

AMANDA PERRY



HIDDEN  
*Embers*

CHOSEN STORM | BOOK 1

# **HIDDEN EMBERS**

**ALSO BY AMANDA PERRY**

**Chosen Storm**  
Hidden Embers

**Knock on Wood**  
Fostering Hope

# **HIDDEN EMBERS**

CHOSEN STORM  
BOOK 1



**AMANDA PERRY**

COVEY PUBLISHING

# **HIDDEN EMBERS: CHOSEN STORM BOOK 1**

**COVEY PUBLISHING, LLC**

Published by Covey Publishing, LLC

PO Box 550219, Gastonia, NC 28055-0219

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Book Design by Covey Publishing, LLC,  
[www.coveypublishing.com](http://www.coveypublishing.com)

Copy Editing by Covey Publishing, LLC

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-948185-23-3

First Printing, 2018

For my beautiful children and amazing husband.  
Without their patience, this book would have never  
been finished.

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## CHAPTER ONE



*My head hurts. Something warm and wet runs down my face. I try to lift my hand to wipe it away, but a pain shoots up my arm, making me moan. Where am I? Why does my head throb? Along with stifled yelling, the pulsing wail of a siren sounds somewhere nearby.*

*The shouts grow closer, clearer, until finally a man hollers from right next to me. "Is she alive?"*

*A strong hand wraps around my wrist, fingers pressing to the inside pulse point. When an unbearable pain radiates through my body, I realize my head and arm aren't the only things hurting. I try to tell them to stop and leave me be, but the words die on my tongue as my dry mouth holds the sound in. I pry one eye open, but my*

*vision blurs. I blink once. Twice.*

*My vision and mind clear, bringing a terrifying reality of chaos and wreckage into focus. Flashing red, blue, and white lights illuminate the room, reflecting off broken glass littering the floor. A pair of booted feet stomps past my line of sight. Following the boots as they crunch over the bits of glass, I catch sight of her. Lying on her back, she has one arm spread wide and the other flung over her eyes. Even with her eyes covered, she wears the permanent scowl I know too well. The same scowl stars in many of my nightmares.*

*Vaguely aware of someone lifting me off the ground, my body becomes numb and my focus fixates on her chest, waiting for movement. She remains still, showing no signs of breath entering or exiting her body. Panic closes my airway as I struggle to break free of the person holding me. The arms around my body refuse to let go.*

*A scream gets lodged in my throat.*

With a harsh jolt, I wake myself and try to breathe through the panic. My eyes dart around in an effort to ensure the horrors from that night aren't truly happening again. The people sitting on the plane ignore me. Hopefully, I didn't cry out or scream in my sleep. I wish the bad dreams could be classified as nightmares, but they're not. They're

memories. Staying awake for days on end helps me avoid them, but my body shuts down after a while, unable to handle another minute without sleep.

Pushing aside the terrifying memory, I let out a deep breath to relax and turn my attention to the view out the window in hopes of a distraction. The plane descends in preparation for landing. I slept the entire two-hour flight. It's not much, but it may hold me over for a while. Living in Washington State and not traveling, I never imagined I would end up on a plane to southern California.

The idea of leaving the state at all never occurred to me, but now, I'm headed to live with my father. A man I've never met before. A man who knew nothing about me until a few weeks ago when social services tracked him down thanks to some paperwork of my mother's the police found. For some reason, she listed him on my birth certificate.

In December, I turn eighteen, which means I need a guardian for six months. A normal girl would be happy about meeting their father. Part of me is curious what he'll be like. I've wondered about him my entire life, but Mom never provided any answers. There's really no telling what I should expect with him.

My body jerks in my seat as the plane's wheels hit the ground. The screeching of the breaks startles me out of my musings and the captain's

voice, announcing the plane's arrival at LAX airport, comes over the intercom. The seatbelt light turns off, and everyone stands up to hurry on with their lives. I sit in my seat until the last person shuffles down the aisle, then stand to grab my bag from the overhead bin.

Making my way into the airport, I pause and glance around nervously. My father said he would meet me at the gate, but I don't know what he looks like. As I glance around nervously, it takes a few passes before finally spotting a sign with my name, Riley, written on it being held up above the crowd.

Easing my way through my fellow travelers, I shuffle toward the sign until the person holding it comes into view. Before me stands a tall man in his mid-forties. His jaw is strong, and light stubble covers his face. My eyes widen in shock as I look into his. I've seen them before, every day when I look in the mirror. They're bright and round and the same electric violet-blue as mine. It's a rare color, not one I've noticed on another person before.

"She has your eyes, Mark," a soft feminine voice gasps beside us.

Turning my head toward the voice, I take in the elegant woman about the same age as the man standing beside her. Her auburn hair falls in waves to her shoulders. Her eyes sparkle in a dazzling shade of hazel green. She has striking olive skin. She's above average height for a female, with a

sunny smile. I want to ask about her, but people I don't know make me nervous. She must notice the curiosity in my eyes, because she gives an answer to my thoughts.

"I'm Leanne," she introduces herself kindly.

I nod my understanding as the name rings a bell. My father's wife. Social services told me about her, but I didn't realize she'd be here at the airport. I assumed she wouldn't want anything to do with me since she isn't responsible for me.

I gaze returns to the man at her side.

"You-you're my f-f-father?" I stumble over my words as I question the man with my eyes, even though I know the answer.

"Yeah, I guess I am." His brow wrinkles in concern as he assesses me, and I wonder if he even wants me here.

I don't want him to catch on to how vulnerable this whole situation makes me feel. Instead, my attention shifts to my old worn shoes. An awkward silence hangs between us until Leanne suggests we go find my bag.

While following them to the baggage claim area, I work up the nerve to explain to them I don't have any checked luggage.

"T-t-this is m-m-mine," I whisper, gripping the duct tape covered strap of my backpack tighter.

My father's eyes dart from mine to the warn

bag and back again. His brow furrows again “Don’t you have more bags?”

After simply shaking my head, his frown deepens, but he doesn’t say anything. The silence becomes too much for me and I drop my head once again, taking deep breaths in a feeble attempt to calm my nerves.

Leanne speaks up again, breaking the silence between my father and me, “Let’s head out, then. We parked the car this way.” I follow them both without a word.

Do these people truly want me here, or did social services force me upon them? I hate the idea of being unwanted. People around me have made me feel useless my whole life, either ignoring me or telling me they wish they could get rid of me. Maybe these people will be different. I want someone to want me around.

"Riley?" My father's voice pulls me from my pity party.

Peering into their expectant faces, I realize I missed something. Having no idea how to respond, I twist my hands anxiously in front of me.

As the moment stretches, my father repeats himself, which gives me a reprieve from guessing. "I asked if you’re hungry. We could stop for burgers on the way home?"

Could this be a test? If I say yes and he doesn't want to spend the money on me or stop for

food, I've annoyed him. If I say no and they're hungry, I've ticked them off because they wanted to stop and I didn't. Since I haven't eaten in about two days my stomach audibly growls with the chance of food in the near future, then twists when I can't come up with the right answer to his question.

I clutch my chest, trying to help air reach my lungs as panic rises. My fight or flight instincts kick in, and I freeze in my tracks, allowing them to walk ahead without me. Leanne notices immediately. Her eyebrows go up in surprise, and I stiffen as the two of them stop and walk back to where I stopped.

"Riley, it's okay," she assures me in a calming voice one might use when dealing with a frightened animal. "It isn't a big deal one way or the other. How about this? Your dad and I are pretty hungry, so we're going to stop for something to eat on the way to the house. If you're hungry, we'll get something for you as well. If not, then that's okay, too."

I stare at her for a few seconds, trying to decide if she's being sincere. This reflects something normal parents would do. Offer to buy their child, or stepchild, food, but since I don't come from a typical household, nothing about my life is normal.

Finally deciding the possibility of food outweighs the risk of their anger, I take a deep

breath for courage and give them a minuscule nod. They both brighten with my acceptance before turning to continue our trek to the parking garage.

I follow my father and Leanne up to a cherry red SUV. It seems brand new and really expensive. My father puts my bag in the trunk, and I slide in the back seat. No one really talks on the way to the fast food place. For me, the silence stems from my lack of things to say or fear of saying the wrong thing. Maybe they don't know what to say either.

According to social services, they know a little bit about what happened. No one knows the full story, not even the police. Telling anyone would be the same as signing my own death certificate. I've learned two extremely important things over my seventeen years: never trust anyone and keep my mouth shut.

Rules to live by in my world.

We stop at a drive-thru, fast food restaurant, and they ask again if I'd like anything.

"They have great burgers here," Leanne coaxes softly. "Your dad and I always get their burgers and fries with a soda. It's the best around. Would you like to try one?"

"T-t-that would b-b-be nice," I tell her. "T-t-thank you."

Neither of them yells or curses at me, and I allow my body to relax slightly in my seat. I spend the rest of the ride taking in my new surroundings.



The palm trees and blue skies captivate me unlike the gray skies and green mush of Washington. I welcome the drastic transition.

When we finally pull up outside their house, my jaw nearly hits the floorboard of the car. The house reminds me of daydreams I would have when reading my favorite novels. Gray stones make up the outside of the extravagant three-story home. Summer flowers border a wraparound deck. The driveway leads to a four-car garage, but rather than parking inside, we park in front of it. I find this odd because aren't garages for parking? After exiting the car my dad grabs my small backpack, shocking me with his casualness. He and Leanne head for the front door to the house. Shaking off the confusion, I rush to catch up.

Once I reach the porch, my dad holds the front door open for me. Stepping inside, I end up in a large foyer. To the right of the foyer a large archway opens to an elegant dining room with cream-colored walls. In the center of the room sits a large, black, wooden dining table with seating for twelve. Hardwood floors with a massive cream and black rug take up most of the dining room. A black hutch with an ivory set of china and crystal glasses inside on display resides in the corner of the room. I'm afraid to set foot in the room, for fear of breaking something or messing up the sheer perfection.

To avoid the dining room, I shift my attention to the left of the foyer where a sitting room with an oversized charcoal fireplace on the main wall resides. A black coffee table in the same design as the dining table is positioned between the fireplace and a cream leather couch. On either side of the coffee table are matching cream-colored love seats. The wall color mimics the dining room, and the art hanging up matches the pieces hanging in the dining room.

I plan to avoid this room as well.

My dad and Leanne lead me through a short hallway, past a set of stairs, toward an elegant open room. On the far left hangs a flat screen TV, large enough to cover nearly the entire soft beige wall. An oversized U-shaped, chocolate brown sectional with a matching ottoman surrounds the TV. The largest wall, made fully of glass, opens the room up with a view of a huge, fenced-in backyard with a pool.

To the right of the room, a state of the art kitchen done in reds, blacks, and whites reminds me of an old-fashioned fifties kitchen except for the brand new black appliances. A dining nook holds a white table with eight matching chairs.

So far, the whole house appears spotless, but still manages to have the feel of being lived in. A few papers are scattered across the kitchen counter, someone's water bottle sits on the table in the small

nook, and notes and pictures hang on to the fridge with random magnets.

"Well, Riley," my dad says from behind me, causing my heart to skip a beat as I jump and spin around. "This is it. I'll give you a full tour later, but down here is the kitchen, sitting room, dining room, living room, study, which is down the hall from the sitting room, and a bathroom, which is the door we passed in the hall, across from the staircase. The room right there"—he points to a door in the corner of the family room, before continuing—"is the master bedroom. Leanne and I are the only ones with a room on this floor. The top floor is our game room. It has a TV just like this one, but there's a DVD player, and any movie you could think of on DVD is probably up there. There are multiple game consoles up there, too. There's also a pool table and an entire wall of books if you're into any of those things. Jaxon and his friends hang out up there a lot."

"J-J-Jaxon?" I ask, the name ringing a bell, but I can't quite place it.

Rather than my father answering me, Leanne speaks up, "Yep, my son. He's twenty-one and goes to the university in the next town over." She beams proudly. "He normally stays in an apartment near campus, but he decided to come home for the summer. He says the food's better here." She scoffs.

I give her a small tilt of the lips and briefly

wonder if I'll be doing the cooking here, too. Back home, the cooking and cleaning was my job. My good mood fades as thoughts of home invade my mind. Everything in California is a complete turnaround from Washington. My dad and Leanne haven't yelled once. The house doesn't stink of stale cigarettes and alcohol. No stains cover the walls or floors, no random strangers passed out in corners of the rooms. No needles or burnt spoons lay out in the open. Hopefully, things really will be better here. I'm still skeptical, though.

When I don't respond to Leanne's information about her son, she and my father go about settling in, placing the car keys in a decorative bowl on the kitchen island, grabbing paper plates and napkins, and taking their jackets off. Leanne takes my dad's jacket from him and disappears down the hall for a few moments until I hear a door opening then closing.

While Leanne puts the coats away, my father places the burgers and fries onto the paper plates and puts the straws in the soda cups. Once Leanne returns, they silently grab their plates and sit at the small table. When they look up at me expectantly, I follow their lead, gently taking my plate and cup and following them to the table. When they start eating, I do also. I try to eat slowly, but my empty stomach calls out for more. Before I realize it, my burger is half gone. I haven't eaten anything but

raw ramen in a long time, so this is food heaven.

At the sound of the front door opening, I nearly choke on my burger. Loud voices float down the hall, getting closer by the second. I jump to my feet as I struggle to swallow the last bite of food in my mouth. My hands shake, and I hug my arms around my body to help control them while my breath comes out in short pants.

A hand lands on my shoulder, and a small yelp escapes my lips at the contact. Scurrying backward, I press my back against the wall. Squeezing my eyes closed and turning my head to the side, I prepare for the blow.

## CHAPTER TWO



After waiting for a long moment, nothing happens. Prying my eyes open slowly, I peek up into my father's gaze. His expression morphs into one of utter misery. Opening my eyes wider, I blink at him, trying to understand why he seems upset.

Did I do something wrong?

Before I overanalyze his mood change, the voices grow louder, grabbing my full attention. Three people walk around the corner into the kitchen area, and a breath I didn't know I held escapes at the realization they aren't who I expected.

Two guys and one girl stroll farther into the kitchen, stopping short when they notice me. They gape at me soundlessly. I fix my eyes on my shoes

to hide my burning cheeks. I hate being the center of attention.

"Jaxon." My dad clears his throat, breaking the awkward silence. "This is Riley. Riley this is Jaxon, Jaxon's girlfriend, Cassie, and his best friend, Caleb."

I peek up under my lashes at the guy shifting his weight in the front of the group. Jaxon—I assume—with his dirty blond hair and defined muscles steps slowly toward me. My entire body stills. He may be upset about me moving into his house. If that's the case, he won't be gracious about letting me know.

He struts up and puts his hands on my shoulders gently, pulling me in for a quick hug. The gesture sends me into complete shock, unable to move or respond to his hug. He pulls back quickly, keeping his hands on my shoulders and holding me at arm's length. He smirks down at me, and I notice he's about two inches shorter than my dad so I don't have to tip my head back as far to see him.

His face is boyish but masculine. He shares the unique hazel eye color his mother has. His chaotically styled hair hangs to about his ears. His jovial attitude makes me want to believe he doesn't hate me yet. If I wasn't too stunned by his effortless show of affection, I might've fallen into a full-blown panic attack with his nearness and physical contact.

Movement catches my attention, and I peer around Jaxon to find Cassie shuffling closer. She's about four inches taller than me, with gorgeous curly black hair down to her shoulders. Her eyes sparkle a soft, warm brown.

"This is freaking awesome," Cassie squeals. Her words come out too fast; it's hard for me to keep up. "There's finally another girl in our group! We can go shopping and get pedicures together. Jaxon and Caleb never do the girl stuff with me. You and I are going to be best friends, just watch."

My eyes widen as I try to keep up with her.

A deep masculine chuckle from the corner of the room draws my attention to the forgotten third of their group, leaning against the far wall in the kitchen. About the same height as my dad, he has dark-brown hair with a just rolled out of bed style. A fleeting thought goes through my mind of whether he really did recently roll out of bed or if he styles it that way on purpose. Either way, it suits him. A light shadow of stubble covers his strong jaw. His tanned skin sets off his almond-shaped, bright-blue eyes. A black, button-up shirt hugs his arms in just the right way, and the open collar reveals a white tank undershirt, outlining his defined chest. Paired with distressed jeans and black biker boots, he's the most striking man I've ever seen.

A half grin crosses his lips while he looks



over my five-foot-one frame, my baggy black t-shirt, too big jeans, and holey sneakers. I blush as I realize everyone else in this room dresses like they belong in Vogue while I could have come straight from the sewers.

"Cassie, give the poor girl a second to breathe, yeah?" he light-heartedly scolds Jaxon's girlfriend.

"Oh, right! Sorry!" Cassie blushes and skips back over to Jaxon. "I'm just excited to finally meet you. I don't have many friends who are girls because for some reason people think I can be too much. Whatever that means. Plus, I have no sisters, just my stupid brother." She rolls her eyes.

"Hey!" Caleb shouts from across the room, making me jump about a foot in the air. "I'm not stupid."

"Y-y-you're her b-b-brother?" I ask before my brain to mouth filter has a chance to kick in.

His gaze shoots from Cassie back to me, and I take a step back, pressing myself into the wall again, before he advances on me for asking a stupid question.

To my utter shock, he simply grins. "Yeah, I'm her older brother. I actually introduced these two lovebirds." He shoots the couple a mocking glare before turning his attention to the half-eaten food on the table. "Sorry for the interruption. You guys should go back to eating. We just planned on

going up to the game room to chill out."

"Actually," Leanne exclaims, stopping Cassie, Jaxon, and Caleb from leaving the room. "Now would probably be the best time to talk to Riley about the changes in the living arrangements."

Sending a panicked glance to my dad and Leanne, I wonder if they want to kick me out already. It hasn't been long, but I've been on my best behavior. If they make me leave, I'm out of options. Social services will stick me in a foster home for the next six months, then I'll be thrown onto the streets. My dad is the only family they found when they searched. My mother was an only child, and her parents died before I was born.

This whole set up appeared too good to be true, but I assumed there would be a little bit of time to come up with a plan before they sent me away. Hot tears sting the back of my eyes, desperate to fall. My mouth opens for me to tell them I'll get my bag and go, saving them the time and effort of telling me to leave. Before any sound can escape me, my dad speaks up.

"Go ahead and finish your lunch, Riley." He points to the chair I vacated a few moments earlier. "You three, take a seat."

Leanne, Jaxon, and my dad sit in the three chairs across from me, Cassie sits at one end of the table and Caleb sits right next to me at the other

end. With the idea of being kicked out soon looming in my mind, I slowly finish eating my now cold fries.

This could be the last thing I eat for a long time, I may as well enjoy it.

"Listen, Riley," Leanne begins. "I know social services told you it would only be me, your father, and Jaxon living here with you, but we've had a sudden change of plans."

She pauses to study my reaction. I try to keep the panic out of my eyes as I wait for her to continue.

When I don't say anything, she proceeds with her explanation. "Cassie and Caleb's parents had to leave the country for business recently. They won't be back for at least six months. Originally, they planned on letting the two of them stay in their home alone, but because Caleb and Cassie are two college-aged kids, they didn't want their home to turn into a crazy party house. Their parents asked us if we'd be willing to let the kids stay with us while they're gone. We have six bedrooms which means no one needs to share a room."

Leanne pauses and gives Jaxon and Cassie a hard stare.

Jaxon rewards her with a cheeky grin before she turns back to me. She watches me for a long moment as if trying to decide her words carefully.

Finally, she lets out a perturbed sigh. "Riley,

we won't push you into telling us anything until you're ready, but we need you to be completely honest right now when we ask if you're okay with Cassie and Caleb staying here. We want you to be comfortable. This is your home, now, too, and we don't want you to think we don't care about your opinion."

I blink repeatedly in confusion.

It doesn't make sense for her to ask my opinion about something. No one ever asks me what I want. My chest tightens. These people, who have known me for a few hours, care more about my thoughts than anyone else in my life. Glancing over at Cassie, I notice she appears worried. At first, I don't understand why. My mind automatically assumes she's worried about their reactions to my opinion, but after a minute of analyzing her, I realize she's staring right at me, like she's waiting for me to answer.

She must be worried I won't want her here. I seek out Caleb and see the same worried expression on his face. As terrified as I am to agree to more strangers in the house, I can't bring myself to say no to them. After all, they belong in this family more than I do. They know my father, Leanne, and Jaxon. I don't.

Closing my eyes, I take a breath to try and make my voice even and calm. When I'm sure I can speak without my voice shaking, I open my eyes

again. "Of c-c-course it's o-o-okay with m-m-me." I try to act excited, but it probably comes across as a grimace. "I d-d-don't mind a-a-at all."

They all watch me, their expressions full of disbelief. Thankfully no one calls me on my clear hesitation, for which I'm grateful. I want these people to like me. If agreeing to something that scares the heck out of me means they'll like me, then I'll do it.

"Great!" my dad exclaims joyfully. "Leanne and I will clean up the mess from lunch. Cassie, can you show Riley her room?"

"Yeah!" Cassie jumps to her feet and grabs my hand.

I flinch hard, not expecting the contact, but she doesn't seem notice. She practically drags me toward the stairs. She snags my bag as we pass it.

My tour of the second floor is short and sweet. There are two bedrooms on the left and three on the right. In the middle is a massive bathroom, complete with a large Jacuzzi tub and double sinks.

Cassie gestures to the left. "The first room belongs to Jaxon and the second room is mine."

As we continue down the hall, Cassie explains the bathroom situation. "Jaxon's room has its own bathroom. Since the other three rooms have always been used as guest rooms, they never saw a reason to put in bathrooms. I guess we have to

share for now."

Without waiting for me to respond, Cassie continues pointing out the rest of the rooms. "To the right, the first room is Caleb's, and the second is for you. The third's a guest room."

Opening the door to my room, I blink a few times, trying to ensure the room in front of me is real. The walls are all painted light-gray. A queen-sized bed takes up the majority of the room. The stark white bedding stands out drastically against the jet-black wooden bedframe. A dazzling, black and white canvas skyline painting of Los Angeles hangs above the bed. A long, black dresser on the wall opposite the bed houses a flat-screen TV.

How many televisions does this house have?

A door next to the dresser leads to a walk-in closet. To the left of the bed sits a white desk with a small black desk lamp and a brand-new laptop sitting on top of it. I make a mental note to find out who left their computer in here and ask if they'd like to keep it in here or take it back to their own room.

Random pops of electric-blue throughout the décor, like throw pillows on the bed and a blanket draped over the desk chair, brighten the otherwise colorless room. A few mason jars with fake white flowers in them rest on a shelf, and a gray and blue cushion rests on a bench by a huge bay window overlooking the neighborhood. To my surprise, the

ocean is visible in the distance.

"I-I-I'm in love w-w-with this r-r-room, I m-m-may n-n-never leave," I mumble to Cassie while spinning in a slow circle to take everything in.

She bursts into a fit of laughter. "I'm sure you can personalize it a bit and make it even better."

Her carefree attitude lifts my spirits a bit.

Cassie leaves, suggesting I settle myself in and unpack my things. There isn't really anything to settle, but I don't voice my thoughts. After pulling the few articles of clothing I have from my bag and putting them away in the top drawer of the oversized dresser, I dig into the bottom of the bag and remove my small collection of paperback novels.

Out of the five books I own, four of them are held together by tape or missing covers. They've been my escape for such a long time, the idea of getting rid of them never occurred to me. After I stack my books on the nightstand, I finish emptying the bag.

Only my toiletries are left. I wasn't sure they would have any I would be allowed to use, and I wasn't going to assume they would purchase anything for me. Before I left, I managed to take a trip to a dollar store. I spent a large chunk of my tiny savings on soap and shampoo and other necessities.

One perk of being forced to walk to the store

and other places for my mother and stepfather was the little bits of money I would find while I walked. It's incredible how many people drop coins and don't bother to pick them up.

After getting everything put away in the bottom drawer of the dresser, I put my backpack in the closet and sit on the bed. All of the traveling and new stresses took their toll on me today. It makes me nervous how tired I am. I haven't talked to my dad or Leanne about the dreams. I don't want to anger them if I wake them up screaming. Then again, I don't want them to know what the dreams are about, and I fear they might ask.

Deciding to keep it to myself and hope they don't notice, I stand and head for the door. There was never anything said about what I should do once finished unpacking, but I doubt sitting here and relaxing is allowed.

Shuffling down the hall toward the stairs, gleeful giggles float down from the next floor up. I stand there for a minute, feeling a pang of envy at the way they all laugh and joke around with such ease. With no worries of punishment. I push the thoughts aside and head downstairs. This is their life, not mine.

"Riley!" Caleb's voice calls from behind me.

It startles me severely, causing me to miss a step and lose my balance. I slide down three steps before strong arms go around my waist, pulling me



into a wall.

“Whoa!”

Except, it's not a wall, it's Caleb's chest. I feel incredibly small against him. But I feel something else, too. Something I can't put my finger on. He holds onto me for a full minute while I turn my head and blink back at him in a daze. For some strange reason, I'm not afraid of him. Any other person in the world who touched me like this would be rewarded with a completely different reaction. It would be normal for me to freak out and hyperventilate in this situation, but with Caleb, I simply stare at him and allow him to hold onto me. My heart squeezes at the contact, but not in an unpleasant way. How strange.

He holds onto me for a long time with a dazed expression on his handsome face before finally shaking himself and releasing me. He backs down a few steps, breaking our contact. An odd sensation of loss rushes through me. With a frown, I try to clear my mind of the disappointment. I'm being silly, and if he catches onto my strange behavior, he might be unhappy with me.

"You okay?" he asks, searching my face for something. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to ask if you were going to come join us upstairs. We're about to watch a movie. The new one with Channing Tatum and Jonah Hill. Cassie says it's our best bet since it has Channing for you

girls and the action for me and Jaxon."

His expression is full of hope, and I lose my ability to speak. Blinking at him is the only thing I'm able to accomplish. Is watching a movie even allowed? It doesn't seem like such a smart idea for me to go up and watch a movie with them. Not without my father giving me permission first.

"You should go with them, Riley," my father's voice calls from the bottom of the stairs.

I turn around to find him strolling by with a book in his hands. It looks like some kind of workbook, and he's clearly distracted by it.

"It'll be fun." He glances up at me long enough to give me a small nod of encouragement before he continues by.

Turning my attention back to Caleb, I bite my lip as I consider what to do. "So, what do you say? Movie night? We have licorice and popcorn."

With no other options and permission from my father, I give Caleb a small nod of agreement.

His smile grows like the Cheshire cat as he turns to lead the way to the game room. I follow him without a word, stopping short at the top of the stairs to the third floor.

The couch in front of the game room TV matches the U-shaped sectional from the living room downstairs, but this one is gray. Cassie and Jaxon cuddle on one end, and Caleb plops down on the other end. I sit in the middle, folding my legs

underneath me and clamping my hands together in my lap to stop them from shaking. Jaxon and Cassie both welcome me excitedly, then Jaxon presses play on the remote, starting the movie.

We quietly watch undercover Channing and Jonah attend college. The movie is decent, but I never saw the first one and end up missing some references.

As the credits roll, I glance at the clock on the cable box and realize it's almost midnight. Cassie and Jaxon are fast asleep on their side of the couch, and Caleb is out cold on his side. Not wanting to wake them, I quietly go down to my room. All the lights downstairs are off, which I take to mean it's okay for me to go to bed.

Grabbing my toothbrush and toothpaste from my bottom drawer, I tiptoe to the bathroom and brush my teeth. Before leaving the bathroom, I stare longingly at the shower. It seems so inviting, but I don't want to wake anyone with the noise. Once back in my room, I put my toothbrush and toothpaste away before crawling under the covers.

I know I won't be able to fight sleep tonight since the day has been so long and eventful. With how exhausted I am, I'm hopeful I won't dream at all. My eyes close as soon as my head hits the pillow, and sleep claims me quickly.

## CHAPTER THREE



*“Come out, come out wherever you are.” His voice gets louder as he searches for me. My blood runs cold at the sound.*

*To avoid being found, I hold my breath and close my eyes tight, wishing myself invisible.*

*“Come on, sugar, you know how I hate to be kept waiting.” He sounds closer, now.*

*My body shakes with terror, and hot tears spill down my cheeks. The air around me hums, a slight breeze pushing the hair away from my face as my hand covers my mouth, trying to muffle the sobs. Suddenly, the door to the closet, my hiding place, swings open. He stands there with an evil grin on his face.*

*“I told you I would find you, sugar.” He*

*sneers, taking a step closer. With his voice deceptively low, he leans down in my face and whispers, "I will always find you."*

*Then, he reaches for me.*

Bolting up, I swallow my scream. My breath escapes in shallow, quick pants. Taking a few seconds to adjust to the dark, I blink rapidly, searching the strange room, trying to figure out where I am.

At first, nothing registers as familiar, and the panic intensifies.

When my vision finally gains focus, the room is empty. The memories of arriving in California flash through my mind, reminding me of where I'm at. Getting up out of bed, I turn on the white lamp sitting on the nightstand. I approach the closet cautiously. After a full minute of working up the nerve to open it, I find it empty as well. A sigh of relief escapes my lips and I glance at the alarm clock, glowing with a bright red to show two in the morning. I've only managed a few hours of sleep, but there's no way I'll be able to go back to sleep, now. Making my way to the top of the stairs, I pause for a few moments, listening to the silence of the house.

When I'm satisfied I haven't woken anyone, I go back to my room and grab my shampoo and soap. The need for a long, hot shower to fully

ground myself in reality outweighs the fear of waking anyone with the sound of the shower.

Once clean and revived, I climb back into bed, grabbing the first book I touch on the nightstand. The next few hours go by fast as I lose myself in the story.

A quiet knock on my door startles me, and I let out a startled squeak. A second later, my heart beats again, and I check the clock to find it's already eight in the morning. I hadn't meant to get lost in my book, but it happens a lot. Getting up, I answer the door to find Leanne in her pajamas standing on the other side.

"Oh! Hey, Riley." She seems pleasantly surprised I answered her knock. "I wasn't sure you'd be up. I made blueberry pancakes for everyone if you're hungry. The three stooges skipped dinner last night to watch a movie, and since you ate early, you must be starving."

I blink rapidly, trying to come up with something to say. No one has ever made me breakfast before. Swallowing down the lump that forms in my throat, I stutter through a thank you. "T-t-that sounds a-a-amazing."

Seeming pleased by my response, she gives me a wide smirk and nods. "Well, I love to cook, so get used to it." She winks, then heads downstairs.

Gazing down at myself, I take in my jeans and plain gray shirt. After my shower, I put my only

other pair of pants and the shirt I wore on the plane in the corner of my closet. I don't own pajamas. Instead, I slept in my regular clothes, like I normally do. I'll need to find a way to wash and dry them with the soap I brought. The idea of using the bathtub crossed my mind, but I don't want to leave my things in the bathroom to dry. They might get in someone's way.

Once I deem myself presentable, I make my way downstairs and follow the chatter into the kitchen. Everyone's around the table in the nook again. I stop at the entryway and take it all in for a moment. A family laughing, talking, and eating together. They all seem genuinely happy.

Will I have that someday?

Caleb glances up from his seat and notices me. His face brightens, and he motions for me to come over. Gazing around, I don't find anyone protesting. Pushing my luck, I make my way over and sink into the seat Caleb motioned to. There's already a plate with some pancakes, bacon, and scrambled eggs in front of me, and since everyone else has their own plate in front of them, I assume it's for me. Leanne said I'm allowed to eat with them; that's the same as getting permission, I think.

I'm quiet through breakfast, listening to everyone talk about things of little importance. They all seem to get along, and my heart drops, wishing I belonged at this table.

After everyone finishes eating, I stand and grab all the plates. I head to the sink, ready to wash the dishes. When the room goes silent, I stop. Turning around slowly, my cheeks heat when I realize everyone's attention is on me. Their expressions range from confusion to frustration. My heart skips a beat as my cheeks burn even more; my gaze drops to the floor.

“D-d-did I m-m-miss a p-p-plate?” I peek up from under my lashes, trying to figure out what the silent stares mean.

“No, but we can get our own dishes, kiddo. You don't have to do those for everyone.” My dad's the first to speak up, but the rest of them quickly agree.

“O-o-oh, uh, o-o-okay.” I glance from them to the sink and back. “I-i-it's a h-h-habit, I-I-I guess.”

“Was that your chore back in Washington?” Cassie continues chattering before I can answer. “My mom always made me clean the dinner dishes as my chore growing up. She said it was because I needed to learn to be self-sufficient. I'm not sure how dishes help a person be self-sufficient, but I didn't mind it too much.”

“U-u-um”—I wring my hands together as I frown down at them like they hold the secrets to the universe— “W-w-well, I g-g-guess so. I w-w-was in ch-ch-charge of cleaning, th-th-the



housework, a-a-and cooking m-m-meals.”

“Harsh,” Cassie mutters, her eyes going wide.

“What do you mean housework and cleaning?” my dad questions with a slight tensing of his shoulders.

The subtle gesture puts me on edge, and I try to choose my words carefully. I didn’t mean to upset him, which adds to the knots forming in my stomach. I’m not even sure what I said wrong.

“Just the u-u-usual stuff, I g-g-guess.” I turn my head toward the sink again, trying to subtly end the conversation.

When no one says anything more I turn back to them in time to find my dad and Leanne exchange a fleeting look that further enhances my discomfort. In an attempt to avoid their questions, I turn fully back to the sink and continue washing the dishes. I’m not sure what happened, but my heart feels like it’s going to beat out of my chest.

My dad and Leanne let the subject of chores drop while I finish up the dishes, and I let out the breath I held. My shoulders relax, but I find it was too soon to calm down when Leanne addresses me as soon as Caleb, Jaxon, and Cassie go upstairs. “Did you like to cook? What was your favorite meal?”

Twisting slowly, I blink at her a few times, trying to decide what to say. Her concern appears

true and I quickly decide the truth is the best way to go. “I d-d-don’t really h-h-have a favorite. I c-c-cooked for th-th-them, not m-m-me.” I set the dish in my hand onto the drying mat and clasp my shaking hands together in front of me.

“You didn’t like your own cooking?” She sounds confused.

“I’ve n-n-never had m-m-my own c-c-cooking.”

Silence. I peek over my shoulder and watch them exchange another glance. My father turns back to me and cocks a brow, silently demanding an explanation. Rather than trying to make up a story, I stumble my way through the truth.

