can block it, if you demand it."

"What are you talking about?"

"The pain you feel when you touch someone. It can be suppressed momentarily. If you'll only hold on for a minute or two."

I stared back in shock. "What, are you mad? Y-you think I went a lifetime afraid to touch anyone because it was fun? 'Cause I like being a lonely freak? Don't you think I'd

know if there was any way around it?”

He threw his head back, releasing a noise that was almost a howl. “Hell’s teeth, Katherine! Every. Single. Time.”

He tensed, launching at me and snatching my arms. This time, just like in my room when he’d shown me the past, there was pain. Excruciating pain! Picture having every limb being pierced at the same time by a million knives, your face catching fire, and the inside of your head suddenly hot enough to melt metal. I couldn’t fight, couldn’t pull back or do a thing about the hundreds of instances of his life skewering my brain like red-hot poker. All I could do was ...

“Aww!”

Yep, bay like a jackal at the moon.

And still the emotion fired up by what he was showing me rose above the pain. Because these weren’t just random moments of his long existence; no, they were detailed, explicit flashes of us. There wasn’t even a timeline I could follow, but considering the once-again fancy-schmancy clothes reminiscent of Marie Antoinette, we had to be somewhere around the year of our Lord 1790. But forget the petticoats and the innumerable layers of skirts matching the feathers — *feathers!* — on my head. Forget the fact that I wasn’t Katherine anymore, and obviously not Lily, either, which meant I didn’t know my own name, or even where we were. But forget all that; I only caught glimpses of it, anyway. Because Lucian wasn’t interested in giving me the historical tour, not unless I saw him as the main attraction of the eighteenth century, that is.

The film was all lips and skin and kisses and an alarming shortness of breath. Us, he was showing me us, and this time his face wasn’t even blurred anymore. And yes, *de rigueur*, he should’ve worn a white powdered wig, but he wasn’t; his blond hair was long, silky, and always pulled back by an elegant ribbon. Long-haired Lucian? (Insert annoyed but deep sigh here.) The pain was shattering, which only made the emotion coming from the past that much sweeter. Soothing. Like a soft breeze caressing a fresh burn, relieving the sting.

“For goodness’ sake, Katherine, fight it!” he shouted from somewhere far away, sounding panicky. “Block the pain!”

“I ... don’t ... know ... how!” I spewed through gritted teeth, seeing him hazily, my eyes yo-yoing from the images of the past to those in front of me. To focus on just one item was impossible. I was adrift on a sea of sweet misery.

“Hell’s bells, just will it! You *can* make it stop!”

The film stopped, and with it went the soft breeze, leaving behind only the sting and the burning. The pain was getting so atrocious, my eyes were already rolling back in my head. Total loss of consciousness was just around the corner. I screamed, begged, cried and, somewhere in the middle of gulping what I believed to be my final breaths, it stopped. With an abrupt snap, it all ceased. The relief was something heavenly, so I spent the next minute just marveling at it like a dental patient tripping on laughing gas. Beyond the fact that it didn’t hurt anymore, nothing else mattered.

Until ... it did. His fingers still entwined in mine were the first details that penetrated. And when that sank in, I simply knew that it really was *me* who’d shut off the pain. No idea by what means, or even how I knew it, but I did, which meant that, once again, he’d told me the truth. It didn’t matter, though. I had no desire to think about it. No other need but to cause him pain, to have him suffer, too. So I slapped him. I slapped that

flawless, petal-soft face with the ferocity of a lioness.

"You moron! Do you have any idea how that felt?"

He was massaging his cheek. My handprint burned pink against his pale skin.

"Do you have any idea how it feels to be left behind? And now, worse, to be rejected by you, time and time again? I just needed you to remember. Me.

Us. I want you to ... want me again, Katherine," he finished in a drowned undertone.

Gnashing my teeth, I said, "Look, I get it. I do, and I am sorry, but I can't help how I feel. And you need to stop trying to force me like this. I'm the one dying here! How do you figure that by hurting me some more you're balancing things? I'm in pain, either way."

The blue tendrils jerked between us and his eyes closed slowly. "But you're not the only one, that's what you don't get. And it all keeps on happening simply because you're too stubborn to listen."

"Listen to what?" I exploded, arms flapping in the air. "There's nothing we can do, nothing we can change. Things are what they are. We pissed off a powerful witch and now we're trapped. End of story."

He made another howl-type noise. "Four hundred years, Katherine. Don't you think we've had enough?"

"What I think, what you think, for that matter, doesn't mean a thing. We're still cursed."

"See, that's where you're wrong. You can change it. The hex, our lives, all of it, you could change it if you wanted."

Like throwing a flaming rag into a tub filled with ice, my anger was instantly cold. "Change it? How?"

He snorted. "Elizabeth was powerful, Katherine, but for the hex to work she's loaded you," he poked at my chest, "with her power."

"Which means?"

"Oh, for the love of all things sacred! Do I really need to explain this every single time? We're only wasting time."

"Cut it out!" I bit back, folding my arms over my breasts. "Say what you mean."

"You're a powerful witch, too. You can summon legions. *Command* legions! You can forge alliances that wouldn't just finish the hex but give us everything we could ever need. Freedom. A life that could stretch on forever. Happiness. Time to be with each other."

"And when you say 'alliances,'" I said in a whisper, afraid of even thinking it too loudly, "you mean ... what, exactly?"

His eyes became two orbs of blue ice, yet it wasn't the coldness that bothered me most. No, what disturbed me was his absolute lack of doubt. He wasn't conflicted about this. All he struggled with was random annoyance at having to, apparently, explain it to me again. And that's when it finally hit me. Why I couldn't feel for him, why I couldn't even stand breathing next to him for longer than a few minutes without getting antsy. Lucian ... he had this sort of twisted vibe about him. Almost as if walking the earth for so long under the power of the hex had made him into something not quite human anymore. There was a hunger about him, a lethal desperation that reminded me of the tigers I'd seen at the zoo stalking in their cages; you just knew that if they ever broke free, there'd be carnage involved.

“You know what I mean, Katherine.”

“Actually, I don’t. Spell it out.”

“Even without the memories from your past, you’ve lived enough to know that there’s more to the world than meets the eye. There’s power to be —”

I hit the roof. “Power? But wasn’t it exactly this ‘power’ that landed us in this tight spot to begin with? And now, what, we make it better by messing with more of it? Sure, why not? I’m always up for a little digging up my own grave. It’s such a pleasant pastime nowadays. If you’re stupid enough to try it.”

Calling him stupid didn’t seem to leave a mark, though. Nor did the sarcasm even get him to blink.

“The idea that all power corrupts was introduced by someone smart who wanted everyone to fall in line,” he answered coolly. “In the right hands, power can be a useful tool. It doesn’t have to master you. It can be mastered. It can be liberating, exhilarating, but not necessarily intoxicating.”

My expression grew colder, too. “Actually, it was a British historian, Lord Acton, who said it. And you know what the end of it was? ‘Absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ Keep that in mind while you cut to the chase. Exactly who do you propose I should ask for help? Demons? Angels? Other witches? Or maybe werewolves? Vampires?”

Again, not even a blink from him. “Don’t be stupid. There’re no such things as werewolves and vampires. As for other witches, to my knowledge, you’re the most powerful in the world. Angels?” He barked a bitter laugh then. “No, I don’t think so.”

“That leaves the demons,” I said dryly, “which brings me back to my initial point. Stupid.”

“Why?” he asked curtly.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m about to die, dude! I’d like to avoid ending up in hell, thank you very much.”

The same brittle laughter twisted his beautiful mouth. “Oh, stop being so naïve, *dude*! You are bound to this world. No matter how many times you die, you’ll never get to see either hell or heaven. You’ll just be waiting somewhere. Waiting to come back.” He paused. “Just as I’ll be doing, down on the other side. Waiting for you.”

Low blow. To go with it, the frostiness in his eyes melted into longing. Sadness. And all kinds of other emotions that made it hard to shout at him again.

“Look, Lucian, I’m really sorry for ... I’m just sorry.” I took a deep breath. “But I’ll never try to finish it by asking a demon for help. I may not ever see heaven, but that doesn’t change what’s in my heart. What you’re asking me to do is wrong.”

He went completely ballistic. “No! You know what’s wrong? *Me*, having to watch you falling in love with him. *Me*, having to content myself with seeing you once in over a century. *Me*, missing you. *Me*, being forced to watch you die, over and over again. That’s what’s wrong, Katherine.”

If anger were a perfume, then right now he was drowning me in it. There was no time to fall back; one moment I was staring at his face twisted in aggravation, and the next he had me flattened against his body, with his soft, fragrant lips pressing on my own. What *was* that taste, caramel apples?

It wasn’t the kiss itself that made it so hard to break away. Not even his impossibly silky lips. Or the sweet scent of him that had to be what childhood smelled like, innocent and sugary. It was the tendrils between us that kept me right where I was. Those invisible

fingertips, legions of them, touching and probing and swamping me in sensation. Rich and magnetic, and so much of it, as if seeking to make up for all seventeen years of emptiness. I was sinking, sinking all the way down into waters both velvet and electric.

To fight him off was to swim against the current; it was to stick your hand into an open flame and then watch, feeling it burn. I didn't want to do it, but I did it anyway. Pushing, and hitting, and biting, I tried everything, but the arms molding me to him were tighter than a vise. He wasn't letting me go. Struggling was like wrestling a freaking bear: nothing gave!

"Oh, I needed this," he whispered with a dark satisfaction. "It's been too long."

"Let go of me!" I hissed, still wriggling in his hold.

He pulled back just a little, so that his lips only just touched mine. In between, soft blue electricity was already knitting the edges of the small gap together. "Please, Katherine! Remember this, pet. Remember us," he pleaded softly.

Warmth pooled in my stomach, no longer caressing but burning. "I don't want to. Let me go!"

I pushed and tugged at his arms some more, with the same outstanding diddly-squat to show for it. His grasp was pure steel around me. I could go on playing Xena until the second coming; it still made no difference.

"You sure about that? Are you sure you don't want to be with me?" he purred seductively. "Rumor has it that you've never been with anyone. Since you're so fixated on dying, why not give me tonight? Don't push me away, Kat, my fearsome little cat." His lips kissed my eyelids, my cheeks, my hair, everywhere they could reach. "Stay with me tonight. Let me show you what you're about to give up. What you've been missing, hmm?"

The embarrassment burned in my cheeks, scorching and, sadly, very plain to see. Where did he get off asking around about my private life? And then laughing at me for it? Taunting me like this? Anger welled up in me like the high tide. Bracing my fists against his chest, I pushed myself back as far as I could until our eyes were level.

"Snooping into my life doesn't change anything. You're no one to me, understand? If you were the last person on earth, I still wouldn't let you anywhere near me."

At that same moment, the parking lot lights came on. Maybe because of it, or as a result of what I'd just said to him, I found myself free of his grasp.

He looked stricken. Even paler than usual, his eyes empty, the blue all washed out. "No one, huh?" he asked, so softly that I could barely make out the words.

For a moment, I wished I could take it back. It was a lie anyway, and a cruel one at that. Lucian had his issues and his many faults, but a part of me, likely, the Marie Antoinette wannabe with the high-piled and feather-trimmed updo, didn't want to see him suffer. He was stuck in this situation because of something we'd done together and now things were all messed up and he was alone. Obnoxiously prying into my life, saying and doing all the wrong things, but still alone. Except, it was all getting to be too much. I was humiliated, scared, and about to die. So, in the end, I didn't take it back.

"Go away," I rasped instead, not waiting for a reply.

Three steps later, he called after me. "You're lying. You feel for me, too, I know you do. You're drawn to me. Don't pretend otherwise. It's how you should feel, Katherine. You're meant to be with me!"

I kept on walking.

“I love you! What’s so wrong about wanting to be with the girl I love? Huh?”

Without stopping or even glancing back, I answered, “It’s wrong because I don’t love you.”

There was no response, only a freak gust of wind that swept the parking lot unexpectedly, cold and hissing like a pit of vipers. Shuddering, I peered over my shoulder. He hadn’t moved, and in the odd light his skin was something of a mirage, almost glowing somehow. He looked like a sculpture chiseled in crystal, as perfect as it was unfeeling, lit from the inside, but by a cold flame.

“Good luck tonight,” he wished me.

That shook me, acting as a reminder that there were other things to worry about. Practical aspects needing to be considered. Hallelujah for those redeeming practicalities; they were the glue still holding me together.

“I’ll finish just after midnight. You should come by my house to get the potion, in case,” I swallowed hard, “you know, if I can’t make it back to J.”

If my boyfriend killed me before that.

He nodded once. “I’ll be there.”

Maybe I should’ve said more, but what was left to say? By now, it was all empty.

CHAPTER: TWENTY-SEVEN



I marched up to my car feeling uncomfortable but not at all unsure. Maybe four hundred years back, Lucian and I really had been crazy in love with each other, but today we were both different people. Maybe way back then, forcing a girl to kiss you was the thing. Who knows? But in present-day America, that could land you in jail, so even try it?

