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Penelope King

A Demon Made Me Do It

Demonblood Series #1

A novel

by

Penelope King

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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter 1. Liora

Whoever says Hell is the worst place imaginable obviously never spent a day at Dove Creek High School. There needs to be an inscription on its front gates reading, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind is the soft hum of my teacher’s voice, but I pay no attention to his words. The clock on the wall ticks by so slowly I swear it actually stops a few times. I close my eyes and try to imagine a happier place—anywhere but here, doing anything but wasting my life pretending to belong in a world that hates me.

“According to Dante, the eighth circle is reserved for those who have committed treacherous acts of fraud and deceit...” Mr. Sodenberg drones. I love how he has the ability to make a journey through Hell seem less interesting than a trip to the dentist.

To be fair, I’d already read *Inferno* when I was eight years old as part of my early demonhood education. Although that was nearly nine years ago, I still have perfect recall of each and every word, as with anything else I’ve ever read. Listening to it being discussed in class is as exciting as re-learning the alphabet without all the fun of singing the catchy tune that goes along with it.

I half-open one eye to peek outside the window. Bare bones of tree branches tremble in the wind. Soon it will be winter. Soon the snow will come. Then, not only will I be stuck inside a classroom for most of the day, my lazy afternoons in the woods will be limited even more. I’ll be trapped in the small cabin I share with Tatiana, my guardian.

Trapped. Story of my life.

Trapped in this classroom, trapped in my body, trapped in the daylight, trapped in this false world. Trapped in limbo with no escape in sight.

It's cold outside, so when my skin starts suddenly warming up, I know something's wrong. As the sun-burning sensation slowly spreads up my neck, I begin to panic.

Oh, no. *No, no, please no.*

"Liora Greyson!" Mr. Sodenberg's angry voice and a book cracking against his podium snaps me to attention. I raise my head from the cradle of my arms and shoot him an icy glare.

"What?" My voice doesn't belong to me anymore. It sounds like me, but it's not.

He scowls at me from behind his reading glasses. "I'm sorry if our discussion on Dante's *Inferno* is interfering with your naptime." The rest of the class titters, except for my friend Corrine Wilson, who looks at me with concern.

"Yeah, mind keeping it down? *Whah Whah Whah*. That's what you sound like." I can't stop the words coming out. My heart sinks and I close my eyes. Realizing I still have *some* control over my own body, I place a hand over my mouth. But it's too late; the damage has already been done.

Again.

Shocked gasps mix with nervous laughs and disapproving sneers. Mr. Sodenberg's face puffs up red and his normally squinty eyes look like they're about to pop out of their sockets.

"Principal's office. *Now.*"

Great. What else is new?

"...and you tell him that you are no longer welcome in my classroom. I will not tolerate this type of behavior."

"Yes, *sir.*" My hand rises to my head and gives a snappy salute before I'm able to force it back down. I grab my book bag, ignoring the superior looks from my classmates. They enjoy seeing me get in trouble, as if

watching the weird-freak-girl getting punished for being a weird-freak-girl makes them feel better about their simple, ordinary lives. But no matter how strange they think I might be, they'd be *terrified* if they knew the real truth.

As they should be.

A cool blast of air stings my face as I trudge down the school's breezeway. I zip up my jacket and debate walking right past the principal's office and right off campus.

I lean against a rusted locker while weighing my options. Either deal with a smart-mouthed demon hijacking my body and getting me in trouble, or, face an angry witch waiting for me at home if I ditch again.

Awesome.

Dante never covered this part in his guidebook through the nine circles of Hell. He only wrote of going to a place where demons punished sinners *after* their deaths. Nowhere does he mention the personal hell of having to share a body with a living demon who could torment at will, but I'm sure he would have appreciated the cruel irony. Perhaps this could have been his 'tenth circle'.

After a few moments I decide to take my chances with the principal. My body temperature feels back to normal, so I think I'm safe for now. I can only pray. The secretary, Ms. Fleming, doesn't even ask why I'm in here, she just gives me her usual hateful glare. I take a seat on an ugly orange chair, stare at the old Civil War photographs on the wall, and ignore her dirty looks.

Principal Winters opens his door and clears his throat. "Miss Greyson, come in." He definitely isn't happy to see me. But that's the reaction of most people. Some, like Ms. Fleming, openly despise me. Others try to act nice, but I can always tell they feel uncomfortable. It's all about the eye

contact—or lack thereof. People tend to look off to the side when speaking to me, or just glance for a nanosecond before averting their gaze. Maybe eyes really are the windows to the soul, and they don't want to see how ugly mine is.

"So, Liora, what brings you here today?" He relaxes in his chair as if we're going to have a nice chat about the weather, his eyes focusing on the wall behind me.

I actually like Mr. Winters. He sort of reminds me of Santa Claus, and unlike his repulsive secretary, he genuinely seems to care about the students. I even give him some credit for trying to be nice to me.

"I may have nodded off in English class. Mr. Sodenberg wasn't happy about it."

"Ahh, yes." He nods as if he understands completely. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Fine."

"How are things at home?"

"Perfect."

His smile fades. "How is your grandmother these days? I know you take care of her by yourself and that must be quite a burden for you."

"She's great. Absolutely no trouble at all."

He frowns, determined to solve me...to fix me. *Yeah, good luck with that.*

"Are you bored in your classes, Liora?"

Why, yes. Yes I am, Principal Winters. I am bored out of my freakin' mind! This place makes me stupider by the minute!

"No, I'm fine. Academically challenged. Intellectually stimulated."

He ignores my sarcasm. "I'm going to be straight with you, Liora. I'm becoming very concerned with your behavior lately..."

That makes two of us...

"...this is the fourth time you've been sent here in the last two weeks. Skipping classes, the incident in gym..."

"I told you, that fight wasn't my fault," I interrupt, but there's no point in arguing. I'm pretty sure he won't buy my 'a-demon-made-me-do-it' excuse, but I'm half-tempted to say it anyway. But then he'll just send me to the school guidance counselor *again*, and she'll tell Tatiana she's concerned with my mental health *again*. Tatiana will have to smooth things over *again* and get mad at me *again*. Pass.

He leans forward in his chair and shuffles some papers on his desk. "There is no question you are academically gifted. Your test scores are consistently the highest in your class and your grades impeccable, despite your apparent lack of effort. Your future is wide open for any number of incredible educational and professional opportunities, if you so desired. Yet you don't appear to care at all, and this concerns me. You seem to enjoy mocking anyone who tries to help you. I just wish I knew where this poor attitude of yours comes from."

Trust me, you don't want to know. "I'm sorry. I'll try to do better. More caring, less mocking. I promise." I force a smile and hope that's the end of it.

But my optimism quickly turns into dread when the familiar stinging creeps up from my stomach, over my chest, and down my arms and legs. She's back.

I need to get away from here. Unfortunately, Principal Winters still wants to chat. He opens a file and carefully peruses its contents. I shift uncomfortably in my seat and take several deep breaths, focusing all of my energy on remaining present and in control.

I am Liora Greyson... I am Liora Greyson... I am Liora Greyson.

But Her electric threads of fire spread throughout my body like a swarm of army ants marching to battle. A battle I will lose.

“Have you given any more thought to your plans after graduation? Mrs. Collins has reported you’ve skipped all of your college prep counseling appointments. As a senior, you don’t have much time left to get your applications in. I have taken the liberty of finding some schools...”

I am Liora Greyson. I am human. I am here. This is my time, not yours...

My silent chant goes unheeded. It’s futile to ever try to fight Her. Her energy overtakes me and again I’m nothing more than a mere spectator—a silent, powerless passenger in my own body. She fixes my gaze hypnotically on Mr. Winters, who instantly freezes and stares back.

“Mister Winters, excuse me, *Principal* Winters, thank you for your concern, but there’s no need to worry about me anymore. I have things figured out and will be just fine. I’m leaving now, and you won’t stop me. In fact, you’ll forget you even saw me today. Everything’s cool as far as Liora Greyson is concerned. She’s your favorite student. You *adore* her.” My voice sounds sweeter than sugar drenched in honey.

Still holding the file in midair, Mr. Winters nods robotically.

“You may speak.”

“Th-th-thank you...th-th-thank you for c-coming in. P-please let me know if I can h-h-help you with anything...anything at all...”

“Thank you, kind sir, I’ll be sure to do that. You have a nice day, now. Ta ta,” I sing and exit his office. One look at Ms. Fleming silences her into submission, and she stares at me like a petrified toad.

Somewhere between the dried-up flower beds outside the offices and the cracked sidewalk, Her invading force recedes, allowing me to regain

control. But there is *no way* I'm staying in school for the rest of the day with Her acting up, regardless of the consequences waiting for me at home.

Fighting back tears of frustration, I weave my way through the collection of old pick-up trucks and rusty hand-me-downs populating the student parking lot, my mind a muddled mess. Why is She showing up when it's not her turn? Nighttime belongs to her, but the day belongs to *me*. And why is Tatiana forcing me to participate in this ridiculous charade of being a normal teenage girl anyway? Clearly it's impossible. I am anything *but* normal and trying to act as if I am is nothing more than a masochistic exercise in futility.

But despite everything I'm feeling at this moment, it's the helplessness that bothers me the most. Not having control over my own life. Always being at the mercy of others with powers greater than mine.

I am so freaking *over it*.

"Hi there, Miss...excuse me?" I don't even notice the lanky guy leaning against the side of a shiny black pickup truck until he calls to me. I want to ignore him and keep moving, but I can't. His voice is like an invisible lasso pulling me back.

"Yes?" I turn around slowly, wary of the stranger witnessing my mad escape. If he's one of the school's security guards, I'm sunk.

He slowly jogs toward me, and I roll my eyes in annoyance. This whole idea of lame, wanna-be- rent-a-cops actually providing us with any sort of 'security' is *such* a joke. All they do is bust students who don't follow the rules. They'll never be able to protect anyone from the *real* dangers lurking right under their noses.

But as he gets closer, I'm relieved to see he's just a boy. My age. He shouldn't care that I was ditching. I give a furtive glance around the parking

lot. We're all alone.

"Hi," he says.

I don't know who he is, but he's not from around here, of that I'm certain. His shiny leather boots appear to be new and expensive and his cable-knit sweater straight off a Ralph Lauren model. But it's the jeans that give him away. All the guys around here wear Levi's like they're an assigned uniform. This boy has on designer jeans. He seems out of place at a backwoods high school deep in rural Virginia. He *should* be strolling around a majestic estate in the English countryside or on a yacht in some ritzy ditzy marina on the coast.

"Hi," I say, even warier now.

He grins, and his dark blue eyes catch the early morning sunlight. He's much taller now that he's standing right in front of me. I tilt my head to meet his amused expression. "Are you a student here?" he asks.

I shrug. "Technically, I guess." *Bring it on, Mr. Fashion Police Wanna-Be.*

He chuckles, and brushes his ebony hair away from his face. "Well, then, maybe you can help me. I'm a little turned around. I'm supposed to go to the registration office to enroll for classes, but I'm not sure where it is."

"You're gonna start going to school here?" My pulse inexplicably speeds up at my question.

He nods. "Yup. Senior. Sucks having to start over now. Oh well." He smiles, and I can't help but think he could have been in a toothpaste commercial with those perfectly straight, white teeth. Definitely not from around here.

"Why would you come *here*?" Oh, yeah. That was smooth. I should've signed up to be the town greeter.

He laughs again. "Sorry?...this is Dove Creek High School, isn't it? Home of the Fighting Spartans?" His eyes move to the large blue and white sign behind me, but never lose any of their affability.

"Well, yeah...I mean...did you just move to town or something? Like, on *purpose*?" Wow, am I really one of those girls who turns into a total idiot when talking to a cute guy?

"Yeah, a few weeks ago. I came to live with my uncle. He works out at the Flintridge mines. You seem so surprised. Don't new people ever move here?"

I actually have to think about this for a moment. "Maybe, I guess. Most people just can't wait to get out, is all. Small town. Smaller people. Not a lot going on, no reason to be here if you don't have to be..."

Okay, I *am* officially one of those idiot girls. Whatever happened to 'Hi, welcome to Dove Creek! We're so happy you're here. My name is Liora Greyson and I'll be your friendly guide...'?

"I'm sure I'll find something to keep me occupied," he says, the twinkle back in his eyes. I like his eyes. Not just because of their cobalt color, but because they aren't afraid of mine. "Besides, I like small towns. I've lived in big cities my whole life. It's nice out here. Peaceful...quiet. You can hear yourself think."

I scrunch my face. Why does he say that like it's a *good* thing? I'd do anything not to hear the thoughts that roam through *my* head. Especially lately, with Her being so psychotically obsessed with suicidal vengeance.

Instead of giving him a reply that will *really* convince him I'm a complete freak job, I take a deep breath and point to the scene of my earlier crime. "The administration office is over there, under the archway by the flowerbeds. Go down that little path and it's the first door on your right.

Don't pay any attention to the secretary. She's a nasty troll with a stick up her butt."

"Got it, thanks." He squints as he surveys the unique architecture. "That sure is a strange looking building. It doesn't even look like a school."

Oh, I got this one. Only heard the story a million and a half times. "That's because it used to be a Jesuit Monastery. It's almost two hundred years old. Believe it or not, those are the original stained-glass windows." I indicate the rotunda where broken colors catch the sun's rays. "It was used as a hospital during the civil war, and afterwards they converted it into a school."

Surprise colors his face. "You mean to tell me you go to a school that used to be a church?" he asks in disbelief.

"I don't think a monastery is *exactly* the same thing as a church. Besides, it's not like it's a religious school now or anything..."

"Still..."

His reaction is confusing so I shrug again, my default response when I don't know what to say or do. The history of Dove Creek High is a source of pride for the town-folk; I've never seen anyone bothered by it before. And that was my only small-talk ace up my sleeve. Great.

"Is there a place of worship in there? An altar or a prayer room?"

And now he's freaked. Good going, Liora.

"Um...well, the building with all the stained glass windows used to be a chapel. But now we just use it as the auditorium. No one actually *prays* there." Maybe's he's some sort of religious nut? Figures. All hot guys have a major flaw somewhere.

He considers this for a moment. "Fascinating," he finally murmurs. When he catches my quizzical glance he quickly adds, "I just didn't expect such a small town to have such an interesting landmark is all."

Shrug number five. "It's about the only interesting thing about this place. It's all downhill from here." Yup. I'm nothing if not consistent.

He turns his attention back to me and gives a small smile. "Somehow, I doubt that," he says under his breath.

I blink. "Huh?"

"If you don't mind me asking, why are you ditching?" he continues without missing a beat.

"Um...what makes you think I am?" My gaze darts around the parking lot again. How long have we been standing here? It feels like less than a second and forever at the same time.

"Well, because school is that way," he says pointing back toward the brick buildings, "but you were headed *that* way." He points to the line of trees on the other side of the road, the corners of his eyes crinkling in amusement.

"Oh, right. Yeah, um...I'm not feeling very well. I was just going to go home and get some rest." I hope the lie doesn't show in my voice. Tatiana always says I'm a terrible liar. Of course, she's not exactly the most unbiased source.

He leans against a rusty blue pick-up truck. "Sorry to hear that. I hope you feel better soon. It'd be nice to have at least one familiar person here. It's not easy being the new guy and not knowing anybody."

I nod sympathetically while thinking how *not at all* sorry for him I feel. This is one boy who won't be lonely for long. Even if the other guys in the class have a hard time accepting this big-city newcomer, the girls will swarm to him like horny bees to a very sexy honey pot. I realize this thought disturbs me.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine," I mumble, my mouth suddenly dry.

His eyes lock on mine, and for a split second he sees right through me; his focused attention makes me feel as if I'm standing alone on a stage under a dozen bright spotlights, vulnerable and exposed. I gulp and my heart beats faster.

"Would you like a ride home, or do you have your own car?" His voice is soft, and I'm taken aback at his question—by the way he asks it. Almost intimately, as if we're already old friends. Many people I've known for *years* don't talk to me with the effortless ease this strange boy does.

"No...thanks. I mean, yeah, I have a car, but it's at home. I prefer to walk. The fresh air does me good. But thanks anyways."

"All right, then. That way, you say?" He motions back toward the buildings. "First door on the right and beware of nasty trolls?"

"Yeah...and if you could do me a favor and not mention that you saw me, that'd be great." I grimace as I think of the trouble waiting for me tomorrow, let alone what's waiting for me at home later today.

He arches a dark eyebrow, and his eyes twinkle again. "Don't worry; your secret is safe with me. Besides, I wouldn't even know *who* it was I was ratting out," he adds pointedly.

"Oh, sorry...My name is Liora. Liora Greyson." Yes. Manners. I knew I had some somewhere.

"It's nice to meet you, Liora. I'm Kieron Ambrose." He holds out his hand and I automatically take it; his large, warm palm makes mine seem cold and tiny. He gives it a gentle squeeze and every cell in my body wakes up on fire. I quickly pull away, not wanting to disturb the *real* fire inside me.

"Nice to meet you, too. Welcome to Dove Creek...I hope you like it here." I finally remember my welcome pitch and wish I hadn't. It sounds even cheesier out loud than in my mind.

"I'm definitely liking it so far," he says. His eyes never leave mine.

There's a rolling jostle in my stomach, but I'm not afraid. This strange fluttering isn't being caused by *Her*. Nervously, I tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ears and smile at my new friend.

"Good luck in there...I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

"Hello, Liora. I was wondering when you'd decide to come home." Tatiana is hunched over the stove fixing dinner as I walk in. When she turns to face me, I'm relieved to see there's no sign of anger in her face or disapproval in her milky-white eyes.

I'd spent the rest of the day in the forest, reading by my favorite tree and thinking of Kieron. I knew it was stupid to get all excited over some guy I didn't even know, but I couldn't help it. There was something different about him. And the way he spoke to me and looked at me...as if I was normal...as if he actually liked me...as a person...

It had felt nice. Really nice. A girl could get used to it, that's for sure.

Any girl but *me*, that is.

"Hi, Tatiana. Sorry, I lost track of the time." I brace myself for her scolding. She easily senses my presence within a one hundred mile radius and knows *exactly* where I've been all day. But she says nothing. Instead, she continues with the food prep and hums softly to herself.

I take a seat at the table and watch her curiously. Although she's completely blind, Tatiana moves around with the confident agility of someone with twenty-twenty vision. She perceives objects around her with an inhuman clarity, her 'inner eyes' as she calls it. But that's not why I'm mystified.

“Do not apologize to me. The sun is nearly set. It is you who must hurry if you do not wish to feel ill tomorrow,” she says as she carries over two plates of steaming food.

I quickly scarf down some of the beef and potato stew, and try to figure out a way to tell her about what happened. I need answers, even if she’ll be irritated with me.

“How was your day today?” she asks right on cue.

I swallow and try to read her face. She could have been a professional poker player.

“Truthfully, not great. She showed up again today and got me in trouble in class.”

Tatiana nods. “Was it a full transformation?”

I shake my head. “No, it wasn’t like what happens at night. This was more like...an out-of-body-experience, but while I was still in it. I was aware of everything She said and did...She made me say things...I think her powers worked too, judging from how the people acted. Why is she doing that? How is she even *able* to? Can you make her stop?”

Tatiana slowly chews her food, and for a moment I think she might not answer me. I know how much it bothers her to always be stuck in the middle of the two of us. Finally, she dabs at the corners of her mouth with a napkin. “I will speak with Her, but I believe she is just reacting to the recent events and heightened danger. Perhaps she is staying close to the surface as a protective measure.”

“She’s not *protecting* me; she’s getting me in trouble!”

“You know She has difficulty distinguishing the difference. What is right for her may be entirely wrong for you.”

I make a noise that’s something between a cough and a snort. “That, right there, is the understatement of the *century*, Tatiana.”

“I will have a word with her...”

“Yes, please tell her to butt out of my life. If she does it one more time, I’ll find a way to wake up during *her* time and make her say and do something really stupid. See how much she likes it.” My threat is hollow and Tatiana knows it. She knows I do everything in my power not to wake up at night and witness the world my demon half inhabits. The only thing that keeps me from going *completely* insane is not knowing anything that happens from dusk to dawn. Blissful ignorance being my only saving grace in this twisted situation.

I return to my meal, but Tatiana fixates her compelling gaze on me. Great.

“What?” I mutter. If she’s still going to give me a hard time about leaving even after I explained what had happened...

“Your energy is conflicted...you speak with anger and frustration, yet there is a happy glow deep within you that was not there before. I am curious as to what caused it.”

I gulp, close my eyes, and pray Tatiana can’t sense how hot my face flushes.

“It’s nothing, really,” I mumble. Oh, please. Who am I trying to fool? Might as well spill it. “There was a new boy there today. Guess his uncle works out at the mines, so he’s going to go to school here. He’s nice, is all. Sorta cute, too.” I shove a heaping spoonful of stew into my mouth and lower my head.

She nods and tilts up her chin. “Ahh, yes. The new arrival. I sensed him several days ago. However, I was unsure as to his exact purpose, and if, in fact, your paths would meet. Destinies have yet to be written, and he is only a half, bound by the dark and embraced by the light. Free will is his, for he shan’t be at the mercy of any master if liberty is within his grasp.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. That's the thing about Tatiana. She'll be perfectly normal one minute, but start speaking in nonsensical riddles the next. I take a swig of some apple juice and glance out the window.

"Do you know what She's doing tonight?" I ask, eager to change the subject.

"Taxes," Tatiana replies. "Should be uneventful. Humans only."

"She's not going to be happy about that. You must know she's completely obsessed with hunting the Amazèa demons ever since she heard they were in the area. Even when She's not surfacing I can sometimes hear her thoughts...she's seriously gunning for a battle. I don't think she'll stop just to collect some money."

"She will, because her search is futile for now. The Amazèa have already left our territory..."

Her words fade away as the first waves of fiery tingles flush through my weakening body. My time is over. I try to push my remaining food away from me, but it's too late. My arms have already gone limp. They are no longer mine.

My fork clanks on the floor. Everything goes dark.

When I open my eyes I'm sitting at the table across from Tatiana. She gives me a small smile.

"Hello, Lucky."

Chapter 2. Lucky

A pungent odor assaults my senses, and I look down in disgust. Even when I *could* consume human food I'd always been a strict vegetarian, unlike Liora, who insists on fueling our body with animal carcasses. It's one thing to try to ignore this revolting fact—quite another to wake up to it staring me in the face.

Electric fire races through my veins as I raise my arms to obliterate the offensive sight. But Tatiana's words stop me cold.

"Please don't, dear. I'm particularly fond of those dishes."

I scowl at my guardian, but allow the dancing flames on my palm to extinguish. "I know she did that on purpose. She knows this garbage makes me sick. You'd think she'd be a little more appreciative after what I did for her today." I kick my chair back with more force than necessary and move to the other side of the room.

"And what was that?" Tatiana asks as she clears away the plates.

"Some idiots were giving her a hard time in school. I took care of it. And I was *nice* about it. All smiles and sweetness... mostly. Why do you insist on making her go to that horrid prison, anyway?"

Tatiana says nothing and takes the dish towel from her shoulder, using it to wipe the counter. I glance down at the clothes covering my body and moan. "And for the love of Lucifer, please tell me why she has to wear these trash bags *every day*. Gah, it's a good thing *one* of us has some taste."

"I think Liora has been more depressed lately." Tatiana dries her hands and follows me into my room. She perches on the corner of the bed and smooths her Victorian-styled dress over her dainty knees. "Lucky, why have you been taking over when it's not your turn?"

“I’d be depressed too, if every time I looked in a mirror I saw a ridiculous emo goth moping back at me. I mean, the black nail polish is cool, but *seriously*...that girl needs to add some color to her wardrobe and lay off the raccoon eyeliner. Please tell her that *funeral chic* is over,” I say as I remove her makeup and reapply my own.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

I hunt through the closet and retrieve my selection before responding. I can tell Tatiana’s mad at me, but I have a very good reason for showing up today.

“Well, someone has to be on point, especially now. I can’t let my guard down for one second with the Amazèa back in town. And Liora, she’s so weak. If they wanted to get me, what better way than to go through her when I’d be unprotected and utterly helpless? Thankfully, she’s been making it much easier for me to pop in... she just sorta mentally *checks out* and *wants* me to take over, even if she won’t admit it.”

Leave it to Liora to blame me for everything. If she hadn’t really wanted me there, I wouldn’t have been able to break through. But as usual she failed to acknowledge this tiny little detail.

Tatiana takes a moment to consider this. “Perhaps you feel that to be true, but it has an unwelcome effect on her well-being. I’m going to request you not interfere in her life unless it’s an extreme emergency. A matter of life or death.”

“Why? I don’t hurt anyone...not *really*...well, nothing permanent, usually. And I need to make sure I’m safe—”

“You know perfectly well your vessel is safe while Liora has possession. Demons dare not cross over the sacred land where her school resides, and Light-angels cannot sense her true nature as long as she is in her pure human form. When you arrive uninvited, especially after she has left our

realm and entered the domain of Man, you put her—and yourself—at risk. And it bothers her. How would you like it if she showed up and took over while you were on a hunt?”

I can't help but laugh at the thought. “That would almost be funny if it wouldn't get us both killed. I can picture her now... ‘Ahh, a scary demon, help! Eeeks, a smelly vampire, somebody call 911!’ That is if she doesn't fall off Diablo and break her ass first...”

“...But okay, okay,” I say in response to the stern look on Tatiana's face. “Her pathetic life in Sapie-land is Boresville, anyway. I'd much rather sleep through it.” I give her a playful wink and pat her tiny legs. The fiercest of fire-demons don't faze me one bit, but I'll never risk facing the wrath of a witch, especially one who can summon more powerful forces than I can imagine with just a few utterances from her withered lips.

“Thank you, Lucky.” Tatiana retreats to her room.

I push Tatiana's reprimand and Liora's pathetic tattle-telling from my head. Right now I have more important things to worry about. As I strip off Liora's shapeless disguise of black rags and change into skintight, red leather pants and a matching vest, my blood churns with heightened anticipation.

How long have I dreamed of this night?

After throwing on my favorite black riding cloak, I fasten it securely at the base of my throat with my Boumeaux—the sacred jewel of my tribe that I wear with pride. Only those of us belonging to the royal order of *demonia angelis* can bear having the stone in our possession; imposters will instantly burn to ash if they so much as touch it. It also allows me to enter the Land of Thiberoux, the mystical realm of the Dark-angels. Most importantly, however, the black diamond broach serves as a warning beacon to the presence of Light-angels, even cleverly disguised. The enchanted jewel will

glow brightly, alerting me mortal danger is nearby. Fortunately, I've never had mine light up, but I know others who have. It allowed them to barely escape with their lives.

A final coat of cherry red lip gloss and a quick brush through my ebony hair and I'm ready to go. Tonight is the night...I can feel it in my bones. I was so close to catching the Amazèa last night, but they eluded me just as dawn approached. Tonight those bastards are all mine. Although it's my sacred duty to deliver Justice, and I do it nightly, this mission is different. This is revenge.

This is *personal*.

Tatiana is in her room, elbow deep in her cast-iron cauldron. She performs this ritual every night, whether it's finding me demons to hunt, humans to torment, or simply keeping a watchful eye on the surrounding lands.

"Where are they?" I demand. No need to say who 'they' are; she knows exactly who I'm talking about.

She swirls her hands through the pot's murky waters. A cool steam rises up over her serene, ageless face. "The Amazèa have left our realm and are now safely within the territory of the Belith tribe. As you are strictly forbidden to cross over to their lands, tonight you have another task—"

"Wait...Hold up. *What?* What do you mean they *left?*" I feel like someone just whacked me in the gut with a troll-hammer. "They just got here a few weeks ago..."

"I do not know...Perhaps they knew they were being followed. Perhaps they were called away. Nevertheless, you know you cannot hunt outside the territory, especially in one protected by such a hostile clan. You must bide your time until the Amazèa return. For now, there are two humans in need of a visit. They both agreed to exchange favor with an Uliminiti demon for

power and riches. One man will soon be elected a state senator, and the other is an actor who will win a major award. Both are home and alone, so there will be minimal conflict.”

I stare at Tatiana, my mouth agape. Surely, she’s not serious. I’m gearing up for slaying and demon carnage and she wants me to go *toll collecting*? And not even from some low-level demons, but pitiful Sapies? So *not* cool, and not even in my job-description. As an Aequitas demon, it’s my duty to torment and inflict Justice on those who deserve it. I’m good at my job. I *like* my job. Extorting money from greedy Sapies is Tatiana’s deal; she just uses me as the muscle. I admit, I enjoy it sometimes. I get a kick out of seeing the Sapie’s faces when I announce who I am and why I’m here...

But not tonight. Tonight the only creatures I’m interested in tormenting are the evil monsters who murdered my best friends—right before they cast their wicked spell that split my precious soul in two.

I’ve been so patient. Not that I’ve really had much of a choice. I’ve thought of little besides revenge every night for the past five years. Five years, four months, six days and two hours to be exact. But the creatures I sought have always been out of my reach, for I’m restrained by the jurisdiction of my tribe’s influence and the unnatural limitations on my time.

But finally, after all this time—after years of training, plotting, waiting, seething... *finally*, the Amazèa had returned to my hunting grounds. The end to my nightmare was in sight. I would kill them once and for all, lift the curse that binds me to the night, and deliver Justice for my fallen friends.

Now Tatiana is telling me the Amazèa have just up and *left*?

“I don’t believe you.” My voice shakes with thinly restrained fury. “You just don’t want me hunting them. You’re just afraid that—”

"I never lie, Lucky. You, of all beings, know that. I admit I disapprove of your perilous quest, but I will not try to stop you. Justice is the essence of your existence, and I cannot deny that. This path is yours and yours alone, and you are well aware of the consequences. But for now, I can assure you the Amazèa are no longer within your range," Tatiana says quietly.

I clench my teeth and glare at her. *What's that expression about not killing the messenger?*

But I know she's not lying. If she says they're gone—they're gone. And there's nothing I can do about it. For now.

This is all Liora's fault. If she didn't turn into a stupid Sapie, rendering me impotent from dawn to dusk, I'd have caught the Amazèa by now. In bitter silence I fume while Tatiana gives me the details for the night's assignment, only half-hearing what she's saying. When she's done, I storm out of our cabin and into the brisk night air. Pulling my hood over my head, I let out a sharp whistle.

The clomping of hooves sound as the Arabian stallion emerges from his place in the shadows. He nuzzles his nose into my chest and gives a low grunt. I stroke his long ebony neck and press my cheek to his. Then, I grab a chunk of his silky mane and swiftly mount the smooth sway of his back.

"Fly, Diablo," I whisper and lean forward. He takes off like a shot and we streak toward the forest. Diablo knows the surrounding woods even better than I do, and as he races along the narrow paths I keep my head down to avoid the low-hanging tree branches, my rage growing steadily with each beat of his hooves.

Another night of being trapped.

I hadn't always been like this. Up until five years ago, when I was twelve, I was a regular demion, a demi-demon with a perfectly beautiful blend of the Ancient Powers of Darkness inherited from my demon sire,

combined with the gentle capabilities and goodness of my human mother. I had the best of both worlds— a viable connection to the Powers along with all of the benefits of being a human, a *Sapie*, we call them. Sapies don't know we exist, but we're everywhere. We look like them, talk like them, and act like them. But we're better than them in almost every way. At least, I think so.

I served a purpose in this world. I knew my place. That is, until the Amazèa cast a spell in an attempt to separate me from my Powers. They succeeded, sort of. I still have my Powers, but they split my soul in half— shattered me right down the middle. Now, I'm only alive at night. My human half, Liora, lives during the day, complete with her own personality, memories, free will.

When the Amazèa separated my demon half from my human half, it was far worse than if I had died. For so long afterwards I wished it *had* been me who died. Instead, it had been my best friends, Kayla and Michael Roberts, who paid the ultimate price while I was forced to watch them suffer.

I've never forgiven myself for being unable to help them.

I've never forgotten the vows I made beside their crumpled, lifeless bodies as I swore to avenge their murders to my last dying breath.