Since I’m rotten at lying, I don’t see a reason to try now. “When I-I-I cooked m-m-meals, I cooked for o-o-only them. I’m n-n-not... I-I-I mean I-I-I wasn’t allowed t-t-to eat the f-f-food I cooked. It c-c-cost too m-m-much for me t-t-to eat the s-s-same things th-th-they did. They s-s-sent me to the s-s-store to buy the g-g-groceries, but th-th-there wasn’t enough m-m-money so I-I-I was o-o-only allowed t-t-to get e-e-enough for them. T-t-they instructed me t-t-to make the f-f-food, th-th-then they a-a-ate, while I-I-I did the d-d-dishes. I’d c-c-clear the t-t-table for them when th-th-they finished b-b-because it was a-a-also m-m-my r-r-responsibility. S-s-sometimes they a-a-allowed m-m-me to eat s-s-something from my s-s-shelf, th-th-

though.”

Shutting my eyes tightly, I give myself a small shake. Talking to people is difficult for me, and I hate how I stumble and stutter over words. Even as I’m speaking, I’m second-guessing every word I say. It’s embarrassing. It gets me into trouble often, but it’s a hard habit to break.

Silence weighs down the room. When it gets too uncomfortable, I glance up, and my eyes focus on my father. His expression hardens as he grits his teeth, making him appear ready to kill someone, and my stomach drops to the floor. I shouldn’t have said anything; this is why I second guess everything. It never ends well when I say things. He didn’t want to hear those things. Speaking up only made him really mad. He bounds to his feet, and I panic.

My flight instincts take over as my eyes dart to the hall leading to the front door. My gaze flickers back to him as he takes a step toward me. With a bowed head, he doesn’t notice me silently calculating my chances of escape. Sitting at the table, Leanne buries her face in her hands.

I spent a lot of my life running, and I’m pretty sure my chances to outrun him are fair, especially if he’s caught off guard. He takes another step in my direction, and I take a step back out of instinct, my hip hitting the counter behind me. As he reaches the edge of the kitchen, I make

my move and race to the front door.

Pulling on the handle, the door doesn't budge because it's locked. I spin to gauge how far back he is, only to find him standing right behind me. Pressing my back against the door, I let out an involuntary whimper and cross my arms over my face, waiting for him to strike.

Getting caught fleeing is always worse than standing still. Because I risked running, I'll pay for it. Cowering lower against the door, my eyes shut tight as I wait for him to make his move. Instead of doing anything at all, he's still and silent for a full minute.

When I finally lower my arms to figure out what he's waiting for, he pulls me into a hug, his body shaking with hard sobs. I stand stiffly, not having any idea what to do.

"I'm sorry, Riley," he chokes out through his tears. "If I'd known about you, I would've protected you. Please forgive me, I'm sorry."

When I don't so much as take a breath, he pulls back, but holds onto my shoulders. I peer up into his pleading eyes and find sincerity there. For a brief moment, I believe he really would have protected me.

"I f-f-forgive you?" I whisper, not meaning to phrase it like a question, but unsure how I should respond.

Mostly, I hope he knows how important his

affection and sincerity are to me.

He pulls me back into the hug, tears now coming from both of us as our hearts break for what could have been. My father holds me like a parent should hold an upset child, while I let myself trust this man I hardly know, even if it's only for a moment, believing he would have kept me safe.

Later when I'm alone, reality will take over, again. I'm never safe, not as long as *he* is still out there.

~

Today started off slow. Jaxon, Caleb, and Cassie left to go run errands soon after breakfast. At the same time, my dad headed to work. Leanne made herself busy in the kitchen, waving off my attempts to help. With time to myself, I end up in the corner seat of the sectional in the game room with a book. It doesn't take me long to lose myself in the pages of a new story I picked from the full shelves in there. My father gave me permission to read any books I wanted and I took full advantage of the vast collection.

When Leanne pops her head in, it startles me. My heart skips a beat as I jump to my feet, staring wide-eyed at her. Her features soften, and she gives me a reassuring smile. "Are you busy?"

"N-n-no." I cautiously shake my head.

She steps farther into the room. With each of her strides, my body stiffens. She pauses a few feet in front of me. My eyes stay glued to her hands, waiting for her next move. A person's hands tell a lot about their intentions. Leanne's hang softly at her sides, not balled into fists like I feared.

"Would you like to go to the store with me?" Her offer distracts me, my gaze jumping up to her face. She appears relaxed, not agitated at all.

"Th-th-the store?" I ask, not understanding what she's getting at.

She nods hopefully. "I have a few things to grab at the store. I thought we could go together." She pauses, her excitement fading. "Unless you don't want to go. You don't have to, Riley. It's up to you."

It would be really nice to leave the house and get some fresh air. With nothing to lose, I accept her offer. "I'd l-l-like to g-g-go."

"Great," she chirps, her grin returning. "Come on."

After getting our shoes on, I follow her to the car. She gestures for me to get into the passenger side as she slides into the driver's seat. While I put my seatbelt on, she does the same then fiddles with the mirrors and the radio.

Pointing to the radio dial, she arches a brow at me. "Do you have a preference?"

"N-n-no." I blink, not used to being asked

my opinion on things. I've been asked what I want and what I think more during my short time in California than I ever was in my seventeen years in Washington.

She nods absentmindedly as she continues to scroll through the stations. When she reaches a classic rock station, she perks up. "Perfect! You can't go wrong with Bon Jovi."

As we drive down the road, Leanne sings along to every song that plays. Her melodious voice merges seamlessly with each of the singers, bringing a bit of joy to our otherwise quiet ride. Since the drive is short, Leanne only sings about three songs before we park in front of a fancy chain store.

She hops out of the car, glides around to the front, and waits for me to catch up to her. When I've gotten out and made my way to her, she strides toward the door. "We probably only need to grab the essentials. I think Cassie has plans to do a big shopping trip soon."

Having no idea what she's talking about, I stay silent.

She doesn't seem bothered by my lack of response. "Don't worry, we'll get you all set up, honey."

Leanne finds the pajama section of the store first. When she picks up a pair of soft, cotton shorts and holds them up for me to inspect, I shake my

head. “I-I-I’m not a good p-p-person to ask about f-f-fashion,” I admit, scratching nervously at my arm. “T-t-the color would be n-n-nice for you.”

“It’s not for me, honey.” Leanne chuckles, lowering the pants. “You need some clothes. That’s why we’re here.”

“M-m-me?” My eyes widen. “But, I-I-I—”

“Please,” Leanne begs, cutting me off. “Let me do this for you. I really want to.”

The pleading in her eyes makes me cave in before I can really think about it. “O-o-okay.”

Truthfully, there is no way for me to pay for the things she wants to buy for me. Maybe I’ll be allowed to find a job to pay them back. The amount they’ve spent on me in food alone will take a while for me to repay. Trying not to dwell on it, I focus my attention on Leanne as she goes through the pajamas. She pulls item after item off the racks, showing them to me.

“What about this?” She holds up a plain black tank top.

“It’s n-n-nice.”

Leanne lowers the tank top and wrinkles her forehead. “You’ve said that about everything I’ve shown you, Riley.”

My heart jumps into my throat as she waits for me to reply. “I’m s-s-sorry.”

“Honey, don’t be sorry,” she soothes. “If you like something, tell me. If you hate it, tell me. I’m



not wearing it, you are. I want you to be happy with what we get.”

Taking a deep breath, I agree. “I’ll t-t-try.”

“Good.” She turns back to the rack where the selections she has made are stacked and gestures to some that are draped over her arm.

“Now, what do you like from our current pile?”

“The b-b-blue is n-n-nice,” I admit.

“You need more than one pair of pants for sleeping,” Leanne scolds softly. “How about we pick three for now?”

It takes a while for me to work up the courage to tell Leanne what clothes I like. It doesn’t help that she’s obviously keeping the price tags hidden from me. When I have three pajama bottoms picked out, we start the process all over again with pajama tops. Just when I think we finally finished, Leanne heads over to the jeans and shuffles through them.

She absentmindedly thumbs through the jeans. “Do you know your real size?”

Blinking a few times, I wait for her to elaborate, but she doesn’t. “Real s-s-size?”

Glancing over her shoulder, she nods. “Yeah, the pants you have now don’t fit you right.” She points down at my ragged jeans. “I think they’re a few sizes too big.”

“O-o-oh.” No other response comes to mind.

Leanne pulls a few different sizes for me and points to the dressing room. “Go try these on, we can’t get you pants without knowing your size. If you’d like help with them, just holler.”

Doing as I’m told, I lock myself in a dressing room and try on the jeans she gave me. The smallest pair seems to fit the best. Since I’ve never done this before, I enlist Leanne’s help. “L-L-Leanne?” My voice barely rises above a whisper, but she responds.

She taps on the door. “Need some help, honey?”

Unlocking it, I poke my head out and nod. “P-p-please.”

“Let’s have a look.” She opens the door a little bit more and scoots in. Once inside her gaze rakes over the pair of jeans I currently have on. “Can I see the waist?”

Lifting my shirt slightly, I show her the waist.

She gently tugs on them, nodding to herself as she circles me. “These look good. Though, I think we should only get a few pairs. You’re such a tiny little thing right now. Hopefully, you go up a size or two soon, and we can get you some new ones then.”

Stopping behind me, she gingerly touches my hip. My hands let go of my shirt, letting it fall back into place as I arch away from her, spinning on my

heel to face her. My arms fold over my stomach automatically to protect myself.

“Sorry, honey,” she whispers softly, putting her hands up, palms out. “You have a dark bruise on your hip. It surprised me is all. Would you tell me what happened?”

Blinking a few times, I take a moment to remember what she’s talking about. Lifting my shirt again, I seek out the bruise. Realization dawns when I find it. “I-I-I hit my h-h-hip on the c-c-counter in the k-k-kitchen.”

“That’s a pretty bad bruise,” she observes, her focus back on my hip. “Doesn’t it bother you?”

I shake my head and use my index finger and poke the bruise. “I-i-it’s only a l-l-little sore.”

“It must look worse than it feels,” she mutters. “I’ll give you some cream to put on it when we get home. It should help to reduce the healing time.”

Before I have a chance to respond, she reaches outside the dressing room door.

She pulls some tops from the hook on the front of the door and hands them to me. “If you like any of these, try them on. We can find others if you don’t like the ones I found.”

She turns to leave the dressing room, but before she makes her exit, I manage a small, “Th-th-thank you.”

Leanne pauses before she turns to face me.

“Anytime, honey. I mean it.”

When she leaves the dressing room, I slide the lock back into place. Going through the shirts she picked out, two simple V-neck tops with long sleeves, one in blue and the other gray, stand out to me. Trying them on, I decide the gray one is my favorite. The blue is appealing, too, but I’m used to wearing darker, plain colors.

After changing back into my own clothes, I hang everything up before heading out to find Leanne. I don’t need to search long since she stands right outside the dressing rooms, waiting for me. She beams when she notices me.

“How did it go in there?” She eyes the clothes draped over my arms.

Pulling out the gray shirt and the pair of jeans Leanne said fit well, I hold them up for her to inspect. She takes them from me, draping them over her arm. She grabs the rest of the clothes from me and hangs them up on a rack by the dressing rooms.

“You didn’t like any of the other shirts?” she distractedly asks, sifting through the items she hung up.

“U-u-um,” my voice shakes as I try to explain my decision. “T-t-the g-g-gray one was most c-c-comfortable.”

She turns her full attention to me. “But, you liked more than just the gray one?”

Shifting from one foot to the other, my eyes dart from the shirts to Leanne and back again. “I-I-I did,” I admit.

“Which ones did you like?” she coaxes, gesturing to the shirts hanging in front of us.

Slowly stepping forward, I point out the blue shirt I tried on. “T-t-this was nice.”

She pulls the blue one from the rack. “Any others?”

“I-I-I didn’t try any o-o-others on,” I admit.

She purses her lips and frowns in concentration as she assesses the two shirts I tried on. “How about these two for now?” She grabs two plain short-sleeved shirts in similar colors from the rack. “And these two, also. They should fit about the same. You don’t have to try more stuff on if you don’t want to.”

“A-a-all of them?” My eyes widen as she adjusts the pile on her arm.

She chuckles and nods. “Yeah, it’s just to get you by until we can really take you shopping later. I think we have everything we need in this section. Let’s grab some underthings really quick, then we will be ready to go.”

My cheeks burn as we enter the underwear section. They remain heated the whole time Leanne rifles through the different items. She seems at ease helping me grab a bra and some panties. I’ve never gone shopping for these things with anyone. It’s

awkward for me to be doing it with Leanne. Her calm nature eases some of my tension, though.

“Let’s check out,” Leanne suggests, heading in the direction of the cashier. “Mark texted me when you were in the dressing room. He wants to meet us for lunch at a small sandwich shop across the street. Is that okay with you?”

Blinking at her, it takes a second to register she’s asking me if it’s okay. “Y-y-yeah, that sounds n-n-nice.”

“Great.” She places the clothes on the counter. “We’ll head over there after this.”

## CHAPTER FOUR



“Hey, kiddo,” Dad greets as Leanne and I stroll into the sandwich shop. He gives me a bright smile as he shuffles up to us. Kissing Leanne on the cheek, he greets her as well, “Hello to you, too.”

Leanne giggles like a schoolgirl, hugging my dad. It’s strange to watch a couple acting in such a loving way toward each other. It isn’t something I’m used to, but it’s wonderful to witness.

“Would you mind ordering for us while Riley and I grab a table?” Dad asks Leanne, his eyes scanning the long line and busy restaurant. “I don’t want to miss out on a place to sit.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Leanne agrees. “Riley, what type of sandwich do you like?”

“U-u-um.” My gaze shoots to the menu

board, and I scan it quickly. “I-I-I’m not sure.”

“Would you like me to pick something for you?” she asks softly.

Nodding in relief, my shoulders sag slightly. “P-p-please.”

“Just your usual, Mark?” she asks my father, slowly backing away from us and toward the line.

He nods. “You know me so well.”

“Coming right up, you two.” She spins around and strolls the rest of the way to the line.

Dad leads me to an empty table in the corner, and we take our seats. His fingers drum on the fake wooden tabletop as we sit in silence for a few moments.

“Did you have fun with Leanne?” Dad finally speaks first.

My only reply is a simple nod. He appears to be waiting for more information, but unsure of what to say, I stay silent.

“I’m told Cassie wants to take you shopping soon as well.” He fidgets with the salt and pepper shakers on the table. “That reminds me, Jaxon checked the mail yesterday and told me your cards came. I’ll have him give those to you tonight.”

I’m about to ask what he’s talking about, but the buzzing of his phone on the table distracts us both. He glances down at the caller ID and whoops loudly. He picks it up and slides the answer bar.

“Hello, darling, what can I do for you?”



His endearment shocks me, and my head spins to search for Leanne, wondering who he would be talking to like that when Leanne is here. When I spot her, it takes me a second to realize she's on her phone as well, looking in this direction.

"Leanne would like to know what you want to drink," Dad addresses me, still holding his phone to his ear.

My attention shifts from Leanne, back to my dad. "U-u-uh." It takes my brain a moment to catch up and realize dad and Leanne are on the phone with each other. "W-w-water, please."

"She wants water," he informs Leanne. She says something else to him, and he grins. "Yes, I'd like my usual soda."

Soon after, he hangs up with her, bringing his focus back to me. His eyes turn serious as he watches me. "How are you liking it here, Riley?"

"I-I-it's nice," I admit quietly. "D-d-different."

He nods his agreement. "I'm sure it's totally different than what you're used to. I hope that's a good thing."

"It i-i-is," I assure him.

He lets out a long sigh as he runs a frustrated hand down his face. "Your mom, Angie, she never told me. I never knew about you."

"I-I-I know." I nod, remembering social

services mentioned my father's surprise when he heard about me.

"I wish she'd have told me," he murmurs, his expression forlorn. "We weren't together long. It sounds horrible, but we were never in a serious relationship. When she took off, telling me she wanted to move on, I wasn't surprised. We'd only been dating for two months. I never thought she was hiding a pregnancy from me."

"S-s-she told me once that y-y-you didn't want k-k-kids." I think back to a time when I was about five, and I asked her about my father. She'd informed me he would have wanted me even less than she did.

He reels back in surprise, immediately shaking his head in denial. "We never once talked about kids. We'd only started dating when she left. I met Leanne about six months later, and she already had Jaxon. I fell in love with both of them right away. Within a year, Leanne and I were engaged, and the adoption papers for Jaxon were being filed. I was excited to adopt him. I would have been just as excited about you if I'd been told about you."

My mind drifts to what life might have been like if my dad knew about me. Maybe I could have lived with him from the start. My mother often told me she never wanted me. I may be naive, but I'm not stupid. I know her reasoning for keeping me

around was the money and benefits that having a child brought her. Maybe my father would have wanted me simply because I was his child, rather than for the government assistance and handouts he could get with me.

“I really wish I could change the past, Riley,” Dad assures me, grabbing my attention again. “But since I can’t, I’d like it if you’d give me the chance to change the future. I want you here, we all do. I hope you know that.”

Before I manage to answer him, Leanne comes up to the table with her arms full of food and drinks. Dad and I stand and help her before she drops anything.

She chuckles at us. “Thanks. Riley, I got you the turkey club. It’s the same thing your dad gets. If you don’t like it, we can get something different.”

“T-t-thank you.” Awkwardly sitting back down, I take the sandwich she hands to me.

Dad and Leanne talk about how busy the restaurant is while they eat. I follow their lead, eating my sandwich in small bites. At first, they try to pull me into the conversation, but I’m not sure what to add. Eventually, they seem to realize I’m most comfortable sitting and observing.

“Alright, ladies.” Dad sighs, standing and stretching. “As fun as our lunch date has been, I have to get back to the office before they fire me.”

If not for Leanne rolling her eyes and

guffawing at him, I would be concerned for his job. Hopefully, her reaction means he's only joking. Before he leaves, he gives her a kiss on the cheek and me a slow, awkward hug. His movements around me always seem to be unhurried, which I appreciate.

“Have a good day, dear,” Leanne calls playfully as Dad leaves the restaurant.

Leanne and I wrap up the leftovers before heading back to the house.

Once home, I spend some time putting my new clothes away. With the price tags still on some of them, I'm finally able to check the numbers. The prices have me choking on air. It's going to take me forever to come up with a way to pay Leanne back for these things.

It isn't long after I finish hanging the last shirt before Cassie knocks on my door, asking to go through the things I bought today and her presence distracts me from my internal panic about my lack of funds.

~

The rest of the week goes by without incident. Leanne spends her days chatting with me, telling me stories about Jaxon, Cassie, and Caleb. Growing up, they got themselves into some hairy situations together. She talks about the time Jaxon

snuck out of the house and hid in Caleb's room because he was mad at his mom.

They called the police and everything to search for him before Cassie told on them.

I also hear about an incident where Caleb was certain he could skateboard down a steep hill backward as long as Jaxon and Cassie put their mattresses at the bottom of the hill and ended up with a broken arm and had to use his allowance to buy everyone new mattresses.

She giggles through a story about Cassie cooking breakfast for Jaxon when they were in elementary school, catching a dishtowel on fire and nearly the entire kitchen. Caleb had to save her and the house with the fire extinguisher.

My evenings through the week are spent doing whatever is asked of me. Sometimes it's watching movies in the game room or sitting in the living room and talking to my father. He went back to work after my first full day of being here, but he spends his evenings with his family. It's interesting to witness the affection he holds for them all. If everyone seems busy, I spend my evenings in my room or the game room, reading. It keeps me out of everyone's way.

I haven't slept since my first night here, four days ago, and it's catching up to me. I'm more jumpy and anxious than usual, which always happens when I haven't slept.

Around two in the morning on Friday night, Caleb, Cassie, and Jaxon come home from a party they attended. With my door cracked, I notice Caleb as he passes by on his way to his room. He stops in front of my door and taps on it. My hands shake as I wonder what he may want, but I tell him to come in anyway. I don't want to be rude.

He pushes the door open and leans against the frame. "Hey, I saw your light on. What are you doing up?"

I'm surprised he doesn't appear drunk or high. Isn't that what people do at parties? It's what my mom and her husband did with their friends.

It takes me a second to realize he's waiting for some sort of response. "C-c-couldn't sleep." I set my book down next to me.

He nods in understanding, then stands there silently for a minute, biting his thumbnail. Finally, he comes to some sort of decision. "Want to watch a movie or something?"

"Um..." I glance down at my new pajamas. A black tank top with gray cotton shorts. The outfit feels modest enough to wear around Caleb, but I quickly debate changing into my day clothes.

"Riley?"

Startled from my thoughts, my eyes dart to look up at Caleb. "Oh!" I squeak, realizing I ignored his offer to watch a movie. "I'd l-l-like that."

“Cool.” He breathes, his shoulders relaxing like he’s relieved I didn’t turn him down. It’s a crazy thought because it’s only a movie. He can’t really care what I decide.

We head up to the game room, and he tells me to pick a movie while he changes clothes. He doesn't give me time to change mine, but doesn't seem to care I'm in my pajamas. I decide on a comedy movie that I've heard of but never seen, hoping he doesn't mind. He comes back after only a few moments in blue drawstring pajama pants and a white t-shirt.

Holding up the DVD, I wait until he's read the title before talking. “Is this o-o-okay?”

With a shrug, he takes the movie from me. “I don't mind. It's a good movie.”

He pops it into the player.

Once the opening trailers start, we settle on the couch. I sit with my feet tucked under me, and on the back of the couch, his arm drapes behind me while his feet rest on the coffee table in front of us. He sits closer than I expected him to, and my spine straightens as he settles in. I don't want to move away from him, but I'm uneasy having him this close to me.

Normally, I feel threatened when someone is this close to me physically, but with Caleb, the uneasiness comes from not knowing how to handle the feelings his nearness cause. Usually, Cassie and

Jaxon sit or lay right on each other and Caleb's on the other side of the sectional. I always sit in the middle, alone. This is different, though, and it has my mind and stomach all twisted up. It takes some time for me to relax enough to figure out what's going on in the movie.

The longer I sit beside Caleb, the more relaxed I become. About halfway through the movie, my eyes become heavy. I shift to try to wake myself up and realize I won't make it another night without sleep. A twinge of panic fills my belly. I can't focus on the rest of the movie as I force myself to stay awake. When the end credits finally roll, I jump to my feet, surprising Caleb.

His eyes crinkle with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Y-y-yeah." I bite my bottom lip while I try to steady my breathing. "I'm j-j-just going t-t-to head t-t-to bed, if t-t-that's okay?"

His eyes widen, and his mouth pops open in surprise, but nods slowly like he isn't sure how to really respond. I race to my room before he has a chance to ask questions. It's pointless to try and stay up any longer, knowing I won't be able to.

Getting ready for bed, I drag myself under the covers and pull them up to my chin.

Maybe, I won't dream tonight.

Maybe, this time will be different.

Maybe, not.



## CHAPTER FIVE



*“You bitch!” he yells at her again. “I know you’re fucking him behind my back. You’re nothing but a whore.”*

*“Calm down,” she begs, but she should know asking him to calm down only makes it worse. Sometimes, I wonder if she upsets him further on purpose.*

*A loud crack sounds from their room, followed by the thud of a body falling to the floor. He knocked her out again. Normally he would leave and go to the nearest bar, but lately he’s getting more violent, if that’s even possible. I know he is coming toward my room now. I open the window to try to climb out before he gets to me, but I’m too late.*

*“Go ahead, sugar.” His voice comes from right behind me. My body freezes with fear. “Go through the window. Go tell all your friends about what you just heard. I dare you.”*

*I back away from the window slowly and inch toward my bedroom door. “I w-w-wasn’t g-g-going to g-g-go anywhere. I-I-I just n-n-needed s-s-some air,” I lie.*

*“Do you think I’m stupid? You think just because you sound like a fucking idiot when you talk, I won’t see through your bullshit?” He glares at catching me in a lie. I shake my head as he stalks toward me. “Maybe I should teach you what happens to kids who lie.”*

*I turn to run, but he grabs my hair and roughly yanks me back.*

*“If you run, I will find you. I will always find you.” He raises his hand, and I scream.*

I bolt upright in bed and try to catch my breath. My vision blurs from sleep, making the room impossible to inspect for intruders. My heart leaps in my chest, my breathing picking up pace. Blinking furiously, I try to use my hands to rub my vision back into my eyes. My door swings open to reveal an unfocused silhouette of a man. It’s him, I know it. He found me and he’s going to kill me. Hot tears trail down my cheeks. I’m going to die, and there’s no escape this time.

Multiple voices reach my ears, but they sound like they're coming from a tunnel. Wiping at my cheeks to clear the tears, I squint to focus on him. I need to know what his plan of attack is. A hand comes down onto my shoulder, and I jerk away, crawling to the other side of the bed.

“Riley.”

*Please, don't kill me. Please, don't kill me.*

“Riley!” My dad's anxious tone finally breaks through the fog of panic, and my body stills. “No one's going to kill you, Riley. You're safe.”

I hadn't realized I spoke aloud until his words register. My mouth snaps shut, cutting off the whispered pleas.

The tears slow, allowing my vision to clear enough for me to gaze around my room. Everyone watches me. Their expressions are... worried? Not furious like I expected. How odd. Jaxon holds Caleb in place by the door. With Caleb's face turned to Jaxon, I can't figure out why he needs to be held in place. He may be the only one I need to worry about right now.

“Let's all head to the kitchen, and get breakfast started.” Leanne pointedly eyes everyone except my dad.

Without question, they head out of my room. Caleb throws one quick glance over his shoulder before Jaxon drags him from the room. For a second, I see a flash of fear cross his face as his

eyes widen and his lips thin into a hard line, but surely my eyes are playing tricks on me.

“Riley? Sweetie, are you okay?” my dad asks, taking my mind away from Caleb’s odd behavior.

“I’m s-s-sorry.” I sniff, using my hand to clean the remaining tears from my face. “I g-g-guess I-I-I should’ve t-t-told you s-s-sooner? I d-d-don’t r-r-really sleep m-m-much. Only e-e-every f-f-few days a-a-and o-o-only for a f-f-few hours. I h-h-have t-t-terrible d-d-dreams, and I-I-I usually w-w-wake up l-l-like th-th-that. I d-d-didn’t m-m-mean to b-b-bother you a-a-all.”

“Well, first”—He gently places a hand on my shoulder. I’m still jumpy from my dream, but I force myself to remain still. He doesn’t deserve me jumping away from him when he’s trying to be comforting— “Never be sorry about anything like this, kiddo. It isn’t your fault, and none of us blame you one bit. Second, I want you to tell me what we can do to help you when you have a nightmare.”

In shock he wants to help me, I gape at him. This all seems surreal. I don’t understand why he’s not angry with me. Shouldn’t he be yelling?

“W-w-well...” I chew on my bottom lip while I decide what I should say. He can’t be serious about wanting to help. Even if he is, I’m sure nothing would make the dreams go away. Finally, I tell him what I assume he wants to hear.

“I g-g-guess the b-b-best thing to do i-i-is let m-m-me be. If y-y-you h-h-hear me j-j-just ignore me. I c-c-can usually c-c-calm m-m-myself down.”

My dad watches me for a long moment, his eyes skeptical. “Okay,” he finally lets out with a resigned sigh. “If that will really help, then we’ll do what you ask, but can I ask a favor in return?”

At my nod, he continues with his request. “Come out, and let us know you’re okay when you’ve calmed down. I don’t like the idea of thinking it wasn’t just a nightmare and something could have happened to you.”

“Okay,” I agree, trying not to show my discomfort. Why would he want to know I’m okay?

“Good.” He pats my knee. “Well, I smell bacon and eggs. How about we head down for breakfast?”

Nodding my agreement, I pause and ask, “I-i-is it okay i-i-if I get d-d-dressed first?”

“You don’t have to ask my permission, kiddo.” He chuckles, standing up and heading for the door.

“D-d-dad.” I stop him as he gets to the doorway. It’s the first time I’ve called him that out loud, and it sounds strange to my ears.

He turns back to me, his eyes wide. A slow, goofy grin spreads across his face as if me calling him dad makes him happy. Raising a brow in question, he answers me. “Yeah, kiddo?”

“T-t-they aren’t n-n-nightmares,” I murmur, frowning down at my hands in my lap. “They’re m-m-memories.”

The silence that follows my confession is too much for me to handle. My gaze lifts back to him to gauge his reaction. He obviously doesn’t know what to say as his mouth opens and closes a few times. Finally, he closes his eyes and hangs his head, leaving the room.

~

When I make my way downstairs, everyone is engrossed in a conversation about whether eggs taste better scrambled or sunny side up. No one—aside from Caleb—seems to notice as I sit in my usual seat. His eyes narrow and his brow furrows. I can’t seem to decipher the look he gives me, but he won’t take his eyes off me. I ignore it as much as I can, but after a while, it makes me too nervous. Did I make him mad by waking him up? Should I apologize to him and everyone else or simply let it go? I’m not sure what he wants from me.

A hand on my knee startles me from my inner debate. Jumping in my seat, my eyes follow the hand to the arm up to Caleb’s face. I don’t pull away from his hand like I probably should. Instead, I let him keep it there.

He mouths, “You okay?” to me. Maybe his

intense stare was him trying to figure out if I'm still upset.

I give him a genuine smile and a short nod in answer. My insides flutter at the thought he might be concerned for me. He beams back as his shoulders relax. His hand stays on my knee throughout the rest of breakfast. At first, I'm not sure if it's the normal thing. No one seems to notice, and if they do, they say nothing about it. In the end I decide it's probably his way of trying to make me more comfortable, and surprisingly, it works.

After breakfast, Jaxon hops up to wash the dishes. Caleb clears the table. When I ask what I should do, I'm told to hang out in the living room and relax. Sitting around doing nothing while everyone else cleans confuses me, but the tension in my shoulders eases somewhat when Leanne sits on the couch next to me. She turns the television on to a show about baking cupcakes in a competition, and I get sucked in without realizing it.

I love to bake, and some of the recipes the people on the show come up with sound like fun to make. If I were to make them here, I wonder if I might even be allowed to eat one of the cupcakes. Having the ingredients for extra things like dessert was a rarity growing up, but I always found it enjoyable to bake when I could.

Water rushes into the dishwasher, signifying

cleanup has been completed. Cassie skips up to me with an expression of pure joy. Caleb and Jaxon saunter up behind her, both wearing amused grins.

“Good luck with them, honey.” Leanne stands up and heads out of the room, giving me a sympathetic grimace over her shoulder.

“Guess what time it is!” Cassie sing-songs as she skids to a stop right in front of me.

“U-u-um.” I glance behind her to Jaxon and Caleb as they sit on the couch. “T-t-ten o’clock?” I ask, not sure what she wants me to say. Since there’s a clock on the wall, she could easily look at, but I don’t think she really wants the time.

Apparently, my answer amuses Caleb and Jaxon because they snicker in the background, earning a glare from Cassie.

“Noooo.” She huffs, plopping down next to me on the couch. “It’s shopping time! The four of us are going to spend the whole day and maybe even tomorrow shopping! And do you know why?” She doesn’t pause for a response, but bounces in her seat. “I’ll tell you why. Because you have no clothes, and you need some things for summer! You can’t keep wearing long sleeves here in California; it isn’t practical. Plus, I am dying to get you in a dress. You should also think about adding some color to your wardrobe. All the blacks and grays are boring. Oh, then we shou—”

“Cassie!” Jaxon jumps up from the couch



and hurries over to us. “Take a breath, sweetheart. I don’t want you passing out on me.” He turns to me with an apologetic smirk. “Riley, would you like to come shopping with us?”

I want to, badly. I want to be normal and have friends, and go shopping, and be cheerful, and do normal fun things. But there’s one major problem with this plan. “O-o-oh, well, I-I-I mean I-I-I would, b-b-but it’s j-j-just t-t-that... W-w-well... I k-k-kind of d-d-don’t really...” I pause and turn away as my cheeks heat with embarrassment. “I d-d-don’t have any m-m-money to go shopping,” I finally whisper. “I still o-o-owe Leanne for the things she b-b-bought me the o-o-other day.”

Cassie tilts her head to the side, her eyes flickering to Jaxon with confusion. “I thought your mom and dad told you to give Riley her new cards?”

Jaxon’s cheeks turn light-pink as he reaches for his wallet. “Erm, I sorta forgot about them. That was the same day you wanted to go swimming, and I kinda got distracted by you in a bikini.”

“Jaxon!” Cassie scolds, smacking his arm.

I flinch away from the exchange out of instinct and immediately cringe at my actions, hoping no one noticed. Luckily, Cassie and Jaxon are too busy bickering, but Caleb sits back on the couch, giving me the same intense look from breakfast. Doing my best to ignore his questioning

eyes, I turn back to Cassie.

Jaxon extends his hand, grabbing my attention. He holds two cards out to me. “The black one is your credit card. That’s mostly for big purchases or emergencies, and the silver one is your debit card. The pin is one two three four. You’ll need to go change it at the bank when you get the chance. That’s the one you use for whatever you might need.”

His brow furrows as he stops talking, trying to remember something. “I think Dad said he put five thousand in your account, so you should be good for a while. If you start to run low, then just tell him or Mom, and they’ll transfer more into your account.”

I blink at him, trying to figure out if this is a joke. He seems serious, though, and the cards look real. They have my name on them and everything.

“Jax—” I start, but have to clear my throat and try again. “J-J-Jaxon, I c-c-can’t afford t-t-to pay them b-b-back for this. There’s n-n-no way I can take this.”

He puts an arm around my shoulders. “Listen, Sis, you are a part of this family. This is what Mom and Dad do. They want us to have whatever we need. Cassie and Caleb’s parents gave them the same cards when they turned sixteen. If we keep our grades up in school, stay out of trouble, help around the house without being asked,

and do some sort of charity work at least once a month, they don't mind doing this for us."

"He's right." My dad's voice comes from behind me, and I spin around. He stands behind the couch with his hands in his pockets and a sincere expression on his face. "I never explained the cards I was talking about at lunch the other day. So long as you follow the rules, we'll support you."

The way he says it, with so much feeling and sureness, makes me wonder if he means more than financial support.

I shift in my seat, uncomfortable with all the eyes in the room trained on me. Trying to take the spotlight away from me, I turn to Jaxon and give him a slight grin. "Did y-y-you just c-c-call me S-S-Sis?"

Everyone laughs as he pulls me into a hug. For once, I don't flinch away from him. "Yeah, I did. I always hated being an only child. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love my mom. She met Mark when I was three, and he's been the only dad I've ever known. I love him just as much as I love her, but sometimes I wished I had a brother or sister to hang out and play with growing up. Dad really sucked at building forts, so I was kind of on my own with that sort of stuff, ya know?"

"Hey! I build a mean fort, mister!" Dad whines with fake hurt in his voice.

Jaxon and Caleb snicker as Cassie pats my

dad on the back and pretends to agree with him.

“Okay, Riley, let’s go get dressed. We’re wasting daylight here!” Cassie claps gleefully, grabbing my hand and dragging me toward the stairs. She pauses and calls over her shoulder to the guys, “Caleb and Jaxon! You boys better be ready in half an hour. No fake headaches or sudden plans!”