Then again, there were lots of other things that didn't make much sense.

Why would Ryder send J to a mystical sleep?

To force my hand, because he wanted to stay here that badly?

Or to convince me that he was such a horrible creature that I should never consider helping him, that he really did belong to the grim in-between realm and that I should send him there?

I wanted to believe the latter because it painted him more like the boy I fell in love with. Good. Golden. Caught between a rock and a hard place, with the hex forcing him to take my life, no matter what, and doing the best he could with what he had. Except, if I didn't work the blood-spell, I couldn't wake up J, either. What happened if I died before she woke up? What then?

Still, when all was said and done, Ryder wasn't acting like a potential sore loser. He knew he could go down, and maybe naming me his heir was his subtle way of saying that I should do it. That I should take him with me when I left the world. That he was okay with it.

Lucian, on the other hand, was anything but okay with letting the chips fall where they may. He wanted me to break the cycle, to finish the hex, by any means necessary. Not only did he think we should ask demons for help — which, hello, nuts! — but also my instinct told me that this scheme had little to do with my own interest. Breaking the hex was something he wanted, not for me, or even us, but for himself. He cared less about my dying, again, than about himself being stuck behind waiting more than another hundred years for his next shot at changing my mind. He'd made himself crystal clear; his ambitions included freedom and a long, possibly eternal life to enjoy it. The only way for it to happen was if he persuaded me to make a few new friends, the kind that had horns and were traditionally residing in hell. But he was willing to press for it, unbothered by the costs. My soul be damned! Now, if that spelled "love" in any language, then obviously I couldn't read, because from where I stood that looked a lot like selfishness and greed.

I pulled up by the side of the house, in too much of a state to rummage around for the garage remote.

And what about his insane expectations that he only needed to show up and, presto! We'd just pick up where we'd left off? To actually assume that I would sleep with him because I was a virgin and about to die, of all the dumb, demented reasons. Then again, maybe it was another seventeenth-century thing, in which case somebody should really point out the "live in the now" concept to him.

Since I was seriously flipping out, the neatly folded note taped to my front door

didn't register at first. I was about to slip inside the house when I caught sight of it. My pulse moved straight to rumba mode; it didn't take a genius to figure out who'd left it there. I yanked it from the door with shaky fingers, almost ripping it in two as I fumbled to open it. The light on the porch was scant, which forced me to charge inside and seize the first lamp I could get my hands on.

The handwriting was beautiful, calligraphic, and put down with care. It read,

My dear Lily,

I know that, by now, you probably found out all about our past and the things I couldn't tell you. And you have a right to hate me — God only knows how much I hate myself! I know that, no matter what I'll say now, it won't make a lot of difference. But, please, believe that I love you. I loved you from the very moment I saw you; even though I knew it was wrong, even though it led to nothing but pain for both of us.

I came by your house a few times, and I also called you. I know I don't deserve to be heard. I never deserved you, but I still have no doubt that we belong together. Our time with each other may seem short, and it may even feel like stolen moments, but they're still ours to be had and they were always meant to be, in spite of all. So, please, let me talk to you! I'm sure you know that time is running short. Let's talk before it runs out. Please, just answer your phone.

Yours Always,

Ryder

By the time I was done reading, my eyes spilled salty droplets onto the paper, smudging the ink. My hands quivered on the cell; I'd forgotten that I set it on silent mode, and now I found there were thirteen missed calls, all from the same number. It only made me wail harder. Maybe it was seeing it right there, black on white, no room for interpretation, no ambiguity left at all. His confession, plain and explicit. He really was the villain. He really was Lex Luthor. The Joker. *My* Doomsday. However deceptively white, the hat he wore was lined in black.

But that wasn't all I cried for. I'd never been one for daydreaming; what's the point when you can absorb everyone else's dreams through a simple touch? There isn't any room left for your own. But now, flopped onto the fainting couch, I realized something. I had been fantasizing. Under the layers of things forced into me through the years, memories, hopes, regrets, and fears that weren't mine, right at the bottom, there was a secret stash made up of my own dreams. Things I was ever so quick to forget about because I never really thought they could come true. But some did. Hearing a boy, someone I cared about, telling me that he loved me; that had happened. And I cried now not because I'd lived to see it, but because in none of my dreams did the boy say those three words via a note, which was also an apology, for the fact that soon he'd have to kill me.

And there was more.

Perfect, agonizing clarity exploded in my mind like an atomic bomb, and for the first time, I saw the facts exactly as they were. Lucian and I had never been the only ones enslaved by the hex. Being trapped in this endless circle of madness didn't just hurt us.

Ryder suffered, too. As a halfling, he wanted nothing more than to be part of the human world, but somewhere during the last four centuries, something had changed inside him. At some point during the last four hundred years he had fallen in love. With me. From hunter, he'd become prey, hounded by guilt and forced to hurt what he loved. Forced by the hex to take my life time and time again.

But Lucian was wrong in thinking that Ryder would never stop. Ryder was tired. Ryder had once told me that when I left him, his heart needed much more than a century to come back from it. He obviously wanted to stop, except the hex's leash on his neck was too tight for that. Maybe the reason he wanted to stay in our world had to do with trying to find a solution. He was probably looking for a way out. Or ... wait a minute. Of course! He wanted to stay because it was the only way he could be around me. *With* me. Before the time came, before the hex pulled hard on his chain again, we could be together for a while, like we had been now. If I didn't ground him to the mortal world, we couldn't even have that, because the hex could only bring him back when it was time to do its bidding. When it was time for me to die.

But why wouldn't he tell me about it? Why put J in a coma to get something I would've happily given him if he'd only ... *explained*? "Explaining", that was it! He couldn't explain. So he'd sent my BFF into a mystical sleep to get what he couldn't ask me for. Of course!

As for naming me his heir, I'd been too angry to see clearly. The money wasn't for me but for my family, and the gesture wasn't heartless but... desperate. He was doing it because there was nothing else he could do. For my parents. For me. For us. No matter how many times he took that road to hell, despite his hoping, we could never meet up in heaven somehow. He was and forever would be my killer.

So how could I show him any understanding? What kind of weird head-case did that make me? How could I feel anything at all for the being who would soon leave my parents childless? No way, right?

Well, I did. God help me, I did care.

My heart broke for him. For us. It pushed me forward, urging me not to go, but run to him.

I ran.

CHAPTER: TWENTY-EIGHT



Like some frenzied heroine from a gothic novel tearing through the night in her long, white nightgown, hair spilling around her in tangles, I bolted across the woods like mad. No white gown flapped around me, but the madness was definitely there. Blood pumped in my ears, my chest ached to open up and give my heart enough room to thunder. Branches whipped at my face, roots caught at my feet, cold air lashed at my skin. None of it stopped me; heck, it didn't even slow me down. I had to see him! Let him know that I understood. Tell him that his pain was mine. That I didn't hide from him because I was angry, but because I didn't trust myself to let him go again. That what was coming, no matter how absurd, I would endure gladly because it kept him in the world, where I could find him again, however briefly, whenever I returned. To him. Always to him.

The McArthur cabin peeked from behind the trees with its windows brightly lit, looking just like a wooden version of a gingerbread house. It never even occurred to me that there might be a wicked witch inside.

I didn't knock; I pounded at the door, both fists clenched so tightly that my nails stabbed my palms and drew blood.

And then he was there. Golden. Lean-muscled body hugged by the smoothest bronze skin. Features too sharp, too boyish, the kind that you could look at again and again, trying to figure out why. Uneven mouth, with that luscious lower lip always quirked lopsidedly when he smiled. Roman cheekbones growing ever so sharp when he was mad. Soulful eyes endlessly shifting from silver to lavender and gold, as mesmerizing as they were scary.

See, Ryder wasn't perfect. But who wants perfect? Perfect is boringly rigid and matchless, and inevitably full of itself. Perfect in a person is often the pinnacle of flawed. What he had, on the other hand, his ... *Ryderness*, was warm and inviting, while still mysterious. Like the *Mona Lisa*'s smile, it could drive you crazy trying to get to the bottom of it. The more you stared, the more you wanted to stare. The closer you got, the closer still you wanted to get. I could see myself growing old looking at it. At him. Unraveling his enigma thought by thought, caress by caress, atom by atom. Taking my time. Spending multiple life-spans on it. On him.

"Lily," was all he could say, before I effectively jumped into his arms.

My momentum was enough to carry us both over the threshold. He was dressed to lounge, in some battered jeans and another wife beater, and when my nose burrowed into his chest, I found that his scent was unchanged: pine trees, leather, with a whiff of gas or exhaust fumes. Familiar. His body was hard, warm, and his arms gave me shelter. How could I feel so safe here? In his arms? What a big cosmic joke my life was.

It was hard to let go, and even harder to consider facing the music. I didn't want to face the stupid music! In fact, I wanted the music to go play itself in some remote part of the Universe where I'd never have to hear it. My eyes burned with tears and fever and I probably looked a lot like a zombie. Dead, and yet walking. His own expression was haunted, the skin stretched tightly over the cheekbones, his lips a little cracked.

We stared at each other for a heartbeat, hands linked between us, eyes speaking

volumes thicker than Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Behind him, I caught sight of Mary Kate, whose irksome existence in my boyfriend's house didn't, for once, bring forth visions of clawing her eyes out. Hmm, how very civilized of me.

In a voice that sounded as if coming from a throat lined in sandpaper, I asked him, "Do you really love me?"

And then I moved straight to hyperventilating.

His eyes glistened, moist, almost entirely gold now. Winding ripples of honey. He took my face in his hands.

"What kind of question is that?" he asked softly, but his jaw flexed in aggravation under the golden skin.

Gulping, I replied, "So important! Would you just answer it, please?"

"Love is a poor word for what you are to me."

"Say it," I rasped.

He did. He said it slowly, as if we had all the time in the world. As if the future belonged to us. As if it stretched on forever.

"I love you."

He made every single sound count.

Now, there are *I love you-s* and then there are *I love you-s*. There's the one Mom said to Dad every morning before she hung up the phone, which meant, *Have a great day*, and was very different from the one she whispered to him on Sunday evening as he set off again, meaning, *The thought of not seeing you for four and a half days eats me alive; I'll miss you every second*. The words might be the same, but there are nuances. Overtones. Degrees. Aren't there almost fifty shades of red in the world?

Ryder's *I love you* was the mother of all *I love you-s*. The original red, from which every last variation flowed. It softened me up and then sank from one end of me to the other like a hot knife through butter. This time, when he pulled me closer, I didn't stop to question how I could feel safe in his arms. If anything, the obvious question seemed to be, how could I not?

But there were no questions. Only need.

"I want to be with you."

The whisper, muffled in his chest, rolled out fast, taking even me by surprise. No, I didn't have a plan, not even a clear understanding of what I was asking. But I was aching, inside and out; it hurt to think or not to think about it, all the same. Only when his arms surrounded me did the pain stop. Only then did it still. He took it away.

I'd only made the logical leap. Being close to him equaled no more pain, and "no more pain" was exactly what I needed.

When I was maybe seven years old and still struggling to understand why I couldn't touch anyone, why there was always so much pain if I did, I remember Dad showing me this painting by Picasso, *Guernica*. It's a scene from the Spanish Civil War, with German and Italian planes bombing a little place in the Basque Country. He explained how pain was a natural part of life. How, as we're all sentient beings, we're bound to feel. Pain, included. He told me to be brave and patient. In time, he promised, there'd be rewards, because pain isn't just capable of educating, but can even breed beauty, such as with the painting in question.

How much of it had made sense to me then is unclear. Mostly what I recalled was crying. I remembered staring at that painting, at the bodies contorted in pain, at the chaos

and terrible destruction, and failing to see any of the beauty Dad was talking about. There was no beauty, only pain, and no relation between them. Growing up, of course, I learned to appreciate the painting, as well as Dad's point of view. But even today, whenever I looked at *Guernica*, my heart stopped for a moment. And for that one moment, before the tears came, I couldn't see the beauty. There was no higher meaning to be attached to it. No point. For that one moment, it was all just pain.

In a way, Ryder's reaction now was like that. He had his own moment when his heart stopped. A moment when he couldn't see the point. When he doubted. Everything stood still. I didn't dare peek from his chest; the rejection

had to be easier to handle if I didn't look him in the eye.

"MK, leave," he demanded in a tight voice.

I breathed out. He didn't care that there was no point.

Blondie moved past, her expensive perfume eddying around me like a cloud of unpleasant news. I stayed tucked away under his chin.

"I'll be at the inn until morning," she said. "Call me if you need anything."

Couldn't she have gone there in the first place, the shameless floozy? When the door closed softly behind her, I glanced up. There was a strain sharpening his features and his mouth was pressed in a thin line.

"Come," he said, moving aside and pulling me with him. "Let's sit down."