I'll never stop trying to lift the curse and restore my broken soul, whatever the cost.

Killing the Amazèa is my only option. There is no plan B.

Unfortunately, this isn't as easy as slaying a run-of-the-mill parasite demon or even a lower Light-angel. It's strictly forbidden by Demonic Law for any demon or demion to attack another ranked higher in the hierarchy. As far as the chain of command goes, the Amazèa rank near the top while I rest somewhere in the middle.

I don't care. I only care about revenge for Kayla and Michael.

I only care about getting my life back.

Whatever the cost.

Diablo gallops us closer to our destination, and I force away the anguish that threatens to swallow my heart whole. Soon we'll reach a Portal to Thiberoux. In order to pass through its protective seal, I need to focus. As the cold fog suddenly appears, enveloping us in complete darkness, I wrap my hand around my Boumeaux. Diablo, unfazed by the blinding barrier all around us, continues racing forward.

I close my eyes. I feel my palm smolder; the stone vibrates in my grasp. Silently, I recite the secret command:

Hasish Auria, permissum mihi obduco.

Hasish Auria, permissum mihi obduco.

Hasish Auria, permissum mihi obduco.

The dense fog quickly lifts, and I welcome my new surroundings. My *real* world – not the one Liora lives in. There, I am an outsider. Unwanted. Here is where I belong.

The three full moons of the goddess Illyria glow brightly in the eternally sunless sky, illuminating the landscape. Acres of lush foliage paint the hillsides vibrant green and gold, untouched by Man's seasons which turn their trees into skeletons. There is no death here. Only life. And limbo. But never death.

The Land of Thiberoux. Home of the royal descendants of the first Dark-angels, the enchanted realm of *demonia*. Safely hidden from the naïve eyes of the human world.

Once, after one of my first visits to Thiberoux as a young demion, I looked for its location on a Sapie map. I was surprised to see that instead of the lakes of fire and oceans of ice, volcanoes exploding with thunder and lightning, magical forests full of sprites and elves, and the pits of swirling

vortexes connecting various dimensions, there were cities, freeways, two airports, and four major universities. Two separate and opposite worlds existing in the exact same space. I used to wonder how that could be possible.

Now I totally understand.

Diablo grunts, his powerful muscles push and strain as we head up the mountainside. I bury my face in his mane and squeeze my legs tight. He's never thrown me, but the curves here are wicked, the cliffs treacherous, and he barrels around them with terrifying agility.

He eases to a trot as we approach the River of Kings. The stream of churning fire flows for miles in either direction and creates a perfect circle around the inner sanctum of Dryndara, my tribe's territory of Thiberoux. A massive beast, nearly invisible in the night save for his piercing yellow eyes, growls menacingly at us from the base of the footbridge.

I eye the creature with caution and dismount. A light tap on his hindquarters sends Diablo cantering into the shadows to await further commands. After dusting off my cloak and lowering my hood, I approach the sentry. The hellhound growls again and bares his razor-sharp teeth.

"What's your problem?" I ask good-naturedly and give him an affectionate pat on the head.

I take several steps back as the canine begins to tremble violently. He rises on his haunches, twisting and convulsing until his new shape is formed. It is that of a young man, skin stretched tight over rippling muscles—his formerly beastly body now a vision of smooth and sculpted perfection. He runs his hands through his bronze hair and looks at me through the lushest of lashes. Fire mixed with desire smolders in his coffee-colored eyes. His sensuous mouth, one designed to render human females utterly helpless, turns slightly down in a heartbreaking pout.

Once again, I count my lucky stars I'm not a Sapie. It is so *not fair* that he is so much more beautiful than me. As a demion, I have a hard enough time resisting him. As a Sapie, I'd be toast.

"I'm mad at you." He runs his gaze up and down my body and lets out a soft, lustful moan.

I roll my eyes. Bones is my best friend, and I know he can't help himself, BUT STILL... Just *once* it'd be nice for him to not greet me with his über sexy, 'come-hither-and-do-me' persona. A demion can only take so much, you know? Oh well, what did I really I expect from something that's also half incubus?

"Yeah? What'd I do this time?" Despite my bad mood, I smile. Seeing Bones always makes me feel better.

"You were supposed to meet me by Cyler's Point last night so we could go into the city together, remember? You were going to torment some of your regulars while I found a few virgins to mate with. But you totally blew me off. Any of this ringing a bell?"

Guilty. I *had* totally forgotten.

"I'm sorry...I overheard something last night and had to check it out. C'mon, let's go get some drinks. I'm losing my mind and need someone to talk to."

Bones gives me his very best sexy smile and shifts closer. "You know I can't leave my post while I'm on duty. But I can help you relax and take your mind off things for a while if you like." He places his hands lightly on my hips and pulls me to him.

Although Bones is perfectly well aware that I'm immune to his hypnotizing powers of seduction, he never stops trying. Usually I love it. Not tonight.

I push his hands away.

“What’s up?” he asks, still staring at my body longingly. I feel the lightest tickle of warm rays where his gaze falls and groan with genuine annoyance.

“Bones, *stop it*. You know it creeps me out when you try your powers on me. Face it, they don’t work. Never have, never will. It’s nothing personal,” I add when he gives a hurt-puppy pout. “You know how much the Sapie girls looove you.”

“Yeah, but it’s not the same. They’re all so powerless and weak, it gets a little boring. Now *you* on the other hand...” He steps closer again, reaches inside the opening of my cloak, and lightly traces his fingers over my bare abdomen.

I push him away, stronger this time. “Ugh, stop! Don’t *make* me have to hurt you. What is *with* you tonight?”

“Sorry...” he says, as if he isn’t remorseful in the slightest. “Just in the mood for some fun. I’m a little charged up. Didn’t make as many conquests as I needed last night, and tonight they put me on patrol when I *need* to be out mating. It’s been so slow out here, and then along comes the sexiest fireball for a thousand miles and you expect me to *behave*?” He laughs as if it’s the funniest idea he’s ever heard. And they say Sapie men have one-track minds; they have *nothing* on incubi. Their sole reason for existing is seduction, mating, procreating—that’s it.

I give him the dirtiest look I can and stomp toward the bridge, but he reaches out for my hand and gently pulls me back.

“Hey, Lucky, I’m sorry, hon...I’m only playing. No more. I’ll behave, I promise. What’s wrong, are you okay? Talk to me.” This time his voice is noticeably softer and his seductive aura muted.

Finally. *This* is the Bones I want to talk to. My friend. I slink over to a tree stump and plop down, covering my face with my hands.

“They’re gone,” I say, fighting back the tears threatening to form. “They got away while stupid Liora played school girl.” At these words a surge of rage floods through me. I have to sit on my hands so as not to uproot the massive stump and heave it into the pile of rocks behind me...only because I don’t want to have to sit on the ground.

Bones sits beside me on the grass. He places a comforting hand on my back, and I feel its fire.

“I know how much you wanted to get them. But I can’t say that I’m sorry you didn’t. I’m glad they’re gone,” he says quietly.

“Bones, do *not* start—” I jump to my feet and glare down at him.

“I’m sorry, Lucky, but you know how I feel. No good will come of this vendetta. Even if somehow you *do* manage to kill them you’ll likely be banished. That is, if the Legionare doesn’t kill you first. Or worse...”

“Bones, you *know* why I have to—”

He puts up his hand, cutting me off. “No, I don’t know. I’ve heard your reasons for years, but I’ve never once agreed with you, have I? Killing the Amazèa will not bring your friends back; they are long gone. You don’t even know with all certainty that your curse would be broken upon their deaths. All you will accomplish by hunting them is getting yourself killed. And maybe others you care about, if you start a war and we’re forced to take sides.”

Fiery rage boils up inside me as I stare him down. If Bones had been even the slightest bit human, he’d be dead by now under my vicious glare. But as much as I hate what he’s saying, I know he’s right.

I don’t care.

“You’re my friend. My *best* friend. You’re supposed to support me no matter what—”

An urgent howling in the distance diverts Bones' attention from my futile argument. The same one we've been having for over five years. "That sounds important. Sorry, I gotta go...you gonna be okay?" He looks at me with concern. He is so sweet when he wants to be. Damn him.

I nod. "I'll be fine. Boring night, collecting taxes. Not gonna start any demon wars, I promise." I give him a shaky smile and a quick peck on his cheek before stepping away.

His body convulses violently for a few seconds until he falls forward on his two large paws. He gently nudges my leg with his long nose, and then takes off running.

I cross the river of fire to join my family.

The entrance to Demon Bar looks like an ordinary boulder to anyone who doesn't know better. Located deep inside the inner forests of Dryndara, directly above the nexus of the Source of Energy, it's the one place where all demions and demons in the territory come to replenish.

The rock protects those who enter it, and as I press down on the hidden lever I take several deep breaths to calm myself down. Violent demons looking for a fight aren't allowed inside the enclave, and even though my anger isn't directed at anyone there, the guard won't care. Only passive demons are allowed in. And I need to drink, badly.

A small door opens, and I pass on through. I descend a flight of steps to another door, this one guarded by a young demion named Ivy.

Ivy looks sweet enough; her petite build and pale blonde hair give the impression of a helpless ingénue turned cheerleader. But she has the power to stun her victims into submission with one painful glare of her baby-blues. And if she's in a less-than-generous mood, she'll leave them in a permanent vegetative state.

“Hey, Lucky. Damn girl, you look hot,” Ivy says with an approving grin. “I’m surprised Bones even let you past him.”

“Hey, sweetie...thanks.” I lean against the doorway and casually glance inside the smoky room. “Bones had to bail on me...”

Ivy flips her golden mane over one shoulder and leans closer. “Well, if you *are* looking for some fun, our mystery guy from the other night is inside playing cards with the Deveni brothers. Go check him out and give me the scoop.”

I raise an eyebrow. “What about Cody?” Ivy and Cody have been an item for as long as I can remember. With the exception of their occasional nuclear battles, they’re perfect for each other. She shrugs to hide the wry smile spreading across her lips. “Someone’s being naughty.”

“No harm in living vicariously through my single friends, is there? Besides, I’m curious about him. He shows up from out of nowhere, and no one really knows anything about him. But he always seems like he’s looking for something or someone. He tries to act all nonchalant but I can tell he’s doing it.”

I have to laugh at her suspicious tone. Despite the fact that the Bar is swarming with demons, it’s probably one of the safest places in the realm. But I figure she must get so bored standing out here just watching all of us all night. Nothing like a good mystery to fuel the fires.

“Hmm. Better not let Cody know you’re spying on a sexy stranger, and with him standing just twenty feet away.”

Ivy shrugs. “Can I help it if these eyes see everything?” she asks innocently, as they turn a startling shade of sapphire.

I quickly avert my gaze from her cherubic face. Sure we’re friends, but with demions you can never be too careful.

“Maybe he’s a vamp?” I make a face. Vampires are the lowest of the low in our culture. Many centuries ago, some rogue demons had tried to create an army by reproducing with corpses of Sapies. The result was a living-dead creature that could only survive off the energy of living beings, as they couldn’t produce any of their own. They’re weak, stupid, and contribute nothing other than stinking up the joint for all eternity.

“No, he’s definitely a demion. He’s just playing cards with them, for whatever reason. There’s no accounting for taste.”

“Cool, I’ll have to go check him out,” I say, even though the absolute *last* thing on my mind at the moment is scamming on some new demion. I don’t want to be rude.

Jefferson Airplane’s *White Rabbit* blares from the jukebox. “What’s your poison, Lucky lady?” Cody smiles as I take a seat in front of him. He’s probably the friendliest demion in here, and one of the few in the room who isn’t openly gawking at me. He wouldn’t dare. Not with the pair of deadly eyes trained on him from the other side of the door.

“Any of my three favorite men will do.”

Cody nods and pours me a tall glass of whisky on the rocks. I always start my evenings with Jim Beam, Jack Daniels or Jose Cuervo. I gulp down the first glass, but sip the second one. Pure demons can ingest their Energy undiluted, but as a demion I need mine infused with alcohol. It’s the only way my modified body can process the magical elixir. Without my daily fix, my blood thickens and feels uncomfortably cold; my muscles get stiff and achy and my powers weaken. It’s even worse when I’m agitated, like now.

“You okay, Lucky? You seem...tense.” Cody chooses his words carefully. Years of dealing with unpredictable demons has taught him well.

“I’m fine. Just need a pick-me-up. Been a rough couple of nights.” I swivel my barstool and survey the scene. The usual crowd mingles around.

All of them, like me, forced to come here and drink from the Source.

I've always found it mildly amusing that even in Demon Bar, the occupants tend to cluster according to type, rank, and status. A group of pure, highest-level demons are playing pool in the back corner, swigging their beers. Although they look human, unlike the demions who age and eventually die, demons never do either. Immortals, all of them, they look exactly the same as they always have for many millennia.

A table of demions —doctors, lawyers, CEO's of major international corporations, several famous movie stars and even a former President and Vice President of the United States—sit on the other side of the room sipping champagne and keeping to themselves. The creatures—demons and demions blended with animal DNA—huddle by the fire pit telling each other raucous tales of mayhem and murder. And as usual, the vamps are gathered in the back, away from the rest of us.

All of them my tribe. My family.

Cody says something, but my attention is fixated on Ivy's mystery man who is staring at me intently. She noticed him a few nights ago and has been curious about him ever since, but I'd been too busy with the Amazèa to give him much thought. Now that I'm looking at him I think it's time to reconsider my indifference. This guy is *hot*, even by demion standards where beauty and perfection are the norm. I could use a distraction...

"...And you're not even listening to me, are you," Cody lightly swats my arm. "Something interesting over there?" His eyes have a mischievous gleam.

I return my attention to him and take another drink. "Nothing *that* interesting. What's up?"

"I was just saying how there's something going on around here that has some of us on edge lately."

“What do you mean?” I glance over my shoulder to give the sexy stranger a small smile, but his back is already turned.

Cody leans closer and drops his voice. “I don’t want to be spreading stories, but I want you to be extra careful out there. I’ve been hearing whispers of some trouble.”

“Like what?” He has my full attention now. If anyone has gotten wind of my hunting the Amazèa I’m in unspeakable danger. Other than Tatiana, only Bones knows what I’ve been up to. But I trust him with my life.

“Some funny stuff...some things that no one can put their finger on exactly. Unexplained disappearances of a few demions, some Sapies found murdered in Pine Canyon. And there were three border battles in the last week alone. I dunno. It just seems like something’s up...nothing good.”

I relax slightly and take a few more sips. Cody is so sweet, but he has a tendency to overreact, usually out of fear. He’s one of the few demions in existence who, for whatever reason, never received active physical powers. Bones and I both agree that this flaw makes him more jittery than the rest of us.

“Doesn’t sound like much to be alarmed at. Demions are unpredictable and often go underground for one reason or another. Pine Canyon is thirty miles away from Dove Creek, and Sapies murder each other all the time. And I’m not surprised at the border skirmishes...I’m only surprised it was as quiet as it was for so long. Besides, if there was any real danger, Bones would have said something to me. In fact, he was complaining about being *bored*.”

Cody reluctantly nods and pours himself a drink. “S’pose you’re right. I dunno. Things were just kind of quiet ‘round here for so long, then all of a sudden things started happening. It just doesn’t sit well with me, is all.” He takes a few nervous gulps.

Poor Cody. It must be awful being so helpless. He may as well be a pure Sapie. “I’m sure it’s nothing. Besides, isn’t it a little weirder that we *weren’t* fighting with the border tribes? I mean, come on, we’re *demons*. It’s amazing the peace agreements lasted as long as they have.”

For centuries, various demon factions had been at war with one another, each for their own reasons. Whether it was for control over a territory, personal slights, or just to fight, the tribes had been battling it out for years. But after decades of carnage with no end in sight, the Legionare—the highly skilled militia unit for the Demon Empire—separated the clans into territories. Now each is forbidden to cross over into another’s land without express permission. But only in Thiberoux...the world of Man is still fair game and open to all.

It has worked surprisingly well, with few skirmishes in recent memory. Anyone violating the treaty is dealt with by the Legionare, a punishment no demon wants to endure.

Still, I’m not bothered by Cody’s concern. Most demons agree the treaty is an unnatural act and it’s only a matter of time before it’s broken. Many of us, myself included, long for war; it’s in our blood. Having the Legionare come after a few of us is one thing, but when entire clans are involved it’ll be a whole lot harder for them to single out a few troublemakers.

I turn to the fresh glass of whisky Cody has placed beside me. One last drink and I’ll be ready to get my game on. Out of courtesy for *Her*—well, more like Tatiana’s strict orders—I have to limit my drinks to three, maybe four if I’m really fired up. And I always drink early in the evening so it has time to metabolize by the time *she* awakens. But I wish I could drink all night, like other demions do. Unfortunately for me, as soon as Liora turns human again the alcohol in our system will affect her the same way it would

affect any other girl who is five foot seven and weighs one hundred and ten pounds.

Reason number ten thousand, eight hundred and thirty three why it's so annoying having to share my body with a Sapie.

I let out a long suffering sigh. I couldn't be any *less* amped about my evening. No Amazèa to hunt, and Tatiana didn't even bother to point me in the direction of any other demons I could slay instead. I *need* to destroy something tonight, if only to take the edge off. Otherwise, if one of the dumb Sapies I collect the tolls from even so much as *looks* at me wrong he'll become nothing more than a messy stain on a wall. And I try not to kill humans. Actually, Tatiana has forbidden it...says it would make stupid Liora go crazy or something.

Reason number ten thousand, eight hundred and thirty four...

Cody leaves to tend to some other patrons and I remember my mystery man in the back. I spin my seat around to get another look and my knees bump into something, stopping me mid-turn. A few drops of Jack splash in my lap, but I don't care.

I don't care because I'm looking into the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen in my life.

I have to hurry. The three moons of Illyria have nearly become one, signaling first dawn in Sapie world. I squeeze my legs tightly, urging Diablo on. He grunts and presses his head down.

After collecting the tributes, I'd managed to find some fun after all, killing a few rogue paranoia-demons working the streets of New York City. Afterward, I'd hit up an underground rave party to dance away some of my remaining aggressions. It hadn't worked, but I love dancing and lost track of time.

If there's one thing Liora and I agree upon, it's to leave our body in a safe place for the other to take over. Of course, this is much more important for me to do than it is for her. I don't really care where I wake up; *I* can take care of myself. But if I leave her somewhere unprotected, her frail human state could spell trouble for both of us.

But mostly, I just don't want her wearing my clothes. All of my outfits are custom made for *me*, and there's no way I'm letting her get her grubby paws on them.

I burst through the cabin door with seconds to spare. Tatiana sits on the floor with her eyes closed. "Hello, dear, how was your evening?" she asks without opening them.

"Super," I say, still miffed at my rudimentary chore. I toss the sack of money on the table and rush to the bedroom, the first waves of coldness already flooding through me. With no time to hang them up, my clothes lie on the floor beside the bed. Naked, I toss myself on it just as everything goes black.

Chapter 3. Liora

I keep my head low as I maneuver down the crowded hallway toward my locker. It's a conscious decision, one designed to prevent me from rubbernecking like an idiot hoping to catch a glimpse of Kieron somewhere. But I realize it's not the smartest idea as soon as I crash smack into the backside of Cade Johnston, one of the school's Neanderthal football players.

"Sorry," I mumble and scoot around him.

His friends snicker; one dramatically recoils in mock horror. I roll my eyes and ignore their immature antics, but hear one of them say, "Better burn that jacket, dude. It's probably jinxed now."

What-ev-er.

Corrine stands by my locker looking like she's ready to burst from her skin. She and I've hung out for a few years. She doesn't ask me too many personal questions and isn't nosy about my private life. That's why I like her—her preoccupation with her own drama prevents her from focusing too much on mine. Her father is currently serving a life sentence for killing a man during a drunken bar fight, so she lives with her mom. But her mom is no prize, either. Perpetually unemployed and permanently drunk, she barely manages to keep up the rent on the trailer they share on the outskirts of town, a place inhabited by the trashiest of the trash—poor even by Dove Creek standards. But she's the closest thing I have to a friend here, and I'm grateful for her companionship.

"Lee-OR-aa!" she hisses, her eyes wide. "I can't believe you totally missed it. Of all the days to get sent home from school you pick yesterday and miss the most amazing thing ever! Well not totally miss it, but oh my God, why don't you ever answer your phone at night? I tried calling you

like fifty times!” She stops to catch her breath, her chubby face flushing pink.

I furrow my brow. Corrine tends to be dramatic sometimes, but this is a bit over the top. “Slow down...I didn’t get sent home, I left. What happened? Is everything okay?”

She raises both her eyebrows and smiles wide, revealing two deep dimples and badly crooked teeth. I begin turning the combination to my lock but she places both hands on my shoulders and pivots my body around.

“That,” she whispers breathlessly. “Isn’t it just *lovely*? Ahhh...”

I look to where a gaggle of girls has clustered in the hallway. Correction, a gaggle of girls plus Kieron standing in the middle, clearly loving the attention being plied on him by half the cheerleading squad. Just as I expected.

I look back at Corrine and roll my eyes. “Really? That’s what’s got you so worked up...some guy?” I just hope my face isn’t as pink as hers. Just seeing Kieron again, in the flesh, affirming that he is real and not a figment of my overactive and unreliable imagination makes my blood pump furiously. I focus on lining up the numbers on my combination lock, which is exceedingly difficult with shaky hands.

She leans beside me and cranes her neck to watch him. “Seriously, Liora, are you blind? Have you not *seen* our selection of guys here, or should I say, lack of?”

“So he’s cute. Big whoop. For all you know he could be a world-class jerk.” I fumble through my locker and try to remember what books I’ll need for first period English. Although after what happened yesterday, I’m not sure it will even matter. Mr. Sodenberg will probably kick me out the second he sees me.

Despite my best efforts, I can't help but peek in Kieron's direction again. His dazzling smile lights up the hallway and two more girls have joined his swarm of admirers. "He seems like a total player," I say and slam my locker shut.

Damn. I have to walk right past him. I move to Corrine's other side so she can be a buffer as we head toward Kieron and his expanding harem.

"He's the hottest thing that's ever stepped foot in this town, if you ask me. And he's *not* a jerk. He's *super* polite...I accidentally bumped into him leaving chemistry yesterday, and he actually said '*excuse me*' and asked if I was okay!" Corrine can barely contain her glee.

"Sounds like a real gentleman." I glance over my shoulder and glower as a pretty blonde named Drusilla Van Varen places her manicured hand on Kieron's arm. He says something to her and she laughs as if it's the funniest thing she's ever heard. I try not to gag.

As we get closer Corrine suddenly stops walking. She looks at me, over to Kieron, then back to me. "Hmm," she says with a small smile, "I hadn't noticed how similar you two look. Like you could almost be related or something."

I stare at her, dumfounded. Him: could be a male super model. Me: not so much. "Um, clearly you need your glasses checked."

She tosses her head and lowers her voice. "It's just a few things, like how you both have the same black hair and blue eyes. That's an unusual combination. And you both have such distinguished features that are very symmetrical. Course he's a lot tanner and taller than you, but other than that —"

"Casper the friendly ghost is tanner than me," I mumble. It's true I'd noticed that his rich, ebony hair was the same color as mine, but his eyes were definitely a few shades darker.

Corrine shrugs and resumes walking, her head close to mine. “Anyways, there’s all sorts of stories going around about him,” she continues, “Dawn Lewis told me she heard he was an actor from LA out here doing research for a movie role. Taylor McKenzie said he was here as part of the FBI witness relocation program because his parents are wealthy European royalty who are being blackmailed. And Carrie Stevens said...”

“Corinne, stop. His uncle works at the mines. He just came out here to live with him. Ya’ll are going bananas over nothing, and I’m sort of embarrassed to be your friend right now,” I say, only half-joking.

“Ugh, look at Druslutta acting like she already owns him. I mean, three nights ago she was making out with Cade Johnston at the Curley Q...wait, *what?* How do you know that? Are you holding out on me?” She grabs my arm.

“Ow, that’s attached, you know.”

I feel Kieron’s eyes on me as we pass by, but will myself not to look. The last thing I’m going to do is join his swarm of admirers like some pathetic groupie.

“...Oh, Manhattan is *marvelous*, all those museums and plays and fabulous restaurants,” Drusilla coos as we walk past. “I’d love for you to tell me all about your favorite places...”

Corinne snorts. “Oh, give me a break,” she grumbles bitterly. “She went to New York once when we were in eighth grade for an uncle’s funeral or something. Now suddenly she’s all big-citified and cultured?”

As I reach for the metal handle, Mr. Sodenberg meets my gaze through the window of the door. His eyes give a warning. Mine roll back in my head. He says nothing, so I can only assume what Lucky said to poor Mr. Winters yesterday somehow got relayed back to him. Corrine, with her poor

eyesight, sits in the front. I take my usual seat in the back, plopping my bag on the empty chair beside me.

I silently recite my earlier vows to myself. I must forget about Kieron. Right now, my number one priority is getting through the day without Her showing up. That means absolutely *no* zoning out. I have to stay alert, focused. Tatiana had told me over breakfast that she'd spoken with Lucky, but I wasn't satisfied that she wouldn't just pop in again if it suited her purposes. So I'd taken the extra precaution of wearing a crucifix necklace; hopefully this will discourage her or ensure her quick departure if she does decide to make a cameo.

I open *Inferno* and practice translating the words into French, a language I'm teaching myself. It's the only way it will hold my attention.

When a body brushes past me, I look up and am surprised to see Kieron smiling down at me. "Hi, again," he says softly.

"Hi." My heart pounds wildly, and I quickly return my gaze to Canto XXIV. But the words become a blur as Kieron continues to hover.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" he asks.

I shrug noncommittally, still staring at my book like it holds the answer to the meaning of life. "Suit yourself."

He chuckles. "Is this your bag?"

"Right, sorry." I lean over to snatch it up and place it on the other side of me. Kieron gracefully maneuvers into the seat and smiles.

"Doing better today?"

"Yes." And I'm re-reading the same sentence for the fifth time. My gaze lifts slightly to see several students turned around in their seats, gawking at us.

"I'm happy to hear that. Sorry to interrupt you...is that a good book? I've never read it."

“It’s fascinating,” I respond dryly.

“Maybe you wouldn’t mind filling me in, help me get up to speed—”
The rest of his question is cut off as Mr. Sodenberg calls the class to order.

If someone had offered me ten million dollars to recall even *one* sentence Mr. Sodenberg uttered during his entire lecture, I couldn’t do it. Even though I’m trying with all my might to concentrate on what the teacher is saying, it’s impossible with Kieron sitting less than two feet away. Fifty minutes passes in a blur, and before I know it the bell is ringing.

“What’s your next class?” Kieron asks as we both stand up.

“History with Jackson.”

“What a happy coincidence. So’s mine. We can walk there together.” It’s more of a command than a request. He’s so close behind me I can smell the musky scent of his aftershave. We make our way to the door and I notice several girls, including Corrine, watching us like blood-thirsty hawks. I give her what I hope is a reassuring smile but I can tell she’s not buying it. Even though her next class is in the opposite direction, she falls into step beside Kieron.

“Kieron, have you met my friend Corrine Olsen?” I ask, hoping to diffuse any awkwardness. She stares at him in awe and I groan inwardly. I’m trying not to be embarrassed for her, but she’s just acting so *swoony*. I’ve never seen her like this before.

But if Kieron notices anything odd about her behavior, he makes no indication of it. “Yes, I believe we quite literally ran into each other the other day, but weren’t properly introduced. Hello, Corrine, my name is Kieron Ambrose. How do you do?”

“F-fine,” Corrine stutters. Her face is beet red. She gapes at both of us for a moment before abruptly turning and rushing in the other direction. Kieron smiles down at me.

“Friendly people here,” he says.

“Yeah, a little *too* friendly,” I mutter as Drusilla swoops in and touches his arm.

“Oh, Kieron, there y’ar,” she says, exaggerating her southern drawl. I’ve noticed she does this whenever she talks to cute guys. She must’ve heard somewhere they like it. Tramp. “I was hopin’ to have ya escort me to biology. Give us a chance to chat.” She pronounces it *bah-awl-gy*, bats her false eyelashes, and smiles coyly. Great. Now she’s morphed into Scarlett O’Hara.

“Can we do it later? I need to talk with Liora for a moment,” he says, matching her phony smile, eye-bat and all. Score one for Rhett Butler.

Drusilla is *not* used to boys saying no to her. Her face freezes and at first she’s confused. Then her gaze flickers over to me. For the first half-second, it seems like she’s never seen me before; for the second, like I’m a fly in her nonfat yogurt. But she quickly recovers. “Why, certainly, I understand,” she says as if she’s never heard of anything more ludicrous. “Find me at lunch. I’ll save us a seat by the fountains where we can have some privacy...and not be *bothered*.”

Kieron nods. “Sounds good,” he says. I want to punch him. And her. Drusilla spins on an inappropriately high heel and stalks away, but not before flashing me a death-ray glare.

Walking down a hallway with Kieron is an entirely new experience for me. Even when it’s filled with bustling bodies scurrying between classrooms and lockers, I’m usually given a pretty wide berth. But Kieron seems to have the exact opposite effect on people. They’re all moving closer, trying to be as near him as possible, hoping to meet his gaze, or, if really lucky, ‘accidentally’ touch him on their way past. It’s sort of like being with a celebrity. I’m thinking how the only thing missing is the

flashing light bulbs of paparazzi when I catch Carrie Stevens snapping a picture of him with her cell phone. And now I'm embarrassed for my entire gender.

"So, I don't want to impose myself on you, but I was serious when I asked if you wouldn't mind helping me catch up to speed on the reading. Mr. Sodenberg excused me from the paper due next week, but I'm not a dumb guy, and I'd really like to pull my own weight. Get started off on the right foot, if you know what I mean."

"If you want to get started off on the right foot I don't really recommend hanging around me," I say quietly. Right now the only thing outnumbering the desirous looks sent Kieron's way are the hateful ones being sent toward me.

He stops and places his hand lightly on my arm. My stomach threatens to leap into my chest and I avert my eyes from his intense stare. "Why would you say that? I asked several people who the smartest person in our class was and they all said you."

"I'm sure that's not all they said," I mumble, very aware of his hand still resting on my arm.

"That's the only part I listened to," he says with a small smile. Our eyes lock.

I take a deep breath. "Okay, if you're really desperate, I guess I can help you out. But if you change your mind, I'll understand."

"I won't," he says, his eyes sparkling again. "When's a good time for you? My afternoons and evenings are free for you—"

"Afternoons only," I say hurriedly. "'Evenings are out. Totally." He gives a quizzical glance but just nods.

"I understand. Hey, thanks a lot. I really appreciate it."

“No problem...today’s no good, though,” I say as I remember a special errand I have to do later.

“Tomorrow, then?”

I nod.

The warning bell rings, and we enter class together. This time, I’m not surprised when he takes the empty seat beside me.

“So, we meet again,” he raises an eyebrow and winks.

For the first time in a long time, I laugh.

Tatiana is sitting in the lotus-position levitating dried rose petals when I get home. I know better than to bother her when she’s ‘feeling the flowers’—her version of reading tea leaves—so I retreat to my room to start my homework and do some laundry.

I plop on my bed and set up my laptop. First up: A ten page paper on the causes and effects of the French Revolution. Thrill me now. I deliberate for about thirty seconds before my fingers fly across the keyboard, and less than twenty minutes later I’m done, footnotes and all. I spend five more minutes on Trig, an assignment that’ll take even the brightest of my classmates over an hour to complete.

Sigh. I can’t even count on schoolwork to distract me for very long. Again, my thoughts return to Kieron, not that they’re ever really far away from him. He’s always there...lurking in the back of my mind, patiently waiting for me to indulge in the fantasy. The one where I *don’t* turn into a monster at dusk. The one where someday I’ll be able to find happiness with him, or maybe even someone else. The one where I can fall in love and live happily ever after.

Yeah, that fantasy. The completely insane, ridiculous, and *impossible* one.