They both groan aloud. My mood lifts at their playfulness. She could probably tell those boys to stand naked in a snowstorm and they would.

Cassie pulls me to my room, and scans the contents of my closet for a full five minutes. “I can work with this, I guess.” Frustration laces her voice, but when she turns around with a pair of dark-wash jeans Leanne bought me along with a dark-blue, short-sleeved v-neck, she doesn’t lash out. “You really need a bigger selection,” she grumbles while turning her back, so I can get dressed in the outfit she chose. “It’s fine, though.” Her voice perks up and I watch as she bounces on the balls of her feet. “It’s going to be awesome taking care of your fashion catastrophe. Even Jaxon can’t complain about it because it’s beyond necessary.”

I lighten at the normalcy of our time together, picking out clothes and talking about shopping. It’s strange for me to have the ability to safely wear short-sleeved shirts without worry of

bruises showing, for now at least. Back home was always an unwritten rule for me to wear clothing to cover marks and bruises easily. It kept people from asking questions.

After Cassie approves of my outfit and my long, blond hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, we head out with the boys. “Sweetheart, maybe you and Riley should head to the mall while Caleb and I go to that new sporting goods store they put in next door.”

“Not a chance, dude,” Cassie snaps as we drive to the best mall around. At least that’s what Cassie calls it. “We are doing this together, suck it up.”

Jaxon deflates visibly but when he glances my way his face lights up. “At least I can get to know you a bit better while Cassie forces us into every single store in the stupid mall.”

Caleb makes a sound of agreement as we pull into a parking spot. Cassie doesn’t give anyone time to say more. She hops out of the car and calls for the three of us to hurry up.

## CHAPTER SIX



We spend the next few hours going through every inch of the four large department stores located at each end of the mall, as well as a few smaller stores in between. Cassie picks out everything she considers perfect for me, and I spend hours in the dressing rooms.

During one of my sessions in the dressing room, Cassie stands outside pouting. “I don’t see why you won’t get that dress I liked in the last store. It’s perfect on you.”

“I-i-i-it was f-f-f-fifty dollars,” I remind her quietly while pulling a pair of jeans on.

She snorts at my simple reasoning. “What about the shoes in the first store?”

“I-I-I can’t j-j-justify eighty d-d-dollars on

shoes.” It makes me uncomfortable to spend someone else’s money, even if they gave permission. “I g-g-got the black s-s-shoes, t-t-though.”

“That’s because it was the cheapest pair I would approve of,” she retorts with no real malice.

“She doesn’t need to get every pair of shoes that fit her, Cassie,” Caleb chides in from somewhere near the fitting room waiting area. “Just because you have a small shoe store in your closet doesn’t mean everyone else should.”

“You’re one to talk, big brother. You should buy stock in those boring ass black and gray shirts you always seem to need.”

Jaxon snickers at Cassie’s words, but Caleb remains silent.

It only takes me a few more seconds to slip on one of the shirts picked for me and open the door. My body tenses, wondering what to expect. Cassie might have made her brother mad with her last statement and I worry Caleb might want to hurt her because of it.

My worries are for nothing, thankfully.

Cassie stands leaning against the wall across from my dressing room while Jaxon and Caleb sit on the wide bench to the left. They both have their heads buried in their phones and their legs surrounded by bags.

“Perfect!” Cassie claps her hands and I

startle, jumping back a bit at the sudden noise. All three of them notice and exchange matching looks of concern. My gaze drops to my bare feet and I rock back on my heels. “Th-th-that was the l-l-last thing.”

My goal of distracting them from my strange behavior works well and I loosen the balls my hands had formed from the unwanted attention.

“I saw the little place across from here is having a good sale,” Cassie yelps, strolling past me into the dressing room and gathering up the items she approved of. “Get changed and I’ll bring this stuff up front. Toss that outfit over, though. I want to add it, also.”

My stomach takes that moment to let out a loud rumble and I blush with embarrassment. “S-s-sorry.”

“What for?” Jaxon tilts his head to the side in confusion.

My eyes widen as I try to figure out if he really wants me to answer or if he’s being sarcastic. His brow draws together as he watches me.

I clear my throat nervously. “M-m-my stomach, being h-h-hungry.”

“You’re sorry for being hungry?” His frown deepens as if he doesn’t understand.

He starts to say more, but Caleb jumps in before he can. “I’m actually starving, too. We need to grab some lunch.”



“We ate those pretzels between the first two stores,” Cassie argues, her hands defiantly placed on her hips.

Caleb glances down at his watch and shakes his head, exasperated. “Shit, it’s basically dinner now. We need to get something before we keep going. Pretzels are a snack, Cassie, not a meal.”

“Also, that was over five hours ago, sweetheart,” Jaxon reminds her.

Cassie mopes the whole way to the checkout line with the overly large pile of clothes in her hands. The boys carry all the bags, which leaves me to fidget with my hands, wondering what to do.

Luckily, I don’t need to wonder long. The guys have so many bags already, Cassie and I grab the new lot after it’s paid for and we all make our way to the restaurant. I’m glad the boys convinced her to let us stop for dinner. My feet ache, and it feels good to sit down at the table of the little Mexican restaurant just outside the main mall.

“This is so much fun! Aren’t you having fun, Riley?” Cassie bounces around in her seat.

“Y-y-yeah, but I n-n-never knew shopping w-w-was such hard w-w-work,” I admit, hiding a grin when the boys chortle.

“Wait!” Cassie shouts, startling me.

Caleb and Jaxon stop laughing at my obvious jolt.

“Wh-wh-what?” I whisper, worried I’ve

made her mad by saying shopping is hard work.

Her eyes widen. “Have you ever been shopping?”

“Erm... n-n-no? I mean, I w-w-went to the th-th-thrift store once, a-a-and I went to the g-g-grocery store a lot.” My cheeks heat as I bow my head. “Also, Leanne t-t-took me shopping f-f-for a few things l-l-last week. D-d-does that c-c-count?”

“Of course not! Well, unless you bought a bunch of cute vintage clothes at the thrift store.” She barely pauses to take a breath as she continues to chatter. “Why didn’t you ever go shopping? Was it just a money issue?”

“Cassie!” Jaxon growls in warning.

Immediately, my spine straightens, and my hands begin to shake at his tone.

Cassie winces and gives me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, that didn’t sound right. I don’t mean to pry about your old money situation. I’m just naturally curious. I’ve never met anyone who hasn’t been shopping.”

“I-i-it’s o-o-okay,” I assure her, not wanting Jaxon upset with her. “I wasn’t a-a-allowed. I could o-o-only go to school and the g-g-grocery store. My m-m-mother and s-s-step-fa—” I stumble, not able to finish the word. I clear my throat and try again. “They d-d-didn’t allow m-m-me to go p-p-places or anything l-l-like that. I w-w-was supposed to stay in the house unless t-t-they said o-o-otherwise.”

Cassie frowns deeply. “What about hanging out with friends?”

I bite my lip, wondering briefly if she doesn’t notice the two men at our table fuming silently. “I w-w-wasn’t allowed to h-h-have friends. N-n-no one w-w-wanted to t-t-talk to me a-a-anyway. I d-d-don’t talk r-r-right.”

Silence stretches across the table. Did I say something wrong? Peering around, Jaxon and Caleb wear mirroring expressions of pure anger. Their eyes narrow into slits, their hands balled into fists on the table, and their mouths form hard lines. Cassie’s eyes widen, and her brow rises. Her mouth opens, but no words come out. My focus stays on the two angry guys, though, worried they’re mad at me.

Jaxon confirms my fear when he hits the table and roars, “Son of a bitch!”

My flight instincts kick in, and my mind screams at me to run away before he hurts me. I deserve to be hurt for saying something stupid and upsetting him. I shoot a glance at Cassie, and she scrunches her brow at me in confusion. After studying me for a second, her expression quickly morphs into panic. I heed her warning that Jaxon’s about to blow up.

My feet move before I even form a plan. Racing by the entrance to the restaurant kitchen, I vaguely register the waiters shouting about a burst

pipe. Hopefully the chaos of whatever happened in the kitchen will distract Jaxon from chasing after me, or at the very least slow him down. I bolt from the restaurant and down the street.

Cassie yells for me to wait, but I can't stop.

With the sun setting, the light blues and whites of the day morph into darker blues and grays. Lots of people walk the streets, so it's easier to blend in. Even when the three of them shout my name from far behind me, I race as fast as my feet will carry me, dodging parents with large strollers and shoppers loaded down with bags. A few of the passersby yell and curse at me for narrowly missing them, but I can't bring myself to care.

Jaxon's shouts for me to stop continue to reach me, but the further I go, the more people there are. The crowd makes it easy for me to slow my run and blend in more. With a glance behind me I breathe deep at the realization I've really lost Jaxon.

Finding an alley, I duck into it and hide behind a dumpster in case he catches up to me or passes by the area.

Keeping as still as possible, I wait a long while before leaving my safe hiding spot.

My chest aches from the breath I couldn't take until I knew for sure I wasn't caught, but there's little relief granted once I release the deep, shuddering breath. This time, I was able to get

away, but if I find my way back to the house, Jaxon and possibly Caleb are going to be furious at me for running. A small whimper escapes at the thought. Why couldn't life be different here? They all seemed great until now. Why did I mess everything up? I'm such an idiot.

With the street now darkened, I trek in the direction I remember the house being.

Since I left the purse Cassie picked out earlier in the restaurant, which holds the cards my dad gave me in it, I'm unable to pay for a cab. I don't own a phone, not that they would come even if I called. The drive here was a straight shot down a main road, making getting back relatively simple.

It was about an hour drive, so in theory, the walk is doable.

Not long into my hike, the skies open, and rain falls in sheets. Not the light kind of rain you can ignore, but the tropical storm type that soaks everything instantly. My pace slows considerably because of the drop in temperature and lack of visibility in the rain. Freezing and tired, my legs ache from the this walk as well as what we did earlier in the day.

Somehow, I'm able to make it another few hours before my legs give out. The rain hasn't let up, and I'm soaked to the bone. I massage my aching legs and wonder what awaits me when I make my way back. My entire body shakes, partly

from the cold and partly from the fear of what's waiting.

When I arrive at the house, they're going to be furious with me for getting away. But they're going to be even more agitated I took such a long time to come back. If I'm lucky, they'll get my punishment over with quickly and send me to my room. I refuse to think of what will happen if I'm unlucky. To distract myself from thoughts of punishments, I search the clouds in the sky for some type of break in the rain.

With a startle I realize the rain stopped pelting down on me.

Glancing around, I expect to see the storm passing, but instead I find the rain continuing around me. For some strange reason it's simply not raining down in the one spot where I dropped down.

After a long while, a minuscule bit of strength rests within my resolve. The strange pattern of the rain works in my favor for the moment, so unfolding myself from the curled position I'd taken up to try staying warm, I push myself to standing. I take the last several miles at a snail's pace, mostly because my legs won't cooperate with me.

As soon as the house comes into view the rain begins to hit my body again, the odd reprieve from the wetness gone.

When I finally make it to the house, it's the middle of the night, and my legs are numb. The lights downstairs are on, which means someone's waiting up for me. They probably spent all this time sitting around, deciding the perfect way to make me pay for my stupidity.

Pausing at the front door, I take a few deep breaths and decide to bite the bullet, ringing the doorbell because I don't have a key.

The collection of running footsteps racing for the door has me taking a step back, not knowing what's going to happen. The door is thrown open, and my dad with Leanne next to him stand there wide eyed. Cassie, Caleb, and Jaxon huddle behind them, but my focus remains on my father. His chest heaves with short breaths, his eyes widen on me, and his hands, loose by his sides, shake visibly.

My mind races with reasons why he would appear so scared. Maybe someone got hurt or something bad happened while I was gone.

I peer around at everyone, and they're all wearing matching expressions of fear and worry. Their expressions have my mind going to the possible punishments I'm about to receive. Before my mind comes up with anything, Dad yanks me into his arms, lifting me off my feet to hug me tightly. He must not realize I'm drenched.

"Thank God!" he cries. "Oh, Riley, we almost called the police. We drove around town for

hours looking for you. We were terrified! Are you okay? Are you hurt?" He sets me down and scans me from head to toe.

I simply stand there, shaking and confused. What in the world is happening?

"Mark, let's get her dry. She's soaked," Leanne insists with a snuffle. Tears stain her cheeks. Once my dad steps out of the way, she hugs me. "I'm glad you're okay."

Leanne and Cassie take me upstairs and find me some pajamas.

"Take a warm shower. It'll make you feel better," Leanne softly orders.

I do as I'm told, all the while wondering what they're planning as punishment. After I'm done showering, I'm beyond tired. Just the thought of taking the stairs makes me want to cry. Not wanting to give them any more reason to hate me, I suck it up and stumble downstairs, nearly falling a few times on the way. Everyone sits on the living room sofa when I creep in. No one notices me at first, allowing me to catch part of their conversation.

"Dad, I'm really fucking sorry," Jaxon murmurs pitifully, his voice broken. It sounds like he's trying not to cry.

Cassie sits next to him, rubbing his back.

"Son, it isn't your fault. She doesn't understand that you weren't mad at her. She isn't used to people caring about her and taking care of



her. We just need to be patient.” Dad lets out a long breath and sits back. “Maybe we should sit her down and talk to her. Explain what she can expect from us.”

I don’t want to get caught eavesdropping, and I’m not sure I want to know what they’re talking about. Instead of waiting where I am, I shuffle farther into the room and make myself known. Leanne spots me first and hops up. She takes my hand and leads me to the couch, starting out at a normal walking pace. My legs refuse to work correctly, giving out after two steps.

Caleb lurches forward, catches me around the waist, and pulls me into the seat next to him and Leanne. I can’t even look at Caleb as I murmur a thank you because I’m terrified he hates me like everyone else must.

“Riley, we need to talk.” My head lifts to see Jaxon staring right at me, and my whole body turns to stone.

This is what I’ve been dreading. This is where he lets me know what my idiocy has earned me.

“P-p-please,” I whimper. “I-I-I’m s-s-sorry. I d-d-didn’t m-m-mean to r-r-run. I’ll n-n-n-n-never do i-i-it again. I-I-I’m s-s-so s-s-sorry.” My body shakes harder, my voice cracking with fear. My only hope is that begging means he’ll go easy on me. “I-I-I’ll do w-w-whatever you w-w-want. P-p-

please, j-j-just don't h-h-hurt me.”

Jaxon reels back, gaping at me before his body stills. Cassie and Leanne start to cry. Why are they upset? Did begging make things worse? Should I have kept my mouth shut?

My dad stands and takes a step toward me.

Realizing he didn't like my pleading, I cower into the couch and he immediately stops in his tracks. To my left, Caleb shifts and suddenly pulls me onto his lap and wraps me up in his arms. As soon as my mind catches up to what happened, I stiffen. My head swirls with thoughts of what he plans to do. A lump forms in my throat, preventing me from taking deep breaths, and my lungs burn with a lack of oxygen. Waves of dizziness push my vision out of focus and a loud ringing fills my ears.

I feel Caleb lean down to my ear, and when he speaks, his voice comes out low and soothing, not at all what I expected. It gives me a shiver, but not the kind I'm used to, not from fear. “Baby, no one is going to hurt you. I promise, not one person in this room wants to hurt you in any way. We all care about you so much, and it kills us to think of the terrible things you've gone through. You may not have told us anything, but we aren't blind. We know shit was terrible for you. You look like you're about to jump out of your skin waiting for something bad to happen to you. But please, believe me when I say I will never let anything like

that happen to you again. None of us will.”

I pull back and stare into his eyes.

It’s always been effortless for me to spot liars. Caleb’s eyes hold nothing but warmth and truth. Right now, I trust his words and believe he will try to protect me. I’m not getting punished tonight. Tears of relief rush down my cheeks.

He puts his hand on my head gently and pulls it to rest on his chest. I hold onto him like he’s my lifeline, and at this moment, he kind of is. He whispers to me, telling me, “It’s okay. You’re safe.” He says it over and over while he holds me, his hand slowly brushing over my arm to give me comfort.

Right now, I never want to move away from this spot, from this feeling of safety.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



*The front door slams as he leaves after their nightly argument. My mother's footsteps race down the hall to my room as I curl up in the corner, making myself small.*

*She pushes my door open. It bangs loudly against the wall, forming another dent. "This is your fault!" She screams, sticking her finger in my face. "If I would have just done the smart thing and gotten rid of you before you were born, he and I would be happy! I hate you! You're a worthless little shit, and I wish I never had you."*

*This is nothing I haven't heard before on more than one occasion, but it still hurts. Isn't a mommy supposed to love their child? That's how the moms in movies and books act. They hug each*

*other and show affection. I wish I could have a hug. I asked for one once, and I got slapped. Mommy told me I was too ugly and stupid to hug.*

*I stare hard at the ground, wishing I was alone again.*

*She grabs me by the hair and drags me to the attic door, surprising me. I want to scream out, "No! Not the attic! It's dark and scary up there!"*

*Instead, I stay silent. They don't like it when I talk.*

*"Tomorrow marks eight years since you ruined my life, and you get to spend from now until midnight tomorrow in here, alone. This is my gift to everyone else on your birthday. No one wants you around, and I don't want to be reminded of my biggest mistake in life. Now get in there."*

*She roughly throws me in and slams the door shut, thrusting me into blackness.*

With a quiet gasp, I awake and bolt straight up in bed, a thud against the wall beside my closet shaking me further. My eyes dart around, expecting to be in the dark attic. It only takes me a second to realize I'm in my room, in California. I sit for a few moments, trying to slow my breath and gain my bearings.

A quick inspection reveals the decorative box Leanne had on the dresser was the source of the thud I heard, which is odd because it had been

in the middle of the dresser. The wall it hit is clear across the room. While I'm trying to calm my racing heart, the memories of the day before rush back, and I completely forget about the box on the ground.

How did I end up here, in my bed? I remember crying on Caleb, which is really embarrassing. I remember there wasn't a punishment for my stupidity yet. Did someone carry me up to my bed? How strange.

Checking the clock, it's already nine in the morning. Worried about what everyone thinks of me sleeping this late, I slide out of bed to head to my closet to find an outfit for today. I may have gotten home in the early hours of the morning, but that doesn't mean I'm allowed to rest.

The second my feet hit the ground, I regret jumping out of bed. My legs shake with every wobbly step I take, the muscles screaming for rest. While trying to steady myself, I stumble into my bed. It takes a lot longer than I'd like to put on a pair of jeans and a plain gray top.

I quickly take care of my morning routine in the bathroom, then head down the stairs. From the walking yesterday, my leg muscles burn with every little movement, but hopefully, once I stretch them out a bit I'll be able to walk easier. Right now, the stairs are my biggest enemy. It shouldn't take five minutes to get down a simple flight of stairs.

When I reach the kitchen, I find everyone at the table. Cassie notices me first, and her permanent grin widens.

“Riley!” She squeaks happily. “You’re up! How did you sleep? Do you feel better today?”

“Um... I-I-I... U-u-uh, yeah, I s-s-slept well.” I pause, shifting awkwardly. “I-I-I’m o-o-okay, today. Th-th-thanks.”

I rock back on my heels when no one says anything more. The move sends shooting pain through my leg muscles, and I grit my teeth against the hurt.

To distract myself, I find cereal and milk on the table with a clean bowl in my spot. This must be part of my punishment. Until now, my plate has had food on it when I come to the table, but this time it’s empty. It must mean I’m not allowed breakfast. A small price to pay for my actions.

I slowly make my way to the table and sit down, hoping that’s at least allowed.

“Do you want frosted flakes or raisin bran?” Leanne asks, holding up both cereal boxes.

It takes me a second to realize she’s staring at me, waiting for an answer. A quick search around the table shows no one objecting to Leanne offering me food.

Scratching nervously at my arm, I turn my attention back to Leanne. “E-e-either one?”

She hands me the frosted flakes with a smirk.

Cassie beams when I take the box and pour a little bit into my empty bowl. I risk a glance at Jaxon to find tenderness in his eyes. A hand comes to rest gently my back, causing me to flinch at the surprise touch. My head jerks up in time to find Caleb standing up behind me. When we lock eyes he gives a small, reassuring nod. A light blush colors my cheeks when I remember sitting on his lap last night.

He gestures to my empty cup. “Hey, babe, you want some juice with your breakfast?”

His easy use of the pet name throws me. Peering around the table, I assume no one else heard him, or if they did, they’re not going to acknowledge it. Maybe this is a normal thing for him. He did say it last night, although I assumed that was more in the moment than intentional. I turn back to Caleb who waits patiently for a response.

“Um... O-o-okay?” It comes out as more of a question than an answer, but he chuckles anyway and pours orange juice into my glass, then refills his own.

“Sis,” Jaxon speaks up after a few minutes of silence, his tone defeated. “I didn’t mean to scare you last night. I’m sorry for making you run like that.”

Unsure how to respond, I simply shift in my seat and wait for him to reprimand me for my



actions. A long, silent stretch fills the room and Jaxon hangs his head and lets out a forlorn sigh.

“You don’t have to be afraid of us, kiddo,” dad promises, putting a hand on Jaxon’s shoulder. “Jaxon would never hurt you. Caleb was telling the truth last night. None of us would hurt you. We’d like to help you feel safe here, but we don’t really know why you ran. Can you tell us?”

As I look around the table, I check for signs of agitation or anger. Cassie joyfully bounces around in her seat while she shoves sugary cereal into her mouth. My dad keeps his hand rested on Jaxon’s shoulder, but his soft gaze remains trained on me. Caleb bounces his knee up and down quickly as he listens to the conversation take place. Leanne folds her hands gingerly in front of her, patiently allowing me time to gather my thoughts. Jaxon keeps his head down and rubs at his temples as if he has a headache.

None of them display threatening body language, which gives me the courage to answer my dad. “J-J-Jaxon was a-a-angry. We w-w-were talking about shopping and h-h-how I haven’t really gone b-b-before Leanne took m-m-me. I w-w-was s-s-stupid and shouldn’t h-h-have said a-a-anything. I didn’t m-m-mean to upset a-a-anyone.”

“Oh, Riley,” Jaxon murmurs somberly. He gets up from his seat and comes over to me. He moves with exaggerated slowness as he kneels next

to me. It helps I'm able to watch and anticipate his every move. When he pulls me in for a gentle hug, I don't shy away from him. "I wasn't mad at you, not even a little bit. It pissed me off to no end that you were treated like shit, and you'd never done something as simple as shopping or hanging out with a friend before. I was mad *for* you, Sis, not at you."

The idea of having someone upset for me, not at me is shocking. "O-o-oh." I blink, trying to figure out what to say about his confession. His words baffle me.

Dad gives me a sympathetic smile. "It'll take time, kiddo. This is new for all of us. Just know that we are on your side, always."

While having people on my side sounds wonderful, I remain skeptical. This life seems too good to be true for someone like me.

~

"Good morning, sunshine!" Cassie chirps, skipping into the kitchen early Saturday morning. "Ready for some volunteer time?"

"W-w-where are we g-g-going?" I fidget with my cereal bowl. This is my first time doing charity work with everyone, and I'm a little nervous about what to expect.

Cassie grabs a bowl for herself, then plops

down next to me. “We’re going to the animal shelter this month. Mark and Leanne mentioned they wanted to work with the cats this time. Jaxon and I will be helping up front. Caleb suggested you help him with the puppies.”

“T-t-that sounds like f-f-fun,” I admit. I love animals. Standing with my bowl, I head to the sink to rinse it. “I’ve always w-w-wanted to v-v-volunteer at an animal sh-sh-shelter.”

“Perfect,” Dad calls as he comes into the kitchen. “We picked a good place this month then. Let’s get ready, girls. We need to be there in an hour.”

Wordlessly, I head upstairs and ready myself for the day. When I come back down, everyone sits around the table, dressed and ready to go. They notice me come into the room and stand.

“Let’s get to gettin’!” Leanne orders, shooing us all from the house.

The drive to the shelter is quick, mostly because Cassie fills the time with chatter. As soon as we file into the building, a heavy set, Asian man comes up to us with clipboards in his hands.

“Hello, again Sullivan slash Montgomery clan.” He gives Dad and Leanne the top clipboard before continuing. “You two mentioned wanting to work with cats this time around. You know the drill, this is a list of tasks needing to be done in that area.”

He repeats himself with Jaxon and Cassie, sending them to the front desk area. “No answering the phones ‘Thank you for calling Golden Tiger Chinese Restaurant, how can I help you?’ That means you, Cassie!”

“You never let me have any fun, Tai!” Cassie cries dramatically, stomping her way around the front desk.

Tai rolls his eyes, turning back to Caleb and me. “You’re new.” He raises a curious brow at me. “Are you a Sullivan or a Montgomery?”

“I-I-I...” My eyes pop wide, and I turn to Caleb for help answering. Technically, I’m neither. My mother gave me her maiden name, Storm.

“She’s Mark’s daughter,” Caleb informs him, then introduces us. “Riley, this is Tai. He’s a cool guy, usually. Tai, this is Riley.”

Kai nods once at me. “Good to meet you, Riley. You two will be working with the dogs. We have quite a large group of puppies today. Here’s the list of things to get done for you two.” He hands us the last clipboard before turning around and rushing back toward Cassie and Jaxon at the front desk.

Caleb scans the tasks on the clipboard. “Ready to bathe some puppies?”

Grinning wildly, I lean over the top of the clipboard and scan it. It really does say to bathe the dogs. “I’m e-e-excited to play w-w-with them.”

Caleb chuckles at my enthusiasm. “Let’s get to it, then.”

He leads me to the dog cages and shows me around the area a bit, stopping in front of a door at the end of the hall. “This is where the supplies are kept. We bathe the dogs outside,” he explains, opening the supply closet and digging around for some buckets and shampoo. “It’s a lot less messy to use a hose outside, which is why I love it when we come here in the warmer months. The dogs love the cool water baths, and we don’t have to make a big mess inside.”

I take a bucket and some leashes from him as he holds them out. “How m-m-many times have y-y-you been here?”

Caleb turns back to the closet and grabs the shampoo and his own bucket. “Too many to count,” he admits. “My parents took us here constantly as our community service when we were kids. They usually let us decide where we wanted to volunteer each month, and we always picked this place.”

“I-I-I can s-s-see why.” Following him down the hall, I peek into the cages full of dogs and puppies in all shapes and sizes. “Playing w-w-with animals all th-th-the time must have b-b-been a dream as a k-k-kid.”

“You never had a pet?” His question is innocent enough, but it stings.

Shaking my head, my gaze drops down to my feet as I continue to follow him. “No, I w-w-wasn’t allowed.”

His brow wrinkles in confusion. “Your mom didn’t like animals?”

Again, I shake my head, but don’t say anything more. He seems to get the hint I don’t really want to talk about it because he keeps silent.

Leading the way outside, he shows me to the fenced in patio. He opens one of the dog kennels from the outside and puts a large lab on a leash before leading him over to me.

Caleb pats the overly excited dog’s head. “Do you want to hold the leash or hose him down?”

“E-e-either.” I kneel next to the dog and let him sniff my hand.

Caleb hands me the leash and picks up the hose. “I’ll hose him down,” he offers. “He’s staying still for you, maybe we won’t get soaked if you hold the leash.”

“Does he h-h-have a name?” I rub the dog behind the ears.

Caleb tilts his head from one side to the other. “Sort of. The shelter provides names to the animals when they arrive, but they’re usually changed when the animal gets adopted. This guy’s name is Bruce.”

“Hi, Bruce,” I whisper into his furry ear. Animals are easy for me to talk to. I don’t second-

guess myself, so I don't stutter through my words. "We're going to give you a bath, now. The water will be nice and cool for you."

Bruce barks loudly in my face, startling me and causing me to fall backward from my kneeling position onto my butt. Caleb's eyes widen with concern for a second, but when I snicker and rub Bruce's head, Caleb lets out a breath and chuckles along with me.

Bruce's bath is quick and straightforward. I'm sad to see him go when we put him back in his kennel, though the next five dogs are just as fun to be around.

"Okay." Caleb sighs dejectedly. "This is going to be the last dog before we can move on to the puppies. He's a good dog. He's just easily excitable and really fucking big."

With his warning left hanging in the air, he walks to the final kennel door and opens it. He wrestles with a dog the same size as a bear. It takes him a good five minutes to put the leash on the massive animal.

"You're going to have to work the hose and spray him down," he tells me, using his full strength to hold the dog in place. "Tiny here weighs more than you do, and he'll drag you around this patio if you try holding him."

Readily agreeing with Caleb, I pick up the hose and turn it on. "You're j-joking about his n-

n-name, right?” I stare at the drooling giant.

“I wish.” Caleb cackles, still trying his best to hold Tiny still. “We should probably make this quick. He’s a strong son of a gun.”

Without another word, I aim the hose at Tiny and soak him down. It takes a few minutes because of his size. When I finish getting his fur wet, I grab the bottle of shampoo and squirt a generous portion onto his back. Tiny yips excitedly, his tail swishing back and forth at such a quick speed, it’s almost hard to see.

“This is his favorite part,” Caleb informs me, gritting his teeth as he struggles to keep his hold on Tiny. “He gets a good scratch, and he loves it.”

Trying to hurry so Caleb can get Tiny back into his kennel, I squirt more shampoo onto the dogs back. Rushing to get Tiny scrubbed down, I bend at the waist and work my way in a circle around him. Without thinking about it, I back my butt into Caleb’s hips while I’m working. Caleb gasps, then grunts and lets the leash go. Tiny takes his chance at escape and rushes off, racing full speed around the patio. He barks loudly as he finishes running a full circle, then turns his massive body toward Caleb and me.

“Oh, shit,” Caleb grabs me around the waist and turns our backs to Tiny.

Feeling the impact of Tiny jumping onto Caleb’s back, I grunt and brace myself when the



momentum pushes us toward the ground. In the process of falling, I drop the hose, and it goes spinning out of control, spraying the entire patio, including us and an extremely soapy Tiny.

Caleb manages to take most of the impact when we hit the ground, keeping me from getting too banged up. Tiny must think we are down on the ground to play because he continues to bounce and jump on and around us.

“Tiny, no!” Tai’s loud voice comes from the door to the patio, and I’m grateful he’s here. He manages to get Tiny back to his kennel and help us up. “You know Tiny can’t be off his leash, Caleb. Are you crazy?”

“Yeah, I did it on purpose, Tai.” Caleb grunts, pulling his shirt away from his body and wringing the water out of it. “I thought to myself, ‘I wonder what would happen if I just took Tiny off his leash and let him run wild. Why not give it a try?’ I’m crazy like that sometimes.”

Tai snorts and shakes his head. “Maybe you two should go play with the puppies for the rest of the day.” He rubs his hand over his mouth, trying to hide a smirk. “It’s probably safer for you both.”

Caleb takes my hand and leads me back into the building, through the hall of dogs and into another hall full of puppies. “At least, these little guys will be easier to bathe,” Caleb offers, pushing open a kennel with three tiny poodle puppies

inside. “Let’s get to it.”

Caleb was right, the puppies were much easier to handle. Still, being with Caleb made every part of our day at the animal shelter fun.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



The next few weeks go by quickly. Cassie took me shopping a few more times, but luckily, I didn't end up walking home in the middle of a summer storm during those trips. Dad spent his days working, sometimes from home, and Leanne kept busy running errands, cooking, and baking. I helped when I could, but most of the time Cassie and the boys kept me busy doing normal teenage stuff. Their words, not mine.

I learned how to play Mario Kart and watched countless movies. We went to the theater and ate popcorn that was more expensive than the movie tickets. We drove to a place where you made your own ice cream mix. Cassie told me this was all the stuff she assumed I missed out on growing up

and she's right.

Caleb is exceptionally sweet and gentle with me. When I get nervous in crowded places he seems to notice and makes a subtle excuse for us to leave. He never asks me about my past either, which I appreciate. I'll tell them all when it's the right time. I don't want them to see me differently when they learn the whole truth. They've picked up bits and pieces since my arrival, but they don't know the worst of it. They don't know what a terrible person I truly am.

When Jaxon and Cassie are busy together, Caleb ensures I have something to do or someone to hang out with. He even modified his plans a few times after finding out Leanne and my dad would be busy. Lately, when we're together and alone my tummy gets a fluttery feeling, like butterflies flying around inside. I'm not sure what it means. I want to bring it up to Cassie, but I don't want to embarrass myself, especially if it's not normal.

Today, the six of us plan to work on building a house for the less fortunate. It's our monthly charity work. Hopefully, it will be as fun as last month at the animal shelter. Leanne and Jaxon are spectacular with animals. It was interesting to watch. It's surprising, though admirable, for even Dad and Leanne to participate in charity work with us. They say it usually takes a full weekend of their time, but it's always worth it. The animal shelter

only took up an entire day last month, but we are supposed to spend today and tomorrow working on this house.

When we pull up to the job site, a half-built house sits in the middle of a dirt lot and with a few workers scattered around. I made sure to wear one of my old shirts and jeans, not wanting to ruin my new clothes.

Distracted by my perusal of the site, I miss Caleb and Jaxon pulling up in Caleb's truck.

When Caleb grabs my hand, I jump. His fingers tighten around mine. "Are you ready to work?"

I blush and nod at him. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Cassie whisper something to Jaxon, and he shoots a strange look in our direction. I'm worried I did something to upset him because he's frowning at Caleb and me.

"Okay, Riley." Caleb takes me away from worrying about what's wrong with Jaxon. "This is where you, Cassie, and Leanne will be." He points to what I assume will be a living room, with painting supplies in one corner. "The whole downstairs needs to be done which means it's probably where you three will be all day."

"Where w-w-will you guys be?" I glance around to find two other women painting in the hallway.

"We need to get some supplies from the

truck, then we'll be up on the roof laying down shingles." He smirks at me, his finger pointing up to the ceiling. "I probably won't see you until we break for lunch."

I give him a nod, even though this disappoints me for some reason. I don't need to see him every second of the day, and he'll be working on the same house as me. Why is it still upsetting? I really need to talk to Cassie. She's my first real friend, and I can't figure these feelings out on my own. I think I can trust her enough to talk to her about it all.

Caleb hugs me quickly, something he's started doing a lot lately, then heads out to get to work. Cassie and Leanne are already starting on the walls when I find them, and I quickly join in. For a while, it's just the three of us making small talk. I've been stuttering a lot less around the five of them. The more I talk to them, the less my voice shakes and wobbles.

A few hours later, the three of us pause for a water break, and out of nowhere, Leanne turns to me and asks, "So, has he kissed you yet?"

I choke on the drink of water I just took, and Cassie is in tears as she howls with laughter. There's a quick commotion outside just before the boys come rushing in, probably to figure out why it sounds like I'm dying. Caleb runs up to me, gently patting my back.