Hard to believe, I know, but this was my first time inside the cabin. Between Dave's Garage, the Hopscotch Café, the movie theater, and my own house, somehow we'd never made it to his. The place was roomier than expected and outfitted with the same understated elegance I'd seen at the beach house. The L-shaped lounge held dark pieces of furniture paired with soft-colored fabrics, hand-stitched carpets, and graceful long-necked lamps for the finishing touches. There was even a small black and stainless steel kitchenette, not really what you'd expect to find inside a hunting cabin. Even more out of place was the northwestern corner, a slightly elevated area I didn't really know what to make of. Accessible via three polished wooden steps, this alcove was separated from the rest of the living space by two walls made entirely of stained glass, in colors echoing the rest of the décor. It was just as beautiful as it was odd, kind of like Ryder himself. Was that where he slept? His inner sanctum?

As we sat down on the couch, I saw a pile of neatly folded bedding, set on one of the two chicly mismatched armchairs. Someone had obviously spent the night on the couch, I concluded, letting out a breath I didn't know I was holding. He caught my gaze.

"She really is my lawyer," he told me softly.

I grimaced without wanting to and then sweetened it with a nod, to say I trusted him. We weren't holding hands anymore, but sat on the edge of the couch, painfully straight, both too tense to rest against the cushions. Then his hand rose to cup my cheek, gently, and my eyelids fluttered closed in relief. I leaned into his palm, my face downright burning against his cool hand.

"You look pretty today," he whispered, and even without opening my eyes I could tell he was smiling. But not really. "As always."

His fingertips trembled lightly on my face, which made me want to cry again. When I opened my eyes, I thought he looked different. Not golden any longer, but stonewashed, like the jeans he had on. Like a sun dying.

He raked through his hair nervously. "Lily ..."

Here it comes, I thought, but couldn't pull back. If anything, I leaned deeper into his palm.

"Baby, I'm so sorry!"

Trembling lips hesitated in front of my eyes. The gold in his eyes disappeared, swallowed by a rush of silver. Angry storm clouds nestled there again. It was hard to look at him. Hard to watch him trying not to fall apart in front of me.

"I have to ... There's no way out," he admitted, so very lost. "And I can't stand to ... The pain, the wait — it's killing me!"

Tears ran down his face, soundlessly. Openly.

"I die with you every time, but I wake up alone. And the wait ... I cannot take the wait anymore, Lily. Without you, the world has nothing in it for me. There's nothing in it that I want but you! Please, you have to let me —"

Scary-fast, my palm clamped over his mouth, cutting him off, air supply and all. Anything to shut him up. I couldn't listen to him asking me to let go. To let *him* go.

"Shh, it's okay," I whispered, crying with him. "I understand." My mouth, of its own volition, formed the words. "Know that. And I could never hate you, not in a million years. And I'm ... okay. I'm not afraid," I lied. "I'll be back. I'll come back to you!" I repeated fiercely. "And you'll still be here, which is all that matters."

"Lily —" He wanted to protest. His eyes seethed like seas in tempest. Seas of molten silver.

Again, I didn't let him finish. "I need to know that I can find you again. I love you!"

It was as if my lips didn't want to form the words. They came out strangled, faint, and got lost in the kiss. A kiss not teasing, not sweet, not like any other we'd shared. A kiss that could've had a name. Despair-in-a-bite. The relief that could never be found, we searched for it blindly within the other one's lips.

We fell into each other's arms in a delirium. No matter how fast things moved — and it was fast, no-sanity-left fast — neither of us seemed satisfied with the pace. Clothes flew around like a hailstorm. An unfocused sense of wrongness, of I-shouldn't-be-doing-this was all that remained of my mind, and even that was hushed. It didn't feel important. His body was my sanctuary; nothing bad could ever touch me there. I wanted to take cover inside him. I wanted to wear him like body armor!

"We shouldn't," he may have argued, but between his own shortness of breath and my lips, it was soon forgotten.

How could anything survive what was happening? How would *I*? It was all crash and burn.

The skin of his chest glowed softly, as if layered in a sheet of gold flakes. The sight of it, the feel of it, emptied my head of thoughts and filled it with straw. I was the Scarecrow! And all that sinew covered in gold was my Land of Oz. If I kept feeling for it, I'd find the wizard eventually. He'd make it all better, for sure.

Kissing, tangled in each other's arms, he carried me across the room. With a whooshing sound, the stained-glass walls opened somehow; I couldn't bear tearing myself away to look. Every second counted. Every second was precious and lasted too short. At least that's how my brainless straw-head saw it.

Ryder's brain, by contrast, seemed to be in working order because, after setting me down on a soft bed, he took a step back. Flushed, with eyes like pools of smoldering honey, he pushed the hair away from his face with shaky hands. Well, maybe he wasn't

all in working order, either.

I noticed the walls first. He must have had this corner of the cabin added to and redone completely. It was very spacious, with one side made entirely of glass and overlooking the forest. The double stained-glass entranceway had mysteriously closed behind us, and that shifted my attention to the fourth wall. This one was a mural. Large and beautiful but dark, done mostly in black, gray, and fern-green. Vines, tribal patterns, strange symbols, and Latin phrases were woven in between the images and framed the whole thing.

*Dum vita est spes est ... Dulcius ex asperis ... Bis vincit se vincit in victoria ...
Memento ut mementatus eris ... Mea culpa ... Mea maxima culpa.*

Every word in his elegant handwriting. Mom and Dad both dabbled in Latin, which made me no expert, but enough so that I recognized some words. “*Bis vincit qui se vincit in victoria*” was a maxim by Syrus, one of Dad’s favorites: “He conquers twice who in the hour of conquest, conquers himself.” “*Dum vita est spes est*” could have been “Where there’s life, there’s hope.” As for “*mea culpa*,” anyone with a pulse knew it meant “my fault.”

But forget the calligraphic Latin script, since it was only a mounting for the real artwork. A small, pointy-roofed building that seemed to be a church. Horses. A park bench. Gravestones. And me, four different versions of me, in fact. Katherine. The Marie Antoinette wannabe. A third one I hadn’t seen before, but could easily recognize. The skirts were less bombé, the décolleté gone under a sweep of high-necked lace, but otherwise, she was just another variation of me. The fourth one was a portrait of the twenty-first-century Lily Crane. Eyes like huge pits of dark moss, body hidden away under boy’s clothing; beautiful, if you were into Greek tragedy. The picture showed me wearing my loneliness like a heavy cloak. I looked smothered in it.

I felt my hands clutching at the snowy-white sheets beneath me with convulsive movements.

“Don’t cry,” he begged, kneeling before me.

Was I? His bare arms came up around me and I was once again surrounded in that fresh, pine-y scent of him. It soothed me.

“I could never go to sleep without you near me,” he whispered. “I would go mad.”

Sobbing even harder, I fumbled for his lips blindly. He kissed me, softer now, that much more bitter for it. What wouldn’t I have given to hold on to that softness! To keep it. To keep him.

“Before we ... first,” he pulled back, breathing hard, “I need to give you something.” He paused. “Something I carry for safekeeping only because it actually belongs to you. Always has. I’m sorry for not giving it to you sooner.”

I considered putting up a fight or throwing myself at him like a wrestler, pinning him down to keep him from leaving. Lucky for him, my body didn’t really want to move now. He walked toward the opposite corner to a small wooden desk, and every step he took was another punch in my gut. When I didn’t touch him, everything hurt worse than an acupuncture session done with those thick rabies-shot needles. I whimpered, keeping my eyes glued to his back, his glorious, statuesque back, that glimmered in the moonlight as if it had been sprinkled with fairy dust.

He came back, turned on a little bedside lamp, and then took my hand gently. A

small velvet box appeared in my palm. My breath hitched. I wasn't born yesterday. I knew a ring when I was given one.

"What...?"

"Open it."

The next few seconds both crawled and went by much too fast. I couldn't quite put two and two together; a newly hatched chick would've done better. So, there was a ring ... there was my palm, still firmly attached to my arm, which meant that I was holding the ring. And if I held it, if he had put it there ... wait, how did it go again?

Totally bovine. Frozen and mute. I stared at the ring and, from it, to the celestial being who'd given it to me. Back and forth between the two items that simply couldn't match. Oil and water. Halfling didn't marry, did they? Some rebel angels, maybe, but that was all ancient past. Unless ... Holy cow, what had Ryder done? What had *we* done?

"I can't let you into my bedroom," he went on evenly, "if you're not wearing this. But you're here now, so we should be as we were. Husband and wife."

CHAPTER: TWENTY-NINE



Splash a bucket of water in my face and it wouldn't have achieved what Ryder's words did. Heck, pour the whole of Lake Superior on me and it still would have been less of a jolt. The world swayed and then turned upside-down. My head throbbed, which was funny, considering that no blood reached up there anymore on account of my heart having stopped dead a while back.

I turned halfway, about as nimbly as Mrs. Burns, our sexagenarian pharmacist, and placed the box carefully on the bed next to me. *So* carefully, like handling a bomb. I couldn't have it in my hand. This couldn't be happening! If he had really married me, then we'd both broken, oh, about a trillion laws.

We were doomed! D-O-O-M-E-D.

The shock jump-started my brain. The part of it that actually worked, that is. Whatever I was running on until now had been some emergency system, set to kick in if the main crashed and, frankly, it performed about as well as a kitchen appliance made in China: all thrum, little bite, meant to die young. So now, relatively clearheaded at last, I found myself thinking that there had to be something I'd missed somewhere. Some detail, a sign, turning the right corner, *anything* —

For his part, Ryder looked as if he'd been struck by lightning. With a stony face, he watched me pushing the velvet box aside, never touching the ring, all the while pulling off the human-statue thing better than any street performer ever would.

It should have hit me earlier, since I'd been staring right at it, but my mind had chewed and then spit it right out. No alarm buttons were tripped, not even a tiny blip. Until now.

"Turn around, please," I whispered.

His face moved, but couldn't quite nail a real frown.

"What? Why?"

"Please, just do it."

He did.

And there it was, right in front of me. His wide-shouldered back, beautiful and graceful and ... ink-free.

"There's no tattoo on your back," I said, stating the obvious mechanically, like a recording playing in a train station.

He spun around fast. "Should there be?"

By now, my knees shook as if I'd OD'd on Red Bull.

"I thought angels and halflings have their name tattooed between their shoulder blades. A symbol that, if read correctly, makes their wings visible. They shoot out from the center of it."

If my source was wrong, and it had been an obscure Web report, so there was every chance of its being full of horse poop, then, at the very least, I risked having him laugh at me. Worst-case scenario, he'd recommend a real nice straight-jacket.

But Ryder didn't laugh. He kneeled in front of me again and placed his hands on each side of my face. I thought he looked worried, which he would've been if my

straight-jacket theory applied. But then I saw the first signs of anger flashing in his eyes. Angry, though? What for?

"That may be so," he said carefully. "But why would I have a symbol like that on my body?" He swallowed hard. "Lily, who do you think I am?"

Something snapped in my chest, possibly my wishbone. No, wait, that was in chickens. Head! My head! That was where all the screws were coming loose. But I was close, so very close, to putting my finger on that magic button labeled: "Press here to see sense." But I couldn't quite touch it. I couldn't quite figure it out.

He spoke again, words that came out clipped, through lips like blades of garden shears. "What did he tell you about me? Who do you think I am?"

His voice rose at the end and I could glimpse his anger. It was the kind that made hurricanes seem like soft showers. My mouth was drier than Africa. There was no way to persuade it to talk, the useless trap. I gulped mouthfuls of air, which tasted like the air in Pompeii must have on the day Mount Vesuvius had blown up. The words were cinders on my tongue, too, when they finally spilled out.

"The hunter. My ... halfling."

I looked away. Except there was no real "away," not for me, not anymore. There was only Ryder, from whom I could never pull away.

God help us both, I just couldn't do it.

He wasn't breathing. I could tell, because suddenly the silence around us felt thicker than motor oil. Then he tilted my face up a notch, forcing me to meet his eyes.

"So what are you doing here, then?" he asked in a smothered voice. "Aren't you afraid I'll hurt you?"

I gave the tiniest shrug that showed me as I was: more breakable than a Swarovski ornament. Vulnerable. For all the powers and my special bloodline, in front of him, with him, to him, I was just Lily. The girl in love with him. Who was about to die. Where else would I be now?

In the corners of his eyes, moisture glimmered like dew drops. His expression changed into something different, something soft that left him just as exposed as my shrug had left me. He ran his tongue over those dry lips and his Adam's apple moved, as if he was choking back tears.

On my face, his fingers trembled slightly, just as his voice did when he spoke.

"Oh, Lily," he sighed. "Such a long time, sweetheart, and your taste in men hasn't improved one bit. You'd put yourself at risk, again, for me."

While he brooded, I groped for my voice and found it still as stubbornly defective. By now, I could glimpse where this was headed, but I was too scared to believe it, for fear that it might not come true. Lily-logic, about as reliable as the Weather Channel.

"So if I'm the hunter, then who is he?"

I could only whisper. "William Kingscott. The real one."

That did it. His arms dropped; they just went soft, lifeless, and slipped away from my face. Panicking, I jerked forward and grabbed them, tugging at him with all my might. There's nothing better than a little despair to change you into a full-fledged Amazon.