I decide to surf the web for a bit and click on the page for local news. When I see the headline I gasp...sickened:

LOCAL MURDERS HAVE CITIZENS ON EDGE

Beneath the headline are three pictures: an adorable little girl who looks to be around five or six, a teenage boy with pimples and a huge smile, and a middle-aged black man. All of them look so *happy*.

I scan the article. Few clues and no apparent connection between the victims. All were brutally murdered, either at home, or in the case of the little girl, right outside. It says she was killed playing on her front porch as her mom ran inside to answer the phone. She'd been gone less than three minutes and returned to find her daughter's head twisted clean off.

"What kind of monsters could be capable of doing something so horrific?" the mother is quoted as saying. I close my computer and taste the bile in my throat.

I know *exactly* what kind of monsters are capable of such horrors.

I was twelve years old when my two best friends were viciously murdered right in front of me. The memory of watching them die is the last thing that Lucky and I experienced as a singular being. After that, she went her way and I went mine. It still makes me nauseous to think that technically I'm part of a breed of monsters that are capable of committing such atrocities.

Tatiana has told me I shouldn't hate myself for the actions of a few "bad elements". Humans kill one another quite regularly, and they don't despise themselves for the crimes of others. That's fine. She can say what she wants. She didn't see what I saw. She doesn't know what I know. It's impossible to forget...or forgive...the hideous cruelty that I know flows through my veins.

Stop it, stop it, stop it! I have to force myself to push away the awful memory and to think of something else. Tall. Black hair. Electric blue eyes. Sexy smile...

Augh!!

I flip on the radio and start gathering up some clothes to run a wash. I accidentally pick up some slutty red leather ensemble that Lucky wore last night and angrily throw it back in the closet. Even if I wanted to do her laundry—which I most definitely *do not*—I wouldn't even know how to wash something like that. I swear she shops at Strippers-R-Us.

The tantalizing aroma wafting in from the kitchen tells me Tatiana has begun making dinner. I throw the last of my clothes in the washer and join her.

"Mmm, fried chicken. My favorite," I say, peeking over her shoulder. A leather satchel rests on the table, and I open it up; it's filled with money and jewels. I pull out a diamond necklace and admire it. "Can I keep this?" It's a ridiculous question. Tatiana would never allow it, and besides, when would I ever wear something like this?

She gives me a look as she sets a plate of fresh chicken beside me, and I reluctantly return the necklace to the bag. "Remove the jewels; I'll put them in my safe. Lucky already has her instructions how to divide the cash."

Even though it's me who is going to the bank, I can't do it all by myself. My job is to be there waiting so Lucky can take over and handle the tellers. Otherwise, they might grow suspicious of a teenage girl coming in with large sacks of cash requesting cashier's checks for various charities. But under her hypnotizing gaze they do as they're told, ask no questions, and soon forget they ever saw us. We have to time it perfectly because the bank usually closes right around the time it gets dark.

"Are you planning on walking or driving into town?" Tatiana asks.

"It looks like it might rain soon...?" I look at her for confirmation. She presses her lips together and nods.

"Just a light sprinkling, but not for several hours...you will miss it."

Usually, I much prefer to walk. But it's late afternoon already, and that would be cutting it too close. And I don't want to put it off until tomorrow; I already have plans to see Kieron. The thought stirs up the butterflies in my stomach.

"Guess I'll drive. I wish I could run like She can," I mumble through a mouthful of food. "Course I guess it doesn't really matter anyway, seeing as how I have to go through the middle of town and people would see."

Tatiana makes a clucking noise and scoops up some mashed potatoes. "She has her talents and you have yours. So tell me, how was your day? Better than yesterday?" She has an odd smile on her face.

Sometimes I wonder just how much Tatiana knows that she doesn't let on. I know she has the freaky ability to sense anything that moves, human or not, and can read the energies of clothes, even down to knowing what color and material they are. I suppose it shouldn't surprise me if she knows I'm obsessing on something.

"Today was...okay," I say. "No hostile takeovers."

"How are classes going?"

"Fine. Same. Boring." As much as I want to not think about the horrifying news article, I can't shake it from my mind. Sighing, I put down my drumstick. "Tat, what do you know about the murders in Pine Canyon? I read about them online and it's just awful. Is it anything... supernatural?"

She lets out a long breath and stands up. Walking over to the window she wrings her hands nervously. Now I wish I hadn't asked.

"I, too, have seen the death. I wish I could say it was a random act of human on human violence, but I fear it's not. There is a blackness

surrounding the poor souls, and I am unable to decipher the meaning or motivations behind the actions. I do not know what caused it, nor why. I only see an impenetrable darkness.”

My heart starts racing. Tatiana usually tries to keep me in the dark about demonic activity, or at least use gentle euphemisms—like referring to Michael and Kayla’s murders as “the unfortunate incident”.

“Am I in danger?” I ask, not sure I want to hear her answer. But, really, when am I *not* in danger? Lucky risks our lives with alarming regularity.

“I do not see this as a threat to you at this time. Perhaps it will be an isolated unfortunate event. Of course, if anything changes you will be the first to know and I will implement safeguards.”

“Okay, sure, whatever you say.” I can’t eat anything more so I clear away the plates and give her a kiss on the cheek. “I better get going. See you tomorrow.” I grab the bag of money and the keys to my Mustang.

The afternoon sun is beginning its final descent on the horizon. I jump in my car, crank up the stereo, and speed off down the dirt road.

This main stretch winding through the heart of Dove Creek is the only source of commerce for miles. Besides the bank, there’s a movie rental place, a pizza parlor and ice cream shop, and a few novelty stores that specialize in hunting and fishing.

Several people are milling along the sidewalk, so I lean back in the driver’s seat and make myself comfortable. I still have a few more minutes, but I really hope the dinner crowd disperses before it’s time for me to change. I can’t do it in the car...*She* won’t bother to lock it up or leave the keys in a safe place. Usually I go to the alley behind the bank to transform, but right now there are too many people. Damn Pizza Pete’s and their Tuesday night special.

After a few minutes the crowd thins. My plan is to sit on the bench until I feel Her approach, then move into the alley way. No problem.

I lock the car and make my way across the street. Then, I spot Kieron walking down the sidewalk.

Oh, no. *No no no!*

He hasn't seen me yet...at least I don't think so. But I have to get away; I can't let him see me this close to a transformation. Who knows what Lucky will say or do? Especially if Kieron tries to talk to her like she's me. At best, she'll laugh in his face. At worst...ugh, I don't even want to imagine...

He stops and looks inside the window of The Stinky Fish Bait & Tackle. I dodge into the alleyway, press my back against the side wall and hold my breath. Then I start thinking—the bait shop is closed; he's not going in there. So unless he turns to go into the bank, he's most likely heading to either the movie rental or pizza place. That means he'll have to walk right past me. *Crap!* All it will take is one little glance in this direction and he'll see me cowering like a cornered rat...

I need to hide.

But there's nowhere to go. The alley is a dead end. If I go back on the street he'll surely see me. *She's* only seconds away from coming, and so is he. And I will do anything in my power to prevent the two of them from meeting.

I have no choice.

Darting over to the enormous grey trash dumpster against the back wall, I struggle to lift its heavy lid. It falls on my fingers, and I have to bite my lip to keep from crying out. I *have* to get in.

Finally, I manage to open it wide enough to squeeze inside. "I'm so sorry, Lucky," I whisper. I don't even want to think about what I'm sitting

on, much less what Lucky will do when she sees where I've left her. As the stench of rotting garbage fills my nostrils, I take a last quick breath of fresh air and close the lid.

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Chapter 4. Lucky

Oh sweet hell this place smells like shit. Where am I? I can't see anything. I have the money bag in one hand, but the other is touching something squishy. And runny.

I lean back on my arm and oozy goo slimes through my fingers. I react instinctively, unleashing the rain of fire coursing through my veins. Metal crashes against pavement in a thunderous explosion, and I tumble to the ground amidst a heap of refuge.

From the pale glow of the street lamps, I assess my surroundings—I'm in the alley beside the bank. Okay, that much I understand. What I *don't* get is why I was in with all the garbage.

Lovely. *Just freakin' lovely.* “Dumpster diving now, are we, you disgusting pig?!” I say aloud, hoping somewhere deep inside she hears me. I don't even care if she has a good reason for leaving me in that filthy place. This is unforgivable and she's just *really* flippin' lucky she ruined her own clothes instead of mine.

I'm busy cursing Liora's name and shaking particulates from my hair when I hear a man's concerned voice. “Excuse me, Miss, are you okay?”

A small group of Sapies gather near the end of the alley, watching me. They must've been attracted to the loud noise. *Great.* Rolling my eyes I swish my hands, still dripping with goo, and mutter, “*Alieno.* Leave.” They instantly shuffle away, already forgetting what drew them here in the first place. All except for the one who continues to watch me with an amused grin.

Fan-freakin-tastic.

“What are you looking at?” I ask, scowling in his direction. Of all the witnesses to my mortal humiliation *he* has to be here?

“You have pepperoni in your hair.” He points helpfully to my head.

I fight back the urge to vomit and carefully pick out the moldy red disk. *Could this night start off any crappier?* Mustering any dignity is impossible at this point, so I wipe my hands on my pants, grab the money bag, and stalk past him. He tenses as I brush by. I’m half-tempted to blow off the banking entirely, seeing as how it’s more for Liora’s benefit than mine. I don’t care a whit about money; I don’t care if it’s for some homeless, snot-nosed brats. And since Liora has no problem leaving me in a dumpster like a piece of trash...

But I know if I don’t get the checks, Tatiana will be mad. And I make it a point *never* to get Tatiana mad—at least not on purpose. But Liora will pay dearly for her utter lack of respect of me, that’s for *damn* sure.

I throw open the door, nearly taking it off its hinges. Tatiana is sitting on the couch waiting for me. I angrily toss the bank checks on the table and storm into my bedroom.

“Do not be mad at her, dear,” Tatiana calls to me. “She was afraid of exposure and had to conceal herself to avoid a problem. She felt she had no choice. I’m sure she is very sorry to do that to you.”

“Whatever.”

Fifteen minutes later I emerge from the shower. I run my hands through my wet hair, and the heat emanating from my palms rapidly dries the long locks. I pull them back in a low ponytail and my fingers briefly touch my Mark. To Liora and other Sapies, the Mark burns hot to the touch. For me, it feels cool...like ice.

This Mark on the back of our neck is the reason Liora won’t ever wear her hair up; she doesn’t want anyone to see it. Personally I don’t see what the big deal is. It just looks like an ordinary tattoo—a simple red star.

Something anyone could get at any tattoo parlor. It's not like it spells out, "I am half-demon," or anything. I swear, she's *such* a demon bigot.

After changing into an all-black leather outfit—perfectly suited for my all-black mood—I charge into Tatiana's room. She's stirring her cauldron, the cool steam curling ghostly ribbons around her serene visage.

"Find me some demons to slay. Tormenting won't cut it tonight."

Since I'm forbidden to kill Sapies, and fighting with other demons in Thiberoux is outlawed by Demonic Decree, I have to find my fun elsewhere: The world of Man.

Naturally, I never fight with any from my own tribe, but there are others...*many* others who encroach on the surrounding towns and use the Sapies as playthings. It's these creatures that provide me with an outlet for my natural desires. And right now—with the Amazèa out of reach *again*—I have a very big itch to scratch. And long, perfectly-manicured black nails to scratch it with.

"I feel your fire and know you must hunt. If you want to stay close by, in Richmond there are two Paraste demons working out of the Galaxy Nightclub. Or, you could go back to New York, where there are several—"

"I'll take the Parastes," I say. I'd just been to New York last night to collect the tributes, and besides, I detest these particular demons. They aren't good for anything useful. Unless you consider easing my itch useful. Which I do. Once they attach themselves to a human body, they assume total control and force their victims to do harmful things to themselves and others. The host never survives for very long.

It's not like my quest to destroy other demons stems from the goodness of my heart. If it wasn't for the fact that Liora spends time in the Sapie world, leaving my vessel weak and vulnerable, I wouldn't care less what other demons did.

But many demons out there can put her...meaning *me*...at risk. Some Paraste demon could attach to one of the kids at her school and make him go all Columbine or something and Liora could get caught in the crossfire. Besides, I need to stay sharp. On top of my game. The Amazèa may be gone for now, but one day they will return. And when they do, I'll be ready.

Tatiana nods. "Very well. I have prepared the revealing powder for you." She motions to the small satchel on the table. I can't help but smile. She knows me so well. The special dust allows me to distinguish Parastes from regular Sapies and takes several hours to create.

I grab the pouch, bid farewell to Tatiana, and summon Diablo. At the Bridge of Kings I take a quick look for Bones, but there's no sentry in sight. "Bones?" I call out. The night is eerily quiet. I try again, louder this time. "Bones!" Still no response. I cross the river and head to the Bar.

"Hey, Ivy...Bones here?"

"Hi, sweetie. Yes, he's been here for about an hour. I think he's waiting for you."

"Yeah, I got held up a bit. *Her*..." I roll my eyes.

Ivy gives me a sympathetic smile and motions with her chin to the guy sitting in the corner. "Our sexy stranger is back again. Did you get the scoop on him or what? I saw you guys talking at the bar last night." She sounds accusatory, as if I'm holding out on her.

I avoid her gaze. Yes, he'd approached where I was sitting, but only to order another drink from Cody. We'd exchanged "hello"s, and he'd commented on the music playing on the jukebox. Guess he really likes Led Zeppelin. But then he went about his business and I went about mine. I hadn't seen him again...until earlier tonight in the alley. But I'm not about to replay this tidbit of embarrassing info to one of the biggest gossips in Dryndara.

“Sorry, Ives, we didn’t really talk. But I really do need to go speak with Bones,” I say as I spot him chatting with Cody.

Ivy gives a small frown, but doesn’t say anything, her attention diverted by a group of approaching demions.

I glance casually around the room as I make my way up to the bar. Cody and Bones are laughing about something, but I’m more interested in the back corner where the vampire brothers are entertaining their friend. As usual he’s facing away from me, his back to the room. *Good.*

“Lucky Lady,” Bones’ cheerful voice rings out. He pats the empty stool beside him. Two tall glasses of Jack on the rocks wait for me on the bar. Smiling, I shimmy over to him.

“Hey, doll,” I say, giving him a peck on the cheek. “Almost didn’t recognize you with your clothes on.”

He laughs, revealing two perfectly even tiny dimples on his tan cheeks. “Well, I’m sorry about that, but they have funny rules here. ‘Course we can always go somewhere a little more private and—”

I punch him lightly on his shoulder. “Seriously, won’t you *ever* stop trying?” Cody raises his eyebrows up and down suggestively, so I lean over and sock him, too. “You guys are ridiculous.”

They both chuckle, and Bones rubs his shoulder gingerly. “I think it’s bruised. It needs a kiss to feel better...”

“Oh, puh-leeze. Spare me.” I roll my eyes and sit down. But the truth is I love when Bones flirts with me, especially because he doesn’t have to. I’m not a natural conquest for him, for his demonic urges of seduction and procreation only extend to Sapie women. Something I am *not*. So whatever instinctual desires drive him, the way he flirts and plays with me is caused by something else entirely.

But as much as I love Bones, deep down I know it'll never work for us to be anything but friends. Best friends. Nothing more. So he hits on me, and I pretend to hate it. It's our way.

"Who's the new guy?" I nod my head toward the corner, hoping I sound nonchalant. Bones is also the jealous type.

Summoned by patrons at the end of the bar, Cody leaves, so it's Bones who answers.

"Can't say. He's passed by me several times; his scent is all right. He's half Sapie, like you. Not sure what type of demon he is. Got a few different reads but none that caused any concern. Why do you ask?" He suddenly sounds wary.

"No reason." I shrug and casually sip my drink. "Just wondering if we had another vampire in town, is all. You know how I loooove the blood-suckers." I pretend to swoon.

"Yeah, I know you love killing them," Bones smirks.

"I don't love killing them," I protest. "It was just that one group three years ago. They were feeding on children...what was I supposed to do?"

Bones holds up his hand cutting me off. "I know, I know, just teasing. Jeez, you've been so testy lately. So high-strung." He begins massaging my shoulders; the warmth of his touch radiates down to my bones. Just as I'm feeling some of my tension release under his magic touch, he totally ruins it. "Ever since the Amazèa came back. It's like you've let yourself go completely crazy ..."

His words pour fuel to my already inflamed nerves. Jerking away, I jump to my feet, knocking over my glass of whiskey in the process.

"Shut *up*. I don't want to hear it from you. They are not here now and I have to live with that fact. But they *will* come back. And when they do, I will kill them in the same sick and evil way that they killed Kayla and

Michael. And I will laugh, like they laughed. And *nobody* is going to stop me. Not even you. And I don't want to hear another word about it, got it?" Angrily grabbing what is left of his drink, I quickly down it before storming away.

I know Bones is right behind me, and as soon as I reach the door I start running as fast as possible. But if there's one creature who can keep pace with my two legs, it's Bones when he has four. As I streak through the forest—the trees and shrubbery nothing more than a passing haze of green—I glare at the enormous black hound beside me. But I can't feel angry with him. He isn't trying to stop me. He isn't trying to talk to me. He's just *being* with me. And something about that makes me feel safe.

Together we sprint through miles of thick forest, though a Portal taking us back to Sapie land. Safe under the cover of darkness, we fly along abandoned back roads and trails, over streams, and up hills. We sail over fences and cut across farms, together, racing as a silent blur.

It's not until we reach the furthest outskirts of town that I ease my pace, and transition into a walk. Bones slows down beside me, still in his canine form. Finally, unable to hold it in anymore, I collapse with my face in my hands and cry.

No matter how fast or far I run, I'm never able to escape the nightmare that continually haunts me. I can't outrun the feelings of anger, hopelessness and regret that plague my mind. I can't hide from the shameful disgust that eats me up inside

It's all my fault...everything that happened to Michael, Kayla, me and Liora...it's all because of me...because I was *weak*. Because I was *afraid*.

Bones rests his head on my lap lovingly as I sob into my hands. Then he pulls away. A moment later he sits beside me, his naked body now that of a man. When he wraps his muscular arms around me, I weep freely on his

shoulder. His skin is as soft as butter and he holds me tight, caressing my hair and whispering soothing words into my ear.

I cry and cry until I can cry no more.

After what feels like hours, I slowly raise my tearstained face and look in Bones' eyes. "If you ever tell anyone about this, I'll find a loophole in the immortality law and kill you. Slowly. And I'll invent new ways to make it hurt first."

He gently wipes away a tear trickling down my cheek. "Your secret is safe with me. Besides, who'd ever believe me anyway? That bad-ass Lucky has such a soft spot for some Sapies," he whispers.

"They weren't just *any* Sapies."

"I know."

He reluctantly lets me pull from his embrace and I pace around, taking deep breaths, trying to regain my composure. My eyes burn, and I'm sure my make-up is ruined. But I don't care. I spot an old tree with a massive trunk. *Perfect*. With all my might I push it until I hear a loud *crack*. I step back as the mighty tree tumbles to the ground.

"Feel any better?"

I don't, but I nod anyway.

"I'm really glad you did that. That tree was giving me the heebie-jeebies."

I swallow a smile.

"Where were you planning on going tonight?" he asks. "'Cause wherever it is, I'm going with you." I turn to admire his beautiful nude form splayed against the rocks. Under the dull light of the moon he looks like a statue of a god.

"Dressed like that?" I ask with a hint of a smile.

He glances down and arches an eyebrow. “Right you are. Didn’t quite think this through. I *do* need to mate though. Badly. Suppose we could break into a house around here and ‘steal me something to wear...” He adds air quotes, and I know he cares nothing about clothes.

“But if you need to, um, *work*, I don’t think you will find what you’re looking for where I’m going. It’s a nightclub, and not a very nice one,” I add in response to his quizzical look.

He nods, understanding. Bones has a very specific type of female he’ll seduce: Between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two, beautiful, healthy and intelligent. One who doesn’t smoke, drink, or use any drugs, and most importantly, a virgin who is at the peak of her fertility cycle. Girls like that probably aren’t hanging out at a seedy downtown nightclub in the middle of the week.

“Well, then, I’ll just search the nearby area. Find a partner in a home that is not brightly lit. Call for me when you’re done, and we’ll meet back up.”

“I’m tormenting a few regulars after. They’ve been let off easy the past few nights so I have some making up to do.”

“You gonna hit up Old Lady Sullivan?”

I nod.

“Cool. I’ll meet you there. I love watching you freak her out.” Of course he does. Mary Sullivan castrated eleven men before murdering them and burying their bodies in her backyard. So far the police and her neighbors have no clue what she’s done. But I know. And now she’s a regular.

“Okay.” I shuffle over to where he’s standing and give him a hug. “Thanks for being here...thanks for everything,” I whisper.

“No problem, kiddo.” His voice sounds thick. I pull back, touched by the compassion in his mahogany eyes.

“Go. You obviously need to mate. Get it out of your system.” With a smile, I gently push him away. I never want him to know how much it bothers me that he has to go do *that*. When he finds his perfect virgin, seduces her, and impregnates her with his seed—I know he has no choice. If he doesn’t continually reproduce with Sapies, his function as an incubus—one who is capable of assuming human form and being my *friend*—will cease to exist. He’ll become and remain a Hound of Hell permanently, forced to guard our sacred realm for all of eternity.

But it really bothers me. I hate thinking of him lying with all those women, flooding them with his intoxicating powers of romance and seduction. I hate knowing he gives them something he can never give me. I hate knowing—no matter what—I’ll always be forced to share his affections with nameless, faceless girls who provide him with a reason for existing.

And I hate myself even more for feeling this way. I am a Justice demon, for Satan’s sake! I’m supposed to be free from passion and operate only on reason and rationality, *not* be subjected to crying fits of anger and the discomfort of petty jealousies. What a crock of crap it is. Totally illogical. *And pathetic*. What do I expect him to do...sit around and pine over me night after night? Tell me he loves me more than anything else and can’t bear the thought of living eternity without me? That I’m his one true reason for breathing and without me his life has no meaning?

Yeah...dream on. Demons don’t work like that. Only Sapies get all wrapped up with their crazy emotions. Something that, thanks to Liora, seeps into my life where it shouldn’t. At least demons have the ability—and *good sense*—to shut off the feelings they don’t want to feel. Not Sapies, though. They seem to enjoy being enslaved by them.

But I can't blame Bones for any of my madness. He's just as incapable of ignoring his demonic desires as I am of ignoring my tainted-by-human ones.

"You sure you're okay?" Bones asks, studying my face.

"I'm fine...promise. Tonight is just what the doctor ordered. Carnage followed by torment. Can't wait." I fake a small smile.

"Okay...well, I'll catch up with you at Old Lady Sullivan's. And be careful...don't get too cocky out there," he says with a wink.

"Yeah, same to you."

For a brief moment we stare into each other's eyes, both of us feeling what neither can say. Then, with a grin as sinful as the devil himself, Bones shakes and quivers, gracefully landing on two large paws. He lets out a lustful howl and sprints toward a remote farmhouse in the distance.

I take a deep breath and head toward the bright lights of the city.

About twenty miles from the club, I wave my hand at a passing motorist who instantly screeches his car to a halt. Now that I'm out in the open I can't run anymore, not without attracting the type of attention we all try to avoid. It makes our lives easier to keep the Sapies in the dark about certain things. If they *really* knew what was going on right under their noses...

I pop my head inside the passenger window of the luxurious Mercedes. A well-dressed middle-aged couple sit side by side, both wearing the blank fixated look of someone under my spell. People are just too easy.

"Take me to the Galaxy nightclub on the corner of Fifth and Main," I command the driver as I let myself in the back. The man instantly makes a dangerous and illegal U-turn and begins driving to my destination.

The couple remains silent, as I have no desire for them to speak. I stare out the window at the whizzing scenery and try not to think of Bones—what he is doing right now. I glance at the seat beside me; there's a playbill

and a bouquet of flowers. *Aww, how cute. Is it date night?* But this couple appears to be in their fifties or sixties; certainly they are not still subject to the ridiculous rituals of romance...

"Why are there flowers here?"

Both remain silent.

"You may speak," I say.

The couple look at each other, unsure who should answer. I roll my eyes. "Man...answer me."

"They are Irena's favorite. I give her these flowers on the twenty-second of every month."

"Why?"

"Because she likes them, and they make her happy. I like making her happy."

"No, I mean why on the twenty-second?"

"That is the day we met. It is the day we were married. It is the day our son was born."

How touching. "You do this every month?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been doing this?"

"Thirty-seven years and three months."

My eyes narrow. Surely this can't be true. But under my spell Sapies are incapable of lying. This man *is* telling me the truth. "You mean to tell me that every single month for the past thirty-seven years you celebrate the day you met and got married, and you bring her her favorite flowers?"

"It is also the day our son was born," he reminds me. "I missed one month because I was in the hospital. But then it was she who brought the flowers to me."

My curiosity piqued, I lean forward. This man's story intrigues me. I knew that some Sapies stayed together for long periods of time, but I didn't think they actually *liked* it.

"Tell me, do you love your wife as much as you did when you were first married?"

The man stares straight ahead in a zombie-like trance. "No," he replies. I slump back in my seat. *Yup. That's what I thought.*

"I love her much, much more," he finishes.

A strange, achy emptiness spreads over my chest. "Have you ever loved another?" I ask.

"That would be impossible."

"Have you ever wanted to be with another woman?"

"Not for one second."

A sense of bewilderment fills me. Surely this wasn't possible... "Have you ever cheated on her?" I ask, somewhat desperately.

"I would rather cut off my own hand than touch another woman with it the way I touch my wife."

I slink down lower in my seat. "Would you die for her?" I whisper.

"Happily. A million times over."

Suddenly, I feel very sad. And *very* alone.

"Pull over," I demand even though we're still several miles away from the club. The man immediately obeys and screeches the car to a halt. As I get out, I give them one final order. "You never saw me, I was never here. You took a wrong turn, but now you are on your way home."

The couple drives off, and I walk the rest of the way to the club. What is wrong with me? Why am I having such an emotional reaction to that man's story? This is the kind of stuff she *loves*...she's always reading sappy romance novels. I just saw one in real life.

So why do I feel so sad? Why can I feel Liora's heart breaking inside of me?

I don't like the answer that fills my mind, but I cannot deny what I know to be true.

I shake my head, trying to force the thought away, but it creeps back into my gut.

I'm sad because this will never, ever, happen for me.

Or for her.

We are destined to live without ever experiencing that kind of love.

This is our ultimate curse.

Chapter 5. Liora

Normally I dread the mile and a half trek through the woods to Dove Creek High. Not the walk itself—*that* part I enjoy—but the fact that I have a long day of misery ahead of me.

But not today.

Today, I feel more alive than any day in recent memory—as if all the mixed-up pieces inside me had miraculously rearranged and lined up in proper order. For the first time, I’m actually looking *forward* to school. Just knowing he’ll be there, nearby, makes me feel I can endure almost anything.

I know I’m setting myself up for a dangerous disappointment. I know nothing can ever happen between Kieron and me, just as I know he’s only talking to me so I can help him with his studies. Guys like him go for sexy girls like Drusilla, or gentle southern sweethearts like Samantha Morgan. He’s new, so he hasn’t figured out how the social system works yet. But he will soon enough, and then he’ll want nothing to do with me. I’m sure of it.

The closer I get to campus, the faster my heart pounds. Once there, I scan the parking lot for his truck but don’t see it. I linger by the front entrance and casually look through my backpack. Maybe when he arrives, he’ll see me here and come talk to me again. Maybe he’ll want to walk to English class together. One can hope.

Two minutes later I zip up my bag, disgusted with myself. Why am I going all stalker on some new guy? Pathetic much? I head down the crowded breezeway and spot Corinne waiting by my locker.

“What’s wrong? You look awful,” I say when I reach her.

“I didn’t get much sleep last night. Mom’s got a new boyfriend, Bill, and they were partying all night long. He thinks he’s a guitar player.” She makes

a face like she's trying to keep from crying.

I frown, knowing Corrine's troubles at home are far worse than she lets on. A few years ago when I was telling her how I hated coming to school every day, she'd confessed how much she looks forward to the hours here away from her abusive home life. "I'm sorry, that totally sucks," I say, closing my locker.

We're halfway to class when she stops and turns to me.

"Um, Liora, I was wondering if you wanted to come over for dinner on Friday...it's my birthday and my mom promised to be sober and make something nice." Her plump face is bright red and she shifts uncomfortably on her feet.

Damn. Oh, Corinne, please don't do this.

She's practically the only person who's been my friend since I became fully human. At first, I thought my life after the "split" would be just like it was before, only with no powers or cognizant awareness of anything that happens at night. But as I got older and entered high-school, people started asking more questions like: "What happened to your parents?" "How do you take care of your blind grandmother all by yourself?" "How do you guys get your money?" And of course, my favorite, "Why can't you ever hang out at night?"

The questions were exhausting, almost as tiresome as the continual stream of lies and excuses I had to use to get out of doing things normal girls my age enjoy and take for granted... going to slumber parties or out on dates, attending school football games, studying with friends at night—or just hanging out. Even eating dinner with a friend for her birthday. Things I wanted to do.

The more I had to say 'no' to friendly invitations, the fewer and further between those invitations got, until they dwindled to nothing. The people

I'd been forced to shun now wanted nothing to do with me.

Now most people just think I'm some sort of snobby, reclusive freak. But it's better this way. Corrine has always respected my boundaries and never judged me. I really hope this isn't changing.

"Um...I don't think I can. My grandma might need me. It's hard for me to leave her alone, her being totally blind and all..." I stammer.

"Right, of course. Forget I mentioned it," she says quickly, biting her lip.

Now I feel horrible. Corrine is really nice, but a lot of the other kids pick on her because she's overweight and wears shoddy clothes. I'm one of the few people at school who will even talk to her. And now I just hurt her feelings.

"Maybe we can do something else instead..." I say, cautiously choosing my words. "Maybe Saturday day we can...I dunno...go down to the lake and bring lunch or something. Or go into town and hit up a matinee or something...whatever you want, as long as it's during the day."

Her face brightens. "You mean it? You'd actually want to hang out?"

I smile. "Sure...as long as it's during the day and I'm home before dark. I can't leave my grandma alone at night."

She nods enthusiastically, her stringy blonde hair flopping in her face. "I understand, totally. Daytime. No prob...we'll think of something fun to do." She's so happy, I feel even more horrible for rejecting her invitation in the first place. I suspect she was more crushed by my initial reaction than she let on.

"So where do you think Kieron is? I don't see him anywhere," Corinne says as we continue down the hall to English class. I ignore the looks of disdain from Drusilla and her friends as they pass by. All dressed in soft pastels and perfectly coiffed pony tails with one strand wrapped to hide the

elastic, they glance at me in my black t-shirt, jeans and combat boots as if I'm a cockroach in their spinach salad.

"Mmm, I dunno," I say as casually as I can. Truth is, I haven't stopped looking for a glimpse of him either, but I don't want to mention this to Corrine. She'd understood when I explained yesterday how he was only talking to me to ask if I could help him catch up with his studies. But I know she's crushing on him hard, and I don't want any further tensions between us.

The final bell rings. As we enter the classroom, I realize I've been holding my breath. The air comes out in a *whoosh*. Wordlessly, and with my heart in my stomach, I head to my usual spot in the back.

The seat beside mine remains empty.

There have been many strange events in my life, but nothing as thoroughly bizarre as the utterly irrational and borderline insane feelings I experience sitting through class without Kieron there beside me.

Part of me wants to cry. The other part is angry 'cause I'm being such a basket case. My crushing disappointment that he's not here is so completely ludicrous—what the hell is wrong with me?

I suppose in a twisted way this all makes sense. It was only a matter of time before I went *officially* crazy; I'm just surprised it hadn't happened before now. Maybe I should go talk to the school counselor. Maybe I should go into her little office with the tacky 80's décor, have a seat on her cracked vinyl couch, and tell her that being a demi-demon who stays up all night drinking, tormenting humans, killing other demons for kicks, and crushing on an incubus-slash-Hound of Hell is really starting to take a toll on my emotional well-being. See if she has any helpful suggestions for me.