“Baby girl, what happened?” Caleb eyes Cassie curiously while she struggles to catch her breath. While Caleb fusses over me and Cassie gasps for air, Leanne crosses her arms and watches us with a smirk.

“Wrong tube,” I wheeze out when I regain the ability to suck in enough air to breathe again. “Sorry, I’m f-f-fine, I didn’t m-m-mean to scare you.”

Caleb puts an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him. “Stop apologizing, you’ve got nothing to be sorry about,” he whispers in my ear.

It’s something he’s been saying to me a lot in the past few weeks. A blush heats my cheeks as his breath tickles the side of my face. The butterflies in my tummy take flight again.

I risk a glance at Leanne, and she quirks an eyebrow as if to say, *Well, has he?* I subtly shake my head *no*, and her expression drops slightly in disappointment. Noticing the silent exchange between Leanne and me, Cassie snorts and coughs to cover her continued snickers.

My dad chuckles at our strange exchange, shaking his head with amusement. “Okay, breaks over! Back to work everyone!”

Caleb asks me once more if I’m all right before heading back to work with Jaxon and Dad. I’m too embarrassed to say anything to Cassie or Leanne after the guys go back outside. My

embarrassment renders me speechless until lunch, allowing the girls to chat amongst themselves.

Around noon the boys come strolling in with burgers and fries for the six of us. Cassie and I lay a clean tarp on the floor for us all to sit on while we eat our lunch. The boys eat faster than us. Having a lot more work, they head back out before us girls finish. I offer to toss our trash in the bin outside while Cassie and Leanne move onto painting the kitchen.

As I shuffle back to the house after tossing the wrappers, someone above me yells, “Look out!”

I freeze and look up in time to see a large object falling from the roof, heading straight for me. Before I have a chance to react, a heavy gust of wind whips my hair around my face and shifts the nail gun a foot away from me, barely avoiding my head.

I blink at the tool in confusion for about three seconds before the yelling voices register. Lifting my gaze from the nail gun, several of the workers from around the job site rush at me. Not understanding what’s happening, I take a step back from the stampede of people. My back hits something, and I’m suddenly swirled around and pulled into a familiar embrace.

“Jesus Christ, baby, you about gave me a heart attack,” Caleb murmurs into my hair as he



holds me tight. “Are you okay? You’re not hurt, are you?”

My mind swirls, trying to catch up to what’s going on. Strange hands reach out to me as the chatter increases. Shaking my head, I bury my face in his chest as uncontrollable tremors race through my body.

Caleb must feel the shaking, because the next thing I know he picks me up and carries me toward his truck. He turns his head and shouts that I’m fine over his shoulder. When we reach the truck, he pulls us both into the bed and situates me sideways on his lap. We stay silent for several minutes while the shaking slowly subsides before he finally pulls back to search my face.

“Why were you shaking so hard, Riley?” he inquires softly.

It’s strange when he says my name. For weeks he’s only called me babe or baby girl.

“It’s nothing,” I mutter as I turn away to hide my burning cheeks.

I don’t want him to know why I react the way I do in crowds. Being terrified of strangers is incredibly embarrassing. My heart would break if he knew the truth and laughed at me. With my head down, it startles me when he gently grabs my chin between his thumb and index finger, tilting my head up. The angle gives me no choice but to stare into his imploring blue eyes. He makes it impossible to

pretend everything is fine. It's clear as day in his eyes he genuinely wants a truthful answer.

"I was s-s-scared," I admit with a resigned sigh. "I get a-a-anxious around strange people. I sh-sh-shake, and I can't breathe. I just... I p-p-panic. Sometimes, I pass o-o-out if there's too many people at once and no e-e-escape. My head spins, and I f-f-forget how to breathe."

"But..." he pauses, as if trying to find the right words. "You didn't. Panic, I mean. You looked terrified, and you got shaky, but you didn't really panic. At least none of the passing out or forgetting to breathe."

"Yeah, but that's because I have you h-h-here," I explain. "I know as l-l-long as you're with me, I'm s-s-safe."

He gawks at me with wide eyes for a moment before cupping my face softly with his hands. His voice fills with awe and hope as he whispers, "You trust me, baby girl?"

Do I trust him? I've never given my full trust to another person before. I haven't had a real friend before either, and my only family was my mother and stepfather. No way would I would ever trust either of them with anything.

But Caleb? He wouldn't lie to me. Truth shines in his eyes every time he speaks. He'd never intentionally hurt me in any way. I have faith he'll always be there for me if I need him. My eyes go

wide as it dawns on me. I really trust Caleb.

I focus back on his face, and the hope in his eyes fades. I don't know where my courage comes from, but I grab his face in my hands and make sure his gaze locks with mine while I tell him my new discovery.

I need him to know how serious I am and what he means to me. "Yes, Caleb. I trust you... with everything."

His smile could light up the city. His forehead rests against mine, as he holds me for a while. Neither of us feels the need to say anything, and that's okay with me.

Later in the evening, we start the drive home. Instead of riding with my dad and Leanne, I get to head back home in Caleb's truck. Caleb is quiet, which allows me to reflect a bit on the day. The realization that I trust Caleb still shocks me. It's not something I planned on; it just happened. Things are starting to transform inside me. I'm more comfortable around everyone, I'm trusting people, and I feel like I can be myself around the people I live with. I can't shake the feeling that some even bigger transitions are coming.

## CHAPTER NINE



After breakfast the next morning, I shuffle into my closet to get dressed for the day. I'm startled to a stop by a full-length mirror hanging on the back wall, which wasn't there when I came into my closet for my pajamas the night before. Slowly creeping up to the mirror, I notice it's quite a bit thicker than a normal mirror should be. After searching the sides, my hand runs over a clasp that opens the cabinet. On the left, a keyhole with a key sticking out of it rests below the clasp. Turning the key, the mirror opens to reveal a large jewelry box built inside.

The mirror and jewelry box combination is a surprise on its own, but the two necklaces hanging inside the jewelry box shock me even more. One is

a long gold chain with a large circular pendant hanging at the bottom. The other is a silver chain, not quite as long, but thicker around. A silver feather pendant hangs on the end of it. Both are gorgeous. The box has plenty of room for other jewelry including special spots for rings, earrings, and bracelets.

Leaving the necklaces in the box, I close and lock it again. It doesn't take long to think of the person who was probably responsible for the new addition to my closet. After getting dressed for the day, I make my way up to the game room where Cassie sits watching television. Every Tuesday after breakfast she watches her recorded shows, which makes finding her today easy.

"Hey," she greets me with a distracted wave. "What's up?"

"Did you put a mirrored j-j-jewelry box thing in m-m-my closet?" I ask, sure she's the only one who would do such a thing.

Her lips slowly and mischievously quirk up, but she simply continues to watch the drama unfold on TV. "No clue what you mean."

"Hmmm." She's not telling me the truth, that part is obvious. Though, I don't call her on it. She must have a reason for keeping her antics to herself.

Instead of trying to get Cassie to admit to putting the box in my closet, I decide to join her.

We sit in silence for a while, watching some reality shows about women who are famous for no apparent reason other than their love of drama and arguing.

In the middle of one of Cassie's shows, her phone rings. "Hey, darling," she greets the person, and I immediately know it's Jaxon on the other end.

She listens to him for a few seconds before responding, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "On my way, honey bunny."

Hopping to her feet, she hands me the remote. "Jaxon needs my assistance with some things. Have fun with the show. Just don't delete this episode. I want to know what happens."

She skips out of the room, leaving me in a fit of giggles. She gets really invested in her reality shows. She acts like she knows the people personally. It's almost as fun to watch her reactions to the people as it is to watch the actual show.

With nothing better to do, I finish the episode Cassie and I were watching, then start a different one she mentioned to me in the past. Halfway through, my head begins to throb with no warning. This has happened a few times before, and dread spreads through me.

Turning the television off quickly, I lie back on the couch and close my eyes. My hope at catching the horrid headache early enough is

crushed when lying on my back does nothing to alleviate the pain. My stomach twists as another needle digs deeper into my brain.

Knowing I need to head to a bathroom right away, I rise from the couch slowly and try to make my way to the second floor with only one eye cracked. Even the smallest light burns my eyes and worsens the pain in my head. I'm torn between going at a sloth's pace versus racing to the bathroom before I get sick on the stairs. If I move too fast, it causes more pain, and I'll get sick sooner. If I move too slowly, I don't make it to the bathroom in time.

Luckily, I'm able to move slowly and make it to the bathroom before the contents of my stomach come up. The motion of emptying my stomach causes my head to ache more, and black spots dance on the outside of my vision.

With no other ideas as to how to get rid of the pain, I rinse my mouth and try to crawl to my bed. The thought of sleeping off the headache is the only thing keeping my body moving. Halfway to my bedroom, a hallway door opens then slams shut. A thousand knives stab my brain simultaneously. Stopping in my tracks and placing my forehead on the floor, I take a few deep breaths to ease the sharpness of the pain. My fingers press into my temples in a feeble attempt at relieving the pressure.

“Riley?” Caleb’s voice is at a normal level, but to my sensitive ears, it sounds like he screams at the top of his lungs.

I whimper, but he doesn’t seem to understand the noise is my biggest issue right now because he continues talking at a slightly louder volume as he frantically kneels next to me. “What’s going on, baby? Are you hurt?”

“Please, no noise,” I beg, barely able to put any volume into my voice.

He freezes for a minute, probably unsure what to do. Finally, he whispers softly, “Is it your head?”

After grunting a quiet confirmation, Caleb picks me up and carries me to my bedroom. Even with his slow, deliberate movements, I take multiple deep breaths to keep my twisting stomach from sending me back to the bathroom. He lays me on the bed and turns the lights off.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispers, leaving the room without a sound.

A few minutes later he’s back with a glass of water with some pills in his hands. “I spoke to Leanne,” he murmurs, his voice barely audible. “She wants to know if light, sound, and movement hurt your head more.”

“Mhm,” I whisper as I settle into the bed.

“Then, she thinks it’s a migraine. She gave me these pills for you to take. If they don’t work,



we'll take you to the doctor and have you checked out.”

Caleb's hand supports my back as he places the pills in my mouth. A cool glass touches my lips, and I take a drink of the water, trying to keep as still as possible. Once I've taken the medicine, he lowers me back to the bed, covers me up, and sits down on the bed beside me.

“Just rest, babe,” he orders softly. “If it's not better in half an hour, we'll take you into the doctor.”

He sits beside me silently while we wait for the medicine to help. His hand strokes my hair softly, soothing the pain slightly. It seems like three hours later, but I know it's only half an hour when my door opens. Even the minute creak of the hinges echoes like a thousand gunshots in my ears.

“Caleb,” Dad whispers, obviously staying as quiet as possible. “How is she?”

Caleb's hand stops stroking my hair, as he slides off the bed. My hand shoots out, grabbing onto his shirt, not wanting him to leave my side. My grip stops him from leaving the bed, but brings a moan from me at the same time.

He takes my hand from his shirt and holds it in his own. “How do you feel, baby girl?”

Blinking my eyes open, I turn my head toward him, but the motion brings a wave of pain and nausea. Inhaling sharply, I try to hold back the

urge to throw up again. Taking deep breaths isn't working this time, though. Instead, I sit up quickly, putting my hand over my mouth. If I hustle, I might make it to the bathroom in time. Caleb puts a hand on my shoulder, preventing me from getting up and I panic. If he doesn't let me up, I'm going to get sick on him and then die from embarrassment.

A quiet commotion comes from around my room, and a trash can is placed into my hands just in time. My hair is gently pulled back and held at the base of my neck, keeping it from getting in the way. It takes a few minutes for me to catch my breath after I'm through. When I'm able to put the trash can down, someone places a cold cloth in my hands.

“Thank you.” My whole body shakes from the pain in my head and the aftermath of being sick. Caleb guides me onto my back in the bed.

Dad whispers to Caleb as he creeps out of the room, “I'm going to get my wallet. We're taking her to the doctor. Carry her down to the car.” His tone leaves no room for argument, although I doubt Caleb would argue.

If I wasn't in such agony, I might protest. But it hurts too badly to even think straight, let alone try and convince them I'll be fine with time.

Caleb picks me up softly, keeping his movements slow and gentle. “Just hang in there, baby.”

Clinging to his shirt, I bury my face against his chest, breathing deeply and trying to keep nausea at bay.

“Here’s a bucket, just in case she gets sick again,” Leanne murmurs. “Call me, and let me know what the doctor says. If they’re going to keep her, we’ll come down there.”

“I’ll call you,” Dad promises. “Tell Cassie to calm down. Her losing her mind isn’t doing anyone any good.”

“You know how she is.” Leanne chuckles softly. “She’s not happy about being left behind to wait and see what the doctor has to say. Even Jaxon said he wanted to come with you guys.”

It strikes me as odd Caleb would be allowed to come with us while Jaxon, Cassie, and Leanne stay behind. For whatever reason, they all must have decided it was best for Caleb to come and I can’t complain. Being in his arms soothes me slightly. Even the smallest bit of relief is welcome.

A car door opens as Caleb and I reach Dad and Leanne. Caleb slides into the back of the car, still holding me in his arms. The door closes, and I cringe, curling closer to Caleb. When the driver’s door opens, and my dad gets in, I brace myself for the sound of the door closing again.

“Mark,” Caleb whisper-yells. “Close it softly.”

There’s no verbal response, but the driver

door closes a great deal softer, only making a quiet click as it's locked into place. Everyone remains silent on the drive, which I'm grateful for.

When we arrive at the doctor, Caleb carries me inside. Dad speaks to the receptionist, and I'm brought directly back to a private room with the lights dimmed and everyone speaking in hushed tones. After Caleb sets me on the bed, I'm given a cold cloth for my head, and a warm blanket is laid over me.

Caleb continues to hold my hand while someone takes my vitals. Having my hand in his is comforting, especially with a bunch of people bustling around me when I can't even see. My eyes stay closed since the idea of opening them makes my stomach turn.

"Hello, Ms. Storm," a male voice murmurs near the bed. My grip tightens on Caleb's fingers, and he uses his free hand to stroke my hair again, trying to reassure me. "I'm Dr. Rodriguez, can you answer a few questions for me?"

"Y-y-yes," I whisper, my voice shaking.

"Good," he murmurs. "I'm assuming light, noise, and movement hurts?"

"Mhm."

"Has this happened before?"

"Mhm."

As he continues to ask questions, he touches the underside of my jaw, poking at it with the tips

of his fingers. He checks my pulse, then pushes on my hands and feet. “How long have these headaches lasted in the past?”

“S-s-sometimes hours, s-s-sometimes days,” I admit, whimpering when speaking a simple sentence brings a wave of pain.

“And you get sick every time you get them?” he asks.

“S-s-sometimes,” I breathe. “It d-d-depends on how b-b-bad the pain g-g-gets.”

After a few more questions, he finally finishes. “Okay, it sounds like you’ve got a pretty bad migraine,” he informs me. “We’re going to insert an IV, give you some fluids, and something I call a cocktail of medications. It’ll be three medications at once. It should knock the headache out rather fast since it’s all going in the IV. We should have you out of her in an hour or two.”

“Thank y-y-you.”

“Of course.” He pats the bed beside my leg. “I’ll come check on you again in a bit to see how the meds are working.”

After the doctor leaves, a nurse comes in to place an IV in my arm. “This is going to be a big poke, but it’ll be worth it.”

My hand tightens again on Caleb’s. He stands from his chair next to my bed and moves the cool cloth from my face. Placing his forehead softly on mine, he murmurs comforting words to me as

the nurse inserts the IV.

A gentle hand comes to rest on my blanket-covered foot and I crack one eye just long enough to see my dad at the end of my bed. When the nurse finishes putting the IV in, Dad moves his hand. “I’m going to call Leanne and let everyone know what the doctor said. I’ll be right back, kiddo.”

The nurse starts the bag of fluids, then injects the medication the doctor prescribed. “This should work fast. I’ll let the doctor know I’ve given them to you. He should check up on you in a few minutes to see how they’re working. For now, just get some rest if you can.”

It only takes a few minutes for the medicine to take effect. They’re like magic when they kick in. The unbearable pain fades almost instantly, leaving only a dull ache. Not long after, I’m able to open my eyes without getting nauseous.

Caleb grins down at me as I blink a few times to get my vision focused. “How do you feel?”

“Much better.” I take a few deep breaths, testing out small movements with my head. My body begins to shake slightly, but I ignore it, just happy to have relief. “I’m s-s-sorry for all of this.”

“Hey.” He frowns, putting a finger under my chin and directing my gaze to his. “You didn’t ask for this, baby. No apologizing for things you can’t control. I’m happy to take care of you when you’re

sick.”

My cheeks brighten at his words. If I’m being honest with myself, having Caleb take care of me when I’m hurting is wonderful. His calm patience helps to soothe me when all I want to do is break down in tears. Crying with such a terrible headache is not a smart idea at all, it only makes things ten times worse.

Squeezing Caleb’s hand in mine, I make sure I’ve gained his full attention before speaking. “Thank you for staying and h-h-helping me. It means a l-l-lot.”

The shaking in my body grows worse. I assume it’s from nerves, but Caleb must think I’m cold. He tucks the blanket tighter around me then takes off his sweatshirt and drapes it over me.

“Anytime, baby.” He settles back to my side and kisses the top of my head. “I’m always here for you.”

The doctor and my dad take that moment to come back into the room. Caleb sits back down, and dad takes residence at the foot of the bed for the doctor to check me over again. “I notice you’re shaking pretty hard, that’s unfortunately a common side effect of one of the medications. It should wear off in a few hours. Just get some rest today, no vigorous activity, no operating heavy machinery. Honestly, if you can just stay in bed and relax all day, that would be best.” Entering some

information into the computer in the corner, he glances my way once more. “Any questions for me?”

When I shake my head, he glances to Dad and Caleb. “You two have any questions for me?”

“What should we do if this happens again?” Dad asks, still speaking quietly.

“I’ll send you home with a prescription. If that doesn’t work, come back here, and we will do the same thing we did today.” He writes down the prescription and hand the paper to my dad. “This should work, though. Take it as soon as you start to feel the pain. It will work better the sooner you take it.”

“Thanks, Dr. Rodriguez.” Dad nods as he puts the prescription in his pocket.

Dr. Rodriguez gives me a quick wave before heading for the door. “I’ll have the nurse come take out your IV, then you’re good to go. You may feel dizzy and lightheaded today, that’s also common. No reason to be worried about it. I’m glad you’re feeling better, Riley.”

“Th-th-thank you,” I stammer, pushing myself up on the bed slightly.

The nurse comes in a few minutes later, easily taking the IV out of my arm. She puts a piece of gauze and tape over the small hole. “You’re good to go, dear. Just rest today.”

After getting to my feet, the room spins.



Caleb wraps an arm around my waist and lifts me off my feet.

“You’re supposed to take it easy,” he scolds gently.

I raise a brow at him. “Does that mean n-n-no walking?”

Dad scoffs next to us. “I’m with Caleb on this one. Resting is all you’re allowed to do today. When we get home, I’ll have Cassie bring you some of those girly magazines she loves. I’ll make you some food and bring it up to you, and you can just hang out in bed all day.”

It warms my heart to have dad and Caleb caring about me. They didn’t even think twice about helping me get better. My dad offering to do something as simple as make me food has tears building behind my eyes.

“Thank you both, for helping me,” I mutter as we get into the car. “It’s the first t-t-time I’ve ever had medicine for one of those h-h-headaches, and having them is w-w-way better than waiting it out for hours or days.”

“Anytime, kiddo,” Dad assures me. “You never have to suffer through something like that again. Just tell us, and we will do whatever we can to fix it for you.”

When we make it home, Dad and Caleb make sure I’m set up in my bed. Cassie brings me magazines as promised. Dad makes me a sandwich

and some soup. Jaxon sneaks some chocolate in, and Leanne grabs a few books she knows I like from the shelves upstairs.

Once everyone files out of the room, content with the knowledge that I'm fine now, Caleb kicks off his shoes and sits down on the bed next to me. He picks up one of the magazines and flips through it.

My eyes focus on the side of his face, and I wait patiently for him to give me his attention.

He grins. "Yes?"

"You don't have to stay if you don't want to." I pick at pretend lint on the blanket.

He closes his magazine and sets it down.

"Would you like me to leave?"

"No," I admit, my cheeks turning pink. "I like having you h-h-here. But if you have other things to do, I u-u-understand."

He shakes his head and picks the magazine back up. "Nope, I'm free all day. You're stuck with me. Though, I'm not sure I want to read about twenty ways to meet my perfect man. I might stick with a book instead."

Smiling to myself, I choose a different magazine and scan through the pages. We spend the rest of the day talking about the articles in the magazines, napping, and reading our own books.

When we're forced to get up and leave my room for dinner at the end of the day, I realize I

really like being stuck with Caleb.

## CHAPTER TEN



*“So, because it’s your birthday, you think you can just leave this house and go whoring yourself around?” he yells while backing me into the corner.*

*“I w-w-wasn’t,” I stutter. “I s-s-swear, I just w-w-went to the l-l-library for a few b-b-books.”*

*“Don’t you lie to me, you little bitch!”*

*“Sam, come on, leave her here! We’re going to be late for our dinner reservation!” my mother yells from the front door.*

*Samael gets an evil glint in his eyes as he stalks closer to me. “You will pay for ruining our evening, little girl.”*

*“Sam! Let’s go!” My mother is getting impatient.*

*“Angie, if you tell me what to do one more time, it will be the last thing you do!” he hollers over his shoulder.*

*The second he looks toward the front door, I take my only chance at an escape and make a run for it. As I reach the back door, I hear the sickening crack of a belt. Seconds later, I feel the stinging pain on my right shoulder, slowing me down. A hand wraps around my neck, and I’m thrown to the ground.*

*“Big mistake, sugar.”*

I bolt upright in bed, gasping for air and searching the room for threats. Instead of the person I fear showing up, I find flames covering my room. *Not again!*

Still trying to gain my bearings, I sit up on my knees and scan the room for an exit. The only two exits, the bedroom door and the window, are both blocked by raging flames. Yelling out will be useless; no one will be able to get to me faster than the flames. With no way out, I’m going to burn in here, like I should’ve done all those months ago.

As the end of my bed catches fire, I jump out of bed, then drop to the floor and crawl to the only corner of the room not engulfed in flames. There, I curl into a ball as I wait for the burning inferno to reach me.

“Riley!” Jaxon’s shout reaches me above the

roar of the fire. “Hold on, Sis, we’re going to get you out!”

My lungs burn from the growing cloud of smoke. Every breath I take hurts as I cough and wheeze. Covering my mouth, I try to keep the thick smoke away, but it’s not helping. I don’t know how they plan on getting to me. It’s not like they have the ability to walk through fire or something.

Cassie calls for Caleb to hurry, and the flames suddenly dissipate. I squint through the smoke, Caleb stands by my bedroom door with his brow drawn in concentration. Jaxon, Cassie, Leanne, and Dad stand behind him, searching for me through the evaporating smoke and blaze.

My head slowly shakes back and forth in confusion as to how the fire seems to be vanishing without any help of water or an extinguisher, but no one else appears shocked by the strange phenomenon.

Before I think of a logical explanation, Caleb picks me up, hugs me tightly to his body, and rushes me from the overheated wreckage. Only a few areas of the room still smolder, light trails of smoke swirling to the blackened ceiling.

“Caleb?” I whisper, seeking the words to ask him what happened, but unsure I know what I experienced.

Caleb’s grip tightens around me as he bows his head to whisper in my ear. “Shh, baby, hold on.

Let us check you over and make sure you're not hurt before we talk about this."

I let out a small, frustrated sigh, but relax into his embrace as everyone settles into the living room downstairs. Caleb takes residence on the far side of the sectional, refusing to allow me to move. Not that I fight him on it. Being in Caleb's arms eases some of my nerves from nearly being burned alive.

"Does anything hurt, kiddo?" Dad asks as everyone finds a seat.

I shake my head. "No, I don't think so. What's going on? How did that happen? What even really happened?" The questions pour out without pause. "Do we have a fire extinguisher or something? Where was it?"

After a moment of silence, Leanne asks, "Riley, has this ever happened before?"

I stiffen involuntarily and glance around the room for a distraction, avoiding eye contact with everyone. "Wh-wh-what do you m-m-mean?"

"I mean"—she pauses, seemingly lost in thought for a moment—"has there ever been a time when something caught on fire without explanation?"

Tension in the room grows as they wait for my answer. I can't tell them the truth. They'll send me away or turn me into the police. They'll hate me if they know what I did.

I don't realize my body has started shaking until Caleb's grip tightens around my waist. "Baby girl, it's okay to tell us. We won't judge you, no matter what," he assures me, softly.

Everyone around nods in agreement.

Should I believe them, though? Will they still care about me if they know what happened? *Trust*. I know in my heart I need to trust them. I already trust Caleb, and he promises it will be okay. His assurance gives me courage. I take a deep breath and drop my gaze down to my lap. My confession might be easier if I don't look at them.

"I killed my mother," I whisper almost too quietly.

I'm not sure they heard me until Cassie inhales sharply.

"How? Why?" she asks, though her voice doesn't sound judgmental. It almost sounds... sympathetic?

"It's kind of a long story." I pause trying to gather my thoughts. They want to know and it's too late to take back what I've already told them. They might as well know the whole truth before they decide what to do with me. "I turned seventeen last December. I've never had presents or parties or any of the things people in movies and books have on their birthdays. That's okay with me. I never had friends to invite to a birthday party, and I didn't need presents. I watched movies whenever I could,



but most of my time was spent reading when I was growing up. I figured my mom wouldn't mind if I went to the library for the day.

“She let me go once a month to stock up on books as long as I didn't speak to anyone while I was there. I'd already gone once in December, but I read all of my books and really wanted more. I guess I should've asked first, but it was just across the street, and I didn't talk to anyone just like my mother said.”

My blood runs cold and I have to pause for a moment to collect myself. The memories flash through my mind like a film reel, making me feel like I'm back at my old house. “When I got home, S-S-Samael was there. H-h-he was enraged and said I was a wh-wh-whore. He thought I was out with boys, I guess, even though I didn't know any. H-h-he and my mother had plans to go to dinner at some fancy restaurant that night, and she was getting impatient. She said they were going to miss their reservation if they didn't hurry. He wasn't listening to her, though. H-h-he just kept yelling at me and backing me into a corner.”

I shake my head, trying to shake the images away. Silence hangs in the air. I can't handle not knowing what they're all thinking, so I risk a glance around the room only to find everyone displaying different, mixed emotions. With a harsh glare directed at the floor in front of him, Jaxon seems

furious, though I'm pretty sure he isn't angry with me since he isn't looking at me.

Cassie and Leanne both appear heartbroken, their eyes shining with tears and brows drawn together in deep frowns. My father looks outraged and defeated. He repeatedly balls his hands into fists, then relaxes them as if trying to squeeze the stress from himself.

Caleb's expression is murderous. I've never seen him so upset and angry before. His eyes are narrowed into thin slits, his lips set in a hard line, and his body shaking as rage rolls off of him in waves. I wonder if I should continue with them all in such states of distress.

I place my hand on Caleb's cheek and turn his face toward me. "Did I do something w-w-wrong? Maybe I shouldn't f-f-finish telling you all about this. You all look really u-u-upset."

"No! It isn't you at all, baby. We just... I can't... It shouldn't..." He sighs and runs his fingers through his hair while turning at Jaxon in desperation.

"I think what Caleb is trying to say is we wish you didn't have to deal with that kind of bullshit growing up," Jaxon explains. "We should've been there to protect you, and we weren't. That makes us angry at ourselves. More than anything, though, we're angry at your mother and her poor excuse for a fucking husband."

I peer around to find everyone agreeing with Jaxon. “But, you guys didn’t even know about me. There’s no way you could have been there to protect me if you didn’t know about me. It isn’t your fault, any of you.”

No one responds, but the anger and upset calms after a while. I remain silent, allowing them time to process everything and decide what they want from me.

“I think we need to hear the rest,” Leanne suggests. “So, we can understand exactly what happened that day.”

When everyone agrees and settles, I continue. “I knew better than to run when h-h-he was that angry. I should’ve just let him get his a-a-anger out, then he’d leave for dinner with my mother. I could’ve gone to my room and rested for the night after they left. I didn’t, though. I was stupid and reckless. He turned to yell at my mother, and I ducked around him and r-r-ran. I made it to the back door, but I wasn’t fast enough.”

The memories continue to push forward in my mind, vivid as the day they happened. My heart races and the tears begin to flow freely. I refuse to stop talking, though.

I want them to understand what happened and why I messed up so badly. “He always had this leather b-b-belt hanging on a hook in the hallway. He grabbed it when he ran after me. He h-h-hit me

with it and I wasn't expecting it. I stopped for a split second because I was surprised by the pain in my shoulder. It was a second too long, though. He g-g-grabbed my neck and threw me down on the ground. He hit me over and over with the belt, and I kept thinking I wish his skin was on f-f-fire like mine. I didn't mean literally, but my body burned with p-p-pain. I just wanted him to s-s-stop."

After catching my breath, I wipe the tears from my cheeks. Caleb holds me tighter as I finish telling them how I killed my own mother. "That's when I saw the flames. They started out of nowhere and spread rapidly. He stopped hitting me and backed away from the fire. My mom yelled, then a large gust of wind made the fire spread to the living room where my mom stood. She looked t-t-terrified. She kept saying, 'Don't do this!' over and over. I tried to crawl to her and help her, but the pain got to be too much. I couldn't make myself move from the kitchen floor. The last thing I remember before I passed out was his voice in my ear. He said, 'You just killed your own mother.'

"When I woke up, it looked like the house blew up. Rather than a normal house fire, it appeared like there had been some type of explosion. All the windows were blown out; there was glass everywhere. Nearly everything in the living room was burned beyond repair. The farthest corner of the living room had nasty smoke damage,

but it wasn't burned. My mother was in that corner. They told me she didn't make it. The police didn't understand how the area of the kitchen I was in had no damage. They were frustrated with me because I told them I didn't know anything.

“It was partly true, I don't remember any sort of explosion. My only theory is the wind was too strong for the old windows and it shattered them. When they asked me over and over, I didn't tell the police anything. They think I don't remember the whole day. I didn't want to go to jail for murder. I still don't! I swear, I didn't mean to do it. I don't even know how I did it!”

Caleb must realize I'm close to losing it because he pulls me to his chest and rubs my back. “Shhh, it's okay, baby. You're okay. No one is going to send you to jail. Just calm down, breathe.”

I focus on his voice and take deep breaths when he says to. After a few minutes, I calm down enough to talk more, but before I manage to say anything my father speaks up.

“Riley.” He blinks in shock. I'm convinced he's disgusted with me for killing my own mother until he speaks again. “Kiddo, why do you think you killed your mother?”

I don't understand the question. Wasn't he listening to me? Sam said I killed her. I saw her on the floor with my own eyes. I open my mouth to say these things, but what my dad says next has me

snapping my mouth shut again.

“She didn’t die from a fire, Riley.” I stare at him in confusion. My mind won’t process his words. I was there. I somehow set the fire. They told me she died. Samael told me I killed her.

“I don’t understand?” It comes out as more of a question than a statement.

“I spoke to the police after social services found me and told me about you,” he explains. “They told me your mother died of asphyxiation, but not from smoke inhalation. It was from strangulation. They know you didn’t do it because the handprints on her neck were too large to be yours. Not to mention the state you were in when they found you. They told me they think Samael did it. They haven’t been able to locate him, but apparently, he has a warrant out for his arrest in Florida for assault, also one in Michigan for suspicion of murder. He always seems to disappear before the police can catch him, though. He changes his last name and uses aliases,” he finishes with a grim shake of his head.

I can’t even begin to process the new information. I didn’t kill her? Why would Samael say I killed her if he did it? I knew he was a bad guy, but a murderer? He really is pure evil. I hope I never have to see him again. My mother wasn’t the best person ever. She let him hurt me; she even joined him in inflicting pain sometimes. She said I

was a mistake and never wanted me. But she was my mother. That means something, doesn't it?

With a sigh, I push away the new revelation for a later time. I can't bring myself to think about what this means right now.

"So, then, I didn't start the fire either?" I ask.

"Well," Cassie mutters, dragging out the word. "We think you kind of did."

"But how is that even possible?" My brain feels ready to explode. Nothing makes any sense.

"Riley..." Cassie starts, but stops and glances over at Leanne.

Leanne takes her queue to cut in for Cassie. "Honey, you're an Elemental."

Everyone's watching me, waiting for my reaction to this news. I search their faces, trying to understand. The seriousness of the admission is clear with everyone, but it's completely foreign to me.

Finally, after a long stretch of silence and staring, I say the only thing I can think of. "Huh?"

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



“Way to throw that out there, Mom,” Jaxon snorts.

Leanne winces sheepishly, then turns to my dad for help. “Mark, would you like to take it from here?”

“Oh, I see how it is!” Dad exclaims with exasperation as he gapes at his wife. “You toss her in the deep end, then ask me to dive in after her.”

I can’t stop the short laugh that escapes at Leanne’s response to him. It’s the expression you would expect a child to use when trying to get out of trouble. Her innocent smile does what she hopes it will because my dad simply grins and rolls his eyes. More giggles bubble up as I watch their exchange.



“That’s a beautiful sound,” Caleb murmurs in my ear.

His voice sends a shiver down my spine. He’s been quiet for a while now, and I almost forgot about sitting on his lap. I turn my head and rest my cheek on his shoulder trying to hide my blush. His shoulder vibrates with silent laughter, which means he probably noticed my change in color anyway.

The lightheartedness of the moment doesn’t last. What I’ve just been told races through my head. Part of me wants to call them crazy and make a run for it. No one in their right mind would believe people could actually have the ability to set things on fire. A larger part of me can’t ignore what happened back in Washington and again, just now. Too many things don’t make sense to me.

Rubbing at my temples, I try to ease the headache that’s starting. It’s not working. My head spins while I try to sort through my questions, deciding what to ask first.

“Dad,” Jaxon interrupts the teasing going on between him and Leanne. “I’m guessing Riley has about six million questions. Maybe, we should explain what’s going on?”

“Oh!” Dad jumps up and comes to sit closer to Caleb and me. “Sorry, kiddo. Leanne distracted me.”

He sends Leanne a playful wink, making her blush.

“It’s okay,” I rub my temples to match the pace of the swirl of images flowing through my head.

Dad squints at me, focusing on my hands as they rub my temples. “Hold that thought.”

He leaves the room in a hurry before anyone can question him.

While he’s gone, I distract myself with thoughts of how kind my father is to Leanne. I like witnessing the love they share for each other. They’re thoughtful and caring toward one another and it’s refreshing.