"Ryder?" I shook him. "Talk to me, please!"

Awareness flashed across his face, but it left his eyes a murky lavender shade I didn't recall seeing before. With a startling lurch, he pulled free of me, only to clutch my shoulders right after. Now he was the one channeling his inner ancient warrior,

unfortunately to grind my collarbones into dust.

"You need to tell me everything!" he demanded sharply. "What happened between you and him?"

Was this jealousy, or was he plain mad?

"Why? What's that going to change, anyway?"

His jaw squared warningly. "I *am* William Kingscott, Lily. You must know that in your heart, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Now, please, tell me what I need to know."

He released me at last, which elevated my chances from needing a collarbone transplant to making do with just a cast. Crossing the room in long strides, he paused in front of an old armoire, from which he retrieved a T-shirt and pulled it on fast.

His words pounded in my cerebrum, alarmingly nauseating. Why was it so loud up there? I wanted to believe him more than I wanted to breathe. But how did I dare? Lucian had showed me the past, a past in which he was Sir William. No matter how much I'd wished Ryder to be him, the fact was that it didn't add up.

"Lily?" he pressed, now standing in front of me.

"Um ..." I was dizzy. Where did I start? What was the point? "I guess it all began after we came back from the picnic. I ... er, Lucian, he sort of showed up in my room."

Here I was, more precariously poised than a Chinese acrobat on a tightrope. The story came out splintered, like a piece of wood chopped with your eyes closed. Big lumps of unnecessary details poured out of my mouth in a jumble, as if I were a toddler, still trying to figure out speech. And all the way through it, I couldn't shake this feeling that I was walking a tightrope, ten thousand feet above the ground, ready to fall at any moment and break every single bone in my body.

Ryder didn't handle it much better, either. He went from pacing furiously to being so still it kind of made me wonder if his heart kept on beating. He comforted me when I got to the part about J, and then swore under his breath and went back to burning holes in the floor while I went ahead and talked about Lucian and the relevant remaining facts. And, no, I didn't think that Lucian kissing me was relevant; the Marie Antoinette-wannabe in me still didn't want him dead.

He didn't once interrupt. Bit by bit, that softness I knew and loved found its way back into him. The storm clouds in his eyes drifted away, and by the end of my tale I thought he looked at me the way he always had. Like nothing else mattered. Maybe it didn't. Maybe he'd reached my own conclusion, simple and crazy as it was. We loved each other. Yes, it was dumb and insane and deeply wounding, but there it was. The bottom line. *We loved each other*. Which made the rest into background noise. A very painful and, in my case, lethal, background noise.

"It's all my fault," he said quietly. "I should've never let him get so close to you."

I barked out a bitter laugh. "You know, that's exactly what he said."

His head whipped around, hands seizing my face again. Licks of flames burned in his eyes.

"Lily, you do understand that he lied to you, yes?"

"I-I want to," I stammered. "But Ryder, I've seen the past when he touched me. And this," I pointed at the mural, "two of these girls are the same ones he showed me in the past. Isn't this proof that he didn't lie?"

He let go of me, grunting unhappily.

"So you think I'd hurt J? You think I'd twist your arm like that, using your best

friend so I could get my way? Do you think I could ever,” his voice shook, “hurt you?”

“No, no, no!” Denial tumbled from my mouth like a hot liquid that was scalding my tongue.

“Then?”

“I think you didn’t have a choice. It was either sending J to sleep or not being here the next time I return. You couldn’t ask me to cast the blood-spell, so you did the only thing that was guaranteed to convince me to work the magic.”

He laughed then, and it sounded like a wild animal dying.

“You’re so wrong, baby. I could never touch a hair on your head or on those whom you love. I know you see J like a sister and I’d die first before hurting you like that. How can you not know that?”

My sanity was wearing off fast. I brought my knees up and cradled myself, biting my lip not to scream.

He went on. “This explanation of yours is just a way to make peace between your mind and soul. Because your soul knows me, Lily, and that is why you’re here. That’s why you came to me even when you thought I was the one hunting you. Hurting you. You came because part of you remembers and recognizes me. But your mind keeps providing incriminating evidence against me, in spite of what you feel deep down and what your instinct tells you. It makes you look crazy, except you know you’re not. So you made up a story to reconcile the facts with the way you feel. Because you can’t function unless things make sense. Because all your life, you’ve had to fight to keep your sanity, and coming up with reasons to get you through the day was the only way to do it.”

He paused.

“Your story makes sense, but is still only a story. It’s not the truth.”

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hands. “What is the truth, then?” My head was going to explode for sure.

He winced. “I can’t talk about it, you know that. What I can say is I *am* William Kingscott. I *am* your rightful husband. Stop thinking, baby, and let your instinct take over. You already know the truth. You know who he is.”

And ... of course I did.

“He’s the hunter. Lucian is the halfling.”

Ryder’s eyes closed slowly in relief. Or agony.

CHAPTER: THIRTY



My reaction speed beat that of a Porsche Panamera Turbo. That car goes from zero to sixty in about four seconds; it took me only one to jump to my feet and bound across the room as if I'd suddenly grown wings. "Whoa." Ryder joined me by the stained-glass walls, which I had no idea how to open. "Where do you think you're going?"

"You don't understand." I pushed against the walls mindlessly. They just wouldn't give. "I left him at the hospital. How do you open this? With my mom, Ryder!"

I was frantic. Even a newborn's movements were better coordinated than mine at this point. "And J. Open this stupid thing!" I shouted, pounding my fists on the beautiful, and, obviously, extremely hardwearing, glass wall. He stepped in and gently caught my wrists, stopping my assault against the stubborn wall.

"Calm down," he said soothingly, making sure he got my attention.

I struggled against his hold. "But you don't —"

"He won't hurt either of them, Lily. I promise you."

Glaring at him, I quit fighting. "How can you be sure?"

"He needs you, simple as that. And you have to understand, he can't just lie. More like distort the truth. So a part of what he told you is accurate." I tugged at my confined hands once, hard and deliberate, and he let go. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The barking, which I now called speech, came out distinctly screechy. It even hurt my ears. But Ryder didn't seem to care. His self-control never wavered, his expression never grew annoyed. And when he spoke, he sounded calm and more pacifying than a temple full of horn-playing Tibetan monks.

"He told you how and why you can help J for more than one reason. First of all, he set you on the right path. He explained *what* you need to do and *why* it would work. But, at the same time, he gave you a message."

"What message?" I asked, marginally calmer.

"If you discovered his lies in the meantime, he wanted you to know that he was powerful enough to hurt J. That if you didn't do what he wants, he could go after someone else you love."

"Which is exactly why I need to get to the hospital," I said, back to barking.

"No, see, this is where you're wrong. Right now, neither of you holds all the cards. He needs something from you, something only you can give him. Until he's sure you won't deliver, he's not going to jeopardize himself by crossing you. You're in what's called a holding pattern, baby, and the ball is in your court, not his."

I nodded; sure, yeah, that made sense, of course. But no, not really. I'd had theories and explanations. I'd had it all worked out: Lucian's reasons, Ryder's reasons. There were rows and columns; there was sense. Logic. A logic that now looked like Stonehenge. Just blocks of stone that may or may not have formed a circle in a distant past. Who put them there, whatever they meant, that was all speculation.

"I don't understand!" I shouted, pressing my hands against my temples. "I spent time with him. He ... I was sure he cared about me! He was hurt, he ... he ... he said things."

Now I was the one pacing. The carpet in Ryder's bedroom was having a really rough

day. My boy-turned *angel*, turned boy again-friend watched me closely.

"I wish I could tell you more, Lily," he offered evenly. "But all I can say, all I can swear to you, is this. You are the reason I live and why I die inside each time you leave me. Everything starts and ends with you. That's the truth."

I stared at him like a child who'd just been told there was no Santa. But the reindeer, the gifts under the tree, the milk and cookies gone during the night, of course there was a Santa! What was wrong with him?

"B-but you said ... you admitted you've lied to me."

He never even flinched. "By omission, yes. By not disclosing the truth about myself. About who I was."

Okay, was it just me or had this really become *The Twilight Zone*?

"But ... how could you? The hex wouldn't let you talk about it. How could you have told me anything?"

"There were ways. Not to tell you everything, but to at least put you in touch with MK. She could've filled you in on the basics. But I didn't want to spook you, Lily, or have you worry beforehand. I didn't want you to go crazy trying to find a loophole and change what I know for a fact cannot be changed. I wanted you to be happy a little longer."

This couldn't be happening!

"But the letter!" I argued frantically. "You said I should hate you. That you hate yourself. Wasn't that your confession? Why ... how ... I mean ..."

He came to me, pausing to brush a disobedient curl away from my face. Slowly, gently. Perfect! He was calmer than a master yogi while I was blowing my stack worse than a crazed cage fighter amped up on steroids.

"Baby, I do hate myself," he said quietly, "and I'd never blame you if you did, too. I am the one responsible for this mess and I deserve my fate. But to drag you along with me! The fact that I insisted on you marrying me, despite El —"

His mouth was still open but he could only gasp, like a fish on dry land. That wild coughing fit, which I still remembered from that day at school, hit again. I took as much of his weight as I could while his body shook and spasmed, tiny drops of blood dripping from his nose onto my skin. Eventually, we tumbled onto the floor, where I cradled him in my arms as he rode the convulsions. And as I looked at him, mounded in my lap, all kinds of things simply fell into place. So easily, in fact, I could've kicked myself for not seeing it earlier.

But in the end, it changed little. Sure, I was very happy that the boy I loved had never killed me, nor was he planning on it. But our fate still was what it was. He was here, but not really. Even as I held him in my arms, it seemed as though we barely brushed against each other, in passing.

I blew out a noisy breath. Ryder was the one for me, if ever one such person had existed for another, but we could never be. We belonged not with but only *to* each other. All we had were stolen moments.

And the hex.

He was suspended outside time, I was destined to die so he could watch it happening, and we were both hounded by a crazy halfling who was all lies and tricks and sick obsessions. All things considered, we were still doomed. Or, more precisely, hexed.

But at least we had now.

I leaned to kiss his forehead. His cheeks were wet with tears.

"I'm sorry," he apologized raggedly.

Eyes still closed, he stirred a little, looping his arms around my waist tighter.

"No worries. But ..."

I wavered; could I ask? Should I?

"I don't understand what you're blaming yourself for," I finally whispered.

Slowly, one shaky limb at a time, he sat up, leaning back on his arms for support. That sudden lack of him in my arms hit me like a road-roller. He was only inches away but, oh, wasn't that far! I brought my legs up under my chin and hugged them close, thinking it would help me not feel so empty anymore. It didn't work.

"Remember when I said he can't really lie? More like bend the truth? Play on it?" he asked, and I nodded. "What he showed you ..."

He couldn't continue, but I saw the rest in his eyes.

"It was the truth? That's really how it happened?"

Again he couldn't answer. He couldn't even nod, which I took as confirmation.

"But how? I did see him —"

With his index finger, he proceeded to draw tiny, invisible circles in the air. Hmm! Guess we were playing charades now. It was positively the last thing I expected to spend my final hours of life on. But I did it, of course, because he wanted to.

"What, circle?"

"No."

"Ring ... sphere ... er, hoop?"

"No."

"Okay, okay, let me try again. Circle, round, around —"

"Bingo."

"Around?"

I frowned, just as he pointed at the light switch behind him.

"Switch?"

He nodded, which only deepened the creases on my forehead. "Aroundswitch. Switch-around. Wait, switch around?"

When he couldn't nod, it was clear I'd hit hot.

"He switched around? He —"

With a loud *thwack*, the connection punched me right in the face, where it had been hanging all along, if only I had opened my eyes to see it.

"He switched the two of you. He showed me the true story but with him as you!" I exploded.

Ryder smiled, probably at my industrious arm-flapping. That sensuous lower lip curled crookedly, the way it did, and my world whirled. Like shreds of soft fabric, my arms dropped, sagging at my sides. I sighed, feeling that warmth only he could put in my stomach spreading through me like rays of sunshine.

"I'm confused by this," he said, while I tried my best to actually hear and not just stare at his sexy mouth. "As far as I know you're a very gifted witch. How was he able to manipulate your mind like that? Didn't you notice anything strange?"

I gasped, hands covering my mouth. "Holy cow, you're right! There was something, this ... this haze-thing. His face and yours, they were blurred. Even when I watched you through J's eyes, in her mind, your face wasn't easy to make out."

“And you didn’t think that was strange?”

“It’s not an exact science, you know,” I argued defensively.

My mind raced back to the images of our past. Our past, mine and Ryder’s.

“Thank God!” I exclaimed in relief.

“What?”

“It was you I kissed. You I danced with, and sneaked away with into the garden in the middle of that masked ball. Thank God!” I repeated. “You have no idea how it felt, living through that with Lucian as my partner.”