I sigh, much louder than I mean to, and the girl in front of me giggles. Mr. Sodenberg shoots me a warning glare but keeps reading. Grateful for

the pass, I focus on my book and vow to make it through the day, one excruciating minute at a time. How *stupid* I was to think some random new cute guy would change *anything* in my life. *Nothing* has changed. In fact, his being here only makes things worse. Makes me more aware of what I'm missing, what I can never have.

That there truly is no place for me in this world.

A few years ago, Tatiana confided that she believes I'll always remain human. So I had to learn to be like a human, assimilate, and really *become* one. Prepare for my future life as a regular human. But really, what hope for a normal life could I ever hope to have? Most girls my age will go to college or get jobs, find husbands and raise families. Sure, I guess I can get a job, but there's no way I'm suffering through more school. And forget ever falling in love and getting married. How could a human male ever understand? And I *loathe* other demions, even more than they despise me. I'm a freak of their kind, nothing but a pathetic "Sapie" girl. Having kids is out of the question, too. No way will I be responsible for bringing any more monsters into this world.

The only thing certain about my future is that I'll be living it all alone. Just me and Tatiana. And probably a bunch of cats. Isn't that how spinsters live?

Tatiana always tells me my humanity is a gift...a blessing. But to me, it feels like a cruel curse. I'd secretly hoped Lucky would be successful in killing the Amazèa, even though the odds aren't in our favor. Death isn't nearly as frightening as the prospect of living the rest of my life alone as an unwanted outsider. Before that horrible day, I knew who I was and where I belonged. Not anymore. Now I'm nothing but an empty shell void of the supernatural powers and abilities that define my kind. I straddle two worlds but belong to neither.

Maybe, if Lucky does manage to kill the Amazèa one day, I'll return to how I was before. Things were very different then, but they were good... turning off my painful feelings in a blink whenever I wanted to. Never feeling scared, or alone. Most importantly, feeling like I was always going to be all right.

Wouldn't *that* be nice.

I move through the rest of my morning like a robot, vaguely aware of speaking when spoken to and nodding my head at the appropriate times. Kieron isn't in any of our morning classes, so as I head out to join Corrine for lunch, I force myself to accept the fact he's not showing up today.

It's funny, though, how no one else's world seems any different for it. While I feel like something precious and valuable has been taken from me, I see Corrine happily chatting by the fountains. Across the quad, Drusilla is holding court with her cronies looking as smug and satisfied as ever. Neither seems to notice or care that Kieron's not around.

Corinne is already sitting with two other girls, Emme and Skye. Emme has blue hair and three nose rings, and Skye has kept her head completely shaved since last year. They're nice enough, and mostly keep to themselves. Corrine and I consider them our 'outcast allies'. I take a seat beside Skye and slowly unwrap my tuna sandwich.

I try to pay attention as they yap about music and boys, but my mind wanders back to Kieron.

"Hello, Earth to Liora," Emme waves her hands in front of me.

"Huh?" I snap out of my daze.

"Are you going to the stupid dance or what?"

"What dance? Oh..." I finally notice the signs promoting the winter formal in a few weeks. "...No. Dances are lame. Especially school ones." I

shrug as if I'm way too cool for such things. But deep down it bothers me that something as simple as attending a school dance is just one more thing I'll never get to experience.

I start to fantasize about what it would be like to go with Kieron as my date. I'd get all dressed up in a pretty gown...maybe even one that isn't black... and he'd pick me up wearing a tux that made him look like a movie star. He'd take me in his arms and together we'd waltz slowly under the starry sky...Everyone would be green with envy at how happy we are, how perfect we are together. All the girls would die from jealousy seeing how much he obviously loves me...

"*Liora!*" This time it's Skye snapping impatiently.

"Huh?" I blink.

"Do you want to go to the bonfire Friday night? We can ditch the football game, and I can get us some beers. We can get wasted..."

I sigh. "Can't. Sorry."

Emme nudges Skye. "See? Told ya. You know..." Emme turns to me, "It's kinda weird how you never want to hang out *ever*. I mean come on, we know your grandma is blind and all, but it's not like she holds you prisoner...You leave her alone when you come to school, what's stopping you from ditching the old bag for a few hours after she's gone to sleep?"

I pick at the crust of my sandwich. "I just don't want to. I hate leaving her alone, and during the day someone else is with her, but at night I'm all she's got."

"But still," Emme presses, "It just seems like *once* in a while you'd be able to hang out...why would you want to stay home every night? It's a Friday night...you should be out partying with everyone else, not staying home with someone five times your age....come on, live a little..."

“Can’t. Sorry.” I stand up and brush the crumbs off my legs. Corrine gives me a sympathetic smile, but it doesn’t make me feel any better. I make up some excuse about having to finish some homework and head off to the library for the remainder of lunch period.

Even though I should be used to it by now, Emme’s words cut deep, a stark reminder of all I’m missing. Even if getting drunk at a bonfire isn’t exactly my idea of a good time, at least it’s *something*. I’m actually surprised Skye even asked me to go. Maybe it was just so they could give me a hard time when I refused.

After what seems like an eternity, the final bell of the day rings. Freedom. I race to my locker, toss in my books and charge to the parking lot. I’m mid-stride when my body stops so suddenly anyone watching would think I had slammed into an invisible glass wall. I inhale sharply, staring .

He’s here.

I remind myself to breathe as Kieron starts his slow lope toward me. Although I’m happy to see him, at the same time I’m terrified by how much this happiness consumes me.

“Hey, Liora. So where should we do this?” he asks.

“Huh?”

“Are you still willing to help me with my assignments?”

I blink and will my mouth to work. “Uh, yeah, sure. I just assumed since you weren’t here all day...”

He laughs, and all I can think of is how I could listen to this sound for the rest of my life. “Yes, didn’t quite make it in today.” He pauses and glances behind him. “Something came up. If you’ve already made other plans I understand—”

“No,” I say quickly. “I was hoping to be with you today...” Oh *no*, that didn’t sound desperate at *all*.

He grins again and hitches his backpack over his shoulder. “Great.”

I glance around and motion to the octagonal building behind me. “You wanna go to the library? There are study rooms in there.” I look back at him and catch a faint grimace on his face. “Or we can go somewhere else,” I add.

He smiles, and I decide it must have been just my imagination. “No, the library is fine. After you, m’lady.”

With an exasperated sigh, I close my book and glare at the group of girls watching us. This is getting *completely* out of hand. What in the *world* is going on with these insane females? Kieron and I hadn’t been in the library for five minutes before they started gathering nearby, craning their necks to see what we were doing.

I lean my head toward him. “Why is everyone staring so much?” I whisper. “Don’t you think it’s a little strange? It’s not like you have two heads or something—”

Kieron glances up, seemingly oblivious to his growing fan club until now. He gives his admirers a quick smile before turning to me. “They’re staring at me because I placed a spell on them.”

I choke on some of the diet orange soda I’m sipping. The burning tickle travels up my nose, and I cover my face with my hand so as not to cough all over his face. “*What?*” I gasp.

He stares at me, his eyes wide and gently pats me on my back. I clear my throat several times and try not to die of embarrassment. “Are you okay?” he asks. I nod, humiliated, and give my runny nose a stealthy wipe.

“Of course, I’m only joking,” he says, studying me. “The reason they’re staring is because I am extraordinarily good-looking.”

Having only just recovered from my original coughing fit, his deadpan response sends me into another one. “And also very humble,” I manage to spit out between laughs and coughs.

He shrugs and rubs my back again, much like a mother pats her newborn after a feeding. “Humility has nothing to do with it. I’m not ashamed to be exceptionally handsome, just as you shouldn’t feel bad for being unusually beautiful. There’s nothing wrong with it. In fact, it’s hundreds of thousands of years of biological evolution at its finest.”

I’ve stopped coughing and laughing. “*What?*”

“Females are hardwired to propagate with the best and strongest mate available, to ensure survival of their species. Even before we knew about genes and DNA, nature gave indicators to let the opposite sex know what mate is best, physically speaking. Now, as they say, looks aren’t everything. And they’re right. But from a strictly sexual standpoint, for reproductive purposes only, you *can* judge a book by its cover. Most of the time.” He tosses me a sexy grin and glances briefly over to the gawking girls.

“... People think it’s shallow to care about looks when choosing a partner, but in fact the opposite is true. We’re operating from one of the oldest and most enduring instincts known to man. The urge to find the strongest, sturdiest match is deeply encoded within each and every one of us. Biologically and anthropologically speaking, this is about the age females are preparing for reproduction. Instinctually, they’re looking for the best mates. I am tall, athletic, and have masculine, proportional features, indicating I have good genes. They want what I have. What I represent. You can’t fight hundreds of thousands of years of human nature, darlin’.”

He stops, looks at me, and laughs. “Sorry, I kind of went off there, didn’t I? It’s just, well, I’m kinda fascinated by human biology and anthropology—how it causes people to interact with each other. Where’d I lose you? Your eyes have totally glazed over.”

It takes me a long moment to answer him. “Right after the part where you said I was beautiful,” I finally whisper. No one, *no one*, has ever told me I was beautiful before. Not even in a phony way, and certainly not in the sincere way Kieron just did. I’m stunned by the effect these words have on me, and how desperately I need to hear them again.

His eyes settle on my face. Comfortably. Easily. “You are, you know—Beautiful.” His voice is lower now, but I hear him clearly. The whole world seems muted except for him.

“Thanks.”

He cracks a cocky grin. “Don’t thank me, thank your genetic heritage. I’m merely observing the simple and complex principles that contributed to designing—”

“Oh, stop it.” Laughing, I playfully tap him with a book.

“Okay, okay.” He holds up his hands in mock surrender. More people are watching us now, and I notice the stern-faced librarian making a beeline for our table.

Kieron sees her too. “Wanna get out of here?”

“Yes.”

Once we get to the parking lot, Kieron suggests we take his truck—he knows a place we can go. Somewhere we won’t be bothered. I readily agree, feeling a flurry of nerves as he holds the door open for me.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he starts the engine. The truck’s hard and glossy black shell belies its soft, cozy interior. It suits Kieron perfectly.

“You’ll see.” He smiles at me with the corner of his mouth and my heart races again. Other than the first time we met, there have always been other people around. Now it’s just us.

The easy banter we shared in the library gives way to an awkward silence. I glance at him as he stares at the bumpy road ahead, taking us away from school and far from town. He swallows, and his Adam’s apple bobs beneath his cowl-neck sweater.

“What kind of music do you like?” he asks and starts flipping through the iPod connected to the dash.

“Almost everything, depending on my mood,” I answer truthfully. “Whatever is fine.”

He clicks through his selection while keeping a careful eye on the road ahead. Soon, a beautifully haunting tune fills the air. It is ethereal, sad, and uplifting—all at once. I sit back and let the enchanting melody wash over me like golden rain. I feel my tension release, and notice Kieron’s hands aren’t clasping the steering wheel as tightly as they were before.

I gaze out the window as if I’m seeing the scenery for the first time. I’ve lived here my whole life, but now it seems newer somehow. I see remarkable splendor in the ordinary...dying trees holding the promise of rebirth; the swirling dance of the clouds as they hold the sun captive, only releasing little glints here and there when they feel like it; the perfect chaotic swarm of birds flying overhead, each in its own little world until the exact second they all fall into line. Even the old woman in overalls with thinning hair and no teeth who waves to us as we pass by looks beautiful. She has endured a long, hard life and still has a smile on her face.

I’m unfamiliar with this path Kieron’s taking. When the road becomes rough and we start bouncing around in the cab, he slows down...then stops.

“Here we are.” A line of trees blocks my vision ahead. Behind us are just open fields, shanty houses, and dirt roads.

“But there’s nothing here,” I say.

“It’s over there. You’ll see.” He reaches behind me and grabs his backpack and a blanket. My pulse quickens again. What on earth do we need a blanket for? And why does he just happen to have one in the back of his truck?

“Follow me. You’ll be safe, I promise,” he says, sensing my hesitation. I fumble around for my book bag and quickly check my cell phone reception, just in case. But if I really did need to call someone, who would I call? What would I say? *Some hot guy has me out in the middle of the woods. Please send help immediately?*

My only option is to trust Kieron. He holds out his hand and I take it.

Together we walk down a narrow dirt path toward a dense overgrowth of twigs and vines.

“This isn’t the usual entrance...it’s kind of a short cut.”

Kieron does his best to block my face from the over-hanging branches. There’s a faint walking path where others have come before, and for some reason this makes me feel a little better. I’m trying to stay collected, but something about this place feels...*off*. I can’t quite put my finger on it...almost like it’s too quiet...the air too still.

We finally break through the last line of shrubs, and I see a massive field of yellowed grass and broken stone. I gasp, take a step back, and trip over a tree root. Kieron grabs my hand to steady me and I look at him...bewildered.

Why has he brought me here?

I'd thought maybe we were going to a little park or a spot down by the river. Perhaps even his house. But we are in none of those safe, logical, ordinary places.

Kieron has brought me to a cemetery.

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Chapter 6. Lucky

The thing people don't understand about demons is that we're not *all* the horrible, evil-for-the-sake-of-being-evil, rotten, eternally-damning monsters everyone makes us out to be.

Okay, I admit, *some* are pretty terrible, but who amongst us can throw stones? It's almost comical, though, the way most Sapies are taught to fear, even hate us, and how they think our ruling Prince, Lucifer, is the worst and scariest thing ever created. I suppose partially they're right, but that's like blaming the ocean for being wet, or an eagle for flying, or a baby for crying. He's just playing his role in the grand scheme of things.

Of course, most people like our Light counterparts just fine, not caring or understanding that we're *all* the direct descendants of the *Angelus Domini*—the original gods who ruled over the universe and its infinite domains. We're all just different slices of the same, great, cosmic pie. My ancestors ruled the earth, heavens, and netherworlds *long* before humans were even a sparkle of a possibility in The Creators' eyes. But then Man pops onto the scene and acts like he owns the joint?

After all, it was us—The Dark and Light-angels alike—who saved Man's weak ass time and time again. Left to their own devices, humans couldn't even get it together long enough to prevent themselves from going extinct, not once, not twice, but twelve times. That's right. *Twelve*.

When Creators provided the necessary reinforcements by integrating Dark and Light-angels with a select group of humans, this gave them not only the support they needed to sustain life, but the means to make that life worth living.

Humans couldn't exist without us. They wouldn't *want* to exist without us, for there cannot be light without darkness, pleasure without pain, joy

without sorrow, and love without hate. It simply cannot happen. The balance of celestial energy is essential for any existence to survive and flourish. Without it, the universe dies.

I, for one, take this responsibility seriously.

The woman screams through her sobs, retreating to the corner of her darkened bedroom. She's trying to get away, but there's no escaping me. Covering her face with her hands, she tries in vain to block out the horrifying images of her worst nightmares. But there's no stopping these scenes of eternal torment I'm inflicting upon her.

I swish back and forth on a cherry rocking chair, watching her squirm and moan. Her pain gives me pleasure, for it tells me I'm doing my job effectively. It was clever of me to suggest she put this chair in here; it's so much nicer when I have a comfortable place to enjoy the show.

"Stop, stop it...you're not real. You're not real..." the woman gasps. Rocking back and forth, I twirl a lock of hair around my finger and hit her with another vision. It's Tatiana's duty to find me humans who have violated Natural Law. Then, it's up to me to deliver a suitable punishment. Lately, I've been favoring psychic torture over the physical; it just seems to be much more effective. It's amazing how dark the human mind can be, so I let them choose their own punishment by living out their own worst nightmares. It's poetic, really. And amusing to see what they subconsciously pick.

She curls up, convulsing as if she's been electrocuted. She presses her face in the corner, weeping, head in her hands, trying to hide from the terror seeping through her mind. On the other side of the room, under the protection of a simple sleeping spell, her husband snores soundly, blissfully unaware of the torture his wife is enduring. Just as he's unaware that his two infants didn't die of SIDS like everyone thought, but had their tiny lives

snuffed out by a selfish and uncaring mother—the same mother who now cowers in a corner screaming at ghosts, unable to escape the sounds of her babies crying out for her.

“Here you are.” The masculine voice causes me to jump.

“Bones, what are you doing here?” I ask, annoyed. “You scared me half to death!”

He sits on the corner of the bed and glances at the screeching woman. “Kind of like that?” he asks with a raised eyebrow. I roll my eyes.

“What are you doing here?” I repeat.

He doesn’t answer me right away. Instead he watches the woman writhe and moan on the floor. “I followed your scent. What’d she do?”

“Double infanticide.”

He shakes his head slowly. “Shame. She looks real nice.”

My chest feels heavy as I gaze at Bones’ strong profile. Even here, in the dimly lit room, I can see he’s not happy. I know it’s my fault. But there’s nothing I can do about it.

The husband snores and rolls over in the bed. The woman screams again. I wish Bones would leave me alone so I can enjoy the symphony of torment, but obviously he wants to talk.

“*Silentium.*” I swish my hand in the direction of the woman, instantly muting her cries. “What’s up?”

He stands up and paces around the room for a moment before leaning against a far wall, hidden in shadows.

“I was worried about you. You never showed up at Old Lady Sullivan’s last night, and tonight you didn’t stop at the Bar. What’s going on?”

It’s true. After slaying the Parastes, I’d blown off my tormenting duties in favor of the sanctuary of my secret spot; a secluded place high in the hills overlooking the valley. A place I go when I need to be alone and think. I

can see clear out to the Lake of Adonni and listen to the Sirens sing their enchanting melodies. Their soothing songs help me to relax.

I didn't want to see Bones last night, and I was hoping to avoid him tonight. It's why I'd taken my drinks from the emergency stash Tatiana keeps in her room instead of going to the Bar.

"Sorry, I just wanted to be alone. I didn't think we had some sort of special date or anything..." My voice sounds snappier than I intend, and I feel him wince in the darkness.

"Okay. I understand. I'm just glad you're all right. I was sorta worried about you is all...There's been some talk of some funny business around here, and I was concerned when I didn't see you. But I guess you have your reasons and you seem to be fine." His voice is tender. Sweet.

Damn him.

"I *am* fine." If you're not counting the knots in my stomach or the sickness in my chest.

I can feel the pain and confusion in his wordless exhale, and I feel even worse. For so long, ever since *the night*, Bones has been my closest friend. He's the only one, except Tatiana, who's always been here for me, no matter what. The only one I can talk to about anything.

But I can't talk to him about this. Not this mess I'm feeling. Not without hurting him or losing him. Just the thought of that happening makes my heart clench.

"Sooo...you're not mad at me? I haven't done something to upset you?" he asks.

I laugh noiselessly knowing he can't see my expression. "No, nothing is your fault. I'm just going through some weird stuff right now, and I have to figure it out on my own."

He crosses the room and kneels beside me. Clasping my hand in his, I see a glimmer of light reflect in his sad, bronze eyes. “If there’s anything you need...anything you want to talk about, I’m here. That’s our deal, remember? For as long as you want me, I’ve got your back.”

Because he’s pure demon, Bones is immortal, unless he’s killed by a pure Angel—Light or Dark. So he’ll continue to live on for indeterminate eons exactly as he is now. When he chooses a companion, he chooses a mortal, like me, and I will be replaced upon my death, or my deciding to end the friendship—whichever comes first. I’ve always known just how lucky I am to have won Bones’ affections and unwavering loyalty when I was just a young demion. I’ve never taken his friendship for granted, and could never imagine living this life without him by my side.

Until now.

Now I’m beginning to wonder if I can stay his friend, now that I know I want so much more from him...something he can never give me.

I know this is all Liora’s fault. Somehow she’s making me have these crazy feelings I’m not supposed to have—or, at least, not able to control. I’ve never exactly loved that Bones needed to mate with so many virgins, but it’s never bothered me this much before. And the couple in the car—as much as I try to block the man’s story, it still haunts me. *Why, oh why, did I choose that car to stop?*

I squeeze Bones’ hand and give him a small smile. “I’ll be okay. I just need some space for a while. Just ‘til I figure out some stuff.”

“By space, do you mean space... from *me*?”

I take a deep breath, whispering my response. “Yes.”

His body stiffens and he stands up. Even in the darkness, his silhouette seems colder, harder. It’s a subtle change, but I can feel it.

After a long pause he speaks. “Fine, but that doesn’t mean I’m not keeping an eye on you.” He places his hand on my shoulder, and I tilt my head up, wishing I could freeze this moment in time—when it’s just the two of us. No one else exists. No one else matters. “Where are you going after you’re done here?” His voice sounds strained.

I glance back at the woman huddled in the corner. She’s almost stopped moving, so I’ll be wrapping it up soon. Torment to exhaustion then on to the next.

I shrug. “Not sure yet. Maybe Mr. Ludwings’s. He’s still playing with little boys in a not-so-playful way. I guess he didn’t receive my first message quite clearly enough. This time I’ll make sure he gets it.”

Bones leans against the doorway. “Well, I’m just glad you’re doing okay. I’m gonna go find me some ladies before the sun comes up.”

Suddenly, it feels like a rock is lodged in my throat.

“Hey, this guy, Ludwing, doesn’t he live near Baymore Park?” he asks.

“Pretty close. Why?”

“I heard some Altrumina Demons have set up a nest there, so be careful. Do you have any weapons with you?”

“I have my dagger.” I pat the emerald-tipped blade nestled safely inside my boots, hidden under several layers of lace. This dagger is good for most demons, but no match for an Altrumina. One touch is all it takes for them to transfer their own mind-bending curse.

Bones arches an eyebrow. “You know that’s not gonna cut it. Stay away from there, especially since you’re unarmed.”

“Yes, Dad,” I tease.

“I mean it, Lucky.” His tone is firm. “You know what they can do to you, and there’s *definitely* something brewing out there. All of us have been put on alert. Don’t go looking for trouble tonight.”

With a sigh, I stand up and gently push Bones out the door. “Go. I’ll be fine. You’re worse than a Sapie mother, I swear.”

He chuckles. “Like you’d really know.”

“Go.”

He silently slips away into the night, and I turn my attention again to the whimpering in the corner.

I wrap my cloak tightly around me as I approach Baymore Park’s west entrance, but the thin velvet does little to protect me from the palpable chill in the night air. Normally, my body doesn’t react to external temperatures, so I can only assume it’s because I didn’t properly replenish. Tatiana’s stuff is good, but it’s nowhere near as good as the Source’s. But I’d figured since I was only tormenting tonight—not fighting—her backup elixir would suffice. It’s also why I’m wearing a long, gothic gown made from yards of vintage lace. I like wearing dresses to torture; it puts me in the right mood. Just like wearing skintight leather puts me in the mood to kick some ass.

I just need to hurry with my rounds and get back to Demon Bar as soon as possible. The fastest way to Ludwing’s is straight through the park. Otherwise, I’ll have to circle around for miles.

Sigh. I don’t want to waste energy on running, and Diablo doesn’t leave Dryndara except to come to the cabin. Bones’ warning sounds in my head, but I’m sure he’s just being overly protective, as usual. Still, I reach into my boot and withdraw my blade. It *will* kill an Altrumina if I’m attacked, as long as they don’t touch me first. No problem. If I see someone who seems at all suspicious *then* I’ll run. No point in wasting precious energy I don’t have.

After several minutes of strolling through the park and seeing only a few strung-out junkies and some prostitutes, I relax, chiding myself for

worrying in the first place. Altrumina are far more interested in infecting Sapies; they wouldn't come looking for a fight with someone they think will fight back.

Just as I'm reassuring myself of this, I spot Altrumina *everywhere*. The place is swarming with them. They look like Sapies, but I recognize their overly-erect posture and out-dated wardrobes. Plus, they always work in pairs, a male and a female, and have whiter than blond hair, straight to their shoulders.

My heart pounding, I pick up the pace and take a wary look around. Directly ahead of me, two Altrumina approach a young homeless boy. Further up, two more are standing by a swing set. Another pair is over on a bench, talking to each other. One female stands alone, silently stalking a young prostitute who's just entered the grove with her john.

I cut off the main path onto the grass, away from any trouble, and silently curse myself for not bringing my crossbow with me tonight. Not because I'm afraid, but because I hate them *so much*. They aren't from my family, so I would kill them happily and with impunity.

Tomorrow. I'm definitely hunting me some Altrumina tomorrow. Tonight, not only am I sadly unprepared and not at all dressed for hunting, my alarming lack of strength would assure my certain defeat in a scuffle.

But I'm curious about the one Altrumina by herself. They always work in pairs. Always. So where's the other one?

A light crunching from behind me causes me to jump and spin around, my dagger at the ready. I find myself face to face with an impeccably handsome, smiling young man with shiny lavender eyes.

Shit.

"You lost, bitch?" he asks, and before the question is out of his mouth he lightly touches my hand.

I fall into darkness.

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Chapter 7. Lucky

I struggle to regain consciousness, but I feel drugged. Everything is foggy...my mind's a blur. I'm shivering from the biting cold, and somewhere in the darkness I hear mocking laughter.

Gradually, I force my eyes open. Everything is dark, hazy. I try to wrap my arms around myself to stop from shaking, but they won't budge.

My body is paralyzed.

Slowly, objects come into focus. I'm standing in the middle of a grassy field, trapped inside a small cage made of steel bars.

"Where am I?" I croak.

The Altrumina who touched me steps up to my prison.

"Why don't you tell us, pretty girl?" He's joined by his partner, who smiles at me with perfect teeth.

"She's yummy," Perfect Teeth says in an eerie, high-pitched voice. "I want to eat her."

The first one laughs and moves closer. He reaches his arm through the cage bars and lightly brushes the side of my face. White-hot razors melt my frozen flesh. My mind screams for me to move out of the way, but my body refuses to listen.

"She's not entirely human, I doubt she would taste very good," my captor says with disdain.

"Still, I wouldn't mind a little sample," Perfect Teeth says. "Let's see what this little beauty is made of."

She comes closer. With all the strength I can muster, I struggle to force my body to obey me.

Nothing.

I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out.

They both laugh, and Perfect Teeth moves closer. I feel her hot breath on my cheek as she whispers, “Don’t you know we swallow your screams, little girl? No one can hear you. Only us, and it makes us feel *so good*. The more you scream the more powerful we become.” Her purple eyes shine wickedly.

I can only watch helplessly as she dangles her fingers in front of my face.

“Interesting that she can’t move,” she murmurs to her partner.

“Guess she has some issues. I expected a fight, but she just froze up.”

“Interesting,” Perfect Teeth repeats.

I hear their words, but they make no sense. I shake my head.

“What do you want?” My voice is barely more than a whimper.

They both laugh again. Perfect Teeth slides her boney hand under the sleeve of my cloak, and down the entire length of my bare arm. Fiery razorblades of burning acid slice open my skin.

I know I’m screaming in agony, but I hear nothing except the sound of their laughter.

The pain is excruciating, unlike anything I’ve ever felt or imagined. It seeps slowly through my body, each beat of my heart moving the debilitating wretchedness deeper inside me. Suddenly, my body shifts from freezing cold to sweltering hot. I can’t catch my breath.

Sweat pours from my forehead and into my eyes. I try crying out again, but the pain is too much to bear, and I don’t have the strength. My eyes close, and my body collapses in a heap on the grass.

“Interesting,” Perfect Teeth mutters again.

Is that all she can say?

“This is going to be a good show,” the male says, sounding amused.

Tattie! Tattie! I need help!

The final wave of torture washes over my head, and I know this is it.
I'm going to die.

Alone in a field, mocked by tormenters, sacrificed for no reason other than to satisfy the needs of pure evil.

Just like...

Suddenly, my suffering stops.

Not only is the pain gone, but my body feels good. Young, strong, healthy, *and whole*.

Cautiously, I open one eye and welcome the warm glow of the soft twilight sun. My cage is gone, and I'm no longer in Baymore Park. I'm alone, sitting in a field of wildflowers and tall grass.

I know this place.

Euphoria washes over me, and I breathe several deep sighs of relief. There's a familiar oak tree up ahead. Smiling, I stand up on wobbly legs and walk over to it.

Our tree.

I lightly trace my finger over the letters carved into its ancient wood.

Michael. Kayla. Liora.

The names form a triangle, and there's a star symbol carved in the middle. I remember how Michael added that part later, for me. He'd told me once that it was *me* who'd made our little group so special. Until I met them, Michael and Kayla had been like any other brother and sister. But once I joined the mix, everything had changed.

We became a family.

"Liora, come here!" A young girl calls. My heart stops. I know this voice...

"Coming!" I hear another girl sing out.

I gasp. As if hypnotized, I find myself moving toward the sounds of happy children laughing by the pond.

I see them....*us*. Michael, Kayla, and me. Michael is by the water, barefoot, his pant legs rolled up to his knees. He's holding a long stick, and his brown hair flops aimlessly in the breeze. Kayla stands beside him, beaming.

I watch as my younger self skips toward them; my yellow sundress floats around me like a ray of sunshine.

I'm only twelve years old here; I am still innocent.

"Liora, look what Michael found!" Kayla says breathlessly.

"What is it?"

My heart pounds wildly. I remember *every second* of this scene playing out before me.

Michael takes his hand out from behind his back. In it, he's holding a beautiful, full-bloomed white and yellow water lily.

"Here, Liora, this is for you," he says, shyly handing Younger Me the flower. "It was floating in the middle of the pond all by itself. I wanted you to have it."

Giggling delightedly, Kayla skips over to the oak tree and grabs the tire swing. "Michael and Liora, sitting in a tree. K-i-s-s-i-n-g."

Michael's freckled cheeks tinge pink. "Shut up, Kayla," he mutters, tossing a clump of grass at her.

"Michael, you better keep your promise!" Kayla yells out as she climbs up the rope and starts swinging.

"What promise?" I'm asking, holding his gift up to my face. I remember thinking it was the sweetest fragrance I'd ever smelled. I watch my younger self breathe deeply and smile.

Michael looks down at his feet, and then peeks shyly up through his long lashes. "I promised her that one day I'd ask you to marry me," he says quietly. "That way you two can be real sisters forever."

Hearing him say those words had lit up my soul in a way I never thought possible. At that exact moment, everything was perfect.

Perfect.

"You want to marry me?" I'm whispering, hiding my happy grin behind the oversized lily.

He nods. "Someday. When we're older. But not too old. Maybe once we're outta high school..."

I see myself laugh, but I know at that moment I was thinking if my heart felt any fuller it would explode from too much joy.

"You've thought this through," I'm saying.

He nods again, braver now. "If you want to, that is. Of course, if you find someone better...someone you like more..."

"Michael, stop. How could I possibly find anyone I like more? That would be impossible! Let's do it. We can get married and the three of us can all live together in a big house and everything will be perfect forever!" I'm dancing around in a happy circle.

He smiles, but it's a nervous smile. His brown eyes turn serious, and he moves closer to me. I know this moment. My heart is racing so fast...

I see myself close my eyes, but remember the feeling of Michael's lips briefly, gently touching mine...of my whole world exploding with fireworks.

He quickly pulls away and looks down at the ground, unaware those few seconds when he first kisses me by the pond will provide me with the happiest memory of my life.

A short yelp followed by a longer scream interrupts the intimate moment.

“Kayla!”

Michael and I both turn and sprint to where she has fallen. Of course, I reach her first, and when Michael arrives I’m already cradling Kayla in my arms.

“Ow, ow, my leg...it hurts...help,” Kayla sobs.

I watch myself take hold of Kayla’s broken leg. I’d never tried doing this before, but somehow, deep inside, I knew I could do what needed to be done. Wrapping my hands around her injury, I concentrate and allow my fire to heal her.

A moment later, Kayla’s sobs are replaced with laughter. Michael crouches beside me, staring in awe. Kayla looks at me adoringly and grasps my hand.

“Liora...how did you *do* that? That was like...*magic*.”

I’m shrugging. “I dunno...I just knew I could.” Tatiana had been teaching me about my ‘special’ heritage, and how I was different from other human boys and girls. She’d also warned me never to say anything, even to Michael and Kayla. But they knew I was different without me ever saying a word. And they loved me anyway.

Kayla struggles to her feet and brushes the dirt from her white dress. “You’re so lucky. Is there anything you *can’t* do? Man, I wish I had cool powers like you do. I’m so ordinary. Boring and...*unmagical*.”