Dad rushes back into the room with a glass of water in one hand and a bottle of pills in the other. “If you’re getting a headache again, take one of these. Doctor’s orders.”

Complying quickly, I take the pill I forgot about. I’m used to having to tough out headaches, not taking things for relief. My heart squeezes when I realize my dad must have picked up the prescription for me in case I ever needed them.

Dad waits for me to set the glass down and focus on him before he speaks. “Okay, well let me start by saying you are not alone in this.” His expression turns serious, but still shows his calm nature. “We are all elementals, and we are all here to help you with this.”

He pauses for a moment to collect his thoughts. Running his hand through his hair he

takes a deep breath and continues. “Elementals are a lot like humans, but we’re a different race. We evolved right along with humans. Elementals originated when the gods and goddesses walked the earth. Some of them procreated with humans, and Elementals were born. Most humans didn’t like the idea, so when the gods and goddesses were sent above, the humans and the Elementals separated. Over time the humans forgot about our existence. Normally for a person to be an Elemental, both their mother and father need to be elementals. The only reason I never told you about us is because your mother was not an Elemental. There should be no way for you to have—”

“How do you know she wasn’t?” I break in, my forehead wrinkling.

He smiles softly at my interruption. “When an Elemental comes into their power, when they master the element they’ve been chosen to manipulate, they’re blessed with a few extra... gifts.” He struggles with the last word. “More like enhanced senses, I suppose. It’s almost too hard to describe. Most elementals are born into this world. This is new for all of us to be explaining everything to you like this. Had I known you existed and had an affinity for an element, I would’ve been teaching you these things from a very young age.”

His eyes close and his brow lowers, his lips tighten and his nose wrinkles in a broken

expression when he talks of not knowing about me. I decide I need to show him I don't blame him. I want him to understand it's not his fault.

I crawl off Caleb's lap, and before he tries to pull me back, I scoot over to my dad and hug him. It's not an easy thing for me to initiate, but it feels right. "I will never blame you for that," I whisper, ensuring only he hears me. "You rescued me, you've shown me more love and kindness than I've ever had before. I love you, Dad."

He sobs on my shoulder, and I freeze. I didn't mean to make him cry, and I have no clue what to do with an adult breaking down. My gaze darts over his shoulder to Jaxon and Cassie, sending them a silent plea for help. They seem to understand right away because Jaxon comes over to whisper something in Dad's other ear. Dad nods then squeezes me once more before getting up and disappearing into the downstairs bathroom. I glance around the room wondering if I've done something wrong.

"Sorry, Sis." Jaxon smirks. "Dad's really emotional when it comes to you. Whatever you said to him, he's just really touched about it. Trust me, you didn't upset him. You just kind of took the guilt off him, I suppose." He lets out a deep breath as he takes his seat again. "Anyway, I told him I would try to continue explaining things to you while he collects himself."

Waiting for my nod of understanding, he sits back and picks up where Dad left off. “So, as Dad was saying, when we master our element, our senses are enhanced, along with other things. We can sense other blessed elementals, which is how Dad knows your mom was only human. That’s why he never told you about us. Technically, humans aren’t allowed to know about elementals, meaning we couldn’t tell you when we thought you were only human. With me so far?”

“Sort of,” I falter. He nods his head, encouraging me to continue. With his approval, I dive in with a few questions. “What does blessed mean? And what if my mom was an Elemental that wasn’t blessed? Would he still be able to sense her? Am I not blessed? Is that why you all didn’t know I was an Elemental? What are—”

“Whoa, tiger! Slow down!” He chuckles as I blush and snap my mouth shut. “I know you have a lot of questions, and I promise we’ll answer all of them, but let’s take this slow, yeah? One thing at a time.”

I nod and stay silent, allowing him to continue. “Good. Now, to answer your questions, I need to give you a little history on elementals.

“When an Elemental turns five years old, the gods and goddesses bestow an affinity to control a specific element upon them. It’s always one of the four elements: Earth, Air, Fire, or Water. From five

until the Elemental turns thirteen, they're trained in how to control their element. We have special schools for elementals, but I'll explain that later."

"So, when the Elemental turns thirteen, they're tested. We have a council of fancy pants elementals—"

Leanne gasps, stopping Jaxon's explanation. "Jaxon, you cannot call our Council of Patriarchs fancy pants elementals!"

"That's what they are, mom," Jaxon chuckles, dodging a pillow she throws at him. "Okay, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. We call them the Council of Patriarchs, one elder council member for each element. It's our own government, but without all the crazy politics. Every Elemental goes before the council to be tested. If you prove you can control your element, then the gods bless you. It's an incredibly strange feeling. The council member who represents your element will hold hands with you and say something that's sort of like a prayer, and you feel a jolt. Kind of like if you stick a fork in an outlet, but not painful. You also get a slight sting wherever your mark ends up."

"Mark? You mean an actual, physical marking? Do you all have them?" I search their arms and other visible areas, but don't find any tattoos or other markings.

Caleb answers for Jaxon. "We all have them, Babe. It's kind of complicated, though. It's just

another thing we will have to go into more detail about later. I know it's a ton of information to take in and if we start giving you the finer details it'll probably overwhelm you more than you already are."

"We'll get to it, Sis. Let's get over the general details first, okay?" Jaxon waits for my slight nod, then picks up where he left off. "The whole process of getting your mark only lasts the length of the prayer, but afterward, you feel different. It's hard to describe. More in control of your element, I suppose. Anyway, you only get until you turn eighteen to pass the test. If you're not blessed by then, you lose your affinity for your element and become a normal human. Any memory you have of the Elemental world is erased. You still have your memories, but they're altered to a point where it's like you've lived as a normal human your whole life. It doesn't happen often, honestly.

"That also answers your second question. Your mom couldn't have been an Elemental because she was in her twenties when they met. We can't sense you because you aren't blessed yet. You're only seventeen, though. You still have time to test."

He pauses and glances around at everyone, seemingly waiting for someone else to add more. By this time, Dad has made his way back into the room.

“Unless I’m wrong and somehow missed that your mom was an Elemental,” Dad mutters, his gaze on the floor as he speaks. “I don’t see how, though. I would have known. It’s not easily missed.”

No one responds to my dad, giving me a chance to speak up again. Jaxon’s explanation hasn’t exactly calmed me down. “But I haven’t been training since I was five years old like you said most elementals do. I didn’t even know anything about this, until today. I didn’t have an affinity until this last December! If we can even call it an affinity. It could very well be a total fluke. What am I supposed to do if I have to take a test, though? Why am I different?”

“Baby, come here,” Caleb orders softly. His tone lets me know if I don’t listen he may drag me over to him.

I scoot closer to him, but I guess he decides it isn’t close enough because he picks me up like I weigh nothing and plops me sideways on his lap. My position allows him to keep his gaze on my face.

“We don’t have all of the answers for you. It shouldn’t even be possible for you to be an Elemental because your mom wasn’t an Elemental. We aren’t sure why you didn’t get your affinity until your seventeenth birthday. It could be because you didn’t grow up in our world. Maybe being



around other elementals triggers it. We just don't know. There's a lot of research we need to do and maybe even talk to the council. As far as your training and testing go... Well, you happen to have the best Fire Elemental there is to train you. I think we can squeeze years of training into a few months." He gives me a playful wink, which automatically sets me at ease.

In that moment I make a mental note to speak to Cassie as soon as possible about my growing feelings for Caleb. No matter what the situation or where we might be, his presence always brings flutters to my stomach and warmth to my chest.

"So"—I clear my throat, trying to change my train of thought—"for now, we work on teaching me how to set stuff on fire?"

I don't really mean it as a joke, but everyone laughs anyway.

"Yeah, that's what we do for now," Caleb says with a chuckle.

"Wait!" I yell, silencing the room and earning surprised looks. "Um... Well, Caleb said I have the best Fire Elemental to train me. Which one of you is the Fire Elemental?"

There's a long silence broken by Cassie's loud titters, followed by Jaxon's snort. Soon everyone has fallen into fits of giggles again, but I don't understand why. I turn to Caleb, and he gives

me a mocking glare.

“Me, baby girl,” he explains over everyone. “I’m the best Fire Elemental there is.”

~

“Try again. Concentrate on the paper. Don’t over think what you’re doing. You’ll feel it in your soul when you get it. It just completely consumes you. Your element is who you are. When you call it forward, when you manipulate it, it takes over completely. When you call fire, you need to call it from something. You can’t just make it out of nothing. It’s different than other elements. Air is all over, Earth is easy to come by, even Water is a lot more accessible than Fire.”

Caleb has been trying to teach me to control my element for hours, and we’ve gotten nowhere. I’m convinced this is all some colossal misunderstanding. Caleb can control fire. I’ve seen it as he shows me what I’m supposed to do. But, I don’t believe I’m truly an Elemental. I can’t even make a spark.

Maybe, I’m broken.

“With fire, you have to concentrate harder,” he explains further, snapping his fingers and creating a small flame in the palm of his hand. Upon closer inspection the flame isn’t actually touching his skin, rather it floats just above his

hand. “You’re finding something from almost nothing. When you put enough focus into it, you can find the fire in anything. All it takes is a small spark, a hot spot, a small bit of energy that can create fire. Feel the heat in the air or in the light bulbs around the area. Pull from the electricity around us.”

Listening to Caleb talk about controlling his element is hypnotizing. It’s not easy to concentrate on lighting things on fire when he’s being this passionate about something. I only want to focus on him and his words.

“Come on, baby girl.” His voice brings me from my Caleb haze. “Just once more, then we’ll take a break and eat some lunch.”

I sigh heavily, but do as he says and focus on the piece of paper lying on the concrete by the pool in the backyard. Everyone thought this would be a good place in case I accidentally catch more than the paper on fire. Cassie sits close to us in case things turn catastrophic. Apparently, her affinity is water. She’s acting as our emergency fire extinguisher. Jaxon, Leanne, and Dad sit under the awning talking about what they should tell the council about me.

My focus goes back to the task at hand, closing my eyes and picturing a bright orange flame engulfing the paper. I put all my energy into lighting it on fire. After I’m almost positive I’ve finally

accomplished my goal, I open my eyes to find the same stupid piece of paper sitting in the exact same spot.

I let out a frustrated groan and stomp my foot like a toddler. “This’ll never work!” I cry, rubbing my forehead.

A light breeze ruffles my hair as I’m in the middle of my little breakdown. A fleeting thought passes through my mind. If I had the ability to control air, I would make the wind blow the evil paper away.

My thoughts become consumed by the urge to send the stupid paper flying far away. The frustration and agitation overtake me. My attention snaps back to the present only to realize everyone went silent, conversations stopping mid-sentence as everyone’s eyes glue onto the paper now floating an inch off the ground.

“Mark, this isn’t the time for joking around,” Leanne scolds my father.

He shakes his head slowly for a few seconds before turning his eyes to me and muttering in awe, “It isn’t me.”

I jerk my attention from the paper to everyone around me as they all jump up and parade toward me. As soon as my focus leaves the paper, it floats back to the ground. No one says a word for what seems like hours, but it’s likely only a few moments.

Finally, Jaxon breaks the silence. “Holy hell. How’d you do that?”

“Err...” I blink at him with wide eyes. “I’m not so sure I did do it. If it was me, though, I just thought about how I hated the paper, then I felt some wind and thought if I could control the wind instead of fire, I would blow the paper away.”

He mulls this over for a few seconds then snaps his fingers and points to the paper. “Do it again, but this time think of it catching fire instead of blowing away.”

“I tried that before,” I argue. “It didn’t do anything.”

“Just try,” Jaxon begs. “This time put the passion behind it you had when you thought of how badly you wanted to control wind instead of fire.”

“Okay,” I huff, not wanting to disappoint them.

Turning back to the little rectangular devil paper, I glare at it and focus all my frustrations from the day on setting it ablaze. Before I know what’s happening, a slight shock goes through my body, then a small charred spot remains where the paper once sat. I turn my head to Caleb, and he beams proudly at me.

I peek over at my dad. “What does this mean?”

“I’m not sure, kiddo.” He sighs, rubbing a hand down his face in frustration. “I think, maybe

we should pay a visit to the council sooner rather than later. They may have answers we don't. I don't think it's something you need to worry about, though."

I try to relax, but the tension remains with everyone and makes me wonder if there's more they haven't told me. I decide to let it go for now and put it on my never-ending list of questions for later.

"Lunch time!" Leanne yells, successfully distracting us all. "Come inside. I'll make deli sandwiches."

## CHAPTER TWELVE



During lunch, the conversation focuses on when we should make a trip to visit the council.

“The council is in Sacramento right now,” Dad explains between bites. “That’s about seven hours from us. It would make sense to just drive there.”

Leanne nods her agreement. “Good plan. We can drive up Thursday and stay in a hotel.”

“Dad.” Jaxon grabs our attention. “Don’t forget to make the appointment with them. If you don’t do it soon, they could be booked solid.”

“Oh, right.” Dad pulls out his phone. “I’ll make it for Friday morning. That way, we have a night to settle into the hotel before we meet with them about Riley.”

Cassie scoots her chair back and stands, grabbing her plate and glass. She heads for the kitchen, talking over her shoulder as she goes. “Let’s just make a trip of it. We could stay through Sunday and have a bit of fun while we’re there.”

Leanne perks up at Cassie’s idea. “There are a few things in Sacramento that could make for a fun, long weekend.”

“I’ll make some reservations at The Citizen Hotel.” Dad chuckles at their enthusiasm. “I assumed you two would want to turn it into a mini vacation.”

He and Leanne spend a few minutes bent over his phone making reservations.

Leanne sits back and claps her hands together. “Three rooms booked for Thursday through Sunday. Thank you, online reservations!”

I don’t get a chance to voice my fears about sharing a room with someone because soon we’re back outside.

“Alright, kiddo.” Dad rubs his hands together with glee. “Let’s try making a tornado.”

My eyes pop wide open. “A real one? Isn’t that dangerous?”

Caleb chuckles, and Dad grins, shaking his head. “No, kiddo. We’ll just make a small tornado. Nothing that could take out a city... Or Leanne’s garden for that matter. She’ll kill me if I ruined her roses again.”



“Again?”

Dad cringes. “Long story. Let’s make a tornado, then I’ll tell you about the rose catastrophe of last year.”

“Okay.” I sigh with relief, rocking back on my heels. “That doesn’t sound bad. What do I do?”

Dad uses his pointer finger, aims it toward the ground, and makes a circular motion with it. “You have to feel the wind, force it to do what you want,” he explains, keeping his eyes on the ground where his finger points. “Wind is pretty rebellious. It’s unpredictable and wild. You need a lot of focus and determination to make it listen. Most natural disasters need wind to become destructive.”

“Like tornados?” I watch as a small cylindrical tunnel of dust and dirt forms out of the wind.

“Exactly.” Dad beams proudly. “Also, hurricanes, wildfires, tsunamis. All those need wind to turn into the disastrous things they are. Think of how a tornado works. Think of the speed the wind must be going, the direction it needs to go in. Think about everything that would be picked up in its path, everything it would destroy. Come stand by me, try to mimic what I’m doing.”

Stepping up to his side, I point my finger at the ground as he did, placing my whole focus on the makeup of a tornado. When I think of all the

components of a tornado and how the wind is the main ingredient, it's easier to manipulate the wind. It takes a few tries, but the more frustrated I get, the easier it is for me to build a small whirlpool. It's more of a gust of wind going in a circular motion than a tornado, but it's better than nothing.

Dad and Caleb watch my tiny tornado for a few minutes, but keeping it going tires me out, and I need to let it go. The tornado disappears the second my focus drops, and the dust and dirt it picked up while it formed falls to the ground.

"It was just a small whirlwind. I couldn't make it grow," I admit sheepishly, and slightly breathless.

"You did good, baby," Caleb assures me when I huff at the empty spot my tornado used to be. "Are you okay to try and stop a fire, or are you too tired?"

"I can try it." I shrug, not sure if I'll be able to accomplish much more. The entire day involved little physical exertion, but my body and mind feel like I completed a triathlon.

"That was fantastic for your first try at manipulating wind, kiddo," Dad assures me, patting my shoulder.

Caleb takes my hands and leads me to the edge of the pool. He builds a small fire on the concrete surround before turning his attention to me. "It's easier to start a fire on hot concrete in the

summer. It's harder to put out a fire that isn't being controlled by you."

"Is that what I'm doing, now?" I eye the small patch of fire he seems to be controlling without even watching it.

"Yeah," he nods, his attention partially on me and partially on his fire. "Pull your emotions forward. It's easier to control when you use your emotions. When you control a fire that's not yours, it's a lot like how your dad described controlling wind. You need to think of the things that make up the fire. All the small particles that form the fire. You need to pick those apart one-by-one until there's nothing left but smoke and soot."

He glides around me, pressing his front to my back and putting an arm around my waist. The contact distracts me, making it hard to focus on his words as he whispers in my ear, "You might think the flame is out. But all it takes is one tiny ember to light the world on fire."

The nerves and excitement his nearness brings are perfect for his advice about using my emotions. At first, the fire grows in size and I think Caleb is responsible.

"Breathe, baby girl," he whispers softly to me and the fire gains a few more inches in height. "If it helps, I can back away. Touching you only seems to make things burn more."

If he only knew how right he is. "It's okay, I

can do this.”

Taking a deep breath, I push my focus into the fire. The feeling of putting myself inside the elements is strange. It’s like my whole being was inside the tornado I made earlier. Now, my entire being is inside of Caleb’s fire, slowly picking it apart. It takes a long time and a lot of determination, but after about an hour and a half, I’m finally able to extinguish the fire fully.

As it turns out, when an Elemental uses their power for hours on end like I did today, they tend to become drained and exhausted. Caleb mentions this bit of information after he notices my fatigue.

“Let’s go order pizza for dinner. I think we’ve done enough for today,” he suggests.

I give him a grateful nod and follow everyone inside. During my time trying to extinguish the fire, the rest of the family came and went from the backyard but Caleb remained with me the entire time.

After Jaxon orders the pizza, we all sit in the living room and talk more about the trip.

“So, it’s Sunday,” Leanne muses, peaking at the calendar on her phone. “We called the construction crew for the charity house project earlier and told them we had a family emergency that needed our immediate attention, but we would make the day up next month with an extra weekend of volunteer work.”

“I thought about taking this week off, but Leanne made a good point when she and I talked earlier.” Dad peers around at all of us as he speaks. “We have no idea what will happen with the council. We’ve never dealt with anything like this, and I don’t believe the council has either. Taking that into consideration, Leanne suggested I save my time from work just in case I’m needed home in the coming weeks.”

“What do you do, exactly?” I ask suddenly. What kind of daughter am I to have never asked him before now what he does for a living?

He smiles softly at me like he knows where my thoughts are. “I’m the Senior Vice President of Sullivan-Montgomery Bank.”

My eyes widen into saucers with this new information. I’ve heard of Sullivan-Montgomery of course; it’s the biggest bank in the world. Literally. They have branches in every country of the world. The information shocks me for a moment, knowing how important my dad must be in the company being the senior VP. Then something clicks into place.

“Wait...” I search the faces of everyone in the room. They all look amused, except Caleb. He appears upset, and I’m not sure why. I brush it off for the time being, though. “Dad, your last name is Sullivan. And Cassie, you said yours is Montgomery...” I leave my unsaid assumption

hanging in the air.

“Yeah, kiddo.” My dad nods. “My grandfather and Cassie and Caleb’s great-grandfather started the company a long time ago. After they retired their sons took over. Now, the company belongs to Derrick and me. Eventually, it’ll be left to Caleb and Jaxon, though if you want to be a part of the company, now, I’d be happy to teach you the ropes and bring you into the family business.”

“I’m not sure that’s the kind of thing I would be good at,” I admit. “It sounds great, but I kind of always wanted to work with kids in some way. Maybe teaching, I’m not sure. So, you work with Caleb’s dad?”

“Yeah, it’s nice working with my best friend. He and Susannah flew over to England. They’ve been there a while dealing with business. That’s one of the reasons Cassie and Caleb are staying here with us.”

I knew from previous conversations with Cassie and Caleb that Derrick is their dad and Susannah is their mom, but one thing Dad said stands out to me. “One of the reasons?” I didn’t mean to say it out loud, but it slips out regardless.

“Long story for another time, Sis,” Jaxon mutters, trying to subtly glance at Caleb who still seems a bit upset. His eyes squint at the floor, and his brow furrows for some reason.

Caleb's mysterious mood distracts me from my curiosity as Jaxon gets up to answer the door when the bell rings. He comes back in after a few moments with three large pizzas.

Is this meant to be dinner for the next week? That's a ridiculous amount of pizza for one night!

I'm proven wrong at the end of our meal when there's only half of a pizza left. I don't believe I've ever seen Dad and Caleb eat that much. The boys always eat about three times what I do, but they seem extra hungry tonight.

At my wide-eyed gaze, Dad chuckles. "When we use our elements like we have today, it uses a lot of energy and boosts our metabolism."

Caleb nods, swallowing a large bite of pizza before speaking. He keeps his gaze focused on his plate. "We get a lot hungrier when we use up a lot of energy."

After I think it through, it makes sense. Normally, I only manage one piece of pizza, but tonight, I ate two and considered going back for a third.

All throughout dinner, Caleb wouldn't look my way. He seems to be in a bad mood, and I don't understand why. Have I done something to upset him? He's stayed almost silent since my dad talked about taking time off work. Though, I can't understand why he would be upset about that. I let out a long sigh and try to ignore the frustration that

comes off Caleb in waves.

“So, do you maybe have some extra blankets stashed away?” I ask Leanne quietly while everyone cleans up the dinner mess and heads off to complete their nightly routines.

“Sure, honey, are you getting cold at night?” she asks. The concern in her voice warms my heart.

“No, I just don’t think my room is going to be the best place to sleep right now, and I was hoping I could set up a bed on the couch or floor in the living room?” I ask, suddenly nervous she won’t like me sleeping on the couch or messing up the living room with blankets. “Maybe the game room would be better.”

Cassie giggles behind me, catching me off guard, and I spin to figure out what she’s laughing about. Rather than explain what’s funny, she shakes her head at me. “Riley, you can use my room. While you were working with Mark and Caleb, we had some people come and look at the damage in your room. They said they should be able to get it fixed by Wednesday at the latest. It’ll be just like it was before, unless you want any changes made.”

“Oh, that’s really nice of you, Cassie, but I can’t just take your room like that.” I’m grateful she’s offering up her bedroom to me, but there’s no way I would let her sleep on the couch.

“It’s really okay, Riley. I’m sleeping someplace else tonight, anyway,” she says the last



part quietly, and I'm almost not sure I heard her right.

Before I have a chance to ask questions, Leanne assures me it's all right and Cassie does have prior arrangements to sleep elsewhere for the night. I assume they mean she's going to a friend's and don't question it further.

Before going into Cassie's room, I thank her and head to the bathroom for a long shower. The hot spray soothes my sore muscles and I take longer than anticipated, simply standing under the water and relaxing.

Cassie's bedroom is bright, decorated in neon pinks and greens. It hurts my eyes if I stare at her bedspread for too long. I'm tired enough tonight I don't even bother turning on the light as I crawl into her comfortable king size bed.

My last thought before falling into a deep sleep is for the first time since I arrived here, Caleb didn't say goodnight to me.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



*I know I'm dreaming. A first for me.*

*Normally, when a nightmare happens I don't realize it isn't really happening until I wake up with my heart racing and my body shaking. This one's different though. It's like I'm watching my life on a film reel. I watch every moment of abuse happening in fast forward. I'm not sure why I'm supposed to be watching this, but somehow, I know the reason behind this dream is important. So, I stay quiet and watch.*

*After what seems like only moments—but must be hours—I'm standing in the kitchen of my old house. Samael hits me with the belt, and my mother yells at him from the living room. Suddenly, everything is on fire, just like when it*

*really happened to me. This time though, Samael lifts his arms in the air right when I feel the gust of wind that made the fire spread.*

*He stalks toward my mother, her eyes full of fear as she repeats, "Don't do this."*

*As he passes my body lying on the floor, he bends down and whispers in my ear. I know what he says to me. He tells me I killed her. I want to turn away. I don't want to watch what happens, but my dream self won't allow it.*

*Samael storms up to my mom and put his hands around her neck. He squeezes her throat until she stops struggling. He drops her to the floor when sirens wail in the distance. With frustration in his eyes, he glances back at my body for a moment.*

*Finally, he turns and runs out the back door, leaving my mother and me to die.*

*I cry and try to catch my breath. I saw her die. I saw him kill her. He lied to me. I didn't kill her, he did. How could he do that? Why didn't he kill me, too? I need to wake up. I don't want to be in this dream anymore.*

*I dash over to the sink in my old house and splash cold water on my face.*

I bolt upright in bed, gasping for air. Something's off about my room, and it takes me a minute to figure out what. Oh, right! This room

belongs to Cassie. I burned mine to a crisp. While the fog of the dream clears, I wipe the cold sweat from my face, only to find myself soaked. My hair, the sheets, my clothes, everything. It's like someone dumped a bottle of water on me while I slept. My eyes go straight to Cassie's nightstand where I left a full bottle of water last night. The bottle now lies empty on the floor.

I stand and turn the overhead light on to get a better look at what's going on. I have no idea what happened, but I don't want Cassie to be annoyed with me for ruining her bed. Grabbing the sheets and blankets, I head to the laundry room. Hopefully washing and drying the sheets will keep them from getting messed up. If they're dry-clean only, I'm screwed.

After putting in a load, I check the clock. It's two in the morning, giving me time to wash her bedding and dry it before anyone notices. I race up the stairs and grab some towels from the linen closet. I spread them out over the mattress to soak up any water left on it. Luckily, most of it ended up on the blankets and me.

While the towels absorb the water, I tiptoe to my ruined room and grab a change of clothes from the closet. I'm thankful the closet was untouched by the fire. All of the new clothing Dad and Leanne purchased for me are safe. The ones hanging up smell heavily of smoke, though. A few bags in the

back of the closet rest untouched because I never got around to hanging anything up, so I pull an outfit from them.

Once I have my clothes, I turn around and head to Cassie's room to check the mattress. As soon as I step into the hallway, I run into a wall. No, not a wall, a chest. I follow the completely exposed, well-built torso up to find Caleb gazing down at me with a mixture of amusement and concern. His dark gray pajama pants hang low on his hips.

My mind suddenly goes to war with itself. Part of me wants to check for drool as my eyes rake over him. The other part of me wants to run and hide from him. He shouldn't witness me looking like a drowned rat.

"Hi," I squeak out. "I was just...um... changing?"

"Why are you soaking wet?" he asks slowly, as if he isn't sure he believes his eyes.

"Well, it was sort of an accident, I think." Shuffling in place, I try to find a way to tell him without sounding crazy.

He crosses his arms over his chest and lifts an eyebrow as if to tell me I should continue with my insane explanation.

I begin with the weird dream, how it was like watching my life on film. I notice his eyes tighten when I tell him about the last part of the dream.

“So, after I splashed water on my face in my dream, I woke up soaked. I’m not sure how it happened, I think the water came from my water bottle. But I figured I should get it all clean before Cassie gets home. I don’t want her angry I messed up her room while she’s gone.”

“Gone? Where did Cassie go?” He straightens up at this new information.

“Well.” I pause because I don’t actually know. “I guess to a friend’s house? I’m not sure exactly, but...”

He storms off toward Jaxon’s room before I even finish. Uh oh, did I get her in trouble? Was she not supposed to stay out all night? Leanne mentioned she had prior arrangements, though. Isn’t that permission enough?

“Jaxon, get your ass up. Cassie’s gone!” Caleb yells while banging on Jaxon’s door.

“What the hell, Caleb!” Jaxon shuffles around in his room before the door swings open to reveal my tired and chagrined brother. “What the fuck gave you the idea she’s gone?”

“I’m right here, big brother.” Cassie pokes her head out from behind Jaxon as my eyes pop out of my head.

She slept in there?! Didn’t Dad and Leanne say that’s against the rules?

“Riley told me you left, and she didn’t know where you went!” Caleb hollers, making me flinch.

I've never heard him yell like this before.

"Jesus, Caleb! Calm down, I didn't go anywhere. I've been here all night!" Cassie fires back at her brother while putting her hands on her hips.

Caleb turns toward me with an angry glint in his eyes. He takes a step toward me. I panic because I don't like when people are angry, especially when I'm the target. With that look in his eyes and his body tensing, it's an automatic response for me to take a step back and put my arms up to protect myself.

I let out a pathetic whimper, cowering low as I beg for forgiveness. "I'm s-s-sorry, C-C-Caleb. I th-th-thought she was at a f-f-friend's house. She s-s-said she was s-s-sleeping someplace e-e-else. I didn't know, I d-d-didn't know, p-p-please!"

I don't realize my eyes are closed until strong arms wrap around me and I yelp in shock. I expected physical contact, but not like this.

"Shhh, baby, please stop crying," Caleb begs of me. I didn't realize I started crying until he asks me to stop. "I would never hurt you. Please, don't be afraid of me. I can't handle it when you have that look of fear in your eyes. Please, baby girl, stop crying. You're safe with me, I swear."

I remain tense for a moment before reality sets in. This is Caleb. He may get angry sometimes, but he's sworn to never hurt me. I can trust him.

My heart tells me he's safe. As I wrap my arms around his neck, I feel all of the tension from the past few days boil over. I melt into his embrace, not caring he may be upset with me still. I need him right now.

The tears don't stop, but I'm not afraid.

"Take care of her, Caleb," Jaxon whispers softly from behind me. "Come get me if you need me."

My body shakes from the adrenaline wearing off. Caleb lifts me up and carries me toward his room. I don't ask any questions. I simply let him carry me. I'm not sure I could speak even if I wanted to. There's no energy left in me.

He sets me down on his bed and goes to his closet, pulling out a plain black t-shirt. He grabs a pair of black and gray boxers from a drawer and hands them to me. I guess he wants me to put them on. I dropped my change of clothes in the hallway, and right now, my closet seems a million miles away. I glance over to find Caleb's back turned, giving me some privacy.

I quickly slip off my wet clothing and pull his t-shirt over my head. I stand to put the boxers on and notice the shirt falls to my knees, covering the boxers. It looks like I'm not wearing anything under the shirt, and the thought makes me blush.

I clear my throat and whisper, "I'm done."

The sound barely comes out, but in the



quietness of his room, Caleb hears me.

Without a word, Caleb comes over to the bed and pulls back the covers. He motions for me to climb in, and I quickly comply, crawling under the warm black and gray blankets. To my complete and utter shock, Caleb climbs under the covers with me. I gape at him, but he ignores it, scoots closer, and pulls me into his side. I curl up to him instinctively and can't help the contented sigh that escapes my lips.

“Sleep, baby.” He places a soft kiss on my forehead. “We’ll talk about all of this in the morning.”

“But what about Cassie’s bedding?” I ask through a yawn. Instead of letting him answer, I continue on voicing my thoughts. “I know you’re upset with me because of something I did last night. Is that why you got angry with me about Cassie? I don’t know what I did, but I’m sorry I upset you.”

He tenses beside me. He lets out a frustrated huff and pulls me impossibly closer to his body. “No, baby, I was never mad at you. I was worried for stupid reasons, and I’m mad at myself for it. As for Cassie, she’s my little sister. Jaxon takes care of her, and I never really have to worry with the two of us looking out for her. Kind of like Jaxon never has to worry about you since I’ll always protect you. But, we always know what’s going on. She and I always tell each other if we have plans that

will take us from the house. That way, we don't worry about each other. I panicked when you told me she wasn't here. I thought she left without telling anyone."

"I'm sorry I made you worry," I whisper, trying to hide another yawn.

His chest vibrates with a quiet chuckle.

"Sleep, baby, we'll talk in the morning. I'll protect you from bad dreams."

I think I say okay before drifting off, but I'm too tired to be sure.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*Someone giggles from far away. Everything is foggy and dark. I can't see who it is or why they're laughing. For some reason, I feel warm and safe, though. That never happens in my dreams. Wait? Is this a dream? The giggling sounds too real, and it's getting closer to me.*

*Suddenly, something around my waist tightens.*

I startle awake and blink to clear the sleep from my vision. It takes me a second to remember I'm snuggled up to an incredibly bare chest... Caleb's incredibly bare chest. The tightening around my waist was his arm.

Giggling echoes through the room, again, and I try to search for the source.

As I wiggle to sit up, Caleb's arm pulls me closer to him. I peek up to find his eyes closed and his breathing even. He must not realize what he's doing. Should I wake him?

Before I figure out a game plan, movement at the foot of the bed draws my attention. The thought of someone being in the room without knowing who it is, has me letting out a loud squeak as I jerk away from Caleb, scramble to sit up, and press my back against the headboard.

It only takes a second for four things to happen at once. First, Caleb jumps from the bed like it's on fire. Second, Jaxon puts Cassie behind him in a protective gesture as they both take a few surprised steps backward. Third, I let out the breath I sucked in when I realize who's in the room. Finally, Leanne sprints into the room with a rolling pin in her hand and flour all over her clothing and face.

Absolute silence for about ten seconds stretches through the room while everyone works out what happened. When our minds catch up, four worried sets of eyes train on me. The only thing I can manage is to cackle like a crazy person. Soon, Cassie and Leanne join me, followed by Jaxon and Caleb.

“You...should...have...seen...your...face!” Jaxon snorts while pointing at Caleb. “I was ready to grab Cassie and bolt!”

This sets us all off again and it takes a good five minutes for any of us to be able to breathe through the laughter.

As we all calm down a bit, the night before catches up to me. Leanne gives Caleb and me a curious stare. Without thinking, I blurt out the first thing that pops into my head. “Nothing happened!”

My outburst makes everyone stop and stare at me.

“Erm... I mean between Caleb and me. We went to sleep,” I finish with a whisper and gaze down at my hands. I broke a rule by staying with Caleb last night, and I’m sure there will be some sort of punishment for it. It’s the first rule I’ve broken in this house.

“Uh, oh,” Jaxon and Cassie murmur at the same time. I assume it’s because I admitted to sleeping in here, but then Leanne lets out a big sigh and surprises me with her words. “Riley, you aren’t in trouble. We have a few more things to talk about today. I assume something happened last night that had you ending up in here. Let’s go get some lunch started, and we’ll chat while we eat.”

“Lunch?” I ask, a little confused. Shouldn’t we eat breakfast first?

“Yeah, you two slept in.” Cassie smirks at us. “It’s 11:30 already.”

I gape at Caleb in shock. I don’t think I’ve ever slept so late in my life. Around nine hours with

no nightmares! A first for me, but now that I think about it, my body feels refreshed and well rested. Leanne, Cassie, and Jaxon head down to the kitchen to start on chicken Caesar salad. I focus on Caleb, who comes back to sit by me on his bed.