His smile died and mine mirrored it soon after, as it occurred to me that, in all the excitement, I’d forgotten about the Marie Antoinette-wannabe. And in that film, Lucian’s face hadn’t been blurred. That meant ... I couldn’t get myself to think about it. Was it true? Did I actually have a past with Lucian?

Ryder looked at the mural, staring right at her. Such a straight posture, none of that shoulder-slumping I engaged in so often nowadays. Ridiculously voluminous dress to go with the hair, which looked like a grenade had exploded in it. Smallest of waists, but a face I could only describe as deadpan. Of all the four versions of me, she was the only one who didn’t smile.

“His face would have been clear when he showed you her,” Ryder said, nodding once to the mural. His tone was strangled.

“Was it real?” I whispered.

My face was a furnace. I could’ve fried eggs on my cheeks.

He turned to me, but he wasn’t mad. Not jealous, not even sad. He just looked tired.

“Doesn’t matter. You’ll always find your way home, baby, and I’ll always be it,” was all he said. Evenly, but in a voice that signaled the subject was closed.

Wow! So, not only did I stab my own sister in the back, but apparently I’d cheated on the boy for whom I did it, too. With my own hit man! Where *were* those Bosnian snipers when you really needed them?

“Don’t blame yourself,” Ryder said softly. My emotions must have whizzed across my face like a meteor shower. “You were always blameless, in every way.”

Back to the cryptic talk, I gathered. Did he mean what I thought he did? Yes, the film Lucian had forced me to watch was full of smooching, but that was pretty much it. And Lucian wasn’t exactly the modest type; if there had been more for him to boast about, he would have done so.

Then again, maybe Ryder was making a point of my innocence as a means to deal with his own guilt. Wasn’t he the guy whose bedroom walls were decked out in “*mea culpa*”? Clearly, his guilt was something to be reckoned with.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “What exactly are you blaming yourself for? It’s obviously me who messed things up. I betrayed my sister. And it was my sister who cast the hex and summoned Lucian.” I refrained from adding, “With whom I then cheated on you.”

An image reemerged in my mind. The halfling descending from the skies, riding the lightning bolts. His killing blow ... The real angel, this time, who was nothing like one. Two-faced, devious Lucian, with whom I had a past. But hey, what’s a little lip-locking between a gunman and his victim? We all breathe the same air, don’t we?

I wanted to bash my head against the wall.

“A young girl can easily be talked into doing things she might never do without that kind of ... persuasion,” he said smoothly. “And, on the other hand, when a man becomes

engaged to be married to a woman, he shouldn't even think about straying. Once that ring slips on the finger, they both enter a binding contract. Honor demands that neither one strays. *Noblesse oblige*, Lily. And what does a man have if not his honor?"

Ah, the joys of being in love with a four-hundred-year-old boy, all morals and reputation and *noblesse oblige*! Part of me wanted to snort enthusiastically. The other part melted into his speech and in that fiery gaze, feeling just like one of Jane Austen's heroines. Maybe the twenty-first century just wasn't my time, after all. Then again ...

"Oh, come on! It's easier to get a mule to do the foxtrot than make me do something I didn't want to. Stubborn is my middle name." I rolled my eyes. Another little something Jane Austen's damsels couldn't do in polite company. "It's sweet of you to try to pin the whole thing on you, but there's no point. I'm old enough to know it takes two to tango."

He stared at me like I'd just dropped a piano on his head; totally, cartoonishly dazed. For a while I thought it was me; did I grow a third eye, maybe? But then the relief crept into his eyes, changing the silver into ripples of honey again, and I got it.

"You don't hate me?" he asked. So stunned, so blown away.

A nervous laugh shook me. "Hate you? Ryder, I couldn't even hate you when I thought you put J in a coma. When I was sure that you had killed me three times and were just preparing to do it again."

I started picking at my fingernails. "I feel a lot for you, but hate?" I shook my head. "Definitely not that. I'm honestly thankful. For you. For our time together." I shrugged. "Beats the alternative. Losing you for good is what I couldn't bear."

He crawled those few inches of distance between us and gathered me in his lap. "I take comfort in that thought, too," he whispered, hot breath blowing goose bumps all over my neck. "Helps me hang on to sanity. It's how I can bear the wait."

We stayed like that, entwined around each other like vines of English ivy, until my mind was quiet again and my body ached no more. Until my soul was patched up and I felt unbroken one more time. In his arms, I was ever so whole. Exceptional in my lack of exceptionality.

"Will you please wear my ring now?" he asked me quietly. Even his voice raised goose bumps on my skin.

We disentangled, and he reached for the velvet box.

Nervous as I was, understanding now that this was all real, that he had truly married me, I tried cracking a joke. Hiding behind sarcasm had always been my best strategy in covering up fear. Not kosher, but it got the job done.

"What's the rush? Afraid someone will smite us for being in your bedroom without it?"

He didn't smile. His eyes swirled and coiled, amber again, just like a wolf's.

"No, baby, that's not it. Fear can only carry you so far. Generally speaking, doing the right thing works better if you believe in it."

I smiled weakly, fumbling with the box. The stone was mounted in a handcrafted setting. It was delicate, yet detailed, revealing a web of laurel leaves. The stone gleamed with a light bluish tone; maybe it wasn't a diamond after all, how would I know? I was only seventeen and not supposed to take an interest in a "rock" for at least another ten years.

My pulse was back to doing the samba. I eyed the mural musingly. "That's the church where we were ..." I couldn't say the word.

He smiled. "Yes. It wasn't much of a ceremony, unfortunately. I guess today you'd say we eloped."

My mouth fell open. "You can talk about it?"

Before Ryder, I'd had no idea that laughter came in colors. But in his eyes, right at the center of the dark iris, just before his lips arched, there was laughter. And it was never dark, but bluish-gray when the laughter was true and joyful. Honey, when his heart was sad or longing. Muddy lavender, when the laughter came out more bitter than anything else.

His irises turned murky lavender now and, just as I knew they would, his lips followed suit, curving ever so slightly.

"I can talk about a lot of things, haven't you noticed? I can tell you that we belong together. That we were married in the autumn. I could even get MK to pitch in and fill some of the gaps I can't."

"Like the fact that you don't die?"

He didn't answer, which, as I'd worked out, in hex-impaired speech meant yes. "You wore a white satin dress with a bodice so tight I was afraid to clasp your waist, it was so slight." He smiled a honey smile. "Venetian Gros Point lace for your veil. We had to travel to a small village in the middle of nowhere because it was the only place I could find a priest who didn't know your father and who agreed to marry us. It was all done in one night, the travel, back and forth, and the ceremony. When the priest joined our hands together, we were both crying like children." He paused, glancing at the mural. "Like the children we were. I was eighteen and you barely sixteen."

I tried imagining it: the dress, the church, riding in a carriage that flew like the wind, parting the darkness of the night. The horses neighing, puffing, and panting. Were we happy? Was it hard to still find happiness while hiding in the darkness with our hearts booming in our throats?

"I know how it sounds." His voice brought me back to the present. "In a time famous for the formality of courtship, for love letters, and exchanging soul oaths, all we had was —"

"Adrenaline rush?" I interrupted jokingly. But his expression broke my heart; it was as if even now, four hundred years after, he was almost ashamed somehow for not being able to offer me more. This, in turn, made me ashamed of having doubted we were happy. Of course we were happy! Because we were together and I got to keep him, however briefly.

He smiled, nodding. "That, too. You were supposed to finally move into my home, a week after the wedding. Your father would've been away on business, which made things easier. We never got to it, though. All that time, we feared your father more than anything, when in fact it was your sister that ..."

He paused. "Still, as short as it may have been, our time together ... we had moments, Lily, beautiful moments. Precious few, but we were happy, I promise you."

"I know," I answered, blushing, wondering if he was reading my mind. "Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

"The hex is very smart, Lily. You see, I can tell you a lot, but nothing that could prove it. No names, no places, no dates. Sure, walking up to you and saying, *Oh, by the way, you're really my wife* would have been easy to do, but without being able to explain myself, you would have thought I was mad."

He was right.

"I can't say anything about the curse. Or about how we met, how we came to be together. No details about my identity from back then, yours, or your sister's. And especially nothing of what has happened since."

"Clever Elizabeth," I muttered ruefully.

"Yes, clever."

He sounded tired, his eyes fixed on the ring with which our long journey together had first started. The velvet box was still waiting in my palm, the stone gleaming softly inside it. Why was I having such a hard time putting it on?

"It's not the ring, baby," he said quietly.

"Huh?"

"The ring. It only comes from the past, it's not really *it*. The past we carry with us, all the time, and wearing the ring won't make it more real. It won't change anything. The ring is just for my own peace of mind. No booby-trap, no catch, I promise."

I rolled my eyes to stop the tears from leaking out. "Am I really that transparent?"

He smiled. "Nah! I'm just really, really old."

Grinning, I reached for the golden hoop at long last, but he stopped me.

"Allow me."

I did.

It fit perfectly. My finger, my skin tone, my hand, us. A current passed through me, our fingers laced into each other's, and my eyes closed. And for a moment, just as the Universe seemed to breathe in and out, flexing its boundaries behind my eyelids, the heavy fabric of the hex failed.

It was wrapped around us and in between like a soiled, oily rag. A thick barrier, keeping me from seeing into his mind. But when the ring settled on my finger, everything changed. For one blessed, agonizing second, the oily weave of the hex fell away.

Four centuries of suffering, of hopeless wait and despair, of a loneliness that couldn't be described by any words, all of it poured into me. Ryder's existence, everything he couldn't say to me, his deepest fears and consolation, and his love for me, I saw and tasted and felt it all.

And it was like being born and dying, all at once. His love for me was the stuff of legends, not only timeless, but untouchable. Absolute. I was deliriously drunk with it, and yet I fell to pieces and the pieces turned to ash in the face of so much pain. Four hundred years of purgatory. Four hundred years of waiting for me. Every time I died, everything died with me. He couldn't even see colors while I was gone; the world was a wasteland of gray. It wasn't until after I was reborn that color started returning, and only when he was close to me, physically, that he could see the world as it was. Poor, lonely, doomed Ryder. So lost and tired and alone.

I cried in agony. I cried with him, for him, for us. I cried and offered him the only comfort I could. His arms were my only safe haven, his body always kept me from pain and all things bad; was it not possible for me to be the same to him? Was it not right, symmetrical, *comme il faut*, that I should be his sanctuary, too?

I offered him myself. All of me.

But once my intentions became clear, because it turns out there's only so long you can fumble with someone's belt buckle before raising a flag, he took my ridiculously shaky hands in his.

“Baby ... no,” he said gently.

And stopped me.

I stared at him, into that face still washed by tears, and I didn’t get it. His eyes blazed wildly, more lavender than silver, a wordless but plain testimony to how much he wanted to. Yet he didn’t.

“The mind is such a fragile thing,” he whispered. “I’ll do anything for you, Lily, give you anything. But not this. Not like this. Don’t give me a taste of what I can never really have, baby, it would kill me tomorrow.”

His fingers went slack around mine and he looked away. “I’d lose my mind. Please, try to understand.”

I did.

CHAPTER: THIRTY-ONE



After much debate consisting mainly of my shouting “no” and “absolutely not” again and again, Ryder won, and I reluctantly agreed to let him call Mary Kate. His arguments were solid. On the one hand, he was sure she could be trusted, and on the other, we did need someone to act as a delivery person in charge of getting the potion to J, in case Lucian decided to ... well, just in case.

However passionate my hate of Mary Kate’s guts, it wasn’t the only reason I fought so hard against Ryder’s idea. Glancing into his mind had revealed additional info to me. I knew now that every time I’d died, he’d tried to stop it, bodily, by throwing himself in front of me, something that obviously had never worked. And even if he didn’t die from Lucian’s blow, being injured by a halfling hurt something frightful. The wound wouldn’t close up for months afterward, and there was always fever and hallucinating and pain. Oh, so much pain! Mountains of it. And I was sure that tonight wasn’t going to be any different; he’d get hurt again. Hadn’t he already planned for it? Why else would he leave me everything he owned? In case he could save me. In case he did die in my place.

I can’t promise you heaven, baby, but I swear to you I’ll do the best I can. Oh, he’d do that, alright! He’d try and end up half-dead again, which was exactly why I wanted him to deliver the medicine to J. So he’d be out of harm’s way.

But no, he was bent on staying. Arguing was just like talking to a brick wall. And once that wall grew lips and soft fingertips and ... To wrap up, he made the darn call.

Mary Kate was waiting in front of my house, dressed, as per Ryder’s instructions, in a warm tracksuit, complete with hiking boots, which transformed her leaning on the luxury BMW she drove into a ridiculous pose. At least, that’s what I thought.

“What’s going on?” she asked as we approached, her eyes latching on to Ryder’s face like flies in honey.

He, however, didn’t get a chance to answer.

“You wanted to know what Ryder’s deal was,” I snapped sourly. “Saddle up, Miss Davis, it’s your lucky night.”