“It’s not really magic, though...it’s something else.”

“Well, whatever it is, you’re lucky. Lucky Liora. Lucky, lucky, lucky,” she sings as she begins climbing back up the tree. Grabbing a thick branch she hoists herself back into the tire, bravely forgetting her earlier mishap.

Michael and I are standing next to each other, watching her with smiles on our faces. He gently wraps his hand around mine.

“Lucky Liora,” Kayla repeats as her long, blonde hair flows behind her in the wind. “And lucky me for having a very best friend and someday sister who is so wonderfully magical. Lucky me. Lucky, lucky me.” The sound of her tinkling laughter carries through the fields.

“I think I’m the lucky one,” Michael whispers from beside me.

“I’m the luckiest of all,” I whisper back.

Michael leans closer and gently kisses me again. Kayla laughs.

“We should get going soon,” I say, even though I don’t want our perfect day to end. “It’s getting dark out, and I promised Tatiana I’d be home for dinner.”

“Just a little while longer,” Michael says. I smile and squeeze his hand.

“Hello, there...”

Michal and I turn to see two young girls emerge from a patch of tall, wild grass. Kayla, unaware of the girls’ arrival, continues to swing.

As I’m watching the scene replay before me, I feel two distinctly separate sets of emotions at once: one...the curious apprehension my younger self is feeling; the second...the sheer, unbridled terror of now.

I try screaming: *Run away! Get Kayla and Michael and run for your lives!*

I hear the desperate pleas in my mind, but no sound comes from my lips. I’m nothing more than a silent, invisible observer, powerless to stop the horrific scene from unfolding.

Just like then.

“Hello, where did you guys come from?” Michael’s friendly voice is laced with surprise.

We should've seen them earlier; I'd thought it odd that we hadn't. But maybe we were all too wrapped up in our perfect little world to notice two people approaching.

"Can we play with you?" the girls ask in unison. They look to be about eight or nine years old. Identical twins, holding hands. Both wearing matching pink and white pinafores with their blonde hair in bouncy pig-tails.

I remember feeling uneasy about these newcomers, but didn't know why at the time. They were the most adorable little girls I'd ever laid my eyes on. But something about them made the hairs on my arms stand up.

"Aren't you pretty far from home?" Michael asks, as he leans down to talk to them. Wherever these two girls were from, it wasn't nearby. The closest house was a few miles down the road, and we knew everyone in the surrounding area.

They shake their heads like little robots. "We like it," they say, again in perfect unison. A strange answer that doesn't seem to fit Michael's question.

"Where are your parents? Where did you come from?" I ask, grasping Michael's hand tighter. He's smiling at the little dolls with an amused grin, but my stomach is uncomfortably clenched.

They stare at us with wide, innocent expressions.

Run! Get Michael and Kayla and run away NOW!!

My silent screams go unnoticed, and now I can't move. My body is frozen, forcing me to watch the gruesome scene about to take place.

"We don't want to play with you," they say to me in eerie harmony. "We only want to play with *them*..."

No, no, make it stop! Somebody help! Make them stop! Run! Get away! Please...please...

Tears fall down my cheeks. Nothing I do matters now.

At this moment, the two little girls' eyes glow an unnaturally bright blue before turning a menacing shade of black. I see my younger self freeze.

No. Please...no. Run...get away, I continue to cry out. Finally, I can't watch anymore and I close my eyes tight, unable to bear witness to the horrors about to happen.

I let out one final, anguished scream. *NOOOOOOOO!!!*

Suddenly, I'm spinning through darkness. My stomach jolts from the waves of nausea flooding my body. Then it stops. My eyes and jaw are tightly clenched, but I feel a palpable difference in the air.

I'm somewhere else.

I struggle to catch my breath and slow my racing heart. Sweat drips from my forehead, my body trembles uncontrollably. But I'm neither hot nor cold. I'm strangely comfortable.

"There you are, sweetheart." The silky voice caressing the air is the most welcome sound I could ever hope to hear.

Bones!

My eyes fly open to the most amazing, unexpected sight. I'm lying on a bed, surrounded by bunches of red satin. Dozens of candles flicker aimlessly, giving the cozy room a sultry glow. Soft music plays soothingly from an invisible stereo, and the faintest hint of musk fills the air. But I'm only vaguely aware of all these things as I search for the beautiful face of my savior.

Bones, oh, Bones...I need you...

From the shadows, Bones steps forward. His perfectly chiseled torso gleams under the glow of dancing firelight. His eyes, deep with a carnal lust, gaze upon me.

I open my arms gratefully, welcoming my hero, my love, my friend. Now I'm safe. Now I'm protected. Now I'm loved. He leans down, closer...closer...I can almost feel his hot breath on me...

"My sweetest love..." he murmurs.

Oh, Bones, I love you so much...

"Please, please take me..." a soft voice moans. Stunned, I jerk my head and see a nude woman lying beside me, aching for her seduction.

No...

The look in Bones' eyes...the sincere expression of love and desire that's supposed to be only for me, is instead being used as his weapon of romance with the nubile beauty. He grins, delicately stroking her body with his fingers. The sounds of her pleasure drive a knife through my heart. He lies down on top of her and presses his hungry mouth against hers.

No! Stop it! Stop kissing her like that!

I want so badly to push him off her, but I can only lie here, paralyzed—forced to watch the scene of seduction as it plays out. I know they can't see or hear me, but I am painfully aware of *everything* they're doing.

I feel sicker and dirtier than I've ever felt.

I try to shut out the image, but even with my eyes closed I still see them clearly—the loving way Bones kisses and caresses her...the girl's indescribable pleasure at his tender embrace and gently gyrating pelvis.

My heart shatters into a million pieces over and over again as I'm forced to watch him make love to girl, after girl, after girl... after girl.

I don't know how many hours pass. I've cried so much my tears have all dried up. Every once in a while, Bones turns to look directly into my eyes and give a smug smile, before returning his mouth to the young beauty beneath him. The sights and sounds of pleasure beside me play over and

over like a broken record of perpetual torture. Instead of growing numb, each passing minute hurts me more and more.

I want to die.

A sharp cracking noise whips through the air, and I'm bombarded with a brilliant, sickly yellow light. Nausea floods through me once more, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

When I open them again, I'm lying on a bed of scorching white sand. The air feels like it's coming from a blast furnace, and my eyes are so dry the lids are like sandpaper.

Slowly, I sit upright. I squint to block out the painful brightness as I assess my new surroundings.

Nothing.

I'm all alone...not a soul is in sight. There are no signs of life anywhere. The air is dead and stale—as if no life has *ever* existed here.

This place feels like death.

Empty, lonely, vacant, *death*.

Hello? Hello?! Is anyone here? Can anyone hear me?

Silence. Sickening silence...unlike any I've ever experienced. Everywhere there is absolute stillness.

I am completely alone in this desolate wasteland.

Totally, utterly, shamefully alone.

I no longer exist. *Have I ever existed?*

Hello! Anybody! Please, is anybody out there?

...Nothing. Even my thoughts are barely a whisper.

Hello?! Somebody! Anybody! Is anyone out there? Can you hear me?

My heart races uncontrollably as I wipe the perspiration from my brow. Barely able to feel my legs, I force myself to stand. I need to get out of here. I need to go somewhere else. *But where?* Each step is exactly the

same as the one before it. Every view and angle of this barren desert of death is exactly the same. Miles and miles and miles of flat nothingness, expanding for eternity.

With me in the center. Alone.

The realization of what this means hits me full force.

I'm doomed. Eternally doomed. Damned to walk this barren wasteland alone, tortured with everlasting isolation. I'd thought watching Michael and Kayla die was horrific; I'd thought seeing Bones' true colors was heartbreaking.

This is so much worse than those. *Infinitely* worse.

I fall to my knees, my silent cries no longer audible even in my head. My eyes are too dry for tears. I can't swallow, and the brilliant light curdles my blood.

Please, please, let me die.

Or am I already dead? Is this my eternity?

No, this is worse than death. This is...*nothing*.

Hours pass...days...I don't even know. Time does not exist. I can't think clearly anymore.

From somewhere, a soothing voice is calling to me. I'm hallucinating, hearing things...

Come back, wake up...you're gonna be okay. Open your eyes...

But my eyes *are* open. There's no one here. The disembodied voice speaks again, louder now.

"You're safe, I gotcha, open your eyes, come back to me. You're strong... fight it... remember who you are...where you come from...where you want to be..."

Suddenly, I'm spinning again. Rainbows of psychedelic colors blur and swish around me. I'm falling...floating....

...I'm lying on wet grass, freezing and shaking. Trying to gasp the fresh air, I choke on my own breath and cough. Where am I now?

"There you are...atta girl...I got you...you're safe. Just breathe..."

There's the voice again...*coming from right behind my ear.*

Only my legs are on the grass, the rest of my body is propped up on something strong and warm. Something with arms wrapping around me...

I struggle to break free, but can barely move.

"Let me go..." I croak.

"I can't. You aren't strong enough yet. Try to relax for a few minutes. You'll feel better," the masculine voice says in my ear.

Is some stupid Sapie really trying to save me?

I'm too weak to fight—I have no choice but to stay where I am. And where I am feels good. Warm. Safe. My head begins to clear, and I realize how much I need to be held right now.

"Who are you?" I whisper.

"A friend."

Gradually, I feel myself return to my body. Objects around me slowly take shape. My senses re-engage; my breathing and heart rate stabilize.

"Where are we?"

He props me closer to his chest. He's warm. Very warm. Definitely not a Sapie. I must admit, if I can't move, this is a very comfortable resting place.

"We're in Baymore Park. Do you remember what happened?" The tenderness in his voice reminds me of how someone would talk to a wounded child.

"I...I was walking...I...I saw an Altrumina...and then...and then—"

"He laid the whammy on you," he finishes.

"No...that wasn't it... I went places...I saw things..."

“Trust me, that’s what happened. I saw everything...well, almost. I got here right as he touched you.”

My head is clearer now and my body feels strong enough for me to sit up on my own. Reluctantly, I disentangle from his protective embrace, briefly meeting his concerned eyes before I glance around. He’s right; we’re sitting on a patch of grass in Baymore Park, not ten feet from where I encountered the Altrumina.

A flash of fear shoots through me. “Where are they?” I ask, panicked. I’m feeling stronger now, but definitely not battle-ready.

“Part of one is over there...” he says, pointing. “There are some pieces over there, there, and there, but to be honest I’m not sure exactly which parts belong to which.” His dark blue eyes twinkle mischievously. “Hope their mommas didn’t wanna give them a proper funeral.”

“You did this?” I ask. He nods.

“Sorry I didn’t stop him before he touched you. I was a few seconds late.”

“A few *seconds*...I don’t understand...I was gone for ...*days*...”

He shakes his head. “Maybe in your mind you were, but trust me, I was here and saw the whole thing. It couldn’t have been more than thirty seconds, tops. After I killed the first one, the others attacked, which is why it took longer than it should’ve...”

I look around again. “That’s impossible...I wasn’t here. I was somewhere else...in a cage. I couldn’t move...”

Again, he shakes his head. “Nope, no cage. You were here the whole time. But I do believe you thought you were somewhere else, doing something. From the sounds of it, it wasn’t very pleasant, either.”

Talk about the understatement of the century.

Bewildered, I force myself to stand up. My legs are rubbery, but I'm feeling stronger by the minute. I hobble toward a wooden bench, my new friend right beside me. I still feel queasy, but once I sit down and take several deep breaths, I begin to feel better.

He sits close beside me.

"Y-you could you hear me?" I ask. Although I'm warmer now, my teeth chatter uncontrollably. He nods, brushing his onyx hair away from his face, then scooches closer and wraps his arm around me.

"I heard you screaming and moaning...calling out some names." He looks away.

I close my eyes. The haunting visions are still there, but thankfully, are fading further away with each passing moment.

"It was horrible," I whisper.

"I know."

"If you hadn't been here...if you hadn't killed them and broken their spell—" I can't even continue...the thought is too unbearable. According to him I was only under for a few seconds. Some Sapies get cursed for *years*.

"I'm *livid* with myself for not stopping it sooner. I saw him come up behind you, but was too far away...too late..." I hear the angry bitterness in his voice.

"Thank you. I- I'm not used to playing the damsel in distress role; I take care of myself. But thanks, you really saved my ass back there. I guess I owe you one." I feel a small smile begin to form. Strange how just moments ago, I never thought I'd be able to smile again.

"Think nothing of it. We all need some help from time to time. Doesn't make you weak."

"How'd you do it? How'd you kill them? I don't see any weapons..."

"I had to do it the old fashioned way. When in doubt, rip 'em to shreds." He grimaces as he glances at his hands; they're covered with deep, red gashes.

"They touched you? But how...?"

He shrugs. "I'm immune to psychic demons. Always have been."

I inspect my own arms; just the faintest threads of pink remain. Once I replenish, they'll disappear entirely.

We sit in silence, staring across the now deserted park. My breathing has returned to normal, but for some reason my heart is still beating too fast. The first hints of dawn threaten to break the night sky. My countdown has begun.

I start to chuckle.

"What is it?" he asks.

I tilt my face to his. "I don't even know your name. I know we've seen each other at Demon Bar and that time in the alley, but..." My voice fades away at the look in his eyes.

He stares at me silently for so long I wonder if I've somehow offended him. Maybe he wants to stay anonymous? Many demions do, especially ones from other tribes. I just assumed he's—at least, according to *him*—a friend. Is it so unusual for friends to know each other's names?

"Sorry, forget I said anything—" I look back up at the grey sky.

"No, please forgive my rudeness. In all the excitement it *did* slip my mind that we haven't actually been properly introduced. My name is Kieron Ambrose. I—I'm from the Proelater tribe out West. Our families are allies." His introduction feels oddly formal, forced.

"Nice to meet you, Kieron. I'm Lucky. Just plain ol' Lucky. From here."

"Lucky..." Drawing out the word, he cocks his head to the side and grins. "Cool name."

“Thanks. So’s yours. It sounds like the name of my favorite Japanese beer.”

He laughs, wiping away any awkward tension. We sink back toward each other and stare at the sky, admiring the billions of diamonds twinkling high above us. His arm is still snugly wrapped around my shoulders, and even though I’m beginning to feel very hot, I hope he doesn’t move it.

“So, Lucky, tell me. What’s a bad girl like you doing in a nice place like this?”

Smiling, I lean in closer.

I hate watching the sky change from grey to lavender; I want my time to last forever. But I’m tired and still weaker than I should be.

It’s been so nice, sitting here in silence, beside my new friend. Despite the horrors of the evening, something good came out of it.

“What are you thinking?” Kieron asks, breaking the lull.

“That I could seriously use some drinks right now.”

He laughs. “Funny, you must be reading my mind. Let’s head back to Dryndara, shall we?”

I let out a long sigh. The nearest Portal to Thiberoux is several miles away. Normally this isn’t a problem, but right now even walking to the outskirts of the park seems daunting.

“I’m parked near the entrance,” Kieron says, as if he can read *my* mind.

“You have a car?”

He chuckles. “Well, no, not exactly. A car isn’t really doable for navigating the woods. It’s more of, well, it’s a motorcycle. Actually, it’s a Ducati.”

I don’t know what a Ducati is or why he feels compelled to mention it. All I care about is not hiking all the way to a Portal. “Oh, you don’t know

how relieved I am to hear you say that. I can't imagine walking right now, forget running..."

He has an apprehensive smile as he holds out his hands and helps me up. Together we make our way toward the south gates, passing by the corpse of a slain Altrumina. Like the others, it is rapidly decomposing and will be nothing more than a pile of dust within the hour. This doesn't stop me from giving it a swift kick to the head.

My relief at being chauffeured to Thiberoux is cut short when Kieron stops next to a sporty racing bike. My jaw drops, and I scowl with disappointment. "How are we both supposed to fit on that?" I ask, incredulous. "Am I supposed to sit on the handlebars or something?" The seat is only big enough for one, and the bike's sleek, aerodynamic design clearly isn't intended for passengers.

"I think the only way for us to do this is for you to sit on my lap. I'm tall enough to see over you, and my arms will reach around. Unless you have a better idea..."

I don't. And I have to admit, as long as I don't fall off and break my face, his idea isn't *entirely* unappealing. Until I remember what I'm wearing.

Great. Of all the nights to hop on a motorcycle, it has to be a night I'm wearing a gown? For riding Diablo it's fine, as the generous material has plenty of room to flow freely over his back. But on this tiny thing? Why couldn't I be wearing my leather pants?

Again, Kieron reads my mind. "Just sit here," he says patting his lap. "Use one hand to hold up your dress and cloak so they don't get caught in the wheels. Hold on to this bar here with your other hand. I'll have one arm wrapped around your waist, so don't worry about falling off."

I do as he says, and soon his arm locks into place around me. Gathering up the folds of my dress, I rest my legs on his. From behind me he chuckles softly. “Okay, this is a new one for me, so I’m gonna take her slow.” The engine roars to life, and I feel a thrill shoot through me.

“Just to a Portal, I’ll summon Diablo from there.”

“You got it.”

Thank Sweet Satan we reach a Portal in less than ten minutes. Even with Kieron holding me tight, I felt as if we were on the verge of toppling over at any second. *Definitely* not my favorite form of transport.

I dismount from the bike, blow a sharp whistle, and wait for my *proper* ride. Kieron stares at me as I straighten out the crinkles of my gown, and I happen to catch the quizzical look in his eyes.

“What?” I ask, not unkindly.

He shakes his head. “Nothing, just glad you’re doin’ better is all.”

Diablo charges from behind the trees, stopping beside me. I softly stroke his neck as he nuzzles my face. “Hey, boy,” I whisper.

Seeming to sense my exhaustion, Diablo lowers his body to ease my mount...as if he knows I had some trouble earlier and feels bad he wasn’t there for me.

“Meet you at Demon Bar?” I ask as Diablo rises to his full height.

Kieron revs his engine. “Yup.”

We both take off racing down the trails, leaving nothing but dust and rubble in our wake.

Chapter 8. Liora

Oh, my God...what the...?

A thousand angry butcher knives stab mercilessly through my head. Moaning, I roll over in bed. I try to swallow but can't; my mouth feels like it's filled with cotton. There's an old glass of water on my nightstand and I eagerly chug it down, but it's like drinking fire. As soon as the liquid hits my queasy stomach, my body spasms and I vomit on the floor beside the bed.

Oh, God. I'm dying. Lucky finally got us killed. I fall back on the bed, unable to sit up; my head is spinning out of control.

But I'm at home. If Lucky had gotten hurt or poisoned, wouldn't I still be out in the woods somewhere?

"Tattie," I call out weakly, "Tat, I need help..."

Within moments she glides into my room carrying a tray with a small loaf of bread, some oatmeal, a banana, and a pink-tinted water concoction.

"There, there, don't worry. This will pass. You just didn't have enough time to metabolize." She places the tray beside my bed and disappears into the bathroom.

I cover my face with a pillow, the sight of food bringing me to the brink of upheaving again. "She did this on purpose," I moan.

"Now, now, dear...I don't think she was being malicious," Tatiana returns from the bathroom with a wet wash cloth and gently wipes my forehead. The cool sensation eases my dizziness a bit, but I still feel like I'm dying. I wish I was dead.

"She had a rough night last night. Her emotions were overcharged, and she was weak. You know what that can do to her body."

“She did it on purpose. This is payback for the dumpster, I *know* it is. She hates me.”

“She wasn’t pleased, but I believe she understood the necessity. Just as you will now.” She pushes the tray of food closer, and I make a sour face. “Drink this first,” she instructs, holding the glass of mystery liquid, “...then eat a little bit, but do it slowly. Your body will re-adjust faster. Otherwise it may take several hours for you to recover.”

I moan and roll over again, wishing Tatiana would leave me to die in peace. But then I remember yesterday; more specifically, I remember Kieron. Even though my brain hurts too much to form any real thoughts, I know I *have* to see him.

Tentatively, I sit up and force myself to sip some of Tatiana’s drink. As I do, I realize I’m still wearing Lucky’s dress from last night. That’s odd. Normally I wake up naked, as Lucky never wants me anywhere near her clothes. If she didn’t even have enough time to change, then I suppose I’m just fortunate she managed to make it home at all. Once, she’d left me in the middle of the forest. Man, was Tatiana *pissed off* about that. I really wish I could’ve witnessed the ass-chewing she gave Lucky that night. Whatever she said obviously worked, as I’ve never since woken up anywhere other than my own bed, albeit it usually nude, and always cold.

Tatiana’s potion must be kicking in because I’m actually able to keep down a slice of the bread and some of the oatmeal. After a few minutes I feel almost close to normal. But even if I still felt like death, nothing is keeping me from school today.

I have to see him.

Tatiana returns with a fresh, damp cloth and sits beside me. “Better?”

I nod. “I need to get ready,” I say getting out of bed.

"I don't know if it's wise for you to go to school today," Tatiana says, a concerned look on her face.

"Why? I feel much better. Great, even. You should sell that little hangover potion of yours, you'd make a killing—"

"That's not it," she says with a frown. "There is a stain of darkness there; a cloud hangs most menacingly...I feel something terrible has passed, or will soon."

"Well, *duh*, I could've told you that. I refer to it as P.E. class," I mutter.

She shakes her head again, but I'm already halfway to the shower. "I'll be fine, Tat. It's school. You know if anything really terrible happens Lucky will show up. It's in her best interest to keep me safe too, right?"

I weave through the woods at a brisk pace, and actually catch myself humming a happy tune. I'm not thinking about how awful I felt when I woke up or Tatiana's cryptic warning.

I'm thinking about him.

Spending yesterday with Kieron was the best time I'd had in years. After recovering from my initial shock at his chosen locale—I mean *really*, who studies in a *cemetery*?—Kieron explained to me why he'd brought me there, and why that place was so special to him. He'd stumbled across it soon after coming to town, and its quiet, haunting sadness had deeply affected him.

Turns out the cemetery was used to bury soldiers who died during the Civil War. Many of the weathered tombstones had dates on them, but no names. Most bore the Confederate symbol, but a few had the Union mark. So many young men had sacrificed their lives fighting for what they thought was right, only to be buried unnamed, ignored, and forgotten.

I had to admit, there was something strangely comforting about being in the quiet yard, with its cracked headstones, overgrown grass, and deadened vines clinging around its wrought-iron fence. It was as if just being there, acknowledging the past, and the soldiers who died for what they believed in, somehow made me feel part of something bigger than myself. I felt a connection to the young men who died in battle, many interred for eternity beside their enemy, who, in another life, under different circumstances, might have been a friend.

We'd each 'adopted' a soldier, leaning against his tombstone while I caught Kieron up on his reading. The few hours we spent together passed in a comfortable blur. We'd left well before twilight, but not before making plans to meet up again today.

It's funny how just having this to look forward to makes my whole world seem brighter. Happier. I smile to myself, remembering the sexy way he grins with half his mouth and how he looks up at me with crystalline eyes through those dark lashes...

The wail of a siren startles me from my reverie. Curious, and concerned, I furrow my brow and pick up the pace. It sounds like *several* sirens, all heading in the direction of the school.

I jog through the last line of trees to the main road, just in time to see a cop car zoom by, quickly followed by an ambulance.

What the hell...?

A crowd is gathering in the parking lot, and a yellow police tape already cordons off the west side of the school. People rush around frantically; many students hug each other with tear-stained faces. A fat policeman and a dainty policewoman work in tandem, herding people off to the side of the entrance. Near the atrium, a TV news crew is preparing to start filming.

My heart thuds ominously, and I survey the chaos looking for any sign of him.

“Oh, Liora, you’re here, thank God you’re okay.” I nearly jump out of my skin as Corrine accosts me from behind, wrapping her arms around me.

I turn to her and am startled to see she’s as white as a ghost. “Corrine, what’s happening? Why wouldn’t I be okay? What’s going on?”

Corrine is so freaked out, she’s actually eerily calm. Tiny tears stream down her face. “They...they only know who the boys are...they don’t know who the girl is yet...” she whispers.

“What boys? What girl? You’re not making sense...”

Her voice is so quiet I can barely hear her. “It’s Cade Johnston and Lee Marvis... they... their bodies...” her voice breaks.

I gasp, bringing my hand to my mouth. *Bodies?*

“In the gym. Janitor found them this morning. There’s a girl there too... but she’s too messed up, they can’t identify her yet.” Corrine makes a strange hiccup noise and bites her lip.

“Oh, my *God*.” I grab her hand and stagger over to the curb to sit down. The crowd seems to have doubled in size. Now parents and townspeople are arriving to see what’s going on.

“Liora,” a deep voice comes from behind me.

Relief washes over me, and I jump up to meet Kieron’s troubled gaze. “Kieron. Oh, Kieron, have you heard? I can’t believe it.” I move closer to him, thinking for some reason we should hug. Isn’t that what people do in these sorts of situations? But he stiffens and I hesitate. We look at each other and Kieron nods grimly.

“They’ve cancelled classes today, for obvious reasons. I think it would be a good idea if we get out of here; let the authorities do their business.”

I glance down at Corrine weeping softly into her hands. Throwing Kieron a pained look, I kneel beside her, patting her long hair.

“Sweetie, it’s gonna be okay. Come on, let’s go. Kieron will give you a ride home.” I eye him hopefully and he nods. But Corrine surprises me by shaking her head.

“Thanks, but I’d rather take the bus,” she mutters. When I start to protest she gives me a steely look, and I realize she’s embarrassed about Kieron knowing where she lives. “Go, I’ll be fine. I’ll call you later.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” I help her to her feet. She gives me a quick hug before walking toward the bus stop. Kieron and I watch her in silence as she shuffles away, head held low. Part of me wants to go after her, but I know she wants to be alone. I have to respect that.

When she’s out of sight, Kieron motions for me to follow him. We weave through the crowd of distraught and frantic people until we reach his truck.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“To get some breakfast. I’m starving.”

A letter on the roadside cafe is burned out. Instead of reading ‘Dine Here Now’ it’s ‘Di e Here Now’.

Perfect.

Kieron hops from the truck and opens my door. When he holds out his hand to mine, it’s covered in deep scratches. “What happened?” I ask.

He glances down as if he hadn’t noticed the wounds before. “Oh, nothing,” he says and shrugs. “Neighbor has a frisky cat.”

One that’s part lion?

The waitress sits us at a cracked Formica table with sticky seats. I ignore the menu in front of me, but Kieron studies it briefly before ordering

a monster pancake platter. How can he possibly be hungry now?

I order tea and sip it slowly, aware that he's staring at me. I glance at him, trying to read his face. He looks tired. Confused. Stunned.

"I still can't believe they're dead," I murmur. "Who could have done that? Why?"

He shakes his head and fiddles with his silverware. "I dunno. Pretty scary stuff."

"I wonder who the girl is...Corrine said they didn't know."

Kieron nods. "Kind of hard when there's no head—"

I gasp and feel sick. "What? She didn't say anything about that—" Trembling, I put down my mug, splashing tea on the table.

Kieron looks pained. "Sorry...I thought you heard. Everyone was talking about it...I didn't mean to upset you."

I shake my head and wipe away the tear streaming down my cheek. Even though I didn't really talk to anyone at Dove Creek High other than Corrine, Emme, Skye, and now, Kieron, the thought of any of my classmates—even jerks like Cade Johnston and Lee Marvis—suffering so horribly, chills me to the bone.

It's just like what happened with...

The waitress returns with Kieron's food, and he hungrily dives in. I shake my head to clear the haunting memories, wondering again how he can possibly eat at a time like this.

He glances up to see me staring. "Sorry," he says between bites, "I didn't have a chance to eat breakfast, and I'm famished. Worked up quite an appetite last night..." He suddenly stops and looks at me, almost guiltily... as if he's said something he shouldn't have.

My eyes narrow with suspicion. Something isn't right here. Under the restaurant's unforgiving fluorescent lights, I see how tired he looks, like he

hadn't gotten a wink of sleep last night. Still devastatingly gorgeous, there are dark circles beneath his eyes that weren't there before. Light stubble on his cheeks suggests he didn't bother to shave. Deep welts on his hands that *definitely* did not come from some ornery house-cat. And in the midst of finding out three of our classmates have been brutally murdered on school campus, he decides he needs to devour a hearty breakfast.

And the way he keeps looking at me...almost knowing, yet distrustful. My stomach flutters uncomfortably.

"I—I think I need to go home," I say. "Tatiana will have heard what happened by now, and I'm sure she's worried."

He stares at me for a while, then nods. "Sure, just let me finish up here real quick and I'll drive you home."

I shift in my seat, absently fiddling with my napkin while he eats in silence. Something isn't right with him, but I can't quite put my finger on it. And until I can, I think it's best to keep my guard up.

After he pays the waitress, we head back to the truck. I can feel his tension almost as much as my own. He angles out of the parking lot, but instead of taking the road back to school and my cabin, he turns in the opposite direction, heading away.

"What? Where are you going?" I gasp, reflexively reaching for the door handle. My stomach lurches, and I feel my heart racing. But what am I going to do, jump out of a moving truck?

Kieron stares straight ahead, his eyes focused on the road. "Liora, I think you and I both know we need to talk." His voice is even, firm.

"About what? Kieron, I told you I want to go home...where are you taking me?" *No, no. This is impossible. I'm not being kidnapped, am I? Oh, this is too much. I knew he was too good to be true. Lucky, please wake up and kick his ass. You have my blessing.*

Kieron glances over at me, lets out a deep sigh, and immediately pulls over to the side of the road. The second the truck stops, I push open the door and make a break for it.

“Liora, *wait!*”

An eighteen-wheeler flies by and I jump back, right into Kieron’s arms. “Let me go,” I shout, struggling against his firm grip.

“Not until you calm down and listen to me. You trying to get yourself killed?”

“Let me go!” I squirm again, but to no avail. Kieron’s arms are locked around me like a vise. With as much strength as I can muster, I stomp down on one of his feet. He doesn’t budge, and lets out a small chuckle.

“Liora, stop. I’m really sorry; I didn’t mean to scare you. Look, I’ll let you go if you promise not to run out and become road kill.”

“I promise, now let me go,” I say through clenched teeth.

He gradually loosens his grip and I take several steps back, eyeing him warily.

Kieron sighs, his blue eyes sad and frustrated...pleading. “Liora, I’m sorry. Honest. I shouldn’t have done that without asking you first. I...I thought you’d want to talk... about... everything that’s going on. I misread your concern...I thought we could go somewhere away from the craziness and just, I dunno, be *real* with one another for a minute.” He looks down and aimlessly kicks at a pebble on the ground.

And now I feel like a huge idiot. What am I worried about? Do I really think he’s some sort of crazed murderer? *Of course not.* And so what if he’s hungry? He’s a growing boy. And we’ve all woken up not looking or feeling our best. If it wasn’t for Tatiana’s magical potion this morning, I’d be looking like something someone scraped up off the side of a ditch. Who am I to judge? I lower my eyes, ashamed at my paranoid overreaction.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I didn’t mean to be a spaz...it’s just with everything that’s happened...I don’t know what to think right now.” I run my hands up the side of my head and clench some hair.

He takes a step closer to me. “Is it okay if we go somewhere to talk? Or do you really want me to take you home. I’m fine with whatever you want. I’ll even call you a taxi if you don’t want to be around me anymore.”

I think it over for a few moments. “How’s your foot?”

He grins. “I have another one.”

“Sorry ‘bout that,” I mumble, and give him a tentative smile. “I guess it’s cool if we go somewhere for a while.”

Without saying a word he heads to the side of the truck and opens the door for me as I climb in. As he starts up the engine again, I look out the window and pray I’m not making a huge mistake.

Once again, Kieron takes me on an unfamiliar road. Instead of to the cemetery—we both agreed we didn’t want to be there now—he’s driving us up a mountain, a winding back-county road flanked by patches of trees and wide open fields.

“Where are we going?” I ask, feeling a sense of déjà vu. He just moved here; how is it he knows about all these places I don’t?

“Just somewhere I think you’ll like,” he says. His profile looks hard and tired at the same time.