“You all right, baby?” he asks softly while tucking my hair behind my ear. “You scared the hell outta me when you yelled like that. I almost set Jaxon on fire.”

He looks down at me with humor shining in his eyes.

“Maybe Cassie would have been able to put the fire out?” I try to joke back. It must work because his eyes light up, and he chuckles.

“Let’s get dressed, baby girl.” He pats my thigh before standing. “We have a lot of crap to talk about today.”

I groan as I pull myself out of the bed. “I’m really not sure my poor mind can handle more information, but I’ll do my best,” I grumble as I head for the door to get changed.

“Riley?” Caleb calls, making me turn back to him.

I’m a bit taken aback by his use of my real name. He almost never uses my name anymore. He always calls me baby or baby girl. I never really thought twice about it, though, since that first day he started using nicknames. He makes it seem perfectly natural. I raise my eyebrows and wait for

him to continue.

“I really am sorry about how I acted last night.” He speaks so softly, I barely hear him. “I was an ass, but I was just really shocked at your reaction to my family’s money situation. I’ve always been chased for my money, and I didn’t want you to be that way. It’s stupid to think that because I know you, and you aren’t like other girls, but I guess it was just a knee-jerk reaction to be on guard like that.”

“I...don’t understand.” I stare at him, genuinely confused. “Why would it matter to me what your father does and what he makes?”

“I... Because... I mean... Shit,” he stutters and rubs the back of his neck while trying to collect his thoughts. “Because Jaxon and I will be taking over when our dads retire.”

Part of me wants to be upset he would think I’d try to go after him for his money. But a bigger part of me knows why he would be concerned. He’s cautious about it. It’s only normal for someone in his situation to worry about being used.

Caleb must take my silence as confusion because he lets out a frustrated huff and plops down. “Baby, that means I inherit a lot of money along with a huge, worldwide company. Most people, most girls, are attracted to that kind of thing.”

“Caleb, that kind of thing has never and will

never mean anything to me. I grew up with nothing, I'm used to it. I can live on top ramen and second-hand clothing. What I don't think I could ever go back to is feeling unwanted and unloved. You all give me that. Now that I have a taste of what it feels like, I'm not sure how I would ever be able to go back to the way I grew up. But money... It means nothing to me. Sure, it would buy a fancy house and nice things, but it can't make you feel safe and protected by the people you live with, and it can't make people love and care about you. I don't need it."

He gawks at me, completely stunned.

Before I process what's happening, he's up and pulling me into his arms. I tense for a second, wondering what his intentions are. When I realize he's only giving me a hug, I melt into his arms and sigh with contentment.

"You really are perfect, baby." He kisses the top of my head.

Before I protest his praise, he shoos me out of his room, giving me no other choice but to go find clothes.

"We have a lot of talking to do over lunch, baby. Go get dressed, I'll see you downstairs."

Heading to my room, I wonder what more there could be to tell me.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I go straight to the bathroom to grab a fast shower to complete my morning—well afternoon—routine. Once I get my hair blown dry and brush my teeth, I head to my disastrous bedroom.

Stepping around the construction materials, I make my way to the closet, hoping to find something in the bags that don't smell like smoke.

Instead of having to dig around, I'm able to dress in the outfit Cassie—not so subtly—laid out in the closet for me, complete with a sticky note on top reading: *WEAR ME*. She picked out a gray tank top with a black vest to go over it and a pair of blue jeans with a brown belt. A long necklace with a key on the end lays next to the outfit. Somehow, jewelry keeps showing up in my closet, and Cassie

always grins mischievously when I ask where it comes from. No one will give me an answer to its origins, though.

I go straight to the kitchen after dressing and find everyone waiting on me to eat. Based on Caleb's wet hair, he took a quick shower as well. He looks especially handsome in his gray V-neck shirt and blue jeans. I can't help myself from admiring him, but Jaxon clearing his throat brings me out of my Caleb haze.

I blush while silently shuffling to my seat at the table. No one says anything as we all dish up our salad and eat. It seems as though everyone's waiting for someone else to begin. It's odd not having my dad here for an important discussion, but I know he needed to work. Leanne will fill him in later.

"Riley, can you tell us what happened last night?" Leanne finally asks after the silence becomes too much.

"Well, I was having a bad dream, like usual, only with this dream, I knew I was dreaming. I was watching my life, all of the bad parts, play like a film reel. Then, it slowed down, and I saw Samael m-m-murder my mom. I didn't want to watch it, but I couldn't turn away. I tried to wake myself up, but nothing was working. Finally, I ran to the sink in my... dream kitchen, I guess it was. Anyway, I splashed a bunch of water on my face, trying to

wake myself. The next thing I know, I'm sitting up in Cassie's bed, soaked and the bottle of water I brought to bed with me was lying empty on the floor," I finish and turn to Cassie. "I'm sorry for ruining your bed, Cassie. I was washing the bedding, but then..." I trail off, not really knowing how to continue.

"No! It's totally fine, Riley." Cassie waves me off kindly at me. "You didn't ruin it, and the bedding made its way to the dryer and back on my bed just fine. No worries."

"Riley, when we finish eating, I think we need to test you more," Jaxon chimes in, changing the subject back to me. "It seems you have an affinity for water as well. Unless Cassie was playing a mean joke on you."

A thump echoes under the table, and Jaxon pulls away from Cassie with a yelp. "Ouch! Did you just stomp on my foot?"

"I would never play a mean joke on her, Jaxon." She glares back at him.

He rolls his eyes. "Yes, you would, just not as mean as the shit you pull on Caleb and me."

"Bite me," Cassie snaps, crossing her arms and glaring at Jaxon.

Jaxon smirks. "Anytime, sweetheart." He ignores Cassie's tiny gasp and turns back to me. "Anyway, I want to know how far your abilities go before we meet with the council. We may as well

try you with Earth as well. Maybe you're—" He stops mid-sentence; his gaze darts around the table.

Everyone's eyes widen with shock and awe.

"What? Maybe I'm what!" I shout, panicked.

"It's nothing, baby." Caleb recovers first and puts a reassuring hand on my back. "We're getting way ahead of ourselves. Let's see what you can do first, then deal with the what and why."

I don't protest because I'm not sure I want to know what Jaxon planned to say. Instead, I switch the subject. "Leanne, I'm really sorry for breaking the rules last night. It won't happen again, I swear."

"Honey, there's something we should tell you." Leanne studies me, her face full of worry and regret, making my nerves skyrocket. "Before we do, we want you to understand our need to wait."

My heart skips a beat, but I remain silent for her to continue. "First, we weren't sure why it was happening. I mean you didn't show any signs of being an Elemental and you were really closed off. We just weren't sure what was going on. We planned on waiting until you were more comfortable around us before we decided anything. We thought maybe once you trusted us, trusted Caleb, we could call the council and speak with them. Then yesterday, with the fire and everything, we didn't want to overwhelm you with more news

—”

“Leanne,” I mumble softly, interrupting her. My body goes rigid, and I do my best to stop myself from shaking. “You’re scaring me. What didn’t you want to tell me? What does trusting Caleb have to do with it?”

“Baby, please understand,” Caleb begs. “You just told me you trust me. Part of me wanted to tell you right when you admitted that to me, but I didn’t want to upset you.”

Shaking my head in confusion, my eyes dart around the room, hoping someone will take pity and tell me what’s happening.

Leanne finally tries to explain the situation better. “Riley, in our world, there’s one person out there for each of us. We all have a second half; they’re always an Elemental as well. It’s believed the gods did this to prevent confusion amongst humans and Elementals. Can you imagine finding out the love of your life could control an element? Not exactly the easiest thing to tell someone. Though, I have to say you’re taking this whole thing quite well.” Leanne pauses for a moment and glances over to Jaxon.

“Sis, the reason Mom and Dad said Cassie wasn’t allowed in my room is because we didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. She actually lives with me in my apartment when I’m at school. She’s

my other half, and I'm hers. Neither of us will ever love another person like we love each other. We usually call them Soulmates. When a person has gone before the council and been blessed, they're able to sense when their Soulmate is near. It's such a hard feeling to explain. You can suddenly breathe. When you touch them..." He pauses and sends Cassie a look filled with such unconditional love, I have no trouble believing they belong together.

"I just knew in my soul the second I touched her, her heart belonged to me and mine belonged to her. Some elementals never find their other half. My mom never thought she would, and that's why she and my birth father were together. He died before I was born, and my mom found Mark a few years later. They're Soulmates, too."

He smiles fondly at his mother as he talks about her. "It's actually really rare for us to find our Soulmates after we reach around thirty years old. That's why most of us give up the search in our mid-twenties. But, anyway, Mom and Dad know Cassie and I will be together forever. So, they have no problem letting us share a room. They know it isn't just a teenage crush or lust or whatever. Just like Cassie's parents are fine with her living with me. Though she's eighteen, so she can be with me legally, now, anyway. It wasn't an issue with our parents when we first started dating, though."

"That's..." I can't really find the words to

express how I feel about all of this, but at the same time, I'm not sure it matters. "Why are you telling me all of this? I mean, I don't mind hearing the ins and outs of this world, but what does it have to do with—" I freeze mid-sentence as what Jaxon and Leanne explained to me sinks in.

"Oh, no," I whisper, almost to myself.

"You... you've... and I... Why didn't you tell me, Caleb?"

Tears form as realization dawns, and I hate it. I don't want him to see me cry. Logically, I know I shouldn't really be mad at him. He's been nothing but considerate and kind to me. But to not tell me this, to let me be completely in the dark, and find out this way. Why would he do such a thing? This isn't the Caleb I know. I thought he cared about me.

Some girl is out there, probably wondering where in the world Caleb has been the past few weeks. All this time he's been hanging around with me, hugging me, being sweet to me, sleeping in the same bed as me! My stomach twists at the idea of what this girl might do when she finds out.

"Baby." He blinks at me with wide, fear-filled eyes. What's he afraid of? Does he want me to keep his kindness a secret from his girl? "Please, hear me out."

"Don't call me that anymore." I cry softly as I push my chair back and rush to Cassie's room.

I quietly close the door and curl up on her bed, letting the tears flow.

This information is too much for my mind to handle. Having to deal with all of these sudden new powers gives me enough stress. Now, this news makes my stress level fly off the charts. My feelings for Caleb complicated things before because I had no idea what to do about it. I'm a terrible person for even having those feelings at all.

I'm not sure how long I lie there.

Caleb and Jaxon yell and argue outside the door. They try to remain quiet, but it's not an easy thing for two guys with deep voices to do. A few seconds after they go quiet there's a soft knock on the door. I don't bother telling whoever it is to go away. I know if they want to come in they will. I'm proven right when I hear the soft click of the door opening. The bed dips a bit as someone sits down, and I turn to see who it is, hoping it's not Caleb.

"Hey, Sis," Jaxon mutters softly. "Look, I know this is hard for you to understand. Maybe we should've told you sooner, but we wanted to protect you. You're going through too much shit already, so we didn't think this would be fair to dump on you."

"Why would he let this happen?" I whisper with a pathetic snuffle.

Jaxon jerks his head up in surprise. "Riley, he didn't *let* anything happen. It isn't really something



any of us control. It just...is.”

“But he didn’t have to be nice to me!” I cry, getting upset all over again. “He didn’t have to call me ‘baby’ or hold me when I was upset. He didn’t have to take care of me when I was sick or spend time with me. He shouldn’t have let me wear his clothes or sleep in his bed last night, either! Those things all seem terrible now.”

The tears flow again as I finish my rant. It takes me a second to notice the complete and utter shock and confusion on Jaxon’s face.

“Riley,” he starts, then shakes his head, as if collecting his thoughts before he tries again. “I’m not sure I understand. Did you not like those things? Was he rushing you into anything?”

I practically see Jaxon shaking in fury. I’m not sure why he’s angry. He isn’t the one whose heart got squashed like a bug.

“No, of course not!” I let out a frustrated sigh and roll over to face him. “I like that stuff too much, Jaxon. I’ve been meaning to talk to Cassie about this feeling I get every time I’m around Caleb. Especially when he touches me. My stomach flutters like a million butterflies are trying to escape, my heart picks up speed, and I get really excited and happy. Yet at the same time, I feel more calm and safe than I ever have in my whole life.”

Jaxon rubs his hands through his hair and stands. He paces around the room. “Listen, Sis...”

He pauses at the end of the bed and turns to face me. “I’m not sure I understand why you’re upset. If you feel all of those things from just being around Caleb before you’ve even been blessed, then what’s the problem?”

“Jaxon!” I nearly scream at him. “What would his Soulmate think of his behavior? He hasn’t even been around her in weeks, at least not that I’ve noticed. He doesn’t mention her. He’s shared a bed with me, Jaxon. That’s not something you do with some random girl, even if it’s just to comfort her. What would she think of me? She probably already hates me. This is horrible—”

“Whoa! Wait!” Jaxon hollers, shutting me up. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Caleb and his Soulmate or other half or whatever.” I gape at him like he has a few screws loose. Did he completely miss the entire conversation?

“Riley, holy fuck!” He roars with laughter. Has he really lost his marbles?

“Wait here! Do. Not. Move,” he orders once he regains his breath again.

I sit there and don’t move, like Jaxon told me. It isn’t really because he told me not to move. It’s more because I’m completely confused as to what just happened. Before I fully recover my senses, Caleb comes to the room alone.

I blink at him, waiting to be told what the

heck is going on.

“Baby girl.” Caleb comes over and sits next to me.

He has an expression of relief, but it also betrays he’s trying to hide a grin as he rubs his chin. My heart would shatter if he laughed at me, too.

“Baby,” he mutters again, bringing my full attention to his stunning blue eyes. “There’s no one else for me. The second I caught you when you tripped on the stairs your first day here, I knew you were it for me. *You* are my Soulmate, Riley.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“I’m... Are... Is it... But...” An actual sentence floats around in my head, but I can’t seem to convince my mouth to form words that go together.

Caleb finds my lack of ability to articulate a full sentence funny. As I’m mumbling random words, he snickers. I try to give him my meanest glare for finding amusement in my shocked rambles, but I’m too relieved and too happy to hold back a big grin.

“It isn’t funny, Caleb!” I growl as sternly as possible.

“Really?” He cocks an eyebrow. “Then, why are you laughing? Is someone tickling your foot from under the bed?” He leans down to check

under the bed, making me snort out loud at his antics.

“Of course not!” I roll my eyes at him between giggles. “I’m not ticklish.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, my mistake becomes evident. I’ve never seen such a mischievous glint in Caleb’s eyes before.

“Caleb,” I drag out in warning, jumping to my feet on the opposite side of the bed. “Don’t even think about it.” I back slowly toward the open door. “We were having a conversation.”

“Sorry, baby.” He smirks. “I already thought about it.”

He barely gets the words out before I rush out of the room, toward the stairs.

“Caleb, no!” I scream as his laughter follows me.

“Better run, baby!” he taunts when I make it to the stairs.

I jump on the banister and slide down like I’ve seen in movies and read in books. A few gasps and curses sound from behind me, but I’m too busy running to care. I haven’t been this carefree before, and it’s thrilling.

“Baby!” Caleb sounds like he’s catching up to me.

“You can’t catch me!” I bolt through the living room, barely noticing Cassie and Leanne in the kitchen. I wave to them as I race to the back

door.

Swinging it open, I skid to a stop at the edge of the pool. I turn around to find Caleb coming through the back door. He slows to a walk, but his eyes hold the mischief, showing he hasn't given up. Behind him, everyone else makes their way to the back door to watch the show.

“Don't do it, Caleb,” I warn.

“What are you going to do to stop me?” he teases with a smirk. He knows he has me caught.

At first, I believe he has cornered me and I've lost our little battle. Then, I remember last night. What better way to test if I have a new affinity? I allow a mischievous grin to form and concentrate on pulling water from the pool—straight into Caleb's face. It works surprisingly well when I put all of the emotions of the morning into it. Although it's only a small amount of water compared to what I wanted. I can't help the hysterical giggles at the look on Caleb's soaking wet face.

After being stunned for a minute, he sprints full speed toward me. There's barely time to let out a startled yelp before he grabs me in his arms, and we're under water.

One thing I failed to mention to him, I can't swim. There was never a chance for me to learn. With all my strength, I cling to him. My legs wrap around his waist and my arms around his neck. I

wait for the panic at the thought of drowning, but it never comes. Caleb has me. He won't let anything happen. No sooner has the thought passed, then we break the surface. I gasp for air for a few moments, resting my forehead on Caleb's shoulder.

"Baby girl?" He sounds confused and worried. Probably wondering why I'm clinging to him like a koala bear.

"I can't swim." I pull back and give him a goofy grin before resting my forehead back on his shoulder.

"Fuckin' hell, babe." He breathes out shakily, wrapping his arms tighter around my back and pulling me impossibly close to his body. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Hey." I grab his face in my hands, momentarily distracted by his light stubble. He skipped shaving this morning. "You had me the whole time. I didn't get hurt; I didn't drown. Caleb, I don't think I've ever felt as free and happy as I did playing with you just now. Thank you for that. It may be silly to other people, but running around like that means something to me. I never had that kind of fun growing up, and now, I have. So, thank you for playing chase with me."

"I'll play chase with you any day, baby girl." Caleb grins at me. "But that wasn't chase."

"Wha—" He doesn't give me time to finish before attacking my sides with his fingers. I never

knew I was ticklish until now. He has me in hysterics. Tears stream down my face before he finally lets up and pulls me in for a hug.

“I found your weakness,” he whispers in my ear as he heads for the stairs of the pool. He pauses at the base of the stairs and gazes into my eyes. “I’m sorry for making you think there was someone else out there for me, baby. It’s a lot to take in; I get that. But you’re it for me.”

“It is a lot to take in,” I agree. “I’m not going to lie and say the idea of another girl being your Soulmate didn’t hurt. I have feelings for you, I just don’t know exactly what those feelings are. It isn’t an instant knowledge you and I belong together like Jaxon explained. It’s not just a silly crush either, I don’t think.”

“Fair enough,” he mumbles with a crooked grin. “As long as they are good feelings.”

“Definitely good feelings.” I nod, smirking.

“Why, Ms. Storm,” he mocks. “You’re going to make me blush.”

I scoff and hold him tighter with my arms and legs, letting him carry me up the stairs and to the back door. Once inside, an amused Leanne gives us towels and we head upstairs to change.

Cassie follows, complaining the whole way. “That outfit was perfect. You just ruined it with your shenanigans. Now, I have to start all over.”

By the twinkle in her eye, she doesn’t really



mind.

~

“Did we get everything resolved with you two?” Leanne asks once we’re all dried off and settled in the living room.

“Yeah.” I blush and duck my head. “I’m sorry about assuming the worst, I just thought—”

“Hey,” Caleb’s soft voice comes from my side. “It’s okay, baby. Everything is fine, now, right?”

I give him a reassuring nod. “Perfect right now.”

And it is. Caleb and I didn’t work everything out between us yet. We still need to talk more about the Soulmate thing. But for now, I’m thrilled with the news I’m supposedly meant to be with Caleb. It makes my feelings for him seem more real. I’m not as afraid to confront them.

“Well, then I guess we should probably put aside our Soulmate talk for a little while and focus on the other issues we have.” Leanne sits down, worry written all over her face. “Riley, we all know about what happened last night, and we saw what you did with the pool water.”

“Fantastic move, by the way,” Cassie interrupts, holding her hand up for me to give her a high five. I can’t help but snicker as I slap my hand

to hers. “Imagine the water fights we could have with the guys!”

“We aren’t going to beat around the bush anymore, Sis,” Jaxon cuts Cassie off and puts the conversation back on topic. “We want to see if you can control all four elements. We know you have an affinity for Fire, Air, and Water. Let’s go outside and see what you can do with Earth.”

As we head to the backyard, I wonder what controlling more than one element means. They said elementals only control one element, normally. It worries me no one mentioned why I have the ability to control more than one.

Changing my focus to Jaxon, I push my questions and worries aside for another time. If I start focusing on all the what-if’s and why’s, I’ll drive myself mad. Jaxon leads us to the small garden on the side of the yard.

“Grow something,” he orders like it’s the easiest thing in the world.

I blink at him a few times, but he doesn’t elaborate. “Uh, like what?”

“Whatever pops in your head,” he suggests with a shrug. “Having an affinity for Earth is pretty cool. You can cause earthquakes, grow anything you want as long as you can locate the right materials in the ground, communicate with animals and insects—which is actually super weird at first—even form or find gems and stones.”

“Plus, all the clay pots you can make!”

Leanne bounces on the balls of her feet. I wonder if the clay serving pots she uses for meals were purchased or handmade by them.

“So, basically, do whatever you want,” Jaxon states again.

I contemplate for a moment about what I want to grow, then an idea pops into my head. I turn toward an empty patch of dirt and concentrate on what I want to grow. My mind goes to thoughts of an apple tree. It would be outstanding to have fresh apples in the backyard. On the way to the library back in Washington, I would pass an apple tree I used to climb and pick apples from. At times, it was the only food I ate.

It made me forever grateful to the tree.

As I’m trying to find the materials I need to grow an apple tree, I think of how charming it would be to build a tree house into it. Spending all day reading in a tree house, eating fresh apples sounds relaxing.

There isn’t an apple seed around for me to use, but I sense other types of seeds in the ground. Using my fear from earlier, I push it to the forefront of my mind while I focus on growing my tree and tree house.

“Holy—” Cassie gasps.

“—shit,” Jaxon finishes.

My eyes pop open, and I expect to find a

giant apple tree with an elaborate tree house built into it. Instead, there's a pathetic little root sticking out of the ground, twisted up into itself.

“Was that what you were hoping would happen?” Leanne asks while staring at the root.

“Um...” I cringe. “Well, not really. I always wanted an apple tree because I'd love access to fresh apples. When I tried to find what I needed to grow the apple tree, I found some random seeds instead. That sounds silly when I say it out loud, but I know they were there. But, the twisting of the roots... Well, that's sort of an accident.”

“An accident?” Jaxon chokes incredulously.

“Well, while I was concentrating on growing the seeds, the idea of a tree house popped into my head. I always wanted one. I was thinking we could build one in an apple tree if we had one. That way, when we go up there, we have apples to snack on.” My eyes drop to my shoes and I twist my hands nervously. “In my mind, I pictured the tree branches twisting and turning to form the tree house. It looked a lot better in my head, to be honest. Did I mess up?”

“No!” they all yell at the same time, making me jump.

“Baby, that's amazing.” Caleb wraps his arms around me from behind, and I relax into him.

“So, this means you have an affinity for all four elements. Imagine the sand castles you can

build!” Cassie declares with bright eyes.

“Sweetheart, focus,” Jaxon scolds her with a grin.

“Well, it would be really cool,” she huffs.

“Guys, we all know this is serious. No one ever thought the legends were true.” Leanne shakes her head, concern wrinkling her brow. “We’ll keep this between us until we meet with the council. We all know what this could mean.”

“Um, I don’t...” I admit quietly, raising my hand in the air.

“Oh, boy.” Jaxon sighs, running his hands through his hair. “Let’s go make a snack, and tell Riley about the legends. Now that they may be true and centered around her, we should tell her.”

“Cassie, can you get out sandwich fixings for everyone?” Leanne asks while heading toward the back door. “I think Mark should be a part of this conversation. I need to see what time he’ll be home.”

“Sure.” Cassie skips to the kitchen.

“Caleb?” I hold him back as everyone else heads inside. “I’m scared. Is this legend thing bad?”

“Baby girl, you have nothing to be afraid of.” He hugs me tight to his body and buries his face in my hair. “I promise, I’ll always protect you. No matter what, you have me. You also have your brother, your dad, Leanne, and Cassie. We’re all here for you.”

With a deep breath, I nod my understanding. “I just don’t know how much more information I can handle.” I sigh, rubbing my temples. “I mean, it hasn’t even been a week since I started the fire in my room, and it seems like there’s something new happening every day.”

“I know, baby, I know,” Caleb murmurs into my hair. “I really am sorry about all of this stress. You’re taking it incredibly well. I’m extremely proud of you. If it’s ever too much, tell me, and I’ll make sure you get some time away to process things. Does that sound good?”

“That sounds perfect.” I sigh, smiling up at him.

I open my mouth to say something, but his lips distract me. They’re full, perfect, and impossibly soft. I wonder what it would be like to kiss him. Glancing at his eyes, I notice they’ve darkened a bit. How odd.

“Come on, baby.” He puts his arm around me and pulls me toward the house. “Let’s get in there before I steal you for the rest of the day.”

I send him a confused glance he either ignores or doesn’t want to respond to.

Why would he want to steal me away for the rest of the day?

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“So, I spoke to Mark,” Leanne announces as we sit down with our sandwiches. “I explained everything to him, and he told me he has one more meeting he can’t get out of, but he would like to be here for the conversation if Riley wouldn’t mind waiting a few hours. He should be home around dinner time.”

“I can wait,” I assure her. “I’d like for him to be a part of this.”

“Perfect! I know he’ll be pleased you agreed to wait for him. What would you guys like to do until then?” She searches around the table for ideas.

I open my mouth to suggest a movie or card game, but the only thing that comes out is a big yawn. I cover my mouth and blush as everyone

chuckles. “Sorry.”

“I think I’ll take Riley upstairs for a nap.” Caleb chuckles. “Mark will want to see her control of Water and Earth. Before using all that energy, she could use some rest.”

“But, I slept really late,” I feebly protest as he takes my hand and leads me upstairs.

“Babe, you may have slept late, but you used a lot of energy already today. First with the pool water, then with the apple tree... uh, tree house... apple tree house... root?” He pauses and mulls over what my pitiful plant should be called, then shakes his head. “Whatever it’s called, you used a lot of energy on it. Your Dad will want you to show him what you can do, so you need some rest. Please, come take a nap with me?”

“Okay,” I relent easily. It’s nearly impossible to tell him no. “Are you tired, too?”

“No, baby,” He grins. “I’ll lie there with you and read, though.”

“If you have other things to do, you don’t have to stay.” I try to hide the sadness at the thought of him not being by my side, but he must hear the disappointment in my tone.

“Nice try.” He smirks. “No way you’re getting rid of me that easy.”

“I would never want to get rid of you,” I reassure him as we enter his room.

“Good.” He sighs happily, pulling me in for a



hug.

If it was possible to stay right here in his arms forever, I would.

All too soon, he lets me go and saunters over to his closet. He pulls out one of his shirts and grabs a pair of boxers from the drawer, handing them to me without a word.

“Caleb, I can grab some comfy clothes from my closet,” I remind him, taking his clothes even as I offer to get my own. “It isn’t the middle of the night this time.”

His brow scrunches together and hurt flashes in his eyes so quickly, I almost wonder if I imagined it. “Do you not want to wear my clothes?”

“Of course, I do. They’re way more comfortable than mine, and they smell like you.” I slap my hand over my mouth at the last part. I hadn’t meant to say the words out loud.

“Smell like me?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah, um... Well, you smell kind of like a campfire. Sort of musky and smoky and comforting.” I blush and turn my gaze down to my feet. “It kind of makes sense now because you have an affinity for fire.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, baby.” He puts his finger under my chin and lifts my head, giving me no choice but to meet his perfect blue eyes. “I love that you think I smell comforting; it tells me I’m showering enough.” He wiggles his eyebrows up

and down as he says the last part.

Hysterical giggles bubble up at his antics. I love it when his playful side comes out like this.

Turning from me, Caleb heads to the door. “I’ll be right back, babe. I’m just going to grab a book from the library while you change.”

As soon as the door closes, I take my clothes off, throw his boxers on, and pull his shirt over my head, doing it in a rush so he doesn’t catch me naked. I take a moment to bring the collar up to my nose and inhale deeply. It really does smell like him, perfect.

I’m startled out of my Caleb haze by the click of the bedroom door opening. I turn around to find him standing in the doorway. His eyes darken like they did outside earlier. I want to ask him why it keeps happening, but before I have the chance, he darts to the left side of the bed and sits down. He avoids eye contact with me.

Did I do something wrong?

“Caleb?” I ask hesitantly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, baby,” His voice sounds deeper than normal. How strange, maybe he’s getting sick?

“Come lie down and rest.”

I study him for a few seconds longer, but he continues to concentrate on his book. I sigh and climb onto the bed next to him. It should feel a bit strange to be sharing a bed with him like this, but it feels right somehow. I didn’t realize how tired I was

until I settle in and close my eyes. I drift away instantly.

“Sleep well, babe.” He presses a light kiss on my forehead and I can’t help but melt a little.

~

“Shhh,” Caleb’s hushed voice breaks through my sleep fog. “She’s really tired after all the craziness of the last few days. I want to let her rest.”

“Is she wearing your clothes?” my dad asks in a whisper.

Does he sound grumpy?

“Calm down, Mark.” I practically hear Caleb rolling his eyes. “I wanted her comfortable. Jeans aren’t comfortable.”

“Uh, huh, and she couldn’t wear her own pajamas, because?” My dad is getting a bit protective of me, and it warms my heart.

“Because she looks cuter in my clothes,” Caleb replies cheekily.

“You are impossible, Montgomery.” I hear a bit of humor in my Dad’s voice. He must trust Caleb with me if he can find humor.

I stretch my arms above my head and yawn. I don’t want them to think I’m listening in on their conversation. I blink my eyes open to see Caleb’s handsome face.

“Hello,” I whisper up at him.

“How did you sleep?” he asks like it’s a genuinely important question.

I’m about to say fine, but a sudden thought stops me. I sit up quickly, my eyes darting around the room as if I’ll find my answers there.

“You okay, kiddo?” Worry etches Dad’s and Caleb’s faces.

“I didn’t dream,” I whisper.

“Huh?” Caleb scrunches up his forehead. His handsome face is adorable all scrunched in confusion.

“No nightmares,” I mutter, slightly distracted by Caleb’s cute face. “Actually, I didn’t dream last night either. I wonder why. That hasn’t happened since I was small.”

Dad lets out a relieved breath before answering. “The only thing I can think of is Caleb, since he’s your Soulmate. It would make sense that being around him keeps you calm and makes you feel safe, even while you sleep.”

I can’t figure out if he’s kidding or not, but I suppose it doesn’t matter. The fact that sleeping in the bed with Caleb takes my dreams away, makes me sad my room should be done soon. Leanne told me earlier today the people she hired to fix it up were a bit off schedule, but they assured her they would be done by noon tomorrow. I guess I have one more night with Caleb before I go back to my

room. The thought puts me in a sour mood.

“Alright, let’s get downstairs and see what you can do, kiddo,” Dad exclaims after a moment of silence. “We’ll tell you about the legends as well. Leanne mentioned to me they told you something about them. I assume you know that’ll be the topic of conversation tonight?”

“Yep!” I say popping the “p”.

“Perfect, well get dressed... Use Cassie’s room, not Caleb’s,” he orders raising an eyebrow at Caleb who snickers. “Your room has a lot of construction going on, making it hard to get into right now, but Leanne told me Cassie got you clothes from your closet and stuck them in hers. She mentioned some had to go to the cleaners because of the smoke smell, though, so not everything is here right now. I’ll see you two downstairs.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



“Riley, have a seat, and we’ll get on with the explanations,” Dad says as Caleb and I make our way down to the living room. “I really am grateful you waited until I could be here to help explain this. It means a lot to me.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, Dad.” I take a seat on the couch opposite him.

Caleb sits next to me and pulls me into his side. I don’t hesitate to curl into him. At least, now, I know what the butterflies and comforting feelings I get around him are all about. I still want some girl talk with Cassie about the whole Soulmate thing, but I guess it needs to wait a bit.

There are more important things to talk about.

“So, where to start?” Dad mumbles more to himself than me, as he sits down next to Leanne. “Well, I suppose I’ll start at the very beginning since you haven’t heard any of this before. For as long as any Elemental can remember, there’s been talk of *The Chosen*. According to the legends, one person is to be picked specifically by the gods and goddesses of the elements to lead all Elementals in a war. Mikaia is the goddess of Earth. Humans call her Mother Earth. Hakan is the god of Fire. Binda is the goddess of the Sea. She represents Water. Then, there is Niyol, god of the Winds. Of course, they all answer to Achak, but that’s an entirely different story.”

“War against who?” I don’t mean to interrupt, but I don’t like the idea of anyone fighting in some war.

“The Fallen,” Jaxon spits with such disdain, and I shrink away from him. He appears to notice my discomfort because he gives me an apologetic pat before sitting on the edge of the couch next to me and explaining. “The Fallen are a group of Elementals who’ve turned to the dark side, to put it simply. When Elementals use their affinity for evil, the gods and goddesses can and will take it away. After their affinity has been stripped from them, they become a part of The Fallen. Nukpana, the fallen god of evil, takes their soul, and in return, he gives them special powers. The catch is, they have

to do his bidding. They're evil people to begin with. They don't usually have a problem following through on his demands. It's the job of Elementals to protect each other and humans from the Fallen."

"How do you stop them?" I ask with wide eyes.

"Kill them." Cassie drops down into her seat. "They aren't people anymore. They literally have no soul. When you kill The Fallen, they turn to dust, like you see in some vampire shows and movies."

A small snort escapes me at Cassie's comparison. Shaking my head, I push us back on topic. "What are their special powers?"

"Depends on the mood Nakpana is in when he gives them their power, I suppose, or maybe it has to do with whatever job he needs done at the time. Some of them can read minds, some can alter a person's thoughts, some move things with their minds, some can even possess another person's body for a period of time. That's why it's really difficult for us to kill them. They may not be able to control the elements, but they have their own secret weapons. Usually, we're faster and stronger, but things like reading our minds and knowing our next move put us at a disadvantage," Jaxon ends on a frustrated sigh.

"Back to the topic we were discussing," Dad says after giving me a moment to absorb



everything. “The Chosen is meant to lead all Elementals in a war against the Fallen. It’s said there will be a group of The Fallen who will plan a vicious attack on us, and unless The Chosen is prepared and ready, we’ll lose. If we lose that battle, it will mean the end of us. The Fallen will have the means to take over, and there will be no more Elementals. No one has ever believed this story. It was always thought to be a scary tale. Everyone but the council that is. They’ve always assured us the legends are true. The council is the closest link to the gods and goddesses we have. They’re marked by the gods and goddesses to become council members. The council knows a heck of a lot more than any of us do. That’s why we need to tell them about your abilities.”

“I’m confused.” I scrunch my eyebrows together and turn to Caleb. “What do my abilities have to do with this legend?”

“Baby girl, the legend says The Chosen will come from an unexpected place and have an affinity for all four elements.” Caleb’s lips purse with worry, which scares me.

Then, his words click into place.

“Wait a second!” I jump to my feet, startling everyone in the room. “You think this Chosen person is *me*?”

“No one has ever shown an affinity for more than one element before, Riley,” Leanne explains

softly, as if afraid her words will send me running.