Ryder, who held my hand with all the purpose of a man hanging over a cliff, didn’t react. The three of us moved inside, where I flipped the lights on, trying to gently wriggle out of his hold. The grandfather clock in the hallway showed an hour left to midnight.

“Let go,” I told him quietly, running my free hand across his face. “I need to get my supplies.”

He eyed me with a baffled expression, as if he couldn’t quite get what I’d asked him to do. He knew that, pretty soon, he’d have to let me go for real. For a much longer time. Again.

Gently, I suggested, “Why don’t you fill Mary Kate in? Tell her what she needs to do.”

He nodded and I left them to it, for once glad to have my head abuzz with details of what I had to do. Practicalities, bless them, still keeping me from falling to pieces. Someone really should write a poem to praise their simple might.

Not up for taking chances, I had decided to work my magic in the woods. Not only

did my powers always peak outdoors, under the light of the moon, but also the place I'd chosen was deep enough into the forest, which put it reasonably far from populated areas. Even if Lucian decided to show up, no matter what fireworks he'd pull on us, nobody else would get hurt. Except maybe Mary Kate, but I could almost live with that. I only jest, of course.

Apart from my plants, oils, and whatnot, I also grabbed some of our camping gear: flashlights, a grill to set over the fire, a pot, strainer, and a couple of Thermos bottles. And, of course, *la piece de résistance*, a knife, so I could draw out those few drops of my blood, without which all of this would've achieved a big fat nothing.

I had no idea how much Ryder had told Mary Kate, but she was a whole lot paler when I returned. She only gave me a strange look, half pity, half flat-out terror, but without uttering a single word.

Ryder, with his drawn face, the cracked lips, and those eyes burning with madness, had never looked worse. I was starting to suspect that putting the ring on my finger had caused some sort of energy transfer between us. From a shaky, whimpering mess, I had turned focused, stronger in some ways. There was a realistic purpose I clung to and it kept my head securely above water.

I'd made my peace with the dying, and now my only concerns were saving J and not letting Ryder get hurt. These were my ambitions and I was going for them with all my notorious stubbornness.

Unlike me, Ryder didn't have the advantage of a purpose. Past this point, his hands were tied and he knew it. No matter how much he tried, no matter what he did, he couldn't change a thing. He'd try, but he would fail. He could only watch. Just as the hex demanded.

In the moonlight, he looked cold, haunted, and I gripped his hand harder. The two of us led the way, each carrying a backpack and a flashlight. Behind us, I could hear Mary Kate struggling to keep up and managing about as well as any city girl could. It occurred to me that she'd been a good friend to Ryder, coming out and agreeing to help like this.

"Hey, Mary Kate," I said, "thanks for doing this."

I owed her that much.

"No problem," came the response from behind me. She didn't sound as scared as I expected. Good for her.

We were heading for a spring where sometimes J and I came to recharge our batteries. I couldn't quite tell why I'd chosen *that* particular patch of forest. Sure, after picking up some pine needles, the spring water remained the last ingredient I needed, but there were other springs in the woods. A couple of which, considerably closer, too ... But something inside nudged me toward this particular one. Luckily, even with the lawyer in tow, we were making good time.

After a few moments of silent hiking, she spoke again, in an undertone.

"I'm sorry, Lily."

At my side, Ryder jerked once. I lifted up his hand and pressed it to my lips. His skin was ice-cold.

"It is what it is," I answered, wanting to look away from Ryder and failing. His eyes burned so painfully!

Behind us, Mary Kate went on.

"I'm sorry, I realize that I don't have all the facts, but this entire situation is simply

ludicrous. That you should walk to your own death, willingly! Surely there is something we can do to stop it. This person —”

“Not a person, MK,” Ryder snapped angrily, his voice a low growl.

“He’s kind of like an angel gone bad,” I intervened calmly. “And no, there’s no way to stop it. Remember those two girls you told me about, Marion Frost and Sarah Manbeck?”

Ryder shot me a sideways glance, but I only answered with a smile that said it didn’t matter. What I knew, what he didn’t think I should know, none of it made any difference now.

“What you don’t know,” I continued, though my eyes stayed with him, “is that they were both me. Everything that’s coming tonight has happened before.”

“What are you —?”

“Enough of this,” Ryder cut in.

Evidently, he didn’t appreciate that Mary Kate had told me about the past. Since he couldn’t really protect me, the least he could do was make sure that I was happy, right until the end. And how could anyone be happy while carrying around a guilty conscience? If you spent your days cowering in fear of the future? He knew better than anyone that didn’t quite work.

Nobody spoke again for the rest of the journey. We stopped here and there to tie pieces of ribbon on the trees so that Mary Kate could find her way back. My woods, my beautiful, beloved woods, where I’d walked so many nights before, seemed no different tonight. The energy radiating from the trees and plants was the same as always: pure, potent, and uncomplicated. It welcomed me back with open arms and I felt safer for it.

With fifteen minutes left before midnight, our camp was set. Tongues of flame danced under the pot filled with water, and my supplies were lined up around me in piles and small leather pouches. I raised my face to the moon, whispered a quick prayer, and then got to work.

“Wait,” Ryder called from behind.

I stopped in midair, dropping the lavender back in the pouch, just as his arms encircled me from behind. A windstorm of emotions exploded inside me, blowing my heart to pieces, showing just how close I was to falling apart. Tormenting me with questions like, how could I let him go? How did I hold on to my mind long enough to cast the spell, when every last bit of me was coming unhinged already?

“I love you,” he whispered in my ear.

“I love you, too,” I answered fiercely even as my face turned and tilted and I got lost in the magic of his lips one last time.

He pulled away slightly, and in the moonlight his eyes glittered like diamonds.

“Always,” he cooed against my lips.

“And forever,” I whispered back, slurred by tears.

We held each other. It was over maddeningly soon.

“I’ll find you again,” he promised, but his voice could barely carry anymore.

I nodded, sniffing. “I’ll be waiting.”

With that, he let go. I wiped my nose on my sleeve and turned to the bubbling pot, crossing my legs under me on the cold ground. I closed my eyes and focused fully on my breathing. Unless I calmed down, this would all be useless.

I let the light of the moon and the familiar sounds of the forest soothe me. The earth

grounded me. Trees shared their energy with me and their power, the lifeblood of every living thing in the forest, crawled under my skin to awaken my magic. Moonlight wrapped around me like a new layer of skin and kept it all together inside. My eyes snapped open.

I was ready.

"I'm going to cast a circle," I said, not recognizing my own voice. It was tuneful, low-pitched, like waves breaking gently against the shore. "You'll want to be as close to me as possible, but without touching me. Don't move until I say so. The circle will act as a cloak and keep the magic from spreading. Hopefully, Lucian won't sense the spell until I'm ready for him."

There was no need to stand or move around. I only had to motion my finger and the air rippled, growing thicker, around and above us. The earth surged with current and then warmed up, softening slightly, closing the circle.

I was ready to get cooking.

Mixing the ingredients was the easy part; my hands moved on their own and my lips whispered, bridging the forces involved, ensuring they fit and worked together. The power crackled and sparked inside the circle and a heavenly smell of flowers and honey and freshly cut fruit spread everywhere. It was that very scent that told me when it was time to add the last ingredient. As always, I had absolutely no idea how I knew when and what to do; my magic had never really been mine. Using it meant that I wasn't the one in the driver's seat, just along for the ride.

I slashed my palm without hesitation, visualizing J's face, thinking her awake, wishing her restored to full health. And then I almost yelped in shock as I watched the cut closing itself above the bath of fragrant steam rising from the pot. Oh yeah, I'd definitely cooked the right batch for healing someone!

Shrugging off my jacket, I used it as a pair of makeshift oven mittens and removed the pot from the grill. Carefully not to spill any, I strained the liquid inside it, dividing it between the two Thermos bottles. After sealing them, I stood.

"Mary Kate," I sang, again in that impossibly sweet voice.

Her eyes were wide, the pupils dilated and dark. She was charged with the magic of my spell, virtually intoxicated, and I could only hope she'd recover once outside the circle.

"Listen carefully," I said. "I will open the door so that you can leave the circle, and you have to move really fast. Understand?"

She nodded.

"You will run as fast as you can and you won't look back, do you hear? And you will not, under any circumstances, open the lid of this container until you are within reaching distance of my friend's lips."

Again she nodded.

"What's her name again?" I checked.

"Jane Archer. Rosemound Clinic, first floor, room one-oh-six," she recited.

"Good. My mother will be there; she's a young blonde lady who goes by Savannah. Tell her I sent you, but don't say a word about what you've seen tonight. Just let her know I'm with Ryder, that's all. Okay? And make sure J gets the potion into her system. If necessary, inject it into her IV. Got it?"

"I understand."

“Good, let’s move, then.”

We walked to the very edge of the circle and I touched the flimsy wall tentatively. It rippled gently, like a thin sheet of smoke but alive. I gave it a small push, whispering again words with meanings I didn’t know, and a small arch appeared. Without wasting a second, I pushed Mary Kate through it. As soon as her second foot touched the grass beyond the circle, the opening snapped shut.

I knew she wouldn’t hear me even if I shouted, so I didn’t repeat that she should hurry. A few moments after she straightened herself up and grabbed a flashlight, she broke into a run. Following the right trail, too, which I took as a really good sign. Pretty soon, she was out of sight.

“Your eyes,” Ryder whispered, standing up in front of me. He reached for my face before remembering he shouldn’t touch me and letting his arm drop. “They’re silver, almost white ... and so bright, Lily. They glow — you ... you

— you’re glowing!” He meant it literally, too. My skin was covered in a silvery shimmer, visible even through the clothes I had on.

“I know,” I answered in the same alien voice. “It’s the magic. It’s not inside me anymore; I’m wearing it. You’re breathing it right now, in fact. And standing on it, and moving through it. It’s all around us.”

His awed expression collapsed into a frown.

“What happens once you lift the circle?”

“It will spread.”

And Lucian would feel it instantly. He’d be drawn to it like metal to a magnet. He’d come. For it, for the power that had summoned him on our plane, and for me. Ryder’s face hardened. “How long can you keep it going?”

“Hopefully, long enough for Mary Kate to make it to the hospital.”

“And then?”

“I’m riding a huge ball of energy, Ryder. I have to set it loose or I will implode.”

“But won’t that drain your power? I mean, it *is* your power, your magic, this ball of energy. Isn’t it?”

I smiled sadly. “See, it’s like a video game. The moment I set it free, my batteries will be instantly recharged. I’m going to get a new life. The magic in me is inexhaustible; I can juggle with it. I can mold it and use it and shape it. I can even throw it, like a boomerang. But I can’t control it, not really, because it’s never really been mine. It’s been forced into me, and I don’t know how to separate myself from it. I *am* the magic.”

His head fell to his chest, bobbing slowly. He looked defeated. Broken. I wanted to put my arms around him, but that would’ve ended my focus for sure. Already I felt dizzy, weakened by the energy the circle was siphoning from me to keep itself alive.

“I need to sit down,” I said, beginning to doubt that I could last long enough.

His head snapped back up like a whip.

“You feel sick?”

I sat on the grass and hugged my knees to my chest.

“The circle is draining me.” Even my voice sounded weary.

“Don’t talk anymore,” he answered softly, coming to sit close, but careful not to touch me. “Save your strength.”

My eyelids felt heavier than lead. They pulled down, urging me to let them fall. I fought it. The sluggishness wrapped around me with soft, caressing fingers of sleep and I

fought it, for as long as I could. Until I could fight no more.

With a final twitch, my concentration failed. One thundering boom later and the circle exploded around us, freeing the magic and letting it scatter everywhere.

I counted three seconds before I was back on my feet and functional again. And I counted five seconds until Lucian appeared at the end of the trail before us.

Ryder moved faster than any mortal should, pushing me behind him. Trying to protect me, even knowing he couldn't.

"Katherine!" Lucian exclaimed, acting surprised, seeming worried. "What are you doing here? Is everything alright?"

"Enough with the masquerade. I know the truth."

He prowled closer with a predatory, feline stride, and in the light of the moon his mouth twisted into one of those cold, empty smiles he usually gave Ryder. But this one was for me.

"Busted," he said, and shrugged with open, upturned palms. Then he burst out laughing.

CHAPTER: THIRTY-TWO



He moved toward us slowly and Ryder put his body right in front of me, as always, giving me shelter. Just as I feared, he was determined to get himself hurt again. Brave and bone-meltingly caring, sure, but definitely on the kamikaze side. How many times was Lucian supposed to hurt him before Ryder understood that he couldn't stop a halfling? It seemed at least once more. Panicking, I closed my eyes, focusing on surrounding us in another, much smaller circle, before I gently pushed him aside.

"He can't touch either of us while we're inside," I said, answering the unspoken question in his eyes.

Then I turned my eyes back to Lucian. He looked different somehow and even more beautiful than usual. The blue scar in the corner of his mouth was gone, its being there in the first place just another one of his tricks, no doubt. There was something unearthly about him tonight, a softness that was just too soft, a radiance that was just too bright. He was too perfect; to even look at him stung. It occurred to me now that, normally, he kept his true appearance hidden under a glamour. You can't really go out walking on the street glowing like a Christmas tree and expect people not to notice.