“Yeah, well you said that yesterday, and you took me to an abandoned cemetery.”

“But you liked it, right?” He looks at me from the corner of his eye.

“Yeah,” I admit with a sigh, and look out the window. Our conversation has been stilted and awkward ever since I tried to run away. But I can’t bring myself to relax; there are just too many things bothering me...not the

least of which is the fact that here I am driving off into the middle of nowhere with a guy I hardly know, and who is making my Spidey-Sense tingle warnings under my skin.

From out of nowhere, a large black crow flies up alongside my window. Great. *Of course* Tatiana's checking up on me. For someone who is blind, she sees *way* too much sometimes. I casually glance over to Kieron, hoping he doesn't notice our new companion. Thankfully, his attention is focused on the curvy road. The bird keeps pace with us for a few more miles, then abruptly flies off in the opposite direction. No doubt heading back to tell Tatiana what it saw.

"You doing okay?" Kieron looks over at me and smiles for the first time all morning. We're near the top of the mountain now, and the town seems far away.

I nod. "It's so pretty here...I've never been out this way before."

"Really?" He raises his eyebrows. "That's weird. I just assumed..."

"What?"

He pauses. "Nothing..."

The higher up the mountain we climb, the more colorful the scenery becomes. Autumn has transformed ordinary trees into a magical array of reds, golds, and greens. The sun, peeking through some ominous clouds, dances on the valley floor below us. It looks like a picture from a postcard.

"How do you even know about this place, wherever it is we're going? Haven't you only been here for a few weeks?" I ask.

"Give or take a few days..." he murmurs. "My uncle brought me here soon after I arrived."

"Tell me about him," I say, eager to break the uncomfortable silence. I want to go back to how we were yesterday when it was so easy to talk to him, before all the weirdness got in our way.

"His name is Troy. He was my mother's brother."

"Was?"

"She passed away when I was six."

"Oh...I'm sorry. My mother's gone, too. She died when I was born," I blurt out, much to my surprise. I've never told anyone the truth about my mother before. Usually I just say that my parents died together in a car crash when I was two.

"I'm very sorry." His gaze briefly leaves the road to meet mine.

"It's okay," I say, shrugging. "I never knew her. It must have been much harder for you, losing your mom at such a young age."

He doesn't answer, and I want to kick myself. Good going, Liora. Morbid conversation, much?

"It was...very painful," he finally says, his mouth pressed in a straight line, his eyes like steely ice.

"So is it just you and your uncle?"

He slowly nods. "Troy's lived out here for several years."

"What about your father?" I ask.

He gives me a funny look, and again doesn't answer right away.

"Um...I don't really know him. He took off shortly after I was born," he says after a long pause.

Great.

"Any brothers or sisters?" I ask. *Please don't tell me they're dead, too.*

He shakes his head. "Nope, only me...that I know of. But I suppose anything's possible."

His strange answer makes me think of my own father, or more accurately, my *Creator*. For all I know I have dozens, maybe hundreds, of half-siblings running around that I don't even know about.

"Yeah, I'm an only child, too," I say.

He turns to stare at me, one hand on the wheel. The intensity of his gaze takes my breath away.

My eyes widen. “What?” *What?!*

An easy smile replaces his serious look. “Nothing...so it’s just you and your... *grandmother?*”

I swallow hard. I’m marching on some dangerous territory, all of my own doing. If I hadn’t started asking him all those questions about his family...

“Well, yeah, Tatiana isn’t my biological grandmother...she just took me in after my mother died. It’s just been the two of us ever since.” *Make that the three of us.*

“Hmm.”

“You’ve always lived here?” he asks a few moments later.

“Yup.”

“And you’ve never been up this way before?” His eyes are sparkling again, and the tension eases from his brow.

“Nope. I’ve been to some places outside of town, but I usually stick close to the woods around my cabin. My Mustang isn’t exactly built for off-roading.”

He flashes me a delicious smile that reaches his eyes, sending the butterflies fluttering in my stomach again. “Well, then, you are in for a real treat.”

The twisty road narrows even tighter, and Kieron turns onto a smaller, unmarked path... one more suited for hiking than driving. The trail is so closely lined by trees and bushes on either side that if someone were to come at us there wouldn’t be enough room for both cars to pass.

But this doesn’t bother me. I’m too enraptured by the gorgeous scenery. Trees arching over us create a lush canopy of sage-colored silk, and bushes

ripe with brightly colored flowers grow everywhere. It's as if we've pulled into the entrance to an enchanted kingdom, unspoiled by human hands.

He drives slower now; the truck bounces over bumps and holes in the uneven dirt road. The sunlight peeks shyly through the overhanging trees, casting a muted glow.

When we finally reach the top of the mountain, the road flattens out. We seem to be truly in the middle of nowhere, worlds away from where we started.

"We're here," Kieron says. "We have to go the rest of the way on foot. The truck won't make it."

We get out. Kieron moves to the back of the pickup and pulls back the protective tarp. Grabbing a large bag in one hand and a cooler in the other, he nods toward the truck's bed. "Wanna grab those?"

I wander back to see what he's talking about. Peering in, I see two fishing poles, a net, and a small tackle box.

"What...*this*?" I ask, incredulous. *Are we seriously going fishing?*

"Yes, please. All of it." His smile is so charming he probably could've asked me to skydive naked over the Grand Canyon and it would've sounded like the best idea ever. I've never gone fishing a day in my life, nor has it ever *remotely* crossed my mind to want to.

Now it seems like the most perfect way to spend the day.

Chapter 9. Liora

“Ready?” Kieron asks. I nod, following him toward an opening in the trees. Taking full advantage of my position behind him, I can’t help but secretly admire his strong frame and steady gait. And how nicely his jeans accentuate his backside.

He cocks his head to the side and smiles. “How’s it going back there? You doing okay?”

I quickly avert my eyes and feel the heat rush to my cheeks.

“Everything’s great. Perfect.” I steal one more quick glance. *Yep. Absolutely perfect.*

“It’s just a few minutes’ walk from here,” he says.

We weave through the trees and cut through low lying bushes and shrubs. When we finally reach the clearing, I gasp in awe.

Kieron stands beside me. “Not bad, eh?”

I have to re-grip the tackle box so as not to drop it. “Wow...just...wow. This place is... *incredible.*” I’m beyond stunned at the sheer beauty of this private sanctuary, one truly blessed with Mother Nature’s best.

It’s not just the abundance of brightly-colored wildflowers—unusual enough for this time of year—that makes this place feel so fresh and alive. Large rocks—some jagged and high, some low and flat—reflect the sun’s rays as if they were shiny diamonds tinged with flashes of silver and gold. A narrow river carves its way along the embankment, finally careening off the mountainside to the lake below. Even from up here I can see fish leaping out of the water.

“Come on, let’s go over there,” Kieron says.

We head to the river’s edge, near the cliffs where the view is nothing short of spectacular. We can see for what seems to be hundreds of miles.

It's like we're on our own planet...in our own miraculous Garden of Eden.

Kieron takes the poles and net from me and sets them on the ground. He opens his bag and shakes out a large blanket. Then he sits down on one side of it, stretches out his legs and angles his face to the sky.

I slowly stroll through the field, losing myself in the fragrant flowers and the hum of the waterfall. Up here, I feel far removed from all the craziness below. I can pretend that all my problems, stresses and worries don't really exist. Right here, in this magical place with Kieron, everything can be perfect.

After a while, I again turn my gaze to his still form. Like a wondrous element of nature's beauty, he stares peacefully at the river, looking as content as a lizard sunning itself on a warm rock.

I make my way back to him and take a seat on the blanket. "Now what?" I ask. He said he wanted to talk, but so far he isn't saying much.

He turns to me, a smile on his face. "Now, we fish."

My feelings for Kieron must have some magical hold over me, because even the disgusting act of hooking bait and the mundane act of sitting by water holding a pole is absolutely thrilling with him by my side.

Soon after dropping my line in the water I feel a gentle tug. Kieron shows me how to reel in my catch, and for a moment I'm proud of my accomplishment. But when the poor fish struggles to breathe, fighting for its life, I feel bad and throw it back in the river where it belongs. Kieron teases me for being a softie, as he reels in one of his own and sets it on the ground beside him.

"Do you know what these are named?" I ask him.

"Rainbow Trout."

I raise an eyebrow and give him a knowing look. “Yes, but that’s just their common name. Their scientific name is *Oncorhynchus mykiss*.”

He leans his face to mine and flashes a mischievous smile. “I only understand the ‘my kiss’ part,” he says, raising his eyebrow flirtatiously.

I give a nervous laugh and look away, cursing my fair complexion that I’m positive is turning bright pink.

“This is fun,” I say, trying to change the subject. “I wish I could come up here more often.”

He leans back on one arm. “Who says you can’t?”

I sigh. “Well, because, you know...we’re *supposed* to be in school. And since I always have to be home before dark it wouldn’t really leave me much time...”

“Why do you always have to be home before dark?” He peeks at me from the corner of his eye; his voice smooth, sexy, and the slightest bit amused.

Here we go. I take a deep breath and recite my well-rehearsed lie. “Tatiana is completely blind. Since it’s just me and her I’m the only one who can take care of her. She doesn’t like to be alone at night.”

He nods, and a moment later asks, “But how would she know?”

“Huh?”

“If she’s blind...how would your grandmother know if it’s dark or not?” This time I’m *positive* I hear amusement in his voice.

My pulse quickens as I grit my teeth and stare out at the river. This is *exactly* why I can’t ever have normal friendships or relationships. People get nosy.

“Me being home by dark isn’t for her, it’s for me. I hate wearing a watch and lose track of time easily. But my grandma is elderly and likes to eat dinner early and go to sleep. So I make it a rule to be home well before then

so that I can take care of her.” The lie comes easily, as I’ve used it countless times before. This doesn’t make me feel any better, though. Just once I wish I could have an honest conversation with someone.

He pauses, as if sensing my discomfort. “Okay, I understand. I promise to have you home in time,” he says quietly, fiddling with his fishing pole.

“But I enjoy being here. Even if our reason for not being at school today is such an awful one...” I say, trying to steer the conversation away from me.

“Why do you do it? Go to school?”

So much for that idea. “Well, because I *have* to. I promised Tatiana I’d graduate.”

“Why does she want you to go?”

“Well,” I pause, slightly unnerved by his odd questions, “because whose parents or guardian *wouldn’t* want their child to at least finish high school? I mean, I know we’re a small town, but we’re not *that* hillbilly.”

He laughs. “No, that’s not what I meant. I mean, what does she want you to get from it? Education? Friends? Social skills? A diploma for her wall?”

“Oh. I, uh... she just wants me to have a normal life like everyone else, I guess.”

“And how’s that working out for you?”

I pause. “What do you mean?”

“Is it working? Are you having a normal life like everyone else?”

“I dunno. I guess so,” I whisper, my heart pounding.

“I see. And is that what you want? To be normal? Is that what makes you happy?”

The corners my mouth turn down as I stare at the ripples in the water. How can I talk to him without sounding like a complete nut-job? My initial

impulse is to lie. Say everything is great. I love school, have fantastic friends, am eagerly looking forward to college in the fall, and already have a sorority picked out.

But as I turn my head and look into his eyes, I hear myself speaking only the truth. “For me, school has been nothing but an experiment in torture for the past five years. I don’t learn anything there, and if it was possible to actually die of boredom, they’d have to bury me every day.” My eyes shift down, unable to meet his gaze. “I don’t really have any friends. A few acquaintances, but no one I’m really close to. Everyone thinks I’m weird and stuck-up and anti-social. The teachers all hate me. They think I’m throwing away my future just because I don’t want to go to Harvard or Yale. I despise everything about it, and if it wasn’t for Tatiana I would’ve happily dropped out long ago.”

“And done what?” he asks gently, unfazed by my admission.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what would you do with yourself? Get a job at the mall? Watch soap operas all day? Get married and have babies? Join the Peace Corps... or maybe the circus?”

Despite my anxiety, I chuckle. “I don’t know...I haven’t really thought about it...it’s not even an option, so why bother?”

He grins and runs his hand absently through his dark hair. “Well, what about for fun? What do you like to do when you’re not suffering the excruciating agony of the world of academia?”

“I hang out by myself in the woods a lot...” *Ugh*, even I know how weird that sounds. “I spend time with Tatiana,” I add hurriedly. “I like reading, especially poetry. I like learning things on my own...especially anything to do with sciences. I’m teaching myself to speak French and Italian. Also how to play the guitar... I like to watch old movies, especially

the ones filmed in black and white..." God, I sound even lamer breaking it down like that. I wish I could've listed Lucky's resume; *She* wouldn't come across as prime candidate for Freaky Nerd-Geek of the Year.

"What about at night after your grandmother has gone to sleep?"

"What do you mean? I don't do anything. Why do you ask?" I hope I don't sound as nervous as I feel. Where is he going with these questions?

His eyes narrow. "It's just...you mentioned how she goes to bed early. I was just wondering how you spend your evenings, if you get lonely or bored being all by yourself. Do you ever go out?"

I gulp and look away. "No...not really. Just take care of stuff and turn in kinda early myself. I'm not really a night owl."

He's quiet. I hold my breath.

"That's too bad," he finally says.

"Why?"

"I was hoping we could hang out one night. Do something fun."

I briefly close my eyes and clench my jaw. "Sorry. I really wish I could, but I can't. I promised Tatiana I'd always stay home in case she ever needs me for anything."

Kieron thinks about this for a moment. "Well, then. Maybe I can visit you at your house...we can make it a Blockbuster night or something. They have great deals on the older movies," he says with an impish grin.

He has me backed into a corner. With a sickened heart, I know my perfect time with Kieron is over. I'd have to be a colossal idiot not to recognize it, and I'm an even bigger one for ever thinking something could've happened between us the first place.

"I'm sorry...she doesn't allow me to have any visitors," I whisper.

Oh, how badly I want to freeze time...to stop the natural progression of our conversation which inevitably leads to him getting up and walking

away, realizing he's totally wasting his time with me...that I really *am* the weird, anti-social freak that everyone says I am. How stupid of me to think for even one second that things might be different with him. *Stupid stupid stupid!*

"Okay, then."

"Okay, what?" I brace myself for his rejection.

"If the daytime is the only time I can see you and spend time with you, then daytime it is."

He shifts closer to me. My heart threatens to leap from my chest. I lick my lips nervously and hold my breath, waiting...

Just as he leans in to me, his arm suddenly jerks and his head swivels, followed by the sound of his surprised laughter.

"Whoa, got a live one here." He stands up and begins wrestling with his pole which is bending almost to the point of breaking.

I jump up and move over to avoid getting wet as Kieron steps into the water to wrestle his catch. As I take a step back, my foot hits a slick stone, and before I know it, my leg shoots out from under me. I scramble to regain my balance, but it's too late. *Splash!* The freezing spray swims up my nostrils as I face plant in the cold water.

"Liora! Are you okay?" Kieron jams the end of his pole in a deep hole in the ground and hurries over to me.

No, I am so far from okay it's not even funny. Kill me now before I die of humiliation!

I nod, wiping wet hair away from my face and spitting out the water. "I'm fine, just slipped. No big deal." *No. Not a big deal at all. I'm just sitting here looking like a giant jackass covered in algae is all. Don't mind me.*

“Are you sure?” he asks, concerned. He grabs both of my hands and helps me to my feet.

“I’m fine, just wet.” I look down at my soggy sweatshirt and jeans. Then I look at his beautiful, horrified face.

And then I start laughing.

Once I start I can’t stop, and soon Kieron is laughing, too. We laugh until tears run from our eyes, and I start to hiccup. I fetch a bottled water from the cooler and sip it while he turns his attention back to the river. Within a minute, he’s reeling in the giant trout.

He sets it down and eyes me appraisingly. “Stay here, I’ll be back in a jiff.”

Before I have a chance to ask him where he’s going, he sprints off in the direction we came from. I watch the fish flop beside me, still alive. Without thinking I toss it back in the water.

Kieron comes back a few minutes later, his arms laden with clothing. “What’s this?” I ask.

“A clean towel and some sweats for you to change into.”

I take the towel and blot my face and hair. He hands me a black and red hoodie and matching pants. “Ummm...” I laugh holding up the large sweatshirt.

“Yeah, they might be a bit big on you. But better than sitting around in wet jeans.”

He’s right about that. The cold denim is already molding to my thighs.

“Thanks,” I say, looking around for a place to change. I consider going behind the trees, but the ones closest to us are pretty spread apart and won’t provide me with much privacy. The denser patches are much farther away.

“It’s okay, you can change here,” Kieron says, noticing my dilemma. “I’ll turn my back and cover my face. A perfect gentleman, I promise.”

I hesitate only a brief moment before nodding. I don't want to walk far in my sticky pants. And I'm feeling chilly. Kieron immediately turns his whole body away and, as promised, places his hands over his face. I wait a few more seconds to make sure he's not going to peek. When I feel confident he won't, I quickly remove my nappy sweatshirt. As I replace it with his large, soft one, I get a whiff of his musky scent. I feel warmer already.

But I can't take off my jeans until I remove my boots. My fingers are trembling so much that getting the laces untied proves to be a challenge. "Just a minute more," I call out, so he doesn't turn around.

"Take your time," he says.

I know my jitters aren't just from being cold. It's from being in this unbelievably *surreal* situation. I can't wrap my head around the fact that here I am, getting practically naked, with Kieron standing just a few feet away. Never in a million years would I have imagined my day ending up like this. In a *billion* years...

Kieron remains true to his word, not once turning until I manage to peel off the mud-encrusted denim and slip into the softness of his sweatpants. I have to fold over the waist and roll it down a few times, but now I'm comfortable and cozy.

"Okay, I'm done," I say. He turns back around and runs his gaze up and down the length of my body.

"Better?"

"Much."

"That looks really good on you."

I grimace, knowing that can't *possibly* be true. The bulky sweatshirt is easily three times too large for my small frame, and I look like I'm wearing clown pants.

"I mean it," he says, walking back to me. "I like seeing you in my clothes. It's...sexy." He raises a mischievous eyebrow at the last word, and I quickly turn my head back toward the river.

"So how come you just *happened* to have spare clothes and a dry towel with you? It's almost like you were expecting me to practically drown today."

"I always keep a towel in the truck. Comes in handy. The sweats were for later, to wear jogging."

"Oh. Sorry."

"For what?"

"I didn't mean to mess up your plans."

His eyes twinkle and he grins. "I think my plans took a turn for the better." He pauses and glances down at his collection of fish. "I see we have an escapee..."

"Sorry," I repeat, giving him a guilty look.

"I'm not."

Finally, Kieron decides we've caught enough fish. Correction, *he's* caught enough, as all of mine have been returned to the water. He grabs the tackle box and pulls out some knives, laying them on a small board. Then he expertly builds a fire inside a nearby rock pit.

"You might not like this part too much, best if you go down to the waterfall for a few," he suggests.

"Oh, please. I'm not that big a wimp. I can take it," I scoff, positioning myself to watch him work.

He shrugs. "Suit yourself. But don't say I didn't warn you."

He gracefully removes his sweater, revealing his sculpted, bronzed torso. My heart quickens and my jaw actually drops, but I immediately snap

it shut when he glances at me.

“Cleaning fish can get sort of messy. Don’t want to stink later.” He smiles and winks. I just nod dumbly, too in awe of his chiseled abdomen and ripped arms to be the slightest bit bothered by the gory decapitation and subsequent gutting of our soon-to-be lunch.

A few minutes later he’s putting the trout in a metal pan over the fire. Then he takes out the rest of the food from his cooler. “How did you just happen to have all this in there?” I ask as I snack on some of the grapes and sliced cheeses.

“This was the lunch I’d packed.” he says, nibbling on some cornbread

“This is so good,” I say between mouthfuls. “I don’t even really like fish, but this tastes amazing.”

“It’s ‘cause it’s so fresh. That’s the trick. Nothing store bought or restaurant prepared will ever come close.”

I could really care less what I’m eating right now, because Kieron still hasn’t put his sweater back on. So I’m far more interested in appreciating his smoking hot body than the quality of our food. But I need something safe to talk about before something *really* embarrassing comes out of my mouth. Watching him move wearing only his loose fitting jeans and hiking boots, eating the food he’d caught and prepared...it’s so damn sexy I could be eating mouthfuls of dirt and wouldn’t notice.

“It’s *really* good,” I murmur and steal another peek. But this time his eyes catch mine and I see a devilish gleam. I quickly look away, embarrassed to be caught so blatantly checking him out.

We clean up our lunch and wander over to sit by the waterfall overlooking the valley. Much to my dismay, Kieron has put his sweater back on, but sitting so close to him is consolation enough.

We sit in comfortable silence, lost in our own thoughts. But I can sense he is holding something back from me. So many times he seems to want to say something, but stops himself at the last second. Other people do that with me a lot, so I'm used to it. But when Kieron does it, it hurts. I want so much to be able to talk with him about anything.

But it's pretty hard to have an honest conversation with someone when it's based on a lie.

And that's what this is. A lie. *All of it.* It's a lie because he thinks I'm someone I'm not. It's a lie, because it wouldn't even cross his mind to consider that the world he knows is really a lie...that there really *are* creatures that go bump in the night, and yes, monsters really *do* exist.

And...that one of them is sitting right here beside him.

After a long silence, Kieron finally speaks. "Liora, I have a confession to make."

Chapter 10. Liora

“That sounds ominous,” I say, my heart speeding up.

He raises an eyebrow and bites his lower lip. “Well, I guess it depends on how you look at it. You might not really like me after you hear what I have to say.”

“What is it?”

He takes a deep breath and stares straight ahead. I look at him curiously, waiting for him to say something...anything. But his face is hard and he remains silent. Whatever he needs to say I wish he’d just spit it out already. The suspense is killing me.

“I wasn’t entirely honest with you earlier. I wasn’t going to say anything, but I think I should just come clean so I can stop feeling like I’ve deceived you.”

“You lied to me about something?” I rack my brain trying to think what he could possibly have needed to lie to me about, but come up blank.

“Well, I didn’t really out and out *lie*...but I was less than truthful... It’s just, well, I didn’t really need help with my schoolwork like I said. I was in all advanced classes at my old school, and I’d already done all the reading.”

Wow. I don’t know what I’d expected him to ‘confess’ but it definitely wasn’t this.

“So, you were just pretending not to know anything about *Inferno*?”

He nods, shrugging. “Pretty much. I actually won an essay contest on it last year.”

I scrunch my forehead, confused. “Why would you do that? Don’t you have better things to do with your time than study stuff you already know?”

He twists his mouth and looks down at his hands. “Yeah, but I needed a reason to spend time with you. To talk with you. It was the only thing I

could think of. Stupid, I know,” he mumbles.

I still don’t get it. “What did you want to talk with me about?” I whisper.

He looks me straight in the eye. “I dunno...nothing. Everything. I think you’re probably one of the most interesting girls I’ve ever met. And believe me, that’s saying a lot. I wanted to get to know you better.”

I don’t know what to say, so I just stare at the grass.

“Oh.”

“I hope you’re not mad,” he says, “that you wasted an afternoon in a cemetery reading with me.”

How could I be mad when other than today, it was the best time I’ve had in my life?

“I’m not mad,” I mumble. *What am I? Happy? Scared?*

Yes.

“Good.” He lets out a sigh of relief. “Because I really want us to be friends.”

Friends? Why does that word sound like such a stinging rejection?

He places his fingertips under my chin and gently tilts my face toward his. “Good friends,” he whispers. “*Very* good friends.”

With benefits?

I think he’s going to kiss me, but he doesn’t, and I don’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved. This is a dangerous path I’m on. One that can only lead to heartache. Kieron doesn’t know anything about me. And if he ever finds out, he’ll hate me. Despise me. Fear me.

But until then...

His eyes never leave mine as I lean closer to him so the sides of our bodies are touching. More than anything, I want to lose myself in this

tranquility for eternity—to freeze this moment forever. Just Kieron and me in our secret, perfect Paradise.

The second our fingers touch, the moment his hand tenderly wraps around mine, the instant I feel the hot flow of energy course through my veins and ignite my soul, I know I'm never letting go. Kieron has entered my life in a way that cannot be ignored or undone. I'm *supposed* to know him.

Somehow...some way, I will make this work. I *have* to.

Whatever it takes.

The sky turns a menacing shade of grey, and I suddenly realize it's later than I thought. My blissful time is over. "I have to go," I whisper, reluctantly.

Kieron nods and together we gather up the rest of our stuff and head back to the truck. Judging from the long shadows cast on the field, and the fact that we're at least an hour away from my home, I know I'm cutting it close. Too close. Being with Kieron makes the time pass way too quickly.

"Please hurry," I say, the desperation apparent in my voice, despite my attempt to stay cool.

Once we start heading down the hill, he gives me a concerned glance. "You're really worried about being late, aren't you?" he asks, casually resting his hand on my knee.

"Yes."

This really, really, *really* sucks. What was I thinking staying out here so late? We should've left an hour ago.

Breathe, Liora...just relax. Don't freak out until you have a reason to...

Kieron speeds the truck down the mountainside nearly twice as fast as he drove up. Normally I would've been concerned, but it's all I can do to

stop myself from whispering, “Faster, please,” every few minutes.

Despite Kieron’s best efforts, the full weight of my cruel reality comes crashing down on me when, halfway down the mountain, the truck inexplicably sputters to a stop.

“What’s happening? Why are we slowing down?” My voice borders on hysteria.

Kieron just shakes his head and taps the dashboard a few times. “It looks like we’re out of gas. I’m so sorry...I didn’t realize...”

I look at him with horror, feeling the blood drain from my face. “No, this *can’t* be happening.” I gasp. We’re still a good thirty miles from town. In the middle of nowhere.

I don’t know what I’m going to do, but there’s no way I can stay here with him much longer. No way. Even if Lucky somehow manages to behave herself, which is *highly* unlikely, if she starts saying weird things and introducing herself as ‘Lucky’, Kieron will think I’m *completely* insane. And what if she does something awful to him? She’s very unpredictable when it comes to people. I don’t think she’ll necessarily hurt him, but using him as a toy for her sadistic amusement isn’t much better...

Okay, I can freak out now. Where’s a good trash dumpster when you need one?

I spot a farmhouse across the fields and get an idea. Not a great one, but so far it’s my only hope.

“All right, you stay here and guard the truck. I’ll run to that house for help and see if I can use their phone.” I jump out of the cab. But Kieron is out in a flash and grabs my arm before I’ve taken five steps.

“Yeah, like that’s really going to happen. There’s no way I’m letting you run off to some stranger’s house...”

“Sorry, but you don’t have a choice. You stay here. I will go.” I struggle to pull my arm free. He releases his grip and gives me a smirk.

“I have a cell phone,” he says, reaching into his back pocket. “And triple-A. Can’t say for sure they want to trek out here, but you can call your grandma and tell her you’re going to be late if you like.”

His words momentarily throw me. “No, I *don’t* like, because I *won’t* be late,” I say, my voice cold. *Now what? Stop and think... Don’t panic.* “Are you sure you even get reception way out here?”

He grins. “Full bars. So don’t worry. I’ll call the towing company, you call your grandma, and everything will be fine.”

I pace in a circle, my body trembling and my mind spinning. This is the *worst* thing that can happen right now. My fantasy is so quickly morphing into a nightmare. *But what did I expect?*

Kieron watches me intently as I try to clear my mind and think. “Okay,” I finally say, “why don’t you go ahead and call them; I really need to go to the bathroom. I’m just going to go behind those trees for a few minutes.”

His expression is a mixture of suspicion and amusement, but he nods silently. I flash him a weak smile to show I’m fine, and then head toward the cluster of trees. I’ll worry about giving him an excuse later, but right now my number one priority is to *get away*. In a million years, I have no idea how I’ll explain my crazy behavior to him, but better he think of me as a lunatic than a monster.

Kieron eyes me suspiciously as I duck behind the thicket. My attention focuses on the farmhouse in the distance. And where there’s a house, there must be a vehicle of some sort. At least I have an excuse to tell Kieron later, as insane and lame as it is.

The second Kieron’s head turns away, I sprint as fast as my legs will carry me, praying the trees are blocking his view of my mad escape. But a

few minutes later, I hear him calling me.

“Liora! Wait!”

I put my head down and continue running as hard as I can, my breath coming fast and hollow. Determined, I press on as my legs turn to rubber.

“Go back!” I yell. My voice is weak, but I’m pretty sure he hears me. I keep going, ignoring the stabbing in my chest and the fire in my legs, focusing only on getting to the house. I don’t know why I think that will save me, especially with Kieron following. Maybe I can hide somewhere. Maybe Kieron will leave me alone for a while and Lucky can get away. Maybe...

...Maybe I’m totally screwed.

I come to the fence bordering the farmer’s property and clumsily scale the low wooden barrier, ignoring the splinters lodging painfully in my fingertips.

Kieron is right behind me.

I stumble and fall. Quickly, I pull myself back up again as Kieron draws closer, almost upon me now. Suddenly, I’m distracted by the appearance of an elderly man. He’s charging toward us holding something long and skinny in his hand. Blinded by my fear and crushing devastation at the pure insanity of the moment, I keep running toward the man and the house, as Kieron barrels up behind me.

I know there’s no point in continuing. My plan to escape has failed miserably. If anything, I’ve only managed to make things worse. But I keep going, mostly so I won’t have to face Kieron and my mortal shame.

Soon, my body makes the choice for me. I stop, gasping for air. The mile sprint has made my legs feel like spaghetti, and they wobble beneath me. Kieron reaches my side. I push him back, but he doesn’t budge, asserting his place beside me. We notice the old man again. He has been

watching us with curious interest up to this point, but now that we've stopped, he's lifting his arms, aiming straight at us.

"Stop right there, or I'll shoot ya both!" the man yells.

Kieron instantly jumps in front of me, his arms held high. I double over, hands on my knees, panting heavily. "Sir, please lower your gun. We wish you no harm," he says.

The old man scowls and points his shotgun directly at Kieron's chest. I clutch the back of his sweater, and he presses back against me protectively.

"What are you kids doin' on my property? This here's private land. Ain't no one s'ppose to be here!" His lined face is contorted with rage, his wispy grey hairs wild and unkempt.

"Sir, we apologize. We just had some car trouble back on the mountain, and we were hoping to use your phone." Kieron's voice is so calm and professional he sounds more like he's ordering a pizza than negotiating with an angry man holding a shotgun.

And he's not even out of breath. *How is that possible?* Even if he ran miles every day, he should be breathing a *little* heavy, shouldn't he?

The old man spits something on the ground and moves closer, giving Kieron a look of disgust. "Don't look that way to me. Looks like she was runnin' from ya, and you was chasin' her." He bobs his head to me. "Y'all ar'right missy? He tryin' to force hissself on ya against yer will?"

"No...no...sir," I gasp, still short of breath. "Nothing like that. Honest. We were driving and ran out of gas. We wanted to get help before it turned dark."

But I know nothing will help me now. The sun is going to set any moment now, and when it does, my whole world is going to collapse.

The old man shifts his narrowed eyes from Kieron to me. He grunts and lowers his weapon slightly, still wary.

“What’re you two doin’ out this way anyhow? Ain’t no one s’ppose to be up there. You havin’ immoral relations and injectin’ yerself with drugs?” He spits on the ground again and kicks at the dirt with a scruffy boot.

Kieron slowly lowers his arms, and pulls them back and around me. I’m biting my lip so hard I can taste blood. This crazy man doesn’t seem to need a valid excuse to shoot us both. And Kieron’s right in the line of fire, protecting me. If I hadn’t acted like such a psychotic lunatic we wouldn’t be in this position.

If something happens to Kieron because of me...

Please, Lucky...hurry up...we need you...

“No, sir. We were just out for a drive and found ourselves in a bit of trouble is all. I sincerely apologize if we gave you a fright. It certainly was not our intention.” Kieron’s voice is loaded to the brim with charm and grace, but the man is unmoved.

“Well I guess we’ll have’ta see what the cops say about that. You can tell them yer story, why you bein’ places you don’t belong and doin’ Lord knows what to that young girl there...” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cell phone.