“So, I have to lead the Elementals in a war when I just learned that I have these powers? I can’t even grow a plant the right way!” My eyes well with tears, and my heart races. I’m close to a breakdown, but at this point, I don’t care. They must be insane if they believe I’m capable of leading anyone with anything.

“Baby.” Caleb stands and puts his hands on my cheeks, forcing me to meet his eyes. “We don’t know for certain what this means. We just know the legends, and we know your abilities exceed the norm of an Elemental. If this means you’re supposed to be a leader in some war, then, I promise you I’ll protect you no matter what. You’re not doing this alone, baby.”

He gently kisses my forehead, and it sends a tingling sensation all the way to my toes. It distracts me from the topic at hand for a moment as I close my eyes to savor his soft lips against my skin. I don’t realize I’ve already wrapped my arms around his waist until he pulls back. More than one pair of eyes on us twinkle with mirth, and it causes my face to heat all the way to the tips of my ears.

Clearing my throat, I step back and meet my dad’s eyes. “What happens now?”

“Now”—he gets to his feet—“we head outside. You can show me what you can do. We’ll prepare and practice for the rest of the week. Then,

we'll continue as planned with our trip to the council. No one is to know about Riley until we speak with the council. We're not even going to tell them until we can do it in person. I don't want to risk this information being heard by the wrong people."

We all nod our agreement before heading out back. My dad struts over to my twisted mess of a tree root and stares at it for a long time, his hands resting on his hips.

"That's my girl." He grins, finally turning to face me. "You're a natural at this, kiddo."

My cheeks heat under his praise. "Thank you, but it's not exactly spectacular."

"Let's start out with Earth," he suggests, calling Leanne and Jaxon outside. "These two will know what to do with that."

"Let's get to growing." Leanne claps excitedly, pulling Jaxon and me over to her garden. "We can start with something simple today. Jaxon and I will take turns growing a vegetable or flower, you copy us."

It sounds uncomplicated enough, but locating all the components to grow the things they want me to grow is harder than I thought. At first, it's a fun challenge, but after an hour, I'm getting tired of trying to grow things. Another hour into my lesson, I only have a small sprout to show for my effort.

"Go take a break for a few minutes. I'll have

your dad help you with wind next,” Leanne ushers me inside the house. “I know it doesn’t seem like much, honey, but the small sprout you grew is really impressive.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I grump.

Once I’ve gotten a drink of water and taken a bathroom break, I head back out.

Dad waits for me in the middle of the yard.

“Hey, kiddo,” he exclaims gleefully. “We’re going to work on controlling the breeze.”

“The breeze?” I peer around the yard.

“There is no breeze.”

“Exactly!” He claps his hands and rubs them together. “We’re going to make one. It’s easy to feel for the air, it’s not as easy to control it.”

By the end of the night, I’ve only managed to get in some training for Earth and Air. Even after only practicing two elements, Caleb ends up carrying me to his room for bed because I’m dead on my feet.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



The next two days Dad goes to work, and the rest of us go outside for more practicing. According to Cassie, I'm more than ready for the test, and my progress has been spectacular. Especially for only training my abilities for such a short amount of time. We don't know how long I've actually been using any of them, like with the fire back in Washington. Cassie mentioned a burst pipe in the Mexican restaurant a few months back. She thinks it was my affinity for water coming out through my fear of Jaxon's anger.

Everyone keeps praising me for how well I'm doing. My opinions on my progress differ. I wish I could advance faster, but there's only so many hours in the day for practice.

In a few sessions, my control on breezes improves a lot.

It doesn't take me a more than a minute to find what I need to grow sprouts in the garden, now. Although I can't get them to grow beyond sprouts.

Even my fire and water abilities improved. Cassie's main focus was to push and pull water at will. Having to pull a small amount of water out of a large pool was the hardest thing for me to master, but practicing for countless hours helped.

My fire abilities have stayed limited to starting and stopping tiny flames. It's harder for me to control the size and heat like Caleb.

The construction crew finished my room on Wednesday. I end up sleeping in my own room so I don't impose on Caleb anymore. I'm sure he's ecstatic to have his bed back to himself.

As tired as I am, my mind won't stop running. My racing thoughts have me tossing and turning all night. It's going to be awful tomorrow because there's more practicing to get in before we head out early. I don't know if my body can handle it without sleep.

My biggest issue with getting to sleep is Caleb. Even though it was only a few nights, I'm now used to sleeping beside him. I don't want to ask him if he minds me staying with him again in case he wants his space. I'm already enough of a

burden on them all. They spend the majority of their time helping me learn to control and manipulate the elements. When we aren't practicing, they're teaching me defensive fighting skills, which I'm terrible at.

A quick glance at the clock on my bedside table shows it's already five in the morning. There's no point in trying to sleep now. I pull myself from bed and grab my clothes for a shower. Cassie insisted on packing for me, and I didn't mind giving her a little bit of happiness. She may have gone overboard with three suitcases, but we're taking an SUV and a truck. Dad said it should all fit.

After having a long shower, I dry my hair and dress for the day. Cassie picked out a pair of comfortable jean shorts and a plain v-neck gray top for me. With a yawn, I head down to the backyard for more practice.

No one knows what the council will make me do for the test. They don't ask a lot from anyone for the testing. They only want to see that the Elemental has learned the basics. Any other advancement comes with time and practice.

Normally for Fire, they simply pull the heat from the room and catch a small item on fire, then put it out. For Water, they require transferring water from one source to another. For Air, they ask for a noticeable gust of wind. When they test Earth, they want a seed sprouting. These are the normal

tests, but it could be completely different for me, though.

I don't know how long I'm out back, sprouting seeds, causing gusts of wind, singing the edges of paper, and pulling small amounts of water out of the pool. Before I know it, Leanne calls me in for breakfast. After we all eat and chat about the trip and the number of stops we should make, I help Cassie clean up the dishes.

“Okay, kiddo.” Dad claps his hands together to get my attention. “Time for one more round before we head out. Jaxon and Caleb will be loading the cars while we make sure you've perfected everything.”

I nod and follow him outside.

First, he directs me to focus on a branch on one of the trees in the backyard and have it grow longer. After I accomplish that, he breaks the branch off. Handing it to me, he has me make a small ember on the stick by the pool in the backyard. Then, I use a tiny gust of wind to turn the ember into an actual fire on the stick. He tells me to use water to extinguish the fire before it burns the stick completely.

I'm panting by the time I'm done. The tasks took a lot out of me.

“Hey, kiddo,” Dad calls, rushing over to me as I lean down with my hands on my knees trying to stop the world from spinning. “What's wrong?”



Are you alright?"

"Yeah." I gasp out. "I'm just a bit out of breath."

"Did it really take such a big amount of energy out of you?" he asks, with concern.

"Uh," I start to answer, but I'm interrupted by Caleb's voice shouting my name.

Before I even raise my head he's right in front of me. "Baby! What is it? What happened?"

"Nothing, Caleb." I stand straight, though still panting, and grin at him. "I'm just tired and a little winded."

"Why are you so tired? We all went to bed early last night. Did you have another nightmare?" he asks, putting his hands gently on my shoulders.

"No, I didn't have another nightmare. I just couldn't sleep, that's all," I admit sheepishly.

"Baby, why didn't you wake me?" He looks hurt, but I don't understand why.

"Because I didn't want to bother you. You looked tired last night, and I don't want to be a burden."

"Ah, shit." He lets out a frustrated sigh, pushing his hands through his hair. "Baby, I promise you're never a burden on me or anyone else. The only reason I didn't put up a fight about you going back to your own room without me was because I thought you'd want a bit of alone time. I don't want to overwhelm you, baby. This is a lot of

crazy shit to take in, and I wanted you to have time to process it all. If I could, I would buy us an apartment and move you in with me tomorrow, but I have a feeling that's a bit fast for you."

"And for me," Dad grunts and turns toward the house.

I snicker and put my arms around Caleb's waist, pulling him toward me. I'm not sure what gives me the courage to be so forward with him, but I need to be touching him right now. "I think moving in together right now may be a bit much, but I would really like to share a room. It appears I have issues sleeping without you."

"Your wish is my command." He winks down at me, causing a blush to stain my cheeks. I notice his eyes darkening again, and I have the sudden urge to kiss him. I think maybe he wants me to kiss him, too, because I feel him lean down slightly.

"Guys, let's go! We have a schedule to keep." Cassie's voice breaks the spell, and we reluctantly pull apart.

I sigh and mumble, "I love Cassie like a sister, but I sort of want to push her in the pool right now." I hadn't meant for him to hear, but Caleb obviously did because he coughs, trying to mask his amusement.

When we make our way to the driveway, three new cars sit outside the garage.

“Whose cars are those?” I ask Caleb.

“The black Ford is mine, the white Maserati is Jaxon and Cassie’s, and the blue Lexus is your dad and Leanne’s. The red BMW you’ve seen is kind of the family car. We all use it when we need it, even my parents when they’re here. I guess you’d never notice the others because we only use them for trips like this or when we live in our apartments,” he explains all of this while helping Jaxon finish loading the suitcases into the truck Caleb claimed as his and the Lexus he said is Dad and Leanne’s.

His black truck has a cover on the bed for the trip. We stuff it full and lock it up. Dad and Leanne’s trunk is also stuffed full with the rest of the things we need on the trip up to Sacramento.

Once the vehicles are loaded with the last of the luggage, Jaxon and Caleb close the garage doors.

I notice a sleek black and chrome motorcycle in the corner of the garage just before the last garage door gets closed. “Whose motorcycle?”

“That, my beautiful girl, is my Harley Davidson Street 500.” He grins down at me. “Isn’t she pretty?”

“She?” I try to hide my laughter, but fail miserably.

“Yes, smart ass.” He puts his arm around my shoulders. “I don’t have a name for her yet,

though.”

“How about Bertha?” I suggest with a straight face.

“You think you’re hilarious, don’t you?” He mock-glares at me.

“Maybe.” I shrug and turn toward his truck. I only take about two steps before he grabs me from behind and lifts me off the ground, causing me to let out a high-pitched squeal. “Caleb! Put me down!”

“I don’t think I will.” He shakes his head, gripping me tighter. “I think I’ll carry you to Sacramento.”

He marches down the driveway with me in his arms, shouting and wiggling the whole time.

“As adorable as this little scene is, we have to get going,” Cassie, once again, interrupts Caleb and me.

“Pool,” I whisper, causing Caleb to burst out laughing as he carries me to the truck. He puts me in the passenger side before he hops into the driver’s seat.

“I would love to see you toss Cassie in the pool, but I don’t think we have time for that if we want to stay on schedule, baby.” He winks and grabs my hand. “Let’s roll.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY



The first two hours of the drive are uneventful with me sleeping for most of it at Caleb's insistence. Caleb only wakes me to tell me we need to make a stop to top off on gas and stretch a bit. Once the tanks are full and everyone stocks up on snacks and drinks, we hit the road again.

"Want to play twenty questions?" Caleb suggests as we pull onto the freeway.

I eye him suspiciously. "How does that work?"

He grins. "It's nothing bad, babe. We just ask each other a bunch of questions."

Shrugging, I agree to play. "Sounds fun."

For the next three hours. I learn his favorite

color is black, he likes country music and classic rock equally, he hates rap and hip-hop, his favorite season is summer because he gets to make the bonfires at the beach, and he loves Stephen King.

“For the record, I love the Beastie Boys, but they don’t qualify as hip-hop in my book,” he insists. “Plus, there was that kick-ass scene in Star Trek with their song Sabotage.”

“Star Trek?” I giggle, shaking my head in disbelief.

He sends me a playful glare. “No laughing, it’s a good movie.”

“You like Sci-Fi movies?” I continue with our question game.

He nods. “It’s my dirty little secret. I’m a sci-fi geek.”

When it’s his turn to ask questions, he learns my favorite color is bright blue, my least favorite food is top ramen—for obvious reasons—I share his love of country music, and I’ll read just about anything I get my hands on.

“Would you read Stephen King?” he asks enthusiastically.

Giving him a wide grin, I nod. “Sure, I’d read it. I can’t promise I wouldn’t get scared, though. Scary books and movies are fun until it’s night time and the lights are out.”

“I’ll protect you, baby.” He winks.

Blushing, I switch the subject by turning the

radio and searching for the local country station. By the time we make it to our next stop, we're singing loudly along to Kenny Chesney.

Once we make it to Modesto, we grab some lunch at a burger place off the freeway. We all sit around, talking, eating, and enjoying each other's company. It mirrors such a normal family trip, and I love it. As a kid, I would notice families appreciating their time together. The parents would be hugging their children and chatting happily with them. Even now, I see families enjoying each other's company. It's awesome to finally be part of one of those families.

After we eat and clean up, we head for the cars again.

I turn to Caleb. "I'll meet you at the car. I need to run to the bathroom."

"I'll go with you," he offers.

I wave him off. "I don't think management would appreciate you hanging out in the girls' bathroom."

Nodding, he continues on to the car while I use the restroom.

As I come back out, something slams into my side. It surprises me so much, I cash into the wall and need a second to catch my breath.

"Grab her, dumb ass!" a male voice hisses from behind me.

Someone grabs me from behind and pins my

arms, making any kind of movement nearly impossible. It only takes a second to realize what's going on, and I try to scream as loud as my voice will allow.

I only manage a high-pitched squeak before someone clamps their hand over my mouth and nose, cutting off my air supply. I panic, trying to kick at whoever it is holding me. I've never been in a situation where I felt I should fight back, but I've watched Caleb and Jaxon play fighting once or twice.

Jaxon has been trying to teach me hand-to-hand self-defense, but none of it stuck with me. I try and remember what I've been taught and thrust my elbow backward as best I'm able to with my arms pinned. I hit something soft and hear a muted grunt.

“Hold her still! If we don't get her to Samael in one piece we're screwed!” a second male voice yells behind me. “Come on, the back door is this way. We can sneak her through there to the van.”

Great, there are two men trying to kidnap me and take me to my stepfather. How did they even find me? What does Samael want with me?

My panic rises as my air supply quickly runs out, causing my lungs to burn painfully. I try to thrash and break away, but the man holding me is twice my size and impossibly stronger.

Black dots appear around the edges of my



vision as multiple voices shout from the end of the hallway.

*Maybe someone noticed the crazy people trying to drag me away!* I think, just before everything goes black.

~

“Baby, please, open your eyes,” Caleb’s strained voice breaks through the fog of my mind. His tone sounds broken, and my chest tightens. “Mark, make her wake up.”

“She’ll be fine, Caleb,” Dad’s soft voice comes from someplace above my head. “You know Leanne used to be a nurse. She checked her out, and she’s fine, she just blacked out.”

“Baby girl,” Caleb whispers in my ear. “Let me see those pretty eyes. I need you to open your eyes for me.”

Finally, I break through the sleepiness and crack my eyes open. “Ow,” I groan as the fading sunlight hits my eyes, making a horrid headache known.

“Oh, thank God,” Caleb breaths out, and I’m suddenly pulled into his warm embrace. “You scared the absolute fuck out of me, baby girl. You are never allowed to pee alone again.”

A few chuckles come from around us as I try to open my eyes again. The light doesn’t hurt my

head as bad this time, and I'm able to tell I'm lying in the back of Dad's car. My head must have been on Caleb's thighs before he picked me up. Now, I sit sideways on his lap, and he wraps both arms around me and buries his face in my hair.

"What happened?" I bury my face in Caleb's chest, wanting to go back to sleep.

"You almost got kidnapped by a few Fallen assholes," Jaxon growls from his spot beside the car.

As soon as he says this, the memory of the two men in the hallway comes rushing back, and I stiffen involuntarily. Caleb's arms tighten around me, and he rubs a soothing hand up and down my back, trying to calm me. "They're gone, baby. You're safe."

"What happened to them?" I whisper softly, though I know at least Caleb heard me.

"My guess," Cassie chimes in with a wicked grin on her face. "Their ashes are being swept up as we speak."

"They're... de-dead?" I turn and gape at all of them with wide eyes.

"Sis, they would've killed you or us if we'd let them live. You have to remember those guys had no souls," Jaxon reminds me sympathetically. "If they ran, they would've just told whoever sent them where you are and the protection you have."

"It was Samael. I heard them say they were

going to bring me to him. I don't understand how he was able to send the Fallen after me? Is he an Elemental, too?" I'm so confused, and my head feels fuzzy.

"That explains a lot," Dad grumbles quietly, lost in thought. "If he's sending the Fallen after you, he may be one himself. We'll bring it up to the council. We should get going though. We've already caused a small scene carrying an unconscious girl from the bathroom area. We don't need anyone calling the cops and complicating things."

Everyone nods their agreement, and we head to our cars. Dad hands me a pill bottle as he passes by and after reading the label I realize he remembered my migraine pills. The pain already started to dissipate, so I put the bottle in my purse and wait it out for a few more minutes.

Before he can make it far, I hurry up to my dad and hug him. "Thank you for remembering those."

He hugs me back, but doesn't respond.

A quick look at him shows his eyes shining and I realize something I said or did must have gotten to him. "I'll see you at the next stop, Dad."

I know my dad wouldn't want me to mention him getting choked up, so I pretend I don't notice. Letting go, I spin around and head back to Caleb's truck.

Jaxon turns to me just before getting in the other car and calls out, “Oh, Sis! We’ll be talking about why you froze up and didn’t use your hand-to-hand training to fight those pricks.”

*Uh oh.*

~

As we continue our drive, Caleb keeps sending glances my way, and it makes me nervous.

“Are you okay?” I finally ask when I can’t take it anymore.

He barks out a humorless laugh and gawks at me. “You’re seriously asking me if I’m okay when you’re the one who was almost kidnapped and possibly killed?”

I’m startled first by his outburst, then by a sheen of tears in his solemn eyes. I’m not sure how to calm him down, and I’m starting to question why I have such an uncanny ability to make grown men cry.

“Caleb,” I start, but don’t finish as I notice he pulls over to the side of the road.

We’re behind Dad, Leanne, Jaxon, and Cassie. They probably won’t notice us fall a bit behind. Before I can ask him why he pulled over, he reaches over and unbuckles my seatbelt. I tilt my head in confusion, but he ignores it. Grabbing my hips, he lifts me onto his lap. In the background,

Brad Paisley's *Then* plays softly on the radio and I find myself wishing we were back to singing along to the songs and having fun. Caleb being upset gives me the urge to fix it, but I don't know how.

"Baby, when Jaxon and I went to the bathroom and I saw those guys dragging you away, then you passed out like that..." His voice roughens and fills with fear. "I couldn't handle losing you, I can't even think about it."

I turn toward him and grab his face in my hands, making sure his eyes lock with mine. "Caleb, I'll never leave you. You're stuck with me, for as long as you want me." I will him to believe me. "I promise, you don't have to worry about losing me. I'm right here, and I always will be. Until the day you tell me you're done."

He gazes into my eyes for a few moments before letting out a shaky breath. "I love you, Riley."

He whispers the confession so quietly, I almost don't hear him. Almost.

My eyes widen, and my jaw drops open at his confession. "I—"

"Wait." He puts a finger to my lips, stopping me from speaking. "You don't have to say anything right now, or ever, if you don't want to. I know it's really soon for this, especially with you not feeling the true bond yet, but I couldn't handle you not knowing anymore. You mean everything to me, and

I need you to know that. I need you to know you're my whole world now, you're my Soulmate. I want to spend the rest of my life with you by my side, through the good and the bad times we know are coming. I want your beautiful face to be the first thing I see in the morning and the last thing I see before I close my eyes at night. I want to see your perfect smile every single day and know that I'm the reason for it."

He pauses and takes a shaky breath. Setting his hand on my tummy, he locks eyes with me and continues, "I want to see your belly round with our babies. I want to argue about whose turn it is to change the smelly diaper. I want to hold you close on our children's first day of school because I know you'll cry. I want to sit next to you and cheer them on together at every dance recital, school talent show, and sporting event."

He takes my hand and lifts it to his mouth, placing a gentle kiss on the back. "I want to hold this hand and see the pride in your eyes when we see them graduate from high school, then college. I want to have matching rocking chairs on our front porch. We can be that little old couple who sits outside and drinks sweet tea while reminiscing about the good old days and watching our spoiled-rotten grandkids run around the yard.

"I want to hold you when you're sad and laugh with you through dumb comedy movies. I

want to sing country music with you when we go on long road trips. I want to be the one you turn to when things are really shitty and when they're really great." He stops for a moment and searches deep in my eyes, cupping my cheeks with his hands.

"I want forever with you, Riley. I love you more than you can ever imagine. When we're both old and gray, I'll still love you. When we're grumpy from training all day, I'll still love you. When we're yelling at each other about whose turn it was to unload the dishwasher, I'll still love you. I love you, now and forever."

*Holy. Crap.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“Caleb.” I gape at him with wide eyes, trying to collect my thoughts. That was one heck of a confession, let alone one to have on the side of the road.

“Hey”—he grins down at me—“I don’t want you to say anything right now. I just needed you to know. Just think about what I said. It’s all true, I mean every single word. I love you, baby.”

Before I have the chance to reply, he kisses my forehead. Shock waves rock my body from head to toe. As I savor the tingles his kiss caused, he grabs my hips and sets me gently back in the passenger seat. He gives me an expectant stare, but my poor mind is turned upside down. After a full minute, I realize he’s waiting for me to put my



seatbelt on.

As soon as I click it in place, he chuckles and takes off again.

Caleb and I remain silent for the rest of the drive to the hotel, and thankfully, it's an uneventful few hours. There's only so much more *adventure* I can handle.

The ten-story Citizen Hotel takes up a corner in Sacramento's downtown. The historic-looking structure surprises me since I expected something like a Motel 6 or maybe a Holiday Inn. When we pull up, Caleb parks the car in front before getting out while I gawk at the elaborate building. I remain in my seat, assuming he's running in to ask a question.

With Caleb's stroll around the front of the car distracting me, I fail to notice the man at my door until he has ahold of the handle. He opens it before I can react and flip the locks, and I yelp in surprise and fear.

"Caleb!" I cry out, glancing at him from the corner of my eye while keeping my focus on the crazy man at my door.

"Baby?" Caleb hurries the rest of the way around the car to stand next to the strange man with his brows drawn together. "What is it?"

My eyes dart back and forth between Caleb and the stranger, wondering if maybe Caleb knows the guy. The creepy man frowns at me, one brow

arched in confusion. Turning my focus back to Caleb, sudden realization and relief cross his face. “Baby, this is the valet. He’s going to take our bags to our rooms and park the car for us.”

My mouth forms a small “O” shape, and I know I’m blushing bright red. How embarrassing. Of course, I’ve heard of the valet service at fancy places, but I’ve never seen it in person.

I don’t dare look at Caleb or the valet person as I hop out of the car and make a beeline for my father and Leanne, who stand at the entrance of the hotel. Not saying a word, I follow them inside and listen as my father checks us in.

The front desk clerk addresses him by his first name. It makes me wonder if he’s been here before for the staff to address him so personally. He’s rented out all three of their penthouse suites, which surprises me.

Do we really need such elaborate rooms?

As our group heads for the elevators, we agree to meet back in the lobby for dinner at six. It gives us about an hour to settle in and freshen up before we meet up again. Dad and Leanne take the penthouse on the top floor. Cassie and Jaxon are given the next floor down, leaving Caleb and I the penthouse suite on the eleventh floor.

It’s silly, but I’m nervous about sharing a room with him now. We’ve slept in the same bed before, and I’d never slept better. It shouldn’t be

any different to share a room and a bed with him in a fancy hotel. I'd been prepared to stay with Cassie for some reason, but being put with Caleb brings on a whole new set of fears and expectations.

As soon as the door to our room opens, my jaw hits the floor. Everything about the room screams luxury. All of the fixtures are sleek and clean. They must have just put the sheets on the bed because the whole room smells like fresh linen. The mini fridge is completely stocked with expensive drinks. The flat screen TV could be used in a movie theatre. The room's reds and soft-brown decor give the place a relaxed atmosphere.

I have a hard time appreciating it fully as I continue to think about my embarrassing moment downstairs. With a frustrated sigh, I go about unpacking my toiletries and a few clothing items Cassie insisted must be hung right away to avoid wrinkles.

I still haven't worked up the nerve to face or speak to Caleb. He must think I'm an idiot for not understanding who the valet was right away. Of course, I couldn't catch up soon enough and he was left to explain things to me like a child.

"Riley?" My head snaps up as Caleb calls my name. He only uses my name when he's serious and needs me to know it.

Well, he has my attention, now.

"Baby, why won't you look at me?" He

sounds hurt, and I hate being the cause of it. “Is it what I said in the car earlier? I don’t take it back, but if you feel rushed, I really am sorry. That wasn’t my intention at all.”

It takes me a moment to realize what he’s talking about. But when it registers he’s talking about his confession in the car earlier, my mouth drops open. He thinks I’m upset because he said he loves me? Boy, he couldn’t be more wrong. Rather than answering him, I drop the dress in my hands and quickly shuffle over to him.

I wrap my arms around his waist and bury my head in his chest. “I’m sorry I embarrassed you, Caleb.”

Caleb stills. “You what?”

“That’s what has me upset. I didn’t know who that guy was, and I made a fool out of myself in front of him and you. I didn’t mean to, I just panicked.”

Caleb lets out a long breath into my hair. “Baby, that didn’t bother me at all. I know you’re new to this world. Not just the Elemental world, but the world of privilege and wealth, too. There are things I grew up with that I forget you don’t or won’t understand, and I’m sorry for not explaining them to you sooner. It isn’t a big deal, though. You should never be embarrassed in front of me. I couldn’t give two shits what that guy thought of the situation.”

I lean back and peer into his bright-blue eyes. “Caleb”—I bring my hands to rest on his chest—“I want you to know something.” I pause, grabbing his hand and leading him to the bed. I sit down and pull him down beside me. “All of those things you said to me in the car earlier,” I murmur while dropping my eyes to our intertwined hands. “Those words are the sweetest, most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard in my life. I’ve never wanted those things with anyone before. I was too afraid of what Samael and my mother would do if I even spoke to another person, especially a man.”

I pause, taking a deep breath. “I mean, now that I live with my father, I don’t think talking to a guy is as big of a deal as it was made out to be when I was growing up. Not that you aren’t a big deal, of course you are. You’re my Soulmate for crying out loud. I just haven’t had enough time to really think things through. You know, with the whole Elemental thing. Then, I find out you’re my Soulmate, then I have to learn all of these new powers and meet with the council which is pretty exhausting and terrifying. Samael’s coming after me for some reason, but I have no idea why. Plus, I’m supposed to be this Chosen person, which makes no sense. I mean, look at me. I’m not equipped to handle this.”

Rambling on like a lunatic hadn’t been my intention, but I can’t seem to stop myself. “I like

you, Caleb, a lot. I just don't know how to handle these things. If you can, I need you to be patient with me. I really don't know how to be in a relationship. I've never even been kissed before. Not that I'm asking you to kiss me, of course, that would be weird to ask someone to kiss me. Not that I don't want to kiss you. I think I do; I've wondered what kissing you would be like. That's not something I've ever thought about with anyone else before. I just—"

"Riley!" Caleb chuckles, stopping my rant. He places his hands on my shoulders in a soothing gesture. "Take a breath, baby."

"Sorry," I mumble, getting distracted by his lips.

All that talk of kissing did something to my head. My gaze flicks from his lips to his eyes and back again. I can tell by the smirk on his face he notices where my focus is.

"Are you getting sick?" I blurt out, not meaning to ask the question aloud.

"Huh?" He blinks, a bit taken aback by my question. "No, why?"

"Oh, it's just... I've noticed your eyes keep darkening when we're close. I wasn't sure if it was the lighting or my imagination." I shrug, feeling silly again.

"Baby." Caleb shakes his head, his hands sliding up my shoulders to cup my face. "Trust me,

I'm not sick, and it's definitely not your imagination." He leans closer to me, our faces only about half an inch apart.

"Caleb," I whisper, though I'm not sure what I plan to say to him.

"I'm going to kiss you now, baby girl." His soft lips land on mine in the lightest of kisses. He stays there for a few seconds, as if testing if I'm going to pull back. I press my lips a bit harder against his, showing I want more. I'm not sure what I want more of, but he seems to understand what I'm trying to accomplish.

His left hand slides from my cheek to the back of my head, tangling in my hair and pulling me impossibly closer to him. His right hand moves to my lower back, tugging my body until we're completely flush against each other. I gasp at the sudden movement as his tongue softly sweeps my bottom lip. I take his lead and do the same to him, earning me a low growl. The sound makes muscles low in my stomach tighten, and I grin with satisfaction, knowing I'm the cause of his reaction.

Caleb pulls back to leave a few softer kisses on my lips, the corners of my mouth, and finally my nose. He sits back on the bed, a little bit away from me.

I blink at him, dazed. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No!" He barks out a shocked laugh while

running his hand through his messy hair. Briefly, I wonder if I messed his hair up, but I can't seem to remember. "Baby, if we don't get ready for dinner right now, I won't be responsible for my loss of self-control. Believe me, stopping is the last thing I want to do right now. I just don't want Jaxon or Mark to kill me either, so we should get going."

Realizing he's right, I nod in agreement, then head to the bathroom to freshen up for dinner.

Looking in the mirror, I don't even recognize myself. My lips are a bit puffy, my hair is messed up, my eyes seem brighter, and I have the biggest smile on my face. I can't help the giddy dance I do around the bathroom before finally pulling myself together and attempting to fix my messy hair. Cassie is going to have a fit.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“What the hell happened to your hair?” Cassie demands the second Caleb and I step into the lobby.

“Cassie, sweetheart,” Jaxon stage whispers, “I’m pretty sure you aren’t supposed to tell your friends when they have bad hair days. Isn’t that girl code or something?”

“No! It was perfect when we left her, and now, all the curls I put in it this morning have fallen out.” She pouts.

“She took a quick nap. Must’ve gotten messed up then,” Caleb lies smoothly.

The whole time they’re talking, I stand slightly behind Caleb, turning a darker shade of red by the second.

“Oh, well, that sucks.” Cassie throws her hands in the air. “All that hard work, and a nap ruins it for me.”

“Didn’t ruin anything for me,” Caleb mumbles, making sure only I hear him.

If my cheeks get any hotter, they might catch fire. At least I could extinguish a small flame now if it were to happen.

“Hey, kids!” Dad greets us as he and Leanne enter the lobby. “I thought we might just have a quick dinner down at the hotel restaurant and do our own things this evening. Any objections?”

When no one objects, we follow Dad to the restaurant attached to the hotel. Like the rest of the hotel, it’s elegant. Chandeliers made of crystal hang from the ceiling. Each table is dressed with perfectly pressed tablecloths and topped with a single, fresh cut yellow rose placed in crystal vases. Soft classical music plays in the background.

The whole setting relaxes me.

I follow everyone else and watch as Dad and Jaxon pull out Leanne’s and Cassie’s chairs. I don’t really think anything of it and head for the seat next to the one Caleb is about to sit in.

“Baby?” I startle at Caleb’s low whisper.

“Huh?” I glance over at him and find him standing behind the chair he pulled out.

“Do you want to sit over there instead?” His forehead scrunches in confusion, and his

adorableness distracts me.

“No, I thought that was your spot,” I admit sheepishly once my brain catches up with the conversation.

He gives me a kind smile and gestures for the chair he holds out. I sit down, and he pushes it in for me. I thought this only happened in really cheesy romance novels. Not that there’s anything wrong with cheesy romance novels, they happen to be my favorite. I used to pretend I was the princess stuck in the tower or the wallflower the popular boy noticed. I guess my real life isn’t far off from my fantasy books anymore.

“So, dear sister.” Jaxon’s voice pulls me from my daydreaming. “Care to share why you didn’t set those Fallen fuckwads on fire or drown them in the mop bucket or whatever. You could have even startled them with an earthquake or blown them over or something, anything.”

“I wasn’t sure what was happening.” I frown down at my intertwined fingers. “I froze and sort of forgot I could even do those things. It was all too fast, I didn’t have time to think. Don’t be mad Jaxon, please.”

“Shit,” he mumbles and the scrape of a chair echoes around the quiet dining room. Looking up, I watch as Jaxon glides around the table and kneels beside me, pulling my chair out slightly and allowing him to see me better. “Sis, I’m not mad at

you. I was scared as shit when Caleb said you were taking too long and he wanted to check on you. I was so damned angry when I saw those guys dragging you toward that back door. But I wasn't mad at you, and I'm not now. I'm just worried about you.

“When we get home Caleb and I are going to buckle down on teaching you more self-defense. I would say Dad could help, but I'm pretty sure we don't want him giving himself a black eye again.”

The table erupts in laughter at Jaxon's last comment, but a shocked gasp escapes me as I blink quizzically toward my father.

“It was one time, son.” Dad pouts. “You'll never let me live that down, will you?”

There's a chorus of, “No's,” from around the table, and Dad glares at everyone. Just then our waiter comes up and glances around the table, his eyes stop at me, and the look he gives me makes my stomach a bit uneasy, though he seems normal enough. Short blond hair with dull-blue eyes. He's about Caleb's age, and he wears a uniform consisting of black slacks, black shiny shoes, and a white, button-up shirt.

“Good evening.” His low, formal voice sounds like a cartoon character. “My name is Fredrick, and I will be your server this evening.”

Cassie tries to hide a snort behind her hands and plays it off as a cough. I wonder what that's

about, but our waiter distracts me from asking her.

“Can I start you off with some drinks this evening?” he asks, still staring at me.

“S-s-sprite, p-p-please,” I mumble and stare down at my plate to break the eye contact he seems insistent on.

Everyone around the table calls out their drink orders as well. The waiter leaves without another word, and the chatting at the table turns to things like the drive here and our plans for the weekend. Cassie glances over my shoulder quite a few times, but every time I look, I notice nothing out of the ordinary.

Fredrick returns with our drinks, handing mine to me first. His fingers brush against mine as I take the glass from him, and I pull back quickly, nearly dropping my drink. I don't like to be touched by strangers, even by accident.

I mumble, “Thanks,” and turn away from him.

After handing out the rest of the drinks, he takes our food orders, starting with me, then heads off to send it in.

As we wait for our food, Cassie occasionally glances over my shoulder. Eventually, she leans in and whispers something in Jaxon's ear, making his head snap up, and his eyes dart to whatever Cassie has been staring at. His eyes narrow into a menacing glare, and he whispers something back to

Cassie.

“Can I kill him?” Cassie begs, giving Jaxon puppy eyes.

Jaxon shakes his head while still glaring over my shoulder. “No.”

“Just a little?” Cassie cajoles, holding her thumb and index finger up to show a small amount.

Jaxon snorts, his glare softening as he turns his attention to Cassie. “We don’t have that kind of bail money, sweetheart.”

Cassie huffs and crosses her arms and pouting in protest.