His eyes were closed and he was breathing in deeply, his nose turned upward into the light breeze. He licked his fingertips and then rubbed them together in the wind.

"Ah, Katherine," he whispered. "You taste better than heaven. And I should know, I have sampled both."

My nose crinkled in disgust, knowing that my magic surged all around us and that he truly was snacking on it. Finally, with one last sniff he opened his eyes widely, and they locked onto mine through the flimsy wall I'd raised between us.

"Oh, shush, little lamb," he mocked. "Don't give me that look. After all, it's your own fault we're here. I offered you an alternative, remember."

I didn't know what he'd seen in my eyes, but I made sure to glare very pointedly as I answered. "Enough lies, Lucian. I told you, I know the truth."

He bared his teeth at me in a disturbing smile that was more of a snarl. "Oh, I know you do. I've known from the moment it happened. There I was, minding my own business like a good little halfling, when what do you know? *Boom!*" he clapped his hands dramatically. "I was suddenly right back home."

Gnashing his teeth, jaw tensing under that flawless skin, he wagged one finger in front of my eyes. "Someone's been naughty. You've taken your boy for a test drive, haven't you?"

Was he upset? Crazy? Pulling the court jester routine to cover the hurt?

"And somehow, in the middle of that, you messed with the curse. Your power jostled it and the bloody thing failed. Allowing you," he pointed at me, "to see into his thick head. And sending me," he prodded at himself, "right back to the hole I had sworn never to see again. Like I said ... naughty."

I opened my mouth to tell him just how far off the mark he was, but he never gave me the chance.

"Don't get me wrong," he purred, piercing me with icy blue eyes. "I can't imagine

anything worse than leaving this plane without trying it.”

From that lecherous look on his face, he’d had plenty of experience to back up that statement.

“I’m glad you took my advice.”

At my side, Ryder went postal. “*Your* advice!”

Lucian didn’t even glance at him. “Quiet, piddling meat, no one’s talking to you,” he spat out coldly. Then, without pausing, he went back to addressing me, his voice warm and silky again. “But I wish you would’ve let *me* do the honors. By my wings, it would’ve made a world of difference to you.”

“You’re obnoxious,” I shook my head while Ryder cursed out loud. “Also, completely off-base.” I stuck out my left hand to show him my ring. “It was the ring, you idiot, not this fantasy-land story of yours.”

Emotions flashed across his face fast, easy to read for a change. All at once he was relieved, embarrassed, annoyed, joyful. Then everything went away, swallowed by that arrogant, too-good-to-be-true mask he used to complement his preppy look.

“Of course,” he said quietly. “The ring.”

His Siberian husky blues connected with mine and for a moment I saw the anger flaring up underneath. He really was a sore loser, which he proved plainly by adding, “No matter. My offer still stands. You can still decide to be with someone who can handle you. All of you,” he finished suggestively.

“If you had a brain, you’d know I’d rather die than let you lay a finger on me.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Did you hate the kiss so much?”

“Kiss?” Ryder was fuming. “You sonofabitch!”

I grabbed his arm, struggling to hold him back and within the confines of the circle. Lucian sniggered, obviously enjoying the show. I was beginning to see red.

“It was like having my tonsils taken out with barbed wire while fully awake!”

He didn’t even blink. “Do stop being such a drama queen, Katherine. There was hardly any tongue involved.”

At my side, Ryder was close to overpowering me and tearing at him. Short on options, I pressed my lips on his, roughly enough to keep him still.

“He’s taunting you,” I whispered. “He wants you to attack him so he can hurt you again. Don’t play into it! Please?”

With my forehead pressed to his, I sent a wave of love and calm through the circle, sensing his muscles relax almost instantly.

“Ahem!” Lucian pretended to cough. He was still smirking annoyingly. “Hex-boy reeks of insecurity. Did something happen after he stuck that thing on your finger? Did he choke on the next step?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Ryder ground his teeth, tense like a rubber band.

“Speaking from experience, mutt?” he snarled.

In the meantime, I was growing bored with the theatricals.

“What’s this about, Lucian? Why are you acting like a jealous boyfriend? Are we back to pretending that you love me? Because that’s old.”

Surprisingly, he met my mockery with a serious expression.

“Pretending? I wasn’t pretending anything, you silly child. Not now and not in the past. When you were Marion Frost, you nearly married me, Katherine!” he said in a very insistent, very emotional tone. It was almost believable. “You know you loved every one

of my kisses then. You know we were good together. You've seen it. Felt it."

Okay, of all the subjects I really wanted to avoid, our engagement, which I'd seen more of through Ryder's memories, definitely made the top of the list.

"You tricked me into it, you know it!" I shouted, gripping Ryder's hand tighter.

"I did no such thing!" he returned fiercely.

"You kept Ryder from me. You made sure we didn't meet. You had him confined to a bed, fighting to stay conscious, for months!" I exploded.

"I did *that*. And you have no idea how dearly I paid for my actions. With nothing to show for it, either. Because you still managed to find your way to him," he hissed. "You and your potions and balms and whatnot. If not for that Florence Nightingale act, we would've been married today. You'd be mine now."

"How could I marry you, pea-brain? I'm already happily married. To him."

He made a wide gesture, meant to shrug that off easily. "You're no more married to him than you are to me. Your so-called marriage will remain a sham until consummated."

Ryder grinned. "You sure about that? 'Cause the ring on her finger says otherwise. Same ring that you say is the symbol of a sham marriage was strong enough to send your ass right back to gaga-land when I slipped it on."

Lucian stabbed him with a look that was all ice. "I'll enjoy ripping your throat out in a minute," he snarled.

"No one rips anything," I interjected. "I've got a proposition for you."

Beside me, Ryder stiffened. "What? What are you doing?"

It was the hardest thing, ignoring him. But I kept my eyes on the halfling, whose face was slowly relaxing into another confident grin.

"You don't have to talk," he said, all silk and melted chocolate. "Right now, I'm drowning in you, Katherine —" His eyelids closed and he inhaled hungrily. "The same power that summoned me here ... it's all around me. It forges a bond between us." His eyes snapped open. "I can hear your thoughts," he said simply, a crazed excitement glinting in his eyes. He was drunk with my energy.

"Never felt anything like it in four hundred years on this plane, and I looked hard, believe me. Every so-called witch, everyone with the smallest knack for magic. But Katherine, nobody holds a candle to this." Again he gulped in deep. "You're ... *intoxicating*, my pet!"

A few things happened at once. Ryder lunged for him, crossing the confines of the circle like there was nothing to it, and the dream I'd had earlier, about J and Elizabeth, tumbled into my mind, as clear as daylight. J's grin as she high-fived me flashed right in front of my eyes, her voice echoing closely after. *We are so kicking his butt now!* It lasted all of one second and then my lips moved, whispering one word. To my ears, it sounded like wind howling, but somehow I knew it wasn't that. Somehow I knew it was Lucian's true name.

Instantly he was thrust back and lifted into the air, where he hovered, screaming, his body twisting and thrashing around in pain. I made a grab for Ryder, pulling him back into the circle, and then cast a second layer of protection, soundproofing the circle. Making sure that his human ears heard nothing of what happened beyond the boundaries of my double-charmformula special. Call me chicken, call me silly, but I figured Ryder had had just about enough of Lucian's incendiary comments.

As for the pain in question, by the time I directed my attention back to him, he didn't

look human anymore.

His torso was bare and the moonlight bounced off his alabaster skin, making him into a marble statue. Washboard abs, naturally, because Lucian was like that. *Too* dang perfect! Around him, fully unfurled and shooting from his back, a magnificent pair of wings quivered with painful after-shocks. They were colossal, and blacker than the night around him.

Gently he descended, so gracefully that my heart wept in the face of so much beauty. He was a jerk, I hadn't forgotten that, but he was a celestial jerk with wings. And his mere sight had been designed for the purpose of taking your breath away.

At least, until he opened that distinctly un-angelic mouth of his.

"You *have* been naughty! Do you realize you're the only being in this world who can hurt me like this?" he asked, drifting closer.

He was smiling, as if he had just paid me a compliment.

With detachment, I shrugged. "See? That's another reason we'd never work. I don't like pain."

He responded with an arch grin. "I don't mind a little pain if it's skillfully applied. And I bet I could teach you those skills, considering you already possess the means." His voice grew softer, low and caressing. "Think about it; with me at your side, you'd never have to hold back. We could do things no mortal body can take ... I could touch you in ways no one else can, Katherine. I could set your power ablaze! And we'd rule this plane, you and me, together."

Ignoring the warmth spreading through my limbs, I rolled my eyes. "Hmm, tempting: pain, sex, and taking over the world. When can we start?"

Even if he couldn't hear Lucian's answers, Ryder could still listen to me. His fingers, firm, familiar, and reassuring, laced into mine, and he squeezed my hand once. The contact made me shiver. It made me stronger. It made me smile.

From the corner of my eye, I saw him smiling, too. Without saying a word, we were in perfect sync.

I could never be any more worlds apart from Lucian.

With my free hand I shook the second Thermos bottle, the one holding the rest of the potion. I dangled it right in front of the halfling's eyes and smiled in satisfaction because he watched it, completely hypnotized.

"You know what I want. Let him go unharmed and you get more than just to sniff at my power. You get to taste it. So you can go on annoying the heck out of this world for another hundred plus years. What do you say?"

He licked his lips, eyes never straying from the container in my hand. "Deal."

"Can I trust you?"

One brow rose contemptuously. "Of course you can trust me! I'm a damn *angel*."

Yep, about as reassuring as handing a pair of sharp scissors to a blind man and asking him to cut your hair, but I couldn't afford to argue anymore. Casting a second layer of protection had bled my energy dry. It didn't matter if I released the circle or not; pretty soon it was going to explode all by its lonesome.

I let the magic flow free and watched Lucian staggering back like a drunk man as it slid over him. He was no better than a junkie getting his fix. Same complete abandon. Same loss of control.

"Lily, what's going on, baby?"

Ryder gripped my shoulders, kneading them with unsure fingers. The look in his eyes, that of a man on death row, told me that he'd guessed time had run out. Rising on tiptoe, I pressed my lips on his for a moment.

"I want you to go now."

It wasn't a plea, not even a request; it was an order. It came out as inflexible as a blade.

"No way. No way am I leaving you with him!" he argued sharply.

"You will. Or I will send you away. I dipped into my power deep enough tonight to pull it off," I threatened. "I'll send you to the other side of the world."

He switched to pleading. "Lily, please, I need to be here! You can't take this from me. You can't. Don't!"

I blinked back tears but held my ground. "No, you don't need to be here. If you stay you'll get hurt and I don't want that happening again. Understand? You've seen this movie already and you know how it ends. Just go."

His face hardened. "Make me!" he challenged.

We locked stares squarely. "I can and I will. If this is how you want to say good-bye, fine. Have it your way."

"Lily, please —"

He never got to finish, though. Lucian was suddenly standing right behind him. "You know what? I'm bored."

The same slim, silver blade he always used grew from his arm, first as an extension of his hand and then as a full-bodied weapon, gleaming menacingly. His arm thrust forward, aiming at Ryder's neck, and I screamed, pulling him out of the way just in time. The blade barely grazed him ...

... before sinking fully into my chest.

I fell.

CHAPTER: THIRTY-THREE



They both screamed my name at the same time. Both my names, past and present.

Ryder, after getting to his feet from where I'd hurled him, launched himself at me like a bullet. With the last of my strength, I tossed a protective cover in his direction, pinning him where he stood, safe from Lucian as long as the magic lasted. As long as I still did.

I lay on the grass with my head turned, unable to tear my eyes away from him. He struggled to break free from my safety net, but I'd learned my lesson since he'd broken the previous circle. I'd made sure this one would hold. From behind its confines, his voice barely carried, smothered by magic. But the tears, his terror, those muffled screams; the visual alone was more than I could bear.

My own pain was ... familiar. I'd had my head splitting open with pain all my life, so I was used to it. As crippling as eternal damnation, sure, but at least something I knew. The unknown came past this point, and it scared me much more.

Lucian fell on his knees, his eyes wide with shock and glistening with tears. His hands cradled my face and his wings wrapped around us, soft against my cheeks, but robbing me of the sight of Ryder. Should I have had any strength left in me, I would've screamed and fought. But very little life was still streaming through my veins and I was using it up fast on keeping Ryder safe.

"Aw, Katherine," he sighed. "Look what you made me do, you stupid, stupid child."

The pain distorting his chiseled features seemed real enough, and as the first tears fell from his eyes onto my face, I wondered if maybe I'd been mistaken. Maybe in his own twisted way, he really did love me. For reasons that were all wrong, of course, since he was as bad as they come, but no less compelling. His tears testified to it.

He moved one hand over the spot where the blade stuck out from my chest and his face crumpled. Around us, the blue tendrils wove a soft blanket, no longer pulling at me, for a change. No more soft-electricity covering, this one was a mortuary shroud.