“Sir, please. Trust me... you don’t want to do that,” Kieron says, sounding like he’s trying not to laugh.

“Don’t you be tellin me what I do and don’t wanna be doin, boy! You hush up and put your hands where I can see ‘em!” He scowls and spits again. Dialing the phone with one hand, he steadies the rifle with the other.

“Sir, please, I’m warning you...you don’t want to do that. Please just let us be on our way.”

“Oh, God. Oh, no” I moan softly behind him. My body trembles uncontrollably, the familiar fire returning. Tears trickle from my eyes.

This is it. The end.

Kieron ignores the farmer’s warnings not to move, and catches me as I fall.

“Liora, what’s happening...are you hurt?” His eyes fill with worried confusion.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry...please don’t hate me...please, Kieron, I’m so sorry...” I whimper.

“I could never hate you...Everything will be okay,” he whispers.

The last thing I feel is his grip tightening around me; the last thing I see is the panic in his eyes before everything goes black.

Chapter 11. Lucky

Those eyes. Those beautiful, clear, shimmering-blue eyes I want to lose myself in...are two inches from mine.

Again.

Am I dreaming? I blink rapidly several times. He's still here, smiling down on me. But that's not all—his arms are wrapped around my body.

Again.

Is someone yelling?

I automatically smile back at his sexy grin. I *am* awake. My instincts tell me we're outside, but my eyes stay locked on Kieron's.

"Hello," he whispers.

"Hi."

Then it registers. He's holding me in his arms as if *She's* fallen and he's caught her. Or as if I've interrupted *their* private moment. A very *intimate* moment.

"Did I come at a bad time?" I ask, my blood stirring hot and fast. The pleasure of waking in his arms mixes incompatibly with the knowledge that those arms were first wrapped around *her*.

He cocks an eyebrow, but doesn't loosen his grip.

"Actually, your timing is perfect." He dramatically swings me upright, his arm still possessively around my waist as I glance around.

"So, care to fill me in on what's going on? And why is that Sapie yelling?" I point to the old man waving a silly gun at us. *Ugh, how tacky. Guns are so pathetic. Toys for the feeble.*

"Long story. I'll tell you everything...."

"I told you to be still and hush up!" the old man screams frantically.

Giving Kieron a puzzled look, I gently pull away from his embrace and walk toward the man. “Is he being serious right now?”

Kieron laughs. “I’m afraid so.”

“I’ve called the police and they’re comin’, and when they get here I’m gonna press charges and make dang sure the two of you...”

“Silence.”

The man freezes. I move closer and can see the rage in his twisted expression. How desperately he wants to yell at us. But of course, now he can’t. I narrow my eyes as I examine the rifle pointed at us.

“That could have hurt her,” I say with displeasure.

Kieron just shrugs. “Nah, I would have blasted it from him if he tried to use it.”

“Why didn’t you just do that in the first place?” I ask. “Why put her—us—at risk?”

“She was safe. I promise. I couldn’t...” He pauses.

I spin around to face him. “Couldn’t *what*?” Why does he look so guilty?

He sighs. “I couldn’t show her...anything. I was still trying to figure out what was happening with her...with us...” He actually stammers his words. My eyes narrow again.

“Kieron, *what* is going on?” My anger is fueled by mounting jealousy. As pleasant as it was to awaken in Kieron’s embrace, now I wonder exactly what it is I’ve awakened *to*.

He sighs again. “It’s a long story. And I have some questions of my own. Let’s get out of here and get some drinks. My truck is back there...”

“No. You go—I hate automobiles. I’ll run.”

I finally notice what I’m wearing and my heart sinks. With horror I examine the unfamiliar garments. These are *his* clothes...*Did Kieron and*

Liora...did they actually...?

"I gave those to her to wear earlier. She got wet and needed something dry," he says, answering my unspoken question.

I raise my eyes to his. The way he speaks of *her*...I can hear the affection in his voice.

It sickens me.

"Well, she may not have any problems wearing clothes fit for an elephant, but no way am I wearing this crap."

Angrily, I pull off her hideous boots and fling them far out of sight. Then I rip off the baggy sweatpants and throw them at Kieron. He catches them and smirks.

"Mind if I have my sweatshirt back, too?"

"Gladly."

I yank it off and throw it in his face. What do I care if I'm wearing only a black bra and boy-shorts? Much easier to move around in, and cooler, too. And I want to get the hell out of here *right now*.

"Please...Liora..." Kieron realizes his mistake the second he makes it, but I don't care.

"I'm *Lucky*, you half-witted moron. If you want to see your little sweetheart, you're gonna have to wait till tomorrow."

"Lucky, I'm sorry. But we *need* to talk..."

I glare at Kieron, and then shift my attention back to the crazed farmer. He deserves to die. He threatened *her* life, which is the same as threatening mine. That alone warrants his death.

I move closer to kill him, but as I look into the eyes of the madman something stops me. I feel something unexpected...*pity*. He's scared. And very weak. That's why he has his rifle; it makes him feel stronger. He's all alone out here, unprotected and vulnerable.

I debate for a quick second. Then, I flash my hand, releasing the controlled stream of electric fire. Instantly, his weapon disintegrates into black ash.

“I just did you a favor. You would’ve probably shot your own balls off. Now go back inside and forget you ever saw us.”

The man nods dumbly and retreats. Kieron steps beside me. “That was very nice of you.”

Shaking my head, I give him one last look of disgust. Wordlessly, I turn and sprint towards home as fast as my demonic legs will fly.

“Hello, dear.” Tatiana’s smile greets me as I burst through the cabin door.

“Do you know what she did today...do you have *any* idea?” I yell and storm into her room to retrieve some emergency Energy stash. I can’t wait for the Bar—I need to cool down *now*.

Tatiana follows me in. “I saw Liora with the new demion. I admit, I was surprised to see her go off with him like that. Although I guess I shouldn’t have been...”

I stop and glare at her. “You *knew* about him?”

“I saw him coming, yes.”

“Did you know that he would *like* her? That they would *hook up*?”

With a shaking hand I grab the green bottle and take several deep gulps. Why am I so *angry* right now? And Tatiana’s been in on it the whole time! Just what the hell is going on around here these days!?

Tatiana goes to her cauldron. As soon as she places her hands inside, cool smoke snakes forth.

“The demion’s arrival was foreseen, but his actions and role were uncertain. Being part human gives him an unpredictable nature that demons

do not have. His free will changed the course of his path, and as a result, he and Liora connected with each other.”

“But what about *me*?” I spit out angrily.

She looks at me with infuriating serenity. “How you choose to connect with the new demion is entirely up to you,” she says.

I finish drinking the bottle and stalk from her room. I need a shower, and quick. Kieron’s scent is *all over* me. Is it because she’d been wearing his clothes? Or is it some other reason? What did they *do* today?

I don’t want to even think about it.

I slam my bedroom door harder than I mean to, and when I hear the sickening splinter of wood I know I’ve shattered it. Great. Tatiana’s gonna love that. But one time she fixed my entire bedroom when I’d accidentally destroyed the walls practicing my fire charms. If she could restore a demolished room with a little of her hocus-pocus, then fixing a tiny door will be a breeze.

As I wait for the water to heat up, I couldn’t be more repulsed by my reflection in the mirror. My hair is a total rat’s nest and my makeup looks like it was applied by a blind preschooler with epilepsy.

Fabulous. Real classy, Liora. What the HELL does he see in you?

After a hasty shower, I scan through my wardrobe with an eagle’s eye, finally deciding on purple, skintight leather pants and matching halter top lined with silver studs. Slaying clothes. I braid my hair into a single plait down the middle of my back, because I know I look beautiful with my hair pulled away from my face. As I apply my favorite cherry red lip gloss, I realize I’m getting upset for no reason. It’s *beyond* silly. Laughable, really. Liora may have tried to sink her pathetic little claws into Kieron today, but now it’s *my* turn.

I admire my reflection in the mirror. She can't compete with this. No way, no how.

"Are you hunting tonight?" Tatiana asks when I exit my room a few minutes later.

"Most definitely."

"Lucky, please sit down a moment. I'd like to talk to you."

"Now, Tat? Can't it wait? I need to get going..."

"It will be brief."

"Is it about the bedroom door? The thing practically broke on its own; I barely touched it..."

"No, although I would really appreciate you showing some restraint while you are inside. This is about last night...what happened with the Altrumina."

I had totally blocked that out, and remembering it now floods me with fresh waves of nausea. My knees buckle and I sit down on the couch.

"It was no big deal. I gotta go." Ignoring my dizziness, I stand back up.

"Do *not* lie to me, Lucky." Tatiana's eyes are hard, and I know better than to mess with her when she means business.

I sigh and sit back down. "Okay, fine. It totally sucked. I was stupid and wasn't paying attention. One of them touched me, and I went all Alice in Wonderland down the rabbit hole of horrors. It *completely* sucked ass, and I will take great pleasure in ripping every Altrumina in the area to shreds, if you'd be so kind as to point me in their direction..."

"What did you see?"

"Um, what?"

"You heard me."

"I-I- don't really...remember..," I stammer.

"Lucky..." The warning in her quiet voice is unmistakable.

“Okay...okay...I saw them. Michael, Kayla, me—my good pals, the Amazèa. I got to relive that day all over again, as if I needed the reminder. Then I got to watch Bones do what he does best. Who needs Pay-per-view when you’ve got the Altrumina acid-trip porno channel? Then I ended up in the Wasteland...you know, the super fun place where demons get banished for eternity? That was a blast and a half. We should plan our next family trip there; the views are something else...”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah, well, as sad as I was for my little party to end, unfortunately, someone insisted on slaying my dear hosts. All good times must come to an end sometime, I suppose.” This time when I stand up, I head toward the door. This inquisition is over, whether she likes it or not.

Tatiana presses her lips together and nods. “I’m glad you are okay.”

I pause with my hand on the doorknob. “I wouldn’t go that far, but I’ll be a lot better once I waste some Altrumina...”

“The few who survived the night scattered far away. Your friend was quite menacing. I don’t think they’ll be back anytime soon—”

“Fine, whatever,” I say cutting her off. I’m so not in the mood to think of Kieron’s heroics right now. “Find me some others, then.”

“There are some Chax demons by the highway...”

“Boring.”

“Well, if you feel you are up for the challenge, there are some followers of Thammuz in a cave by Wellington Hot Springs. You will hear their song, which will carry for several miles. It sounds like a cluster of owls.”

“Perfect.”

“You cannot kill them with your hands or your Powers. You must slit their throats. Make sure you have your dagger.”

“Always,” I say, patting my boot.

“And, Lucky...”

“Yeah...?”

“I know you’re upset with Liora right now. If you do anything to harm her or her life in any way there will be severe consequences. Understood?”

I roll my eyes. Does she ever bother to tell Liora not to mess with *me* or harm *my* life? *Nooooooo...*

“Tatiana, I wouldn’t *dream* of it.”

When I reach the River of Kings, I dismount Diablo and take a quick look around for Bones. I hate how we left things between us last night. I want to talk with him and make sure we’re still cool.

Or do I?

After all, *I’m* the one who said I needed some time and space to figure things out. But really, what is there to decide? I want him. I want him more than just as a friend or a companion. I want him to be mine...all *mine*. He may want me, but he also wants others. Many others. It’s who he is. This will never change.

And how awful this makes me feel will also never change unless I can go back to the way I was before...before the split and without Liora’s human emotions infecting my judgment.

Question is, can I live with that? Can I stay friends with Bones, even though seeing him go off to seduce Sapie women drives a knife through my heart? Can I continue to pretend forever that I’m fine with it? Can I live with the sadness I feel whenever I see the cocky smile he gets before heading out to make his conquests, or see his eyes aglow from his satisfying missions?

Can I ever forget the image of watching him make love to all those women?

If I was normal...if I was still a pure demion, I'd be better able to shut these unwanted emotions off. Maybe then I could deal with this situation with a clear head. But as things are now, I can't. Since Liora went human, all my hard work toward mastering the fine art of apathy has gone right out the window.

And it really pisses me off.

And then there's Kieron. Sure, I've met plenty of other demions before, but there's something about him...I don't know what it is. Sure he's gorgeous...he's a demion. That's not it. Last night, after he helped me with the Altrumina...sitting there in the park beside him...I don't know, it's like I felt safe. Whole. Right....if only for a moment. Being with him felt easy. *Good.*

But then tonight, waking up in his arms...knowing he'd been with Liora...that something was going on between them. The sick feeling hit me almost as hard as it does when Bones leaves me for his Sapies.

And now I don't know *what* to think, or do. I wish I could make these feelings disappear! Maybe I can talk with Tatiana...maybe there's something she can do to fix me. Maybe she can create some sort of concoction that can make me how I'm supposed to be... No more sadness, anger, jealousy, loneliness, insecurities, confusion...*nothing*. Nothing but pure instinct.

Sigh. Talk about wishful thinking. Despite Tatiana's great powers, even *she* can't influence my curse. She's already tried.

I slowly make my way across the bridge, pausing briefly to gaze at the churning inferno below. The hypnotizing dance of the flames mildly soothes me, and helps me remember who I am.

I am a demion. I am proud, beautiful, and powerful. And I am *not* about to let some stupid males make me feel weak and question my greatness. If

they don't want me...only *me*...then it's *their* loss.

Right?

My chin held high, I stride confidently toward the Bar, ready to face anything. Then it hits me, and I stop suddenly in my tracks. *Liora... Kieron...*

I already knew that my mixed up feelings about Bones were caused by Liora's influence. It's her human side that corrupts me. But, it isn't just my feelings about Bones that are messed up. Even when I meet other demions I've never had any urge to pursue them because of how much Liora hates all things demon. At least, I *think* that's why.

So why is Kieron different? Why was she with him? Why was he with her? And if *she* didn't feel something for him, would *I* be feeling this way?

I need answers. Now.

A demon named Daisy sits by the door painting her fingernails blood-red. Just as pretty and just as deadly as Ivy, one controlled touch from Daisy can instantly turn any living creature—human or demon—into stone, ash, or fire, depending on her mood.

"Sup, crazy Daisy?" I cautiously air-kiss both her cheeks.

"Lucky, love. Long time no see. You look *amaze* as always."

"Thanks, you too. Love the pink hair. But I'm surprised to see you working...Where's Ivy?"

She shrugs and gently blows on her fingertips. "Dunno. Didn't show up tonight so they called me in. Cody's not here either, so maybe they're off having one of their world-famous blowouts..."

"Hmm. Hope everything's cool," I say, secretly relieved to be spared Ivy's gossip for one night.

The smoky room is crowded, but I spot both of them right away: Bones at the bar drinking by himself, looking sulky; Kieron in his usual corner

with his back to me.

I decide to approach Bones first. If nothing else it'll be good for Kieron to see he isn't the only hottie in town. Make him realize I'm not the *only* one with some competition.

"Hey," I say, sliding into the seat beside Bones. "How goes it?"

He stares straight ahead with a blank expression on his face and chugs from his glass. Then he sets it down and turns to me. His eyes are cold... like a stranger.

"I don't know. You tell me." Even his voice sounds different. Hard. Detached.

"Good...things are good." I glance around nervously. I didn't expect him to be this mad. Actually, mad would be better. Mad would imply he still cares.

I peek over at Kieron. He's not looking my way, and now I hope he doesn't. If Bones decides to make a scene, I certainly don't want Kieron witnessing my humiliation. Again.

"So, it's okay for you to talk to me now?" Bones asks in a flat tone.

"Bones, yes, *of course* it is." I signal Gyan, Cody's fill-in, to bring me a drink.

"I thought you needed space from me. If you want to be left alone so much why are you here talking to me?"

"Bones, you're still my friend. That hasn't changed...for me at least. And I hope not for you. I just need to figure some things out. It doesn't mean I don't care about you. Don't be mad."

He finishes his drink and sets down his glass. "I'm not mad. But I gotta go. I'll catch you later." And with those cold words he grabs his brown leather jacket off the back of his chair and disappears.

I take a few sips of my drink and stew at his attitude. What gives Bones the right to act like this? I only told him I need some time to figure out the crazy thoughts and feelings in my head. And I need to figure them out so I can be his friend even though I like him *too* much. It's not like I called him a disgusting, whorish, mangy mutt or something.

"This seat taken?" a voice whispers in my ear, causing my heart to jump a beat. I hadn't even noticed him come up on me.

"No." I wave my hand absently, trying to appear calm. Bones' ambivalent departure had made my stomach clench. But after what I told him, what did I really expect him to say?

It's better this way. It has to be.

Kieron sits down and orders us more drinks. We sit in silence, neither of us looking at the other until we are both finished. After I take my last sip, he stands up and places his hands on the back of my seat.

"Shall we?" he asks, pulling out my chair as I rise.

"What is this, 1850?" I mutter.

Once we get outside, I shoot Kieron a quick glance. "Try and keep up." The instant the words leave my mouth, I streak into the depths of Dryndara's forest as fast as I can.

Although all demions and demons have extraordinary speed as well as strength, I'm one of the fastest. Because of my Brand, there are few who can keep up with me when I *really* let myself loose.

So I'm quite surprised to see Kieron keeping pace with me almost stride for stride. Without thinking, I head to my secret, safe place. I've never brought anyone here before, not even Bones. I don't know why I'm letting Kieron follow me here now.

Before long, I reach the top of the cliff. The Sirens are singing tonight, filling the air with their hypnotizing melodies. I glance down at the

lightning-peaked volcanoes and the rivers of fire below, before turning to give Kieron a furious glare.

“Okay. You need to tell me exactly *who* you are and what the *hell* is going on.”

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Chapter 12. Lucky

Kieron wanders to the edge of the cliff and sits down on a patch of grass. He looks up at me with what I'm sure he thinks is an irresistibly charming smile.

"You seem upset," he says.

"Well, no shit, Sherlock. You win a cupcake for being so damn observant."

"Why are you mad?" The corners of his mouth hint at a smile.

"Are you *serious*? I don't exactly appreciate waking up with a gun pointed at *me*, let alone at *her*. At least I can defend myself, but she can't. And for *some* reason you were right there letting it happen. I want to know what you were doing with her and how she wound up in that situation. And why you seem to be the one responsible for it."

Kieron leans his body back so casually he may as well be sunning himself at the damned beach. I don't know if he's intentionally trying to be sexy, or if it just comes naturally to him. Either way, it's pissing me off.

"I was trying to figure it out...I needed to see how it works," he says.

"How *what* works?"

"You two, you and Liora. I...I've never seen anything like it before. I thought the stories couldn't really be true, but you really *are* two separate identities, aren't you?"

I move closer to him, my hands on my hips. "Yeah...so?"

"So it's...*fascinating*. I mean, you're like me...a demion, but for some reason you have completely split up your traits—human on one side, demon on the other. A human by day, a demon, or I guess I should say, demion, by night."

"And another cupcake for the brilliant Captain Obvious."

“But why...I mean, how did it happen? Were you Created this way?”

“I’d rather not discuss that right now. It’s wonderful that you find us so interesting, but that doesn’t explain why you were with Liora today and why you almost got us killed.”

“Is...is she here now? Liora? Does she know what’s going on? Can she hear us?”

I’m quiet for a moment. “No. She’s sleeping.”

“Does she know anything? About you and your life? Or is she completely in the dark?”

My eyes flash with anger. *I’m* the one asking questions around here, not him. Especially if his questions are going to be about *her*. “I don’t know what she does or doesn’t know, and I don’t really care. If you’re so interested, talk to her.”

He drops his head slightly. “I guess I just thought it would be easier to talk with you about...this.”

“Well, I can’t really answer any questions about her. Sometimes I see what she’s doing, but most of the time it’s so mundane there’s no point in even paying attention. She’s woken up a few times, but since she hates all things demon, she keeps her distance as much as possible. I sleep when she is awake and vice-versa.”

Kieron bites his lip and taps his fingers absently on a rock.

“So today...you had no idea what was happening...*at all*?” His voice is quiet.

I let out a long sigh and drop my arms to my sides. “No.” *Is he really this dense?*

“You didn’t...I don’t know...*feel* anything?”

“I just said no,” I snap.

He drops his head even lower. “Oh. I... I think I might have screwed up.”

My eyes narrow. “Why, what did you do?”

He stands up and begins pacing in a circle. I move over to take his seat on the grass. “This is new for me,” he finally says.

“What is?”

“This...you...*her*...me....us.” He shakes his head in disbelief.

“You like her?” I whisper. I don’t even have to ask; I already know his answer.

He stares down at me with such intensity I momentarily forget to breathe; his dark blue eyes glow under the bright lights of Illyria’s full moons.

“Yes.” He comes to sit beside me. Any pleasure I feel by him sitting so close is extinguished by his response. *Of course* he likes her. All demons are ruthless unfeeling bastards who care only about themselves...

“But,” he continues, “I like *you*, too. To me, you and she are the same. I see you as one... I didn’t count on you being so completely *separate* from one another.”

“You really think Liora and I are the *same*?” My voice spits out the last word, my anger mounting. He may think he’s being nice, but to me, it’s the greatest of insults.

“No, most definitely not. I see now how you’re completely different. It’s just, well, a lot of demions—especially where I come from—they assume a normal Sapie guise in the daytime, leaving their demon activities for after sundown. I’ve even known several who use two different names...one for day, as a ‘human’, one for night as a demon. In essence, they *are* two separate beings from day to night. But you and Liora...this is on a whole other level.”

He shakes his head again. “I mean, I still can’t quite believe that the girl I’m talking to now isn’t the same one I was with all day today. It’s wild. I... I admit I don’t quite know what to do or say...”

“Sorry to make things *so complicated* for you,” I mutter. Why is he even still here? It’s clear which one of us he wants, and it’s not me.

Kieron places his hand on my knee. It feels good, but I brush it away. He sighs.

“Lucky, I had no idea that you weren’t...*with us*...today. That it was either one or the other—you or her. I kept waiting for her to say something—*anything*—that gave any indication she knew who I was. But she never did. Honestly, some of the things she said confused the hell out of me.” He pauses, appraising me. I look away, but can still feel his intense gaze.

“At first I couldn’t figure out why you...*she* was acting the way she was,” he continues, “but then I finally decided that maybe it was just your way; how you cope with what you are...you play a different role during the day than you do at night. I admit I thought it was sort of extreme, but I figured you had your reasons, and if you weren’t going to say anything than neither was I.”

“I’m not playing. This is not a game for me.” Why is he still talking?

“I know that now. I mean...I knew something was up when she became so worried about the dark. I didn’t realize that’s when you’d ‘trade places’—that part was quite unexpected. But when I saw her run, well, no demon would run that slow. And earlier she slipped and fell. No demion would ever do that.”

“So you solved the great puzzle. Congratulations.” I stare up at the twinkling stars and make a wish for one to fall on my head and put me out of my misery.

“Lucky,” he says my name so tenderly it wakes up the butterflies in my stomach again, “I meant what I said earlier. Although you may think of yourselves as different identities, I only see you as one. I cannot distinguish the difference.”

“Then you’re beyond blind.” *And stupid.*

“No, just the opposite. I see you better than you see yourself. And I like what I see. *A lot.* I...really like you. *All* of you.”

I roll my eyes. Typical guy. Why settle for one girl when you can have two? “So you want to be with us both, is that what you’re trying to say? You think you can have two girls for the price of one?”

He lets out a low chuckle. “I’m thinking it may be more along the lines of ‘one girl for the price of two’...but...I...I want us to be friends. I want to be able to get to know you better...all of you...*both* of you. I may not do everything right, but I’d like to try. Are you willing to at least give us a shot and see where it takes us?” He gently returns his hand to my knee. This time I don’t push it away.

“You want to be *friends*?” I ask quietly.

He grins and lightly squeezes my leg, sending shivers up my spine. “For now...yes. I think it’s a good place to start. Until we know each other better...until I’m able to better understand how separate you two are.”

“We’re not *totally* separate, you know...I can feel a lot of her emotions and sometimes I can make her do things.”

“But she doesn’t have your powers...or your memories?”

“No, not usually.”

“And you don’t have any of *her* memories?”

I make a face. “Not if I can help it.”

He laughs. “I take it you don’t really like her very much?”

I look back at the sky. I am so *not interested* in opening up that suitcase of emotional baggage. “Well, I *do* admit I’m a little jealous of her right now. She got to talk with you all day, but I don’t know anything about you.”

“What do you want to know?”

Where do you come from? Why are you here? Why couldn’t you tell Liora wasn’t me? Do you like her better? Why did you say you like me? Did you mean it?

“What’s your Brand?” I finally ask. Best to start with the basics.

“Latros.”

“No way. *Really?* That’s...*whoa*. I’ve never met one of your kind before.”

He shrugs modestly. “It’s no biggie. What are you?”

“Aequitas.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “A Justice demon? Wow, remind me never to piss you off,” he says, laughing. “No, seriously, that’s impressive, though.”

“Not *that* impressive. My sire mated with a peace-loving hippie or something ‘cause... well, you’ve met Liora—all soft and sweet and emotional.” I stick out my tongue in disgust.

“Yes, she is,” he whispers.

I groan and roll my eyes. “Well you’d think they’d at least try to be *somewhat* compatible when they reproduce. Having two complete opposites for parents doesn’t exactly make for the most well-adjusted demion offspring.”

He laughs again and lightly grazes my arm with his fingertips sending shivers up and down my spine. “I think you’re just fine.”

“Thanks for the endorsement. But what about you...Who do you work for?”

“I’m sort of a free-agent these days.” He subtly avoids my gaze, but there is a guarded change in his tone.

“How? I thought all tracker-demons belonged to someone. You’re like... the best of the best...”

“It’s complicated. I’ll explain it later.”

I narrow my eyes, trying to read his expression. True, there is much about the demon world I don’t know. Hiding beneath the veils of secrecy, illusion, deception and lies is our way of life. But I’ve always believed that Latros demons—highly skilled, extraordinarily gifted, and *extremely* lethal bounty hunters—*always* have a master they’re bound to; they have no say in it. But maybe I’m wrong. Wouldn’t be the first time.

I can tell that he’s uncomfortable, so I change the subject. “How are you gonna break the news to Liora about who you really are?” I ask, absently picking at blades of grass beside me.

He furrows his brow and gazes out to the valley. “I hadn’t quite thought it through...It wasn’t like I was *trying* to keep it a secret or anything, I was just trying to figure out what was going on with you...I mean, her.” Then he frowns, clearly troubled. “Do you think it’ll be a problem?”

I laugh, taking pleasure at his naiveté. “Well, I have some bad news for you, Loverboy. She hates all things demon, and that includes half-breeds like you.”

“You mentioned that, but I just assumed you meant our lifestyle. How can she hate demons when she *is* one?”

“Because Liora is *not* a demon. She’s one-hundred-percent pure *human*. The only demon she has in her is when I break through. And even that’s hard to do unless she wants me to do it, which isn’t very often.”

“So, you’re telling me she dislikes all demons and demions even though she shares her life and body with one?”

I let out a loud sigh and shake my head. How can someone who is so cute and supposedly so brilliant and talented be so *dense*? But I'm secretly pleased at his predicament. I already have to share my life with Liora. I don't want to share Kieron with her, also.

"No, I'm not telling you she *dislikes* them, I'm telling you she *hates* them. She blames us for something awful that happened a while ago. Of course, it's silly to hate an entire species for the actions of a few derelicts, but what can I tell you...she's basically a big, fat, demon bigot. You're deluding yourself if you think she won't despise you if she finds out what you really are." I know I sound smug, but I don't care. It's true.

Kieron is clearly unnerved by this. He stands up and walks over to the grass. Running his long fingers through his hair, he stares out to the valley.

As much as it bothers him to hear it, he *needs* to know the truth. It's far better he find out from me than some other way—like if Liora's into him and he just comes right out and tells her he's a demion....

I roll my eyes, picturing how well *that* little bombshell would go over. And I've already had about all of her nonsense I can take.

"So there's no chance of you putting in a good word for me?"

Unfortunately, he's not looking at me and can't see my annoyed expression. "Sorry, no Cyrano de Bergerac here. You're on your own, Romeo."

"Sorry I asked that," he says a moment later as he sits beside me again. "This must be...very hard for you. In your mind, it's as if I was concerned for another girl entirely. As if my feelings are directed at someone other than you..."

I shrug. "Yeah..."

"Well, they're not. *Never* forget that," he whispers in my ear. Then he quickly, lightly, kisses my neck, sending shivers of fire and ice racing

through my blood.

“I’ll try. No promises, though.” I try to make my voice stern, but I can’t help smiling. *Just friends, huh?* True, it was just a quick, soft peck below my earlobe. But I’ve wondered what it would be like to kiss him ever since I woke up in his arms in Baymore Park. Maybe we can be ‘kissing friends’...

But just thinking of Baymore Park strikes a chord in my memory. I turn my face to his, mere inches away.

“I have a question for you...” I start, trying not to let myself get distracted by the fact that I have an insatiable urge to run my fingers through his thick, lush locks and pull his mouth to mine. *Focus, Lucky!* “Last night, at Baymore Park, with the Altrumina...how did you happen to be there?”

He presses his eyebrows together again and sighs. Then he looks away, but not before I see a dark flash in his eyes.

“Kieron?”

“I had no idea this would happen when I came here. This wasn’t *supposed* to happen,” he says, almost as if he’s speaking to himself.

“What wasn’t...and why won’t you answer my question? What were you doing in Baymore Park?”

He finally turns to face me, and I’m stunned to see how hard his face is. His jaw is rigid, his lips pressed tight. But it’s his eyes that surprise me the most. They’ve suddenly gone from clear and open to dark and foreboding.

He sighs again and locks his gaze on mine. “Actually...I was following you.”

His answer confuses me, and my body stiffens; I don’t know if I should be flattered or creeped out.

"I don't get it...why were you following me?" My eyes feel as wide as one of Illyria's moons.

He takes a deep breath again. I notice he's removed his hand from my knee and is tightly clenching the grass behind him. "Because it's my job."

"*What?*" My heart starts to race. If he's saying what I think he's saying...

"I came here for you," he says, quietly.

"Why?" My question is barely a whisper.

"I came here...*to kill you.*"

Every cell in my body instinctively shifts into high alert, but I don't flinch a muscle. If Kieron plans to take me out, he's in for one hell of a fight.

"I'd love to see you try." My mouth is shaped in the sweetest smile I can muster, but my eyes are bright with pure demonic fury.

"Well *obviously* I'm not going to. I would've done so already."

"You would have *tried*," I counter. "Nice ego just assuming you'd win."

Latros demons are tough, but I have my own talents. Each with our own strengths and weaknesses, we'd be pretty evenly matched unless...

I let out a horrified gasp and jump to my feet. "Is that what you're doing with her...us? Looking for *weaknesses*?"

How could I be so *stupid*? How could I think for *one second* that this demion was any different than the rest? Friend, my ass!

"No," he says quietly. "I only knew there was another demon—you—interfering with my bounty. I came here to eliminate that interference, as I normally would."

"So what's stopping you?" Every fiber of my being is ready for a fight; my fingers twitch anxiously, ready in a split second to grab my dagger from

my boot. But Kieron remains passively on the ground.

"I have no desire to kill you...or her. Especially not her."

"*Especially?*" I sneer. "Gee, thanks."

"Only because I'd never kill a human. And that's what she is. At least you have the Powers to defend yourself."

"That's right – and don't forget it." Even my hair feels like it's on fire as I focus on controlling my rage. My heels dig into the soft ground. This whole thing with Kieron was a set-up, a trick...

"Lucky, please relax. I don't want to fight you, I don't want to hurt you, and I *certainly* don't want to kill you. I only told you the truth because we have a situation we need to sort out–"

"The only thing that *needs* to happen is you *need* to stay the hell away from me. And Liora." My eyes are angry slits and my voice shakes with rage. Silently, I will Kieron to stand up and attack me. I want to fight. I want to smash his lying face in.

But when he rises to his feet, it's not with the aggressive posturing I hoped for, but with regretful trepidation. I'm unmoved by the hurt in his eyes. He's nothing but a dirty demion here on a mission to kill me, who just *happened* to get sidetracked by the circus-freak sideshow that is my life. I've had other demons come after me before, but they've *never* gone through Liora to get to me. This is a whole new level of low.