As I’m about to ask what’s wrong, our waiter shows up with refills for our drinks. After quickly handing them out to everyone else he sets mine in front of me and leans toward me to whisper, “I added a cherry on top, just for you.”

“U-u-uh, th-th-thank y-y-you?” I mumble, not knowing what else to say.

He grins down at me. “You can call me Freddie, sweets.”

I’m at a loss for what to say to him, but luckily, I’m saved when Jaxon starts to sing under his breath, “One, two, Freddie’s comin’ for you. Three, four, better lock your door. Five, six, pick up your crucifix. Seven, eight, stay up late. Nine, ten, never sleep again.”

I’m not sure what he’s referring to, but I don’t get a chance to ask before Cassie bursts into

a fit of giggles. Dad and Leanne try to hide their chuckles, but Caleb simply glares, his eyes narrowed into dangerous slits, his teeth clenched, and his jaw set. I'm glad his anger isn't directed at me. I know it isn't because he's sending the scary glare at our waiter. I'm still not sure what exactly is going on.

"I think we would like to switch waiters, please... Freddie," my father insists while trying to keep a straight face.

Freddie glares at everyone, then turns to me and says, "Your loss," before stomping off toward the kitchen.

I'm left trying to work out what he thinks I've lost and why everyone else seems to think he's wrong and I haven't lost anything.

The rest of dinner passes quickly with delicious food and mindless chitchat. We end up with a new waiter, an older gentleman by the name of Bill. He's quiet, but efficient. Instead of appearing silly by asking what happened, I decide to wait.

~

Once back in our hotel room, Caleb and I settle in to watch a movie and relax for the evening. I use the quiet moment to figure out what happened at dinner and what I missed.

“Caleb,” I whisper during a slow spot in the movie.

“Hmm?”

“Why did Dad switch waiters at dinner?”

He stiffens beside me. “Why? Did you not want him to?”

He sounds upset by the idea, and I don’t understand why.

“No, I didn’t mind. The first one made me a bit uncomfortable, but he didn’t seem to do anything wrong. I just don’t know why Dad didn’t like him.” I muse. “None of you seemed to like him, actually.”

“Baby girl, you’re perfect.” He chuckles and pulls me in for a hug. “He was flirting with you, baby. Jaxon also told me when he’d walk away from the table and go to the waiter station behind us, he would stare at you and talk to the other waiters, pointing and making lewd gestures your way. He’s lucky I didn’t burn all his hair off, but I didn’t want to cause a scene, and Mark took care of it before I could.”

“Oh,” I murmur, a bit surprised.

Is that what flirting is like? It just seemed creepy to me, but maybe that’s because I’ve never had anyone flirt with me before. I shake it off and continue watching our movie.

Then another thought occurs to me. “What was that song Jaxon was singing?”



“Don’t worry about it, baby girl,” Caleb says with a grin. “You have enough nightmare’s as it is.”

He doesn’t allow me to press the matter. Instead, he places a gentle kiss on my lips.

The kiss doesn’t stay gentle for long, and we miss the entire second half of the movie.

~

After Caleb makes sure I receive a thorough goodnight kiss, we decide to head to bed. We need to be up early for my meeting, and I don’t want to be too tired during the test tomorrow. It doesn’t take him long before he’s in a deep sleep beside me.

I lie staring at the ceiling for hours, trying to get my mind off the tests in the morning. We need to be at the council’s office by eight, and its already midnight. I should find a way to get some sleep, but I can’t seem to stop thinking about what would happen if I fail tomorrow. Will the Fallen win this so-called war? Will my new family hate me? Wouldn’t that mean Caleb and I can’t be together? If I really am this Chosen person, will the Elementals be upset I’m so new to their world? Will they want to follow a girl that wasn’t trained her whole life like they’ve been?

This leads to thoughts of my success. Will

my feelings for Caleb change? Won't people be after me all the time because I'm supposedly this big powerful person? Can I handle leading people I've never even met to some victory? I can't even squish a bug without feeling guilty. How am I supposed to kill a Fallen? I understand they're really more like soulless demons, but they used to be people, right?

Is it sort of the same as killing a zombie? Now, I'm comparing real life Fallen to fictional zombies. I've officially lost it. Then again, if someone had asked me a month ago if Fallen were real, I'd have called them crazy. Maybe zombies are real, too. I shift to my side for the millionth time and come face to face with a wide-awake Caleb.

My eyes widen, and I squeak in surprise.

"Baby girl," His voice is rough with sleep, and it does strange things to my heart rate. "Why are you still awake? And why can't you keep still?"

"I didn't mean to wake you," I whisper. "I can't stop thinking about tomorrow, and it's making me restless."

"Come here." He rolls onto his back and shifts the covers, making it easier for me to slide closer to him. "Lay your head on my chest."

I do as he says, and his left arm comes to rest on my back, while his right hand takes hold of my left resting our joined hands on his stomach. He

massages my back slowly as he kisses the top of my head.

“You’re amazing, baby,” he whispers. “You shouldn’t worry because I know you’ll pass. Your dad and Leanne know it, too. Even Cassie and Jaxon know you’ll get through tomorrow with no problems. We’ll all be there for you. Now try to get a little sleep before we have to wake up, okay?”

I nod against his chest and curl tighter into his side. His left hand continues to slowly rub small circles on my back. It’s incredibly relaxing, and I melt into him even more.

“Caleb?” I mumble as I start to doze off.

“Hm?” He sounds just as sleepy as me.

“Are zombies real?” I ask, thinking of my earlier worries.

Caleb’s chest vibrates with laughter. “Go to sleep, silly girl.”

It isn’t long before the smooth rhythm of his hand on my back puts me in a deep sleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



In the morning, talk is minimal while we dress and prepare to leave. Cassie comes over to our room and curls my hair for me. She finds a pair of skinny jeans and a black v-neck shirt for me to wear. She adds a pair of black cowboy boots and deems me ready to go. At first, I worry I'm dressed too casually for a meeting with such important people, but Cassie assures me the setting is casual. Plus, I need to be able to move around easily during the test, and if I'm in a dress or skirt, it might be difficult.

Dad and Leanne drive with Jaxon and Cassie. Caleb and I take his truck.

“You look gorgeous,” Caleb murmurs as he helps me into his truck. “You’re going to do

amazing, baby. I promise.”

After settling in my seat, I turn to him.  
“Thank you, Caleb.”

Other than the quick exchange, our ride is silent. We’re both simply too lost in our thoughts. All the what-ifs from last night come back to me on the way. I try to push them away, but I feel like I’m drowning in doubt.

I know I need to hold it together long enough to finish this test. I’ll pass, or I’ll fail. I can deal with the consequences of either afterward.

“Baby girl,” Caleb’s hushed voice brings me out of my thoughts. “We’re here.”

I glance up to see a tall, unmarked building. It appears abandoned, probably to ward off suspicious people. No one would think to look in an empty building for important supernatural people, would they?

With a nervous sigh, I open my door and follow Caleb to the heavy metal door in the back of the building.

Dad, Leanne, Cassie, and Jaxon already wait at the door for us, tension etched on their faces. Are they assuming I will fail?

Dad takes out a key from his pocket and unlocks the door. I follow everyone inside and through a bunch of dark and creepy hallways. If I didn’t believe this building to be abandoned before, I sure do now.

“Is this the part where you guys kill me?” I ask, trying to lighten the tense mood.

Jaxon and Cassie snicker, while Dad responds, “No, kiddo, we aren’t at that part of the movie yet.”

I scoff at his quick retort but stay silent. After what seems like miles of dreary hallways, we come to an elevator door. Once inside, Dad presses the button for the basement, then puts a code into a hidden keypad. This gets better and better.

Caleb seems to pick up on my unease. He puts his arm around my waist and pulls me close to his side. I wouldn’t be able to handle the hidden keypads and creepy hallways without him.

“Does everyone know the code to the secret dungeon or just you?” I ask my dad, only half kidding.

He shrugs, trying to hide the grin taking over. “They only give the code to the cool kids.”

Leanne snorts at him, rolling her eyes. “You get the code when you make an appointment with the council. Every code is different. This way they know who’s coming before we even get to the bottom floor.”

“That’s handy,” I admit. It’s a smart security feature, also.

When the elevator stops and the doors open, I freeze in my tracks, shocked by the sleek and clean lobby. Behind the lobby desk sits a stunning

woman with long auburn hair. She's impeccably dressed in a navy-blue blazer. As we enter, she glances up, and her eyes go straight to Caleb. She gets a wide grin on her face, and jealousy courses through me at lightning speed. He's mine; he said it himself. I don't want girls this perfect gawking at him. He might change his mind about me.

"Good morning, Caleb," she purrs, and anger to rises in my chest. "How have you been?"

"Fine, Britt," he replies in a clipped tone.

"Riley has an appointment with the council."

"Okay." She glowers at his obvious dismissal. "I'll let them know you're here. Have a seat."

We take a seat on the pristine leather couches in the lobby and wait, but it's not long before Britt comes back and gestures for us to follow her. She leads us down a hallway with glass walls. I peek into different offices as we continue along. The place has the appearance of any other business until Britt opens a set of double doors at the end of the hall.

When Britt steps out of the way and allows us to walk in, my eyes pop wide. The room could hold a thousand people easily. About twenty chairs line the back wall, seemingly set up for an audience. The rest of the room has the appearance of a high school gymnasium. Light-brown vinyl covers the floors from wall to wall. There aren't any windows, but the light fixtures above give off

plenty of light. On the back wall of the room, a platform holds a long wooden desk. Behind the desk sit four people, who seem to glow with power and importance.

“Hello, welcome!” A fiery redhead in about her late thirties calls to us. Her olive-green skirt and black button-up blouse pair well with her long, curly hair. “I’m Scarlett, the Fire representative on the council. These are my fellow council members. Misty represents Water.”

Misty gives a small wave, though she seems lost in her thoughts. She also appears to be in her late thirties. Her shiny black hair is cut into a short bob. She’s wearing a bright-blue dress with a brown belt around her waist.

Scarlett continues the introductions by pointing to a man with shrewd eyes and a permanent scowl. “Forrest, he’s our newest member, and he represents Earth.”

He doesn’t give off friendly vibes like his fellow council members. His medium-brown hair is curly, but cut short and gelled back. The top two buttons of his dark-green button-up are open and the long sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. He seems too young to be a council member, no older than his mid-twenties. By the glower being sent our way, he’s clearly made up his mind to hate us before we’ve even entered the room.

“Finally, we have Jett, he represents Air.”



Scarlett points to a man with glasses, in his mid-sixties. He wears a dark gray suit with a white button-up shirt and a silver tie. His hair is salt and pepper colored, and his eyes crinkle around the sides, giving me the impression he laughs a lot. “I believe most of us have met on one occasion or another, however with a few new faces on each end would you introduce yourselves again, please?”

“Yes, of course. I’m Mark, Air. This is my wife, Leanne, Earth. That’s our son Jaxon, Earth, and his Soulmate, Cassie, Water. Finally, our daughter, Riley, and her Soulmate, Caleb, Fire.” Dad goes through the introductions smoothly.

I’m a bit shocked when he claims me as the daughter of both of them, but I don’t comment. I’ll figure out my feelings on that later. Now’s neither the time nor the place.

“Riley, what is your affinity?” Jett asks in a rough, scratchy voice.

“That’s actually why we’re here,” Caleb admits before I answer Jett. “We have a bit of a situation with Riley.”

“Situation?” They exchange glances between the four of them.

“Please tell me you did not tell a human about us, then bring her here!” Forrest roars.

“Of course not!” Jaxon snaps, taking a step toward Forrest.

“Riley, dear, please step forward,” Misty

requests calmly, interrupting Jaxon and Forrest's almost fight. I peek at Caleb, and he gives me an encouraging nod. I take a few steps forward, putting myself directly in front of the platform.

"What is the situation your family speaks of?"

"I- I- I—" It's as if my brain forgot how to send words to my mouth. I take a few deep breaths before trying again. "W-w-well, I h-h-have an a-a-affinity for all f-f-four e-e-elements, I g-g-guess," I whisper, frowning at the ground.

Gasps echo through the room. Lifting my gaze, I find both Misty and Scarlett with their mouths wide open. Jett appears skeptical, and Forrest seems annoyed.

"We have heard that three times this past week. We don't have time for your attention seeking," Forrest grits out through clenched teeth.

"Let her prove herself, Forrest," Jett chides, still a bit skeptical, but also curious.

"H-h-how?" I ask quietly. "I w-w-was told I'm s-s-supposed to p-p-pass a t-t-test?"

"How long have you known about these supposed gifts?" Scarlett asks, regaining her wits.

"W-w-well, I f-f-found out a-a-about the first on m-m-my birthday," I murmur. "The r-r-rest have just sh-sh-shown up r-r-recently."

"I think we need to hear this from the beginning." She settles back in her seat for my story.

After receiving another encouraging nod from my family, I explain everything. Starting with my birthday and Samael, the fire in my room, making the paper float, then soaking the bed to wake myself up, and finally thinking of a tree house and the apple tree and growing a twisted, sad little root.

I skip over the more personal parts, especially about my mother and my life growing up. They listen patiently, never commenting on my sputters and stumbles even though it makes the story twice as long. They don't react when I finish, remaining silent for a long stretch.

“Show us,” Jett orders finally. “Did your family explain the testing process to you?”

“Y-y-yes?” I wish I could be any place but here right now, this whole situation makes me too nervous. My stutter has gotten worse, and my body shakes visibly from fear.

Jett speaks up again before my fear turns into a full-blown panic attack. “I'm not going to lie to you, Ms. Storm. Forrest is telling the truth when he says we've had a lot of Elementals come in here claiming to be the Chosen. The process is the same for all of them.”

“P-p-process?” My nerves reach a peak as I glance from the council to my family and back again.

“We don't want your family to help you

along in any way,” Forrest sneers.

“Wait just a damn minute!” Jaxon lurches toward the council, particularly Forrest, again.

I think it’s safe to say the two of them won’t be the best of friends anytime soon.

Dad places a hand on Jaxon’s arm, pulling him back. “Jaxon, calm down.”

“Apologies for Forrest’s bluntness, he doesn’t have anything resembling a filter,” Scarlett continues where Forrest left off, rolling her eyes at her fellow council member. “We have to clear the room. It’s standard for every test where someone is claiming to be the Chosen.”

“You think we’d try to cheat for her,” Caleb accuses. “That’s crap. We aren’t leaving her alone. We said we would stay with her. I’m not about to break my promise to her. You can all just—”

Before he continues, I turn and put my hand up. “It’s okay, Caleb. I can show them whatever they want to see. I have nothing to hide.”

He frowns down at me before his shoulder slump in resignation. “Fine, but we’ll be right outside the door. Call for us if you need us.”

They shuffle out of the room, Jaxon and Caleb the last to go. They clearly aren’t thrilled about leaving as they send petulant glares in Forrest’s direction.

When the door closes, Forrest speaks again, so I swivel to face my testers. “For the Chosen, we

don't have you do the normal test. We have a more complex test for you. We require you to show us you can manipulate all four elements at once."

"A-a-at t-t-the same t-t-time?" This isn't what I expected. I've never used all four elements at the same time. There's no telling if it's even something I'm capable of. "H-h-how?"

"Diamonds." Scarlett grins mischievously.

The blank stare I give her must be a clear enough sign of my confusion.

She chuckles as she goes about explaining. "Form us a diamond. We have earth you'll use in that room." She points to a closed door in the corner of the room. "There's no flooring in that room. It will give you all access to the earth. You need to locate the coal in the earth, use the fire to heat the coal, the air pressure to form and shape the diamond, and the water to clean it up. All without touching the elements."

"O-o-okay," I agree, not at all ready for this.

I'd hoped they would simply make me perform all the tests everyone told me about. It's what I'd practiced for.

The council leads me to the corner room, entering ahead of me and standing against the far wall.

"Begin," Forrest orders, clearly bored.

The four of them wait silently as I take a few deep breaths and search the earth for the coal I

need to form a diamond. Thank goodness for high school geology.

It takes me almost an hour to gather enough coal into a tight lump. The fear of failure helps the process along. Once the tight lump of coal forms, I push it above the surface of the earth. Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I glance at the council and notice Forrest's scowl softens slightly, his gaze on the lump of coal.

Continuing with the test, I use the heat in the room to light the coal on fire. It slowly smolders. Using the air in the room, I help the fire along with the lightest of breezes. It takes a while to turn the small embers into a true fire. When the coal finally burns, I adjust my use of the air in the room to put as much pressure on the coal as possible.

Sucking the heat out of the room turns the air cold. I do my best to make the fire hotter, but it's hard to focus on so much at once. Partly to warm the room back up and partly to ensure the right amount of heat gets applied to make the diamond. The cold air cools the coal down and tears form behind my eyes. I'm terrified there isn't enough heat to make the diamond correctly.

It takes a while, but something forms from the coal. I only hope it's the diamond the council wants. I search the room and find a bucket of water in the corner. Pulling the water from the bucket uses the rest of my energy. It barely makes it to the

coal, but it's enough to reveal a hard mineral that's definitely not a diamond, and my heart sinks.

The silence in the room is deafening as I wait for the council to say something.

“Whoa,” Misty breathes out.

Scarlett glides up to the dirty stone and picks it up. It's a tiny thing, barely the size of my pinky nail. From my angle, it doesn't look like it formed correctly either; it may not be a mineral at all. I might have made a simple rock of some kind. My chest tightens as Scarlett takes my failed diamond to the other council members.

Their heads bend together and whisper as they examine my work. My labored breathing quickens every minute I don't receive any kind of response from them. My head spins, and I have to place one hand on the wall to keep from falling over.

“Go wait with your family, we need to discuss this,” Forrest shouts loudly in what I'm coming to realize has to be his normal tone. He's an exceptionally impolite person.

I hope he doesn't fail me because he's having a bad day.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Heading back to the lobby to let the council talk, I stop in my tracks at the sight in front of me. Britt stands in front of Caleb, batting her eyelashes and flipping her hair to get his attention. If she didn't have such a heavy amount of makeup on, she'd have a model worthy appearance. I don't think models wear such heavy makeup, but I don't know a lot about it.

Caleb ignores Britt's advances, gazing in any direction but hers. He glances briefly my way, then back to the other side of the room. His eyes bounce back to me, widening when he registers I stand there. He jumps to his feet, nearly knocking Britt onto her butt and rushes to me, the rest of my family hot on his heels. The five of them reach me



at the same time, all talking at once.

“How’d it go?” Cassie blurts out.

“You look exhausted!” Caleb brushes the sweat-dampened hair from my cheek.

“Did you pass?” Jaxon questions.

“Do we get to be there for the blessing?”

Leanne asks.

Blinking at their expectant faces, I open my mouth with the intention of explaining everything they missed during the test. Instead, a muted sob escapes, followed by a flood of tears.

Caleb pulls me into his arms as Dad questions me. “What happened, kiddo? What’s the matter?”

“I-I-I—” My voice cuts off as I cry too hard to force any real words out.

I’m brought over to a chair and hands on my shoulders gently push me to sit down. Dad sits in a chair on my left, Cassie on my right. Caleb kneels in front of me while Leanne and Jaxon stand beside him.

“Deep breaths, baby,” Caleb orders softly, his tone laced with concern. He puts his hands on either side of my face. He uses his thumbs to wipe the tears away as they fall. “Talk to us. What happened when we left?”

It takes a while for me to take in a good amount of air into my lungs. When I’m fairly certain I’ve regained my ability to breathe, I

explain what happened and what the council required from me during the test.

“I didn’t do it right,” I admit with a snuffle, doing my best to keep the tears in. I don’t want to break down again; I don’t have any energy left in me to cry more. “It didn’t form a diamond. It looked like a weird rock or something. I messed up, I failed.”

“Did they tell you that you failed?” Leanne glances angrily at the door leading to the council.

“No,” I admit, shaking my head. “But they asked me to make a diamond. I didn’t do it.”

Caleb opens his mouth to say something, but Britt comes sauntering up to us and interrupts him by tapping him on the shoulder, flipping her hair when he turns around. My emotions are too crazy for her antics right now. There might actually be steam coming out of my ears as I glare at her.

“Do you need something, Britt?” Caleb snaps, clearly not amused by her interruption.

His irritation helps ease my anger. At least, he isn’t happy with her either.

“Yes, I do,” she answers with a suggestive smirk directed at Caleb.

I’m surprised by how badly I want to set her perfect hair on fire. I’m not a violent person, but I don’t like the way she’s acting around Caleb.

“Well?” Jaxon growls, taking her attention away from Caleb for a moment.

“Oh! The council would like to see you back in there,” she informs us with an exaggerated pout. I’m not sure why she’s sticking her lips out like a duck, but she still won’t take her eyes off Caleb as she does it. She’s like a spoiled kid not getting her way.

We all stand and head back in without a word to Britt. I’m pleased Caleb doesn’t seem to notice her overly friendly focus on him. Instead, he helps me move forward as we walk. Standing up and moving require more effort and energy than I have left in me.

Once we make it back inside, the council asks my family to sit in the back of the room as they order me to step forward. We all comply as asked, though Caleb waits for me to gain my footing before letting me go.

“Miss Riley.” Jett folds his hands on the table in front of him. “I assume your family has told you the legends of the Chosen?”

“Y-y-yes, S-s-sir.” I nod quietly.

“Good.” He takes a deep breath. “Riley, we have no idea if this legend is going to happen tomorrow or twenty years from now. The four of us firmly believe this is real. After watching you perform the test, there is no denying you have an affinity for all four elements. While most of us believe you are the Chosen, there is still some doubt. That being said, we have decided to pass

you anyway. We have agreed to leave it up to the gods and goddesses if you are marked as the Chosen.”

They’re passing me?

I let out an audible breath and turn to peek at my family. The pride on each of their faces gives me a lump in my throat. I’ve never had anyone show pride for me before. The lump in my throat tightens more as my eyes bounce to each of them.

“We have never done this before,” Scarlett admits sheepishly, bringing my attention back to the council. “Blessing someone with four affinities is new for us. We discussed this and thought it would be best to do it as a group. We will all say our own prayer for you, one at a time, but while we all stand in a circle. Is this all right with you?”

I shrug, “If y-y-you think that’s b-b-best.”

With my cooperation, they stand and come down to form a circle in the middle of the room with me. I glance over at Caleb and find him with an encouraging smile on his handsome face. I can’t help the blush spreading across my cheeks in return.

Scarlett stands to my left, Jett next to her, Forrest to his right, and Misty to my right.

“Everyone ready?” Jett asks, waiting for each of us to nod. “Right, let’s do this.”

“Honey, I need you to kneel for Forrest and me,” Misty explains. I do as she asks, and she gives

me a gentle nod of approval. She stands in front of me, taking my hands in hers.

*Water, I plea for thee to flow,  
Through me to this girl below.  
Shower her with your gentle rains,  
Show her how to fix what pains.*

A light showering of water, like a soft rain, hits my body. Almost as soon as it begins, it vanishes, and a slight sting on my ribs grabs my attention.

Before I'm able to pay too much mind to the stinging, Forrest with his scowl firmly in place steps up. He takes Misty's place in front of me and grabs my hands.

*"Earth, I call to thee to come,  
Gather round and bless this one.  
I beseech thee, Earth to strengthen she,  
Who bows before you on bended knee."*

I'm startled when the Earth shakes around us. At first, I assume it's an Earthquake, and we should stop. Then, I realize it's part of the blessing. We have the ability to make Earthquakes. That's astonishing. The moment the Earth settles, the spot on my upper back, between my shoulder blades, stings, similar to my ribs.

Forrest steps back, and Jett comes around the circle to stand in front of me. He grins and takes my hands. He pulls me to my feet before starting his blessing.

*“Wind, I ask thee to stir,  
Place your blessing upon her.  
Who comes before you today,  
Grant her your power, this I pray.”*

A hard gust of wind whips through the room. It goes through my body, instead of around it. It’s a strange but welcome sensation. As soon as the wind dies down, my ankle stings a bit. I wonder if the stinging sensations are normal?

Suddenly, Scarlett comes to stand right in front of me, replacing Jett. Her face set with determination, she takes my hands and begins.

*“Fire, I coax thee to brightly burn,  
To help this girl to teach and learn.  
The wonders of your mighty light,  
That helps us fight off the night.”*

My entire body jolts, a heated shock coursing through my veins like lightning. It isn’t painful, it actually feels right, like I’m home, and I love it. The world spins a bit, and I assume it’s part of the experience. With a strange detachment, I notice the stinging happening again, on my forearm this time. Scarlett steps back, and all the council members smile at me, with the exception of Forrest, though his scowl is softer.

I try really hard to smile back, but I’m incredibly dizzy. Is the room supposed to be spinning and tilting? I glance over at Caleb and notice he’s concerned. It doesn’t make sense to me.

Shouldn't he be excited? I passed. I've been blessed. That's supposed to be a good thing.

“Riley!” Caleb yells as he sprints toward me. It takes me a second to realize my eyes have started closing.

The air around me rushes through my hair, almost as if I'm falling, fast.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I'm exhausted. I remember waking up this morning, going to the council, taking the test, and the blessing beginning. After that, it's a complete blank. With great effort, I open my heavy eyes and see I lay on the floor of a stark white room. There doesn't seem to be any walls or doors. It's just endless white. I push myself up and spin in a circle, trying to find an exit.

"Don't bother," a deep male voice fills the room. "There is no exit unless we provide one."

I spin around in a circle again, coming to an abrupt stop when I find two men and two women standing in front of me. I squeal and jump back a few feet.

"Wh-who are y-y-you?" I ask, trying to keep



a brave face, but failing miserably.

I really hope Samael didn't send them for me. I'm all alone this time, no one to help me defend myself. These four people radiate power and importance, and I know I wouldn't stand a chance against them.

“Calm your heart, child,” the woman standing next to the first male speaks softly. My heart slows, as if under the spell of her voice. Her straight black hair falls to her waist. She wears a flowing gown with different shades of blue intertwined around the skirt. The top is decorated with glittery beading. It almost looks like what I'd imagine the surface of the ocean does when the sun hits it. “We are not here to harm you, we are here to help you.”

“Wh-wh-where is h-h-here?” I stutter, trying to gain some confidence.

“That is of no importance, Chosen One,” the larger of the two men says, with an easy grin on his face. His build is even bulkier than the bald guy from the fast car movies Caleb likes to watch. His dark brown hair falls to his long-bearded chin. He wears a bright-red toga with a brown leather belt holding it closed around his waist. His feet are covered with brown leather sandals. I wouldn't expect someone as intimidating as him to be this calm and easy going. “We are here to speak to you about what is coming your way. I am Hakan, god of

Fire, this is my Soulmate Binda, goddess of Water,” he explains while gesturing to the woman in blue.

“I am Niyol, god of Air, and this is my Soulmate, Mikaia, goddess of Earth,” the second male adds.

He’s almost as large as Hakan. He doesn’t have a beard like Hakan, but his light brown hair hits his shoulders. He wears a stark white toga with a gray leather belt around his waist. The material of his outfit, along with his hair, seem to flow around him, as if moved by some unseen wind.

Niyol’s Soulmate, Mikaia’s, curly white-blond hair hits her shoulders. Her floral gown is impossibly realistic, as if someone pressed real flowers into the material. “You, my dear, are Riley Storm. You are the girl we have Chosen to fight the Fallen and bring peace to our people.”

“B-b-but,” I sputter. “I’m j-j-just some girl, a n-n-nobody. I didn’t even g-g-get these powers until m-m-my birthday. My mother w-w-wasn’t even an Elemental. How’s a-a-any of this even p-p-possible? H-h-how do you e-e-expect me to l-l-lead people when I c-c-can’t even t-t-talk to people?”

“First, your mother was an Elemental, she just did not pass her tests before the age of eighteen. She was never blessed. We had to alter her memory so she didn’t remember anything about our world as we do with all Elementals who do not pass their test in time. We are convinced she would

have ended up a Fallen if she had passed her test as she was not a pleasant woman. Normally, we would not allow someone who has not been blessed to have a child with an affinity for the elements. However, we knew your father would find his way to you, and he would be the perfect person to help you through this battle,” Hakan explains with a serious expression.

“Riley, it is important you understand something,” Mikaia says, softly. “You will lose this battle if you do not trust your family. Jaxon, Cassie, Leanne, Mark, and Caleb. Trust them all, without doubt and without exception.”

“I t-t-try to,” I whisper, knowing I’m not fully there yet when it comes to trusting everyone in my family. They’re all loving, they never hurt me, but it’s a lifetime of habit I’m trying to break.

“You are.” Niyol beams. “You have done extraordinarily well, Chosen One. We are incredibly proud of how well you have accepted your fate. We want you to understand, we didn’t give you your gifts until recently because we knew you would not have anyone there to help you with them. We also knew you would be able to master your affinities quickly and efficiently. We never worried about you passing your test.”

“Samael is getting an army ready,” Binda confesses with sad eyes. “Nakpana, the god of evil and darkness, told him about you. We wish we

knew how he found out who you were before you had even gotten your powers. We think he just had a suspicion and told Samael to get close to your mother. It allowed him to keep an eye on you. When you set fire to the kitchen on your birthday, you confirmed to Samael you are the Chosen. Your unusual background tipped him off. You hadn't shown any obvious signs of being an Elemental around him until then. When it happened suddenly he figured it out quickly. He has been getting an army of Fallen together since that day. It took him a bit to find you, but now that he has, it won't be long before they come after you."

"What a-a-am I supposed t-t-to do?" I ask, panicked.

"You will know when the time comes."

Hakan replies. "For now, you must work on trusting your family. You must train hard and be ready to fight. Let your family know what we have told you, but no one else. Not even the council. This is especially important."

"I u-u-understand." I nod to them.

"You will do wonderfully, my dear," Mikaia assures me kindly. "Good luck and know we will always be here with you. Now, get back to your Soulmate before he has a heart attack."

With that, the room goes pitch black and I feel as if I'm falling. The rush of the drop slows and I gently drift down as if someone is laying me on

the ground.

“What the fuck did you do to my sister?” Jaxon’s voice breaks through the darkness, jolting me back to reality.

“We have never done this before, Jaxon,” Scarlett sounds shaken by Jaxon’s anger. “We have no idea what happened.”

“Baby, you can’t keep passing out on me like this,” Caleb’s voice whispers in my ear.

Coming back to myself a bit more, I realize he’s holding me on his lap. I blink my eyes open and peer up at my Soulmate.

“Hi,” I whisper. Not the most intelligent or profound thing to say, but he doesn’t seem to care. Every part of his body touching mine causes invisible electricity to spark against my skin.

The way everyone tried to describe finding your Soulmate to me finally clicks into place. Everything in me calls out to Caleb and I genuinely feel the same from him. Our souls are linked and it’s a physical feeling I can identify now. My life suddenly means nothing without him. He possesses every beat of my heart and I feel every beat of his.

“Fucking hell, baby girl,” Caleb chokes, pulling me into a hug. “If you do that one more time, I’m going to lock you in my room and never let you out again. We are not making a habit of this passing out shit, got it?”

My heart melts a little at his concern, while

his touch rights my world. “I’ll do my best, Caleb.”

My arms wrap around his neck, and I hug him back.

I have so much to tell him, to tell all of my family. The future terrifies me, but in this moment, wrapped in my Soulmate’s arms, I believe everything will be okay. We’ll stop Samael and whatever evil he and the other Fallen are planning.

·  
All I need to do is trust in them, and learn to trust in myself.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



My name is Amanda Perry, and I have a writing problem. Really, it's true. I've been writing stories for as long as I can remember thanks to my Grandmother who is a script writer. When I married the love of my life things got a little crazy and I took a step back from writing for a while. We had our first baby and I became a stay-at-home mama. Time flew and my baby became my big kid! While my Big started school, I decided to take up writing again. We became pregnant with our angel baby boy a while later. God decided he needed our baby boy more, but a few months later blessed us with our youngest child. My Little has become very active lately and keeps us all on our toes. Having two young children and writing a book wasn't enough for me. I decided to go back to work part time and I have to say I love my job. While my spare time is minimal, I do enjoy dancing with strangers in casinos, googling odd facts, and

drinking my weight in Diet Coke. My family means everything to me and in that I include a few close friends. Writing is my passion and as long as I'm able, I'll continue to pursue my dream.

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**House of Glass: Poisoned Houses Book 1**  
**By Lyn Forester**

After Caitlyn's life falls apart, can she trust her old racing competitors to help her build a new future?

On a poisonous planet, humans and halions coexist in stacked city structures with only a high wall to push back the toxic jungle. But not all poison comes from outside. As an elite, Level 12 citizen and the daughter of a ruling family, Caitlyn has fought her entire life to not follow in her father's footsteps.

When her secret identity as Sparks, a low-level disc-bike racer, is discovered, her father ships her off to the Academia for Planetary Alliance to turn her into a proper politician. Determined to toe the line until she can escape, Caitlyn's plans are

once again thrown off balance when she meets her new classmates, Declan and twin brothers, Felix and Connor—three men who know her and are determined to become a team.



## **The Heart of Five: Divinity Saga Meg's Story Part One** **By LA Kirk**

Average is how Megan Little would describe her life until her twenty-fifth birthday. Her body starts to change like a countdown clock heading for zero. When her research on the transformation proves futile, she makes a desperate decision and travels north to investigate a supernatural reason for what's happening.

On the way, a chance encounter leaves her car vandalized, forcing her to stay the night in a small, tourist town.

Five men step in to help Megan only to open up more questions in her search for the truth.



**Precursor: Suoja Guild Book 1**  
**By AJ Anders**

In the war against demons, Evie's father stands against all things supernatural, including the Surmata, a race of beings that want to coexist with humans while they wage their own war against the demonic race. Raised in the Resistance, Evie struggles to stay true to herself and not fall under her father's brainwashing.

With everyone around her a possible spy for her father, Evie's sole relief from camp life comes from her best friend Maximilian. When he introduces her to his friends outside of the Resistance, Evie discovers a whole new world and possibly a place to belong.

But forces inside the camp are determined to keep Evie in her place, even if it means destroying

who she is.



**Sanguine: Blood Slave Book 1**  
**By HK Khan**

Vampires 'came out' nearly a century ago, and have convinced the world that they are model citizens. There are official donor centers where you can give your blood freely in exchange for the high that vampire venom can give you, and everything seems on the up and up. But that's not necessarily the case. There's a black market trade for blood slaves, and there, they try to strip you of everything that makes you human. Even your name.

As with every society, there are rogues, and the rogue vampires see humans as their chattel and treat them as such. The Hunters, a secret organization of elite-trained men and women, track down the rogues in the shadows and protect humanity as best they can.

It's rare for someone to escape enslavement, but every so often, someone manages to break free, and if they're lucky, they land, quite literally, in the arms of seven handsome Hunters.