"Hell's teeth, Katherine! It brushed your heart, pet. If I take it out, you'll be dead within seconds. As it is ..." His jaw snapped shut and he seemed unable to utter any words for a moment or two. "The the knife is enchanted and a part of me, the hunter. The hex forces me to kill you and this blade is my instrument. You'd die as a result of a simple scratch from it."

I blinked once to let him know I understood. I may have not been quite ready yet, but I knew where I stood.

"Why did you save him? Why would you do that?" he shouted angrily, and before I knew it, his lips brushed mine, quick and savage.

When his head came up again, the tears had gone dry, leaving only the fury behind. "He needs to die! Without him standing between us, we'll be together. We'll end the curse. You belong with me, can't you understand? He's just a mortal. You're not. Your blood calls to me because it's just like mine. You and I are the same."

Stop it! I thought, pitching a few sparks of magic onto the words and hoping he'd be able to pluck them from my head.

His hands tightened around my face. "Stop what?"

Oh, good, he could hear me. *Stop tempting me with what I could be with you by my side. Stop saying we belong together. You don't even see me, Lucian! All you care about is my power. The magic.*

"You are the magic!" He threw the words I'd told Ryder back at me. I winced, and not just from the blade in my chest.

But I never asked for it. I don't want to be consumed by it. I don't want to be it!

His eyes softened. "My Kat ... my fearsome little cat, don't you know by now that you can't escape what you are?"

I know. But I can be more with him.

The monumental black wings cocooned around us quivered. "More? You mean you can play mortal with him. You can pretend to be a simple human. How exactly is that 'more'?"

I know you don't get it. You see it as a power trip. You see the mortal world like some personal playground. It's so much more than that. It's home to me.

Quietly, softly, he pleaded. "I could make it my home. For you. With you, if you'll only have me."

My vision blurred; was it tears or the Grim Reaper, circling nearby?

I have a home, Lucian. Ryder is it.

The softness vanished. He was done begging, which I guess meant we'd be moving up to threats now.

"Not if he's dead, he's not!" he hissed darkly.

You can't kill him, you know that. The hex will keep him alive.

He nodded, his eyes turning charcoal and cold. "But I can hurt him a lot. I can hurt him again and again. I can make sure he'll spend an eternity in a sickbed, where maggots devour his flesh."

So, you cripple the boy I love and then expect me to love you for it?"

"I expect you to grow up and understand where you belong."

I know where I belong, Lucian. I belong with him.

I watched the anger sweep over his face like an electrical storm. I saw lightning bolts sizzling in his eyes and I heard claps of thunder rumbling in his chest. And then I watched it all die down, bit by bit, until his eyes were blue and warm like the summer skies again and his body lay still above me. His expression became soft, then pained, and finally resigned. I didn't know what was happening, but my tired heart twitched at the change. A smile, so soft it seemed almost shy, parted his sculpted lips.

This Lucian ... I didn't know this Lucian. He'd plunged a knife in my chest, I should've been scared out of my wits of him. And I was, but no longer of him; I was scared for him.

"I'm an angel. How can you choose a mortal over me? Do you realize what that does to my self-esteem?"

Oh, no! Lucian, what are you doing? I can sense something ... something bad! What ... what do you want to do?

Tenderly, with the kind of care I never would've thought him capable of, he brushed the hair away from my forehead. His touch, made even gentler by the tendrils vibrating between us, was soothing and lighter than a feather.

"This world, this beautiful, maddening, spellbinding world, could be a halfling's

dream-home, easily. It could be everything our own realm isn't. When I first got here, I was struck by the taste of it. Heaven, Katherine, for a few moments, your world tasted like heaven, only spicier! But they were just moments, pet, and then that taste changed to ash. It's not for lack of trying that I say this because, for the longest time, I did fight the truth. I filled my existence with people, and things, and everything I thought might do. I tried all I could. But the world still tastes like ash ... from the second I remove you from it — how's that for sad irony? I'm fated to kill the very thing that makes this realm breathtaking. Because the reality is that, without you in it, the mortal domain feels a lot like my own cursed home. And ... I think I've had enough of it."

Lucian, please! I begged without really knowing what for. *Just ... What do you want to do?*

"Give you what you want, love," he said, so very softly. "I'm ending this."

With a lingering brush of lips on my forehead, he rose to his feet. I didn't know what his plan was, but my heart had taken a tumble right into my stomach. Bad sign. Really bad.

Lucian, wait!

But he didn't. He walked away and then kneeled, arms crossed over his chest, wings cascading behind him like rivers in a tempest, dark and restless. I couldn't stand to watch so much beauty. So much grace. So much otherworldliness.

One word arose from his chest and the sound of it shook the earth. The forest shivered and kneeled down to it. The trickle of spring water on the rocks echoed like broken glass. I recognized the word; the closest English translation I could think of was "Michael."

And there was only one Michael that Lucian could turn to now. Only one Michael whose name would have such an impact on the world around me. The archangel himself.

But why would Lucian call on the archangel?

To ask for help, of course.

To have Michael end the hex, by sending him back between realms.

Without a hunter bound by magic to our plane, the hex would become void, and Lucian was sacrificing himself to finish it. He was willingly returning home, to the very place he'd sworn never to see again. I knew this, somehow, as soon as he called on the archangel.

The energy in the forest changed. I could almost hear the grinding of the wheels of time becoming silent and still. A new scent filled my nostrils, something infinitely sweeter than anything I'd ever smelled, like milk, cookies, honey, and Oriental spices, all blended together into something that was, simply put, refined perfection. Bells chimed in an undetermined distance, followed by a drowned sound, which I knew right away: wings fluttering.

The darkness was shredded and brought to its knees. The night groaned, but yielded, and the dark became light.

"Michael."

Lucian, still kneeling as if in prayer, whispered the word adoringly. And the archangel was there, washed in a liquid glow, brighter than all the stars in the sky clustered together. I could only peek between my lashes. His wings, immaculate and mighty, faded into the fluid light like a poem, praising the beauty of all things holy.

Lucian didn't move, and soon I saw him averting his eyes, too. The light around

Michael could easily melt retinas, even the halfling variety, I gathered.

Until that radiance died out, I couldn't even peep anymore. When it happened, Michael was left looking a lot like Lucian, except for his wings, as white as the halfling's were black. He was barefoot, with strong legs sheathed in leather pants and nothing else on. His hair was long, a stream of auburn silk brushing his shoulders. And just like Lucian's, his face was so perfect, it tore me up inside to look upon.

"Arise, young one." He spoke softly, but somehow I could hear every sound.

The pain in my chest wasn't there anymore, which led me to believe that nothing harmful could survive in the archangel's presence. No pain, no mistrust, no confusion. I was pretty sure he had stopped time as well. Words came up short.

Lucian stood, proud and tall, with a face set into hard lines.

"Thank you for coming. I need your help," he said simply.

Michael's eyes drifted over to me and Ryder, who, I now saw, was kneeling, keeping his head down. If not for that pesky knife still stuck in my chest, I would've done the same.

"Yes," the archangel agreed. "I can see that."

Lucian eyed him openly. Determinedly.

"I wish to be released. I wish them free, as well."

Michael nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "Yes, young one, so you do."

"Can it be done?" the halfling asked impatiently.

The other one laughed softly and I sensed it flowing over me, over the forest, the spring, the world. Peace. Laughing notes of peace.

"That is a pointless question. You do understand you will never be able to come back? Releasing you means withdrawing your invocation rights. No matter who summons you, her included," he pointed to me absently, "you won't be able to answer. This plane of existence shall be forever closed to you."

Lucian, stop! I thought, and the despair in my mind's voice caught me by surprise. *Let's think about this. There's got to be some other way!*

He ignored me, of course. So why did I care? Because I understood sacrifice. I understood what it took to willingly lay down your life for someone else. And I knew Lucian ... he made Machiavelli look like Mother Teresa. He was misguided, cruel, obnoxious. The word "sacrifice" wasn't a part of his vocabulary. For him to do this ... Of all the things in the Universe, he had to pick me to redeem himself with by actually caring. And I may not have cared in return, not like him, not enough, but still sufficient to resent his sacrifice.

He squared his shoulders, nodding once. "I know the terms. In fact, I'm counting on them to break the cycle. I accept."

Michael shrugged, a graceful, light gesture that put a knot in my throat. "Very well, then. Kneel."

Lucian, stop this right now! You know you don't want to go back there. This is forever, you idiot! Stop! I screamed inside my head.

He didn't. He just dropped to his knees, keeping his head low, saying nothing. The archangel held out his arm and almost touched his head, when Lucian whispered raggedly: "Wait."

"Yes?"

"What will become of them?" he asked, without raising his head.

Michael gestured again, vaguely in my direction. "She has proven wise in using the power; she will keep it. She will live, grow old, and die, as any mortal should. So will the boy."

Lucian's head bobbed once, tensely.

"She will still hurt whenever she touches someone?"

"Such is the price for her insight," Michael agreed.

"Could you make sure that ..."

There, Lucian stopped, gulping so hard I heard him.

"She shouldn't hurt when she touches him," he whispered.

For crying out loud, Lucian! I cried out frantically. *You stop this right now, do you hear? I don't want it on my conscience! Do you not get what forever means? You will go mad, you moron! Stop it! Please!*

The archangel nodded. "It will be as you ask, young one. Are you ready?"

The halfling nodded, too. His face tilted, eyes searching for and locking on mine. By now I was well drowning in my own tears, unlike him, whose face was dry. There was a man's resolve in those blue eyes and not an ounce of doubt, nor wavering. Only determination and a deep, permanent sense of sadness.

His velvety voice echoed, in my head, one last time. *Good-bye, my little witch.*

Out loud, he said, "I'm ready."

Michael's hand came to rest atop his head, and I knew for a fact that I was looking into *le bleu de Lucien* for the very last time. Into those eyes, warm again, like the summer skies.

There was a sharp snap, followed by another pyrotechnics display, and then the brilliant light took them. They were both gone.

The knife in my chest evaporated inexplicably and I sensed the wound closing. No pain, wooziness or any other side effects hinting at my close brush with death lingered. But a new hole yawned in my chest. And just because this one didn't have a knife jutting out from it didn't mean it hurt any less.

Slowly, as gently as if I were made of glass, Ryder gathered me in his arms. I hid my face in his pine-y scented chest and cried. Cried without even trying to explain why. And he ... he just held and soothed me. He whispered in my hair and kissed the tears away. And when they ran dry, he carried me home, just like in a Jane Austen novel. For once, I didn't complain.

My heart weighed tons. Chunks of lead, stuffed in my thoracic cavity, dripping acid — that's how it felt.

Things stay with you, they say, and the past grows into a living organism that you can never really shake off. Everything you've ever done, the good and the bad, is supposed to always be on your trail, breathing down your neck. Linkin Park even wrote a song about it. Time acts on it, people say, or so they hope, and eventually some of it even gets forgotten, buried deep within. I wouldn't know about it, given that I'm only seventeen and not a member of Linkin Park. But what I do know is that, even if I lived a thousand years, I'd never forget to whom I owed every single day. Lucian's sacrifice would always stay with me. Remembering it was the smallest thing I could do, in remembrance of him.

But every time I did that, every time Lucian's name was going to drift into my thoughts again, it would also remind me of the choice I'd made. And that would make it

less painful because I'd never regret my decision. Ryder was my home. My shelter. The yang to my yin. He was the one who balanced the forces in me. The one who wanted the girl but didn't mind the witch, either. Tailor-made for me.

"Thank you for choosing me," he whispered quietly.

His eyes locked on mine, no longer swirling, but gray, and flecked with gold. He wasn't sad, not angry, just open like a book to me.

"Don't say that. There was never a question of choice."

"Sure there was," he argued softly. "And I know exactly what you picked by picking me. And what you've given up."

Of course he knew. Yang to my yin, remember?

"So, thank you."

See? Right choice, right there.

"Put me down," I said. My house was already visible from behind the tree line.

He did.

I pushed myself on my tiptoes and took his face in my hands.

"I wouldn't be me without you."

"I wouldn't be at all, without you," he whispered, lowering those sinful lips to mine. "I win."

Hand in hand, we made our way to my house. A whole lot of future stretched on before us, as far and wide as any eyes could see. Which, of course, opened the door to a sea of other issues.

"So ... when do you think we should tell my parents we're married?"

He laughed, stopping to plant a kiss on my nose. Then his expression turned serious.

"I love you, Lily."

Warmth spilled in my cheeks. "I'll never get tired of hearing you say that."

"That's good, 'cause you're looking at about seventy years of listening to it. On a daily basis."

I smiled back, thinking of nothing but how I could barely wait.

His cell rang as soon as we were on my porch and Mary Kate reported that J was alright. The doctor was calling it a "miraculous" recovery. I hadn't even worried about it, because even if the potion had failed, I had plenty of time now to try again. After all, I did get to keep my powers. I was still freak girl.

But I was Ryder's freak girl.

And that made a world of difference.

THE END