"Lucky, please listen to me, I understand why you're upset, but you have it all wrong."

"Guess I've been wrong about a lot of things lately," I say, storming away. I need to get out of here and away from him *now*.

"I knew from the first night I came to Demon Bar," he calls out. "The first time you entered the room...I knew you were special...I could feel it in my soul. The Deveni's told me you were the one I was seeking, and they

were right. But before I'd even spoken to you, I knew my mission was off...that I had to find another way. That I needed to know you—"

I stop walking and spin back around. *First*, he uses me and lies to me, now he's talking to me like I'm some idiot schoolgirl. Does he *want* to die tonight?

"You're *lying*. I *remember* the first night you were in Demon Bar. *I saw you*. You sat in the corner and didn't turn around once. There's no way you saw me. Nice try."

Kieron takes a tentative step toward me. "I'm part Latros demon, remember?" His small smile causes my insides to smolder. Now I don't know who I'm madder at: him for being a lying snake bastard; or me for still being affected by his sexy grin.

"Yeah, so? What does that have to do with...?"

I suddenly remember something Ivy mentioned to me long ago, when she was explaining to me how her eyes are able to see through solid steel...

"Wait...Do you *really* have the three-sixty vision? You can actually see out of your whole head?" I ask, my curiosity briefly outweighing my animosity.

He nods, taking another small step. "I was watching you the whole time. After you left, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I knew I needed to get to know you. But I wasn't sure how. I tracked you to Liora's school a few days later, and that night I waited for you to return to Demon Bar. And then..." His voice trails off.

"And then...what?" My voice is lower, less angry. More apprehensive.

"I followed you," he confesses. "You ran off with your friend, the hellhound. I heard you cry. I saw your pain as you mourned for your friends...your *human* friends. I...I've never seen that from another demion before..."

“Yeah , well, that’s *her* fault,” I mutter. “Told you she gets all emotional.” My humiliation at having him witness such a private moment is only slightly tempered by the compassion in his eyes.

“I understand what drives you to do what you do. Why you hunt other demons.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“Trust me.” His face unexpectedly fills with pain. “My mother, my *human* mother, was murdered while I was forced to watch. The demons who did it took their sweet time, and I was powerless to stop them. I was six years old, but it may as well have happened yesterday.”

As I hear these words, my anger slowly subsides. He’s not seeking pity. He’s not making excuses. He’s only offering his understanding.

He drops his head and returns to his seat on the cliff. I stare at the back of his head for a long moment, wondering if he’s watching me. But I no longer want to leave. I don’t even hate him anymore. He’s seen the same horrors I have. He’s experienced the same unspeakable suffering. He’s felt the same horrible feeling of powerlessness so alien to most of our species.

He’s lost someone he loved. Just like me. A kindred spirit. Tatiana told me about them one time when I was little.

Slowly, I wander back to where he sits, and kneel beside him. Close—but not touching.

The three moons of Illyria float side by side, soon to be one. The Sirens are silent. So are we.

“I’m sorry,” I finally whisper.

“Me too.”

Still staring out over the valley, he moves his hand just slightly so that it rests on mine.

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Chapter 13. Liora

It takes a few seconds for my last memories to surface, but once they do, I wish to God they hadn't.

"Oh, *no*. No, no, no!" I groan, flinging the blanket over my head. *Kieron. Oh, God, oh no...*

Moaning, I bury my face in my pillow, wishing it could block out the world. What happened after I left? What did Lucky *do*? Does Kieron hate me? Is he okay? Is he even still *alive*?

I replay those final seconds over and over in my mind, each new memory puncturing a fresh hole in my heart: My failed escape; the man with the gun; falling asleep in Kieron's arms as he looked at me with such sweet concern...

It's over. It is so *all over* for me. There is *no way* anything good happened after I left. There is no best case scenario, only differing degrees of horrible.

The only question is, how bad is it? I can't bear to consider the answer.

I scream into my pillow, the down filling muffling my cries. I hate this *so much*. Every single second of it. Life is *not* supposed to be like this, even for a demon. *Especially* for a demon. I'm supposed to have the world at my feet, not half-exist as a pathetic, sniveling nobody held hostage by the night and perpetually tormented by an unseen enemy.

Tatiana lightly taps on the bedroom door and lets herself in.

"Good morning, Liora, dear. Are you going to join the world today?"

"No," I respond into my pillow.

"What is the matter?" She sits at the end of the bed and places her hand on my calf.

"I'm sick. I'm not going to school. I'm going to sleep all day."

She clucks disapprovingly and smooths her long, grey hair behind her ear. “You are not sick, my dear. Something is bothering you. Either tell me what it is or please get ready for school.”

I bolt up and throw off the blankets, my fiery eyes fixing on her opaque ones. “What does it even matter what I do? Don’t you see? It doesn’t *matter* if I’m late or not there at all! None of this matters! I am a fraud...a fake. I don’t even exist. Not really. This life...this life...it sucks Tattie, it really does. I hate it! I hate everything about everything!” Angry tears spill down my cheeks.

She leans forward, wrapping her frail arms around me as sobs wrack through my body, her unconditional love making me feel doubly horrible. I hadn’t meant to take my anger out on her. She’s always been the one person I can count on; the one person who’s always been there for me. But right now she’s the only target I have for my frustration.

“There, there... don’t be so sad, my sweet Liora. Things aren’t always as bleak as they appear to be,” she coos, patting my back.

I pull away from her embrace and flop back on the bed. I’ve only been awake a few minutes but already my body is totally exhausted and my mind drained. I curl up in the covers again.

“Please just let me sleep,” I beg her, sniffing loudly under the blankets.

She stands up. “Do you plan to hide in here for the rest of your life?”

“Yes.” I nestle myself in further.

“And you think that will make you feel better?”

“Yes.”

She sighs. “So be it. But it saddens me to think that I raised a young woman who would quit so easily. You are the strongest person I know, and giving up without a fight is not like you.”

I turn over and remove the cover from my face to see her gazing down on me with concern. “I don’t even know who I am anymore,” I say, my voice softer.

“Yes, you do. And instead of focusing on all the things that are going wrong for you, why don’t you try opening your eyes to all that is good?” She has a hint of a smile on her face.

I sit up, propping myself against some pillows. “Like what? Name *one* thing that’s good. I hate school, I barely have any friends, I don’t even have...” I picture Kieron’s face and have to fight back a fresh wave of tears. “*She’s ruined everything...*”

“I have an idea,” she says, reaching down to stroke my hair. “Why don’t you go out and find just one good thing you like about your life. It is there, waiting to be discovered. But you cannot find the goodness if you hide from the light. You must seek it, even when the darkness surrounds you.”

“I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. Please...just this once. For me...”

Exhaling loudly, I give her a scowl. Tatiana rarely plays the guilt card, but when she does, it always works. I groan again and dangle my legs over the side of the bed to get out. But then I pause, remembering.

“Why do you even want me to go there? I’m sure you heard what happened yesterday. School’s probably cancelled, anyway.”

She closes her eyes and lowers her head. “Yes,” she whispers, “I am aware of the tragedy. Your school may or may not be open, but I want you to go anyway—”

I reach for the robe beside my bed and slip into it. “But why? It’s not even safe! Three students got whacked, and one’s missing her head! Why would you send me back there?—”

"I do not have all the details, as it's still blurry. I have spoken with the others at Coven yester-eve and we do not feel the deaths occurred at the school. Rather, the bodies were placed there intentionally." Like her, Tatiana's group of sister-witches are pure humans, but they all have special insight as to the locations, movements, and energies of demons and demonic activity.

"But why? Who would do such a thing?"

"We believe perhaps someone is trying to send a message. Who the messenger is, however, remains to be seen, as their energies were cloaked in a manner none of us with the Vision can penetrate. Yet."

I sigh. "But you still haven't told me why you want me to go there. Obviously it's no longer safe. Won't I be in danger?"

She shakes her head. "I am confident you are not in any danger, just as I am confident that if something should arise, Lucky would take over. But I will never allow a child of mine to cower in the darkness because of fear. It is only when we face our fears head on that we become stronger..."

I slowly make my way to the bathroom. I know when I've been beaten. There's no out-arguing Tatiana. Ever.

"Fine, I'll go. But I'm telling you now, when I come back and tell you there is not one good thing in my life, that today sucks just as bad as every other day, and that pretending to be a normal human is a big fat friggen waste of time, I'm done with it. No more school; I don't care what you say."

"Deal."

I stop walking and spin around, scanning her face for signs she's just messing with me. Her expression is stoic as she leans against the violet wall of my bedroom.

"Wha-*really*? You'd let me drop out?"

"If that is what you decide to do. But only on one condition. You must promise me this: You will shake off whatever is upsetting you. You will open your eyes and heart to the possibility of life and love. You will embrace opportunity and let down the walls of the fortress you have built around your spirit. You will see others as they are meant to be seen, and in turn, allow them to see *you* for who you really are. And you will not be so afraid to fail that you don't even try."

"Fine, whatever."

"Liora..."

"I promise, Tat."

An impossible pledge.

Stepping outside, I welcome the stinging chill on my face. It takes my mind off Kieron, if only for a moment. I set my backpack down and fumble for my mittens; it's much colder than I anticipated. Maybe I should just drive today.

But I know if I do, it'll just make the long hours cooped up in the classroom pass that much slower. For some reason walking to school is the only way I can tolerate being there. Plus, I need the time to think. Figure out what I'm going to do, what I'm going to say when I see Kieron. He'll want an explanation for yesterday, no doubt. Maybe I should just say that I had a bad reaction to some prescription drugs. Or maybe non-prescription drugs. That might be more believable.

Yeah... *Side-effects may include headaches, drowsiness, and demon possession...*

Just as I'm about to turn from the path into the woods, I see him. The wind slaps my face as I stand there, not moving. *What is he doing here? I'm not prepared!*

Kieron leans against the side of his truck, looking like a male model posing for an outdoorsy catalogue. When he sees me, his face lights up and he jogs to where I'm standing.

My first instinct is to run away. But considering what a complete epic failure that was last time, I grit my teeth and stand my ground. Might as well get this over with.

Half of me admires the graceful way he moves toward me; the other half fiercely braces for the inevitable.

"Hey, Liora. How you doin' today?"

No. No way. Uh-uh. Is he really trying to act like everything's totally hunky-dory? I don't think so!

I try to read his expression, but the only thing I see is the easy openness of yesterday. No anger. No resentment. No suspicion.

Very suspicious.

"F-fine...I guess."

"I brought your things from yesterday...your clothes and book bag. You forgot to take them with you last night. I figured I should give 'em back to you here, not at school." His eyes gleam mischievously. "We wouldn't want people to start talking..."

"Heaven forbid," I say, flatly.

He gives me a half smile. "Well, they're in my truck. Would you like a ride to school? It's kinda chilly out to be walking."

What is going on here? "I don't want to drive...I want to walk."

"Okay, we'll walk together. Just let me grab my stuff."

As he trots back to his truck, my mind is spinning. Why is he acting so normal? Like everything is *fine*? Like the insanity of yesterday didn't happen, and Lucky didn't show up and ruin everything. *This is NOT possible.*

No. Something's definitely up.

He returns with his backpack slung casually over his shoulder and hands me my bag. Then he nods toward the forest.

"Shall we?"

Birds chirping and the crunching of leaves and twigs are the only sounds as Kieron and I hike through the woods. I'm waiting for him to say something...*anything*. But he remains silent, and so do I. He seems perfectly relaxed and at ease, but with every passing second I feel my mind closer and closer to exploding.

Finally, I can't take it anymore. We've reached the forest's walls; soon we'll hit the main road. I stop abruptly, set my backpack on the ground, and take a seat on a fallen log.

He turns to me with a quizzical glance. "What's wrong?"

"I think you and I need to talk."

"Sure. What's up?" He drops his bag and sits beside me.

"I need to ask you something and it might seem strange." I stare straight ahead, unable to meet his penetrating gaze.

"You can ask me anything, Liora. I promise I won't think it strange."

Yeah. I highly doubt that.

I take a deep breath and dive in. "What happened with the farmer with the gun last night? I...I must have blocked it out or something because I don't remember anything after he said he was going to call the police. Did...did anything *unusual* happen? Did I do or say anything... *strange*?"

Kieron runs his hands through his dark hair. It's so cold that his breath makes little puffs in the air.

"Well, after you fainted..."

"Fainted?"

“Must’ve been from all that running and the fright of being held at gunpoint. Anyways, you fainted for a moment. When you came to, you were very nice with the farmer and he let us go.”

“And then what?” I suck in my breath and hold it.

He shrugs. “And then nothing. You wanted to go home, so I took you home. No big deal.”

My eyes narrow. Is he telling me the truth? Lucky despises automobiles, and I’m having a hard time believing she’d agree to go with him. Unless... No. Even if she thought Kieron was gorgeous, she hates human boys. Well, not *hates*, but she thinks they’re weak and pathetic and totally beneath her. She’d never be interested in one, no matter how handsome he is...

I’m only slightly mollified by his response. Perhaps she decided to play it cool to keep from being found out. But it still doesn’t explain why he’s not at all confused by my erratic behavior...

“Did I...say anything weird after I came to? Anything unusual?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno...just anything silly. I’m taking some prescription medications for insomnia and sometimes I get a little loopy and say things I don’t mean —”

“No, nothing weird. You were just...sorta quiet.”

I put my head down. “Oh, okay.”

How badly I want to believe him, but it seems too good to be true. But maybe, after all the crap I’ve been through lately, the universe decided to do me this small favor. Maybe Lucky really did behave, and maybe Kieron really doesn’t care that I ran away.

Yeah, and maybe pigs can fly and speak Chinese.

I decide not to push it. If Kieron wants to pretend everything’s fine, so will I. Having him want to be my friend is the closest thing to a miracle I’ve

had; I don't want to blow it now.

"Guess we better get going; don't wanna be late," I mumble, picking up my bag and slinging it over my shoulder.

"Wonder what school's gonna be like today," he muses, falling into step beside me. "I'm sure people are really freaked out."

"Maybe it won't even be open. You heard anything new?"

He shakes his head.

We reach the parking lot, and although it's not as chaotic as yesterday, several students, parents, and teachers are gathered in small groups, talking. I see another news van set up, where a pretty reporter is speaking into a camera.

Kieron stands beside me as we survey the scene. I look for Corinne, but don't see her anywhere. A girl named Marcy wanders by looking dazed, and Kieron reaches out and grabs her arm.

"Do you know what's going on?" he asks.

She pauses and shrugs. "They cancelled classes until Wednesday of next week, but they've set up a bunch of rooms for students to talk to grief counselors if they want to." She looks at Kieron when answering, ignoring me completely. "I guess the police will be questioning students at some point, but the parents have to be there, too, so they're getting it all organized."

"Thanks." He drops her arm and she walks away. He turns to me. "Do you want to talk to a grief counselor?"

I shake my head. "I just wanna get out of here."

"Yeah, me too...guess we're hoofing it again?"

"Sorry I made you walk all this way just to turn around and go back..."

He smiles. "Don't apologize. I can't think of a nicer way to spend the day than walking through the woods with you. If you want to go back and

pick up my truck we can go somewhere and just chill...I brought something for you...something I hope you like..."

My face brightens. "You did? Something for me?"

He nods. "Just a little something...I was looking at it and thought of you. But let's get going before we get lassoed into some group therapy session," he says as we both spot a teacher heading in our direction.

We aim back toward the woods.

I lean up against a headstone and take the small leather book from his hand. "This is for me?" After Kieron and I had made our way back to my cabin, we hopped in his truck and drove out to the cemetery. For some reason, both of us felt it was the right place to be today.

He does that cute thing with his mouth where he smiles out of one side. "Yeah, well, it's for you to borrow...if you want...for as long as you like. I just thought you might enjoy it. You mentioned you liked poetry. I made this collection earlier this year. It has all my favorites in one place."

I gently open the brown cover, turning to the first page. A table of contents lists several of my favorite poets: Robert Browning, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Emily Dickinson...

"There's a few in there that make me think of you..." he says, quietly.

My heart starts the thudding thing it does when he looks at me with his sweet eyes. I love this feeling...the one where we are the only ones alive on Earth, where no one else exists, and no one else matters. It's just the two of us, talking, laughing, *being*.

"Which ones?" I ask, tucking my hair behind my ear. I pull up my knees and rest the book on them, thumbing through the pages.

"Well...there's a couple in particular. Want me to tell you one?"

My skin tingles as I nod, handing him the book. But he shakes his head, holding up his palm. “It’s okay...I have it memorized. And I’m sure you’ve heard it before...”

“Tell me...”

He takes a deep breath and leans back on his arms and begins speaking in dulcet tones.

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.*

*One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling place.*

*And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!*

He looks toward the ground as I stare at him wordlessly, unable to believe what I’ve just heard. *Of course* I know that poem; it’s one of my favorites. But to hear Kieron speak the enchanting words of Lord Byron directed at *me*...

"Thank you, that was beautiful," I whisper, not knowing what to say. How *does* one properly express the euphoric, dream-like state I'm in?

He glances up, almost shyly. "I was hoping you wouldn't think it was totally corny. Certain parts really struck me as...well...I hope it's all right I shared that with you."

"It's more than all right, I love it."

He grins shyly. "I like how I don't feel stupid telling you things like this. If I told anyone else how much I liked poetry they'd think I was a total wuss."

I smile. "I don't think you're a wuss at all. I love poetry. It's powerful and deep. Most people just don't get it."

"But you do."

"Yeah...I get it..." My words fade away.

"Can I read you one more?" he asks. But this time he doesn't look shy or embarrassed. He looks almost afraid. "This one...well, it's more about *me*. How I feel."

"Please do," I urge.

I sense his hesitation, and he looks away, unable to meet my gaze. He's quiet for so long, I begin to fear he's changed his mind.

"I've never told this to anyone before...read the poem, I mean."

"I'd really like to hear it," I say softly.

He takes another deep breath and fixes his gaze on a headstone. "Okay...here it goes, it's called *We Wear the Mask*. Do you know it?"

I shake my head.

He pauses briefly, and then begins to speak...slowly, quietly. There is a marked change in his tone. When he recited the first poem he sounded confident, strong, and lyrical. Now he sounds sad and remorseful, almost haunted.

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,--
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.*

*Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.*

*We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!*

My breath is short as he finishes. "It's about hiding your pain and unhappiness and pretending everything is good and normal and wonderful when it's really not. Pretending to be one way, when you're really another way."

"Yeah, I got that," I whisper. Why did he say this poem was about him?

What is he hiding?

What mask is he wearing?

Chapter 14. Liora

“What do you wanna see?” Corinne asks, scanning the marquee. Her round eyes are wide with excitement, and I’m happy to see she’s back to her normal self. It’s only been four days since the gruesome discovery at school, and I’d been concerned about her, especially since we hadn’t seen each other since then.

She was so thrilled when I called her last night and reminded her about our plans. I tried to match her excitement, but the truth was, I was sad. Sad because even though it had only been a few days, I hadn’t seen Kieron since that afternoon in the cemetery.

Being with Corrine helps to take my mind off him, if only for a few hours. It felt a little strange at first, coming here with her. Although we’ve spent time at school together for the past few years and talked on the phone occasionally, this is the first time we’ve actually hung out away from school.

“It’s your birthday...you decide,” I say as I lick my chocolate ice cream cone. We’d just walked to the theater on Main Street after eating lunch at the diner down the block.

“Well, I don’t want to choose something you won’t like...I want you to have fun, too...”

“Anything you pick is fine. Promise.”

Corinne squints her eyes, pondering her choices. I glance at the list of titles and almost drop my cone when I see one titled *Demon Desires*.

Good God, please don’t pick that one, I pray silently. I’ve never seen any movie or TV show with demons that’s anything short of cringe-worthy. Viewing them is downright painful sometimes, with their cheesy, pathetic caricatures of demons and their lifestyles. Grossly misinformed.

“Okay, I want to see *Demon Desires*,” she says.

Of course you do.

“It’s supposed to be a horror, are you cool with that?”

More like a slapstick comedy you mean. “Sure, whatever you like.”

I could kick myself. Why didn’t I just say that horror movies give me nightmares? It wouldn’t even be a lie, really. This lame movie probably *will* give me nightmares...daymares, whatever.

It’s my treat, so I step up to the window to buy our tickets. I try not to choke on my words as I say, “Two for *Demon Desires*, please.” But Corrine is happy, and today is about her, not me. I just have to put my demonic issues aside for a few hours.

As it turns out, I barely make it six minutes before I start laughing at a ‘scary’ part. Corrine shushes me with an annoyed scowl, but I can’t help it; it’s just so *ridiculous*. I mean really, the music, the makeup...and *seriously*, why are Hollywood demons always so ugly, with horns and glowing yellow or red eyes? Well, I have to admit some demons have yellow eyes, and a few have red eyes, *sometimes*...but certainly not all of them. And I’ve *never* seen any with horns...well, except a few of the creatures...like the satyrs.

“How’d you like it?” Corinne asks as we exit the theater two torturous hours later. I shield my eyes from the bright sun.

“It was all right, I guess.”

“I thought it was awesome...imagine falling in love with the man of your dreams only to find out he’s a demon and he wants you to bear his evil spawn? That would totally suck, huh?”

“Totally.”

We walk toward my car. “So what do you want to do now?” I ask, unlocking the doors.

Corrine slides in the passenger side and snaps on her seatbelt. “Um, I dunno...do you want to hang out more?” She sounds almost shy, but hopeful.

“Sure, I have a few more hours if you want.”

“Wanna cruise around the mall?”

“Sounds good. I wouldn’t mind looking for some new tops,” I say, surprising myself. I’ve never been one for shopping; that’s Lucky’s department. She’s the *fashionista*. I prefer not to stand out or be noticed, hence the ‘all black all the time’.

“Oh, I just wanna walk around and look at stuff,” Corinne mumbles. “I don’t have any money to actually buy anything. But, of course, *you* can if you want...”

“It’s your birthday. We’ll find you something cute...my treat.”

“Liora, no. You don’t have to...I didn’t mean for you...”

“I insist. No arguing.” I pull out of the movie theater parking lot and head toward the Riverdale Shopping Center fifteen miles away. I don’t know where my sudden urge to bond with Corrine is coming from, but making her happy is making me happy. So I’m going with it.

“Liora, can I ask you something...something kinda personal? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” Corinne asks as I merge onto the highway.

The tone in her voice puts me instantly on guard, and I grip the wheel tight. *Please don’t push it, Corrine...* “Sure, what’s up?”

“Umm, I was just wondering...have you ever, you know...*done it* with a boy?”

I exhale and press my lips together to keep from laughing. That’s just about the *last* thing I expected her to say right then. “No, I haven’t...Have you?”

She looks down at her lap and fidgets with her seatbelt. “No, but I want to. I want to be in love. I want love like those people in the movie had... crazy love.”

Good grief. “Well, not to sound like your mother or anything, but you know that sex and love aren’t the same thing. And insane love isn’t necessarily good love, either...”

“I don’t know whose mom you think you’re channeling, but it’s *definitely* not mine,” she says with a grimace. Well, at least she has a sense of humor about her wanton mother.

“I just mean,” she continues, “just imagine being so super crazy in love with someone that nothing can tear you apart, no matter what...no matter how awful or scary or horrible or anything. I want someone to love me like that...and then that’s where the sex would happen. Obviously.”

Obviously. “Yeah, I mean, it would be cool to be in love and all, and have someone be super in love with me...but not like *those* people...in the movie I mean. That was just *creepy* and all kinds of wrong.” My eyes stay focused on the road ahead. I rarely drive on the highway, so I’m more concerned with the cars flying past than I am with Corrine’s deluded sex life.

“I guess...”

I glance over my shoulder as I change lanes, and catch the disappointed look on her face. “Her feelings for the demon weren’t real... she thought she loved him, but did she really? He possessed her to feel that way about him. And he killed her family and friends when they discovered the truth about him. I don’t think that’s someone I would want to love...”

“Yeah, I know...I wasn’t talking about that part necessarily, just...when they were together...how much he loved her...so much so that it made him do all these crazy things...”

“Have you ever had a boyfriend?” I ask, trying to steer her away from the crazy movie she apparently now thinks represents some sort of romantic *ideal*.

She blushes and pushes up her glasses. “No, not really.”

“Well, you will one day. And when you do, I hope you want someone who treats you better than that dumb guy in the movie.”

“Sorry,” she mumbles, looking out the passenger window.

I’m confused. “Sorry for what?”

“Sorry I made you watch that stupid movie.”

Oh, *great*. Now I’m coming off like a righteous bitch...taking that movie waay too seriously. It’s not her fault it offended me personally on so many levels. She thinks we’re just having a girly-bonding chat over a make-believe fantasy story, and I go and get all sanctimonious on her. No wonder I don’t have any friends.

“Oh, come on, I liked it,” I lie. “I just don’t think that I would exactly want to model my love life after it is all...I mean demons...eww.”

“He was pretty sexy when he was pretending to be a human, though,” Corinne giggles. “I’d almost be willing to overlook the whole demony-thing to have a guy that good-looking be interested in me.”

I send her a sideways glance and wink. “Be careful what you wish for... you never know what might come creeping in your room late at night...”

She laughs. “I know, I know, you’re right. That movie *was* pretty lame, I guess...I mean, who ever heard of a demon that looked like some sort of male underwear model? *Puhleeze*.”

I have to smile. That was the only part the stupid movie actually got *right*. As a rule, demons, male and female, are *far* more beautiful than normal humans. And humans are so weakened by beauty, they’re practically powerless against it; it’s in their DNA. So physical perfection is in ours.

That's just how things work. When *She* takes over, even *I* become more attractive than I normally am. I know, because I've peeked in her world once or twice and have seen the way the guys look at her...with such lust and desire. Especially her friend, Bones. No one *ever* looks at me the way they look at Lucky.

"Totally ridiculous," I laugh.

We take a break from window shopping and head to the food court. I order corndogs and a strawberry lemonade, and then pay for Corrine's Chinese food, even though she keeps insisting I've done too much already. I'd bought her a charm necklace earlier and got such a kick from her squeals of delight. After all, what good is the money I have from Lucky's extortions if it doesn't make someone less fortunate happy?

We sit off to the side of the food court, by the planters. The mall is crowded today, and I see a few faces I recognize.

"So, have you heard anything new about what happened at school?" Neither Corrine nor I have mentioned the tragedy earlier this week, but it's still on my mind. Tatiana is good for a lot of information, but human stuff... not so much. "I wonder if the police have any leads," I add, nibbling the breading of my corndog.

Corrine grimaces and fiddles with her chopsticks. After dropping her noodles several times, she gives up, picks up her fork, and begins twirling. "I saw Jake Wheeler at the Suds-n-Spin yesterday. His uncle works for the Pine Canyon police department. Apparently they think the murders in Pine Canyon last week and what happened at school are related."

"So it's like a serial killer thing?"

She pokes at her sweet-n-sour chicken. "Guess so. But he says they think it's more than just one person. And I guess they found some weird

stuff that makes them think it's not normal killings."

I chuckle at her choice of words. '*Normal killings*'.

"Like what?"

"He couldn't say much for details, just they suspect that it's a few people at least, and that they're into witchcraft or devil worship or something."

My heart skips a beat. I slowly eat several French fries and drink some lemonade before speaking again. "What makes them think that?" I hope my voice sounds casual.

She shrugs. "Dunno, he didn't really say. Just something they saw. Weird markings, maybe? I don't really believe in that stuff. Probably just a couple of sick psychopaths...like that movie *Kalifornia* with Brad Pitt...you ever see it?"

I shake my head, and squirt some mustard on my corndog.

"It's really weird. Brad Pitt plays a serial killer, and—"

"Corrine, focus."

She takes a sip of her coke. "I don't know what to say...that's all Jake told me."

"Do they know who the girl is yet?"

She shrugs again and stands up, gathering her trash. "He didn't say anything about that. Look, I'm sorry, but I really don't wanna talk about this anymore...it freaks me out too much."

I nod, following her lead. We toss our stuff away and head back to the main mall. A few stores down, we pause to look at some pretty gowns in the window. Corrine grabs my arm. "Oooh, let's go in there and try some on...just for fun."

Ugh. I can't think of anything less fun than *that*. But it's still her day, so I follow her inside.

We enter the fancy boutique, ignoring the looks of disdain from the salesclerk who sizes us up and dismisses us, realizing there's no commission to be made here. I laugh to myself thinking how differently she'd treat us if she only knew that less than one week ago, I had more money in my hand than she'll make in five years. She greets us with an icy smile, then moves away to watch us from a distance, making sure we don't do anything to harm one of her precious dresses.

"Ohhh, this one is so pretty," Corrine says with a longing sigh. She's holding up a long, pink frilly concoction that looks horrible with her dishwater hair and ruddy skin tone.

"Try it on," I say. If it makes her happy, why not?

"Are you going to try on anything?" she asks.

"Mmm...dunno. Maybe, if I see something I really like," I say, though I have zero intention of playing dress up. I just want Corrine to have some fun.

I wander through the racks of beads and satin, fingering several gowns. For a brief flash I imagine myself wearing one at a formal dance with Kieron. *This one...*the silver and rhinestone silky one. I hold the delicate fabric up to my body for a moment before returning it to the rack. Like that would ever happen. *Ever.* Unless, of course, schools start holding dances at noon. Why bother even fantasizing?

"So, what do you think?" Corrine asks hopefully as she emerges in the hideous pink dress. Its tight fit hugs her ample figure unforgivingly, but she spins around like a supermodel.

I smile at her. "You totally rock it."

She sighs, looking at the price tag. "I mean, I know I can never buy something like this, and where would I even wear it? It's not like I'll ever

have a date to the dance. No one's *ever* asked me to a dance," she mumbles, the corners of her mouth turning down.

My heart goes out to her. Funny how I've never thought of Corrine and me being in the same boat before.

"School dances are totally lame anyways," I say, trying to cheer her up. "I'm never going to one, either."

Corrine admires herself in the three-way mirror, and I catch the salesgirl eyeing us disapprovingly. "Yeah, but that's your own choice. I'm sure guys would ask you if you'd put your guard down, ever. And what about Kieron? I've seen how he looks at you. I bet he'll ask you if you're nice to him."

Just hearing his name makes my chest feel fuller. Corrine returns to the dressing room to change and I follow, leaning by the door. "I don't think he'll ask me. But even if he does, I can't go."

"Why not?"

"Because you know I can't leave my grandma—"

"No, I mean why don't you think he'll ask you? I haven't really noticed him even talking to anyone but you. Whenever you guys are by each other, you just look so, I dunno...*right* together. Like you match or something. It seems logical he'd ask you." She doesn't sound even the tiniest bit jealous or bothered by her observation. Considering how gaga she was over him, this seems like a pretty quick recovery.

"Kieron and I are just friends," I say.

She chuckles from the other side of the door. "Sure. He was reading you poetry and took you on a romantic fishing trip? *Trust me*, he's interested in being more than just friends."

Earlier when Corrine had asked what I'd done with my time off from school, I'd given her the cliff-notes version of my time with Kieron. But I

didn't tell her that he'd only pretended to need my help with his homework. I still wanted her to think that's why we were hanging out.

"It doesn't bother you that he might like me?"

"No, of course not. I mean, if you do hook up, of course I'd be totally jealous 'cause he's so gorgeous and all. But I know I'm not in his league... it's not like I'd ever stand a chance."

She emerges from the tiny dressing room in her sweats, the gown in her arms. The saleslady instantly swoops in and takes it from her. Corrine rolls her eyes. "Let's go."

I notice the time. "Sorry, Corrine, but I have to get headed back..."

She nods. "I understand. Totally. Thanks for today—" She stops and grabs my arm. "Wow, speak of the devil."

I look at her surprised face and follow her line of vision. My heart sinks into my stomach. Sitting by the elevators eating frozen yogurt and laughing is Kieron...and Drusilla.

My insides feel like ice as I watch them. I'm so stupid. So very stupid. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

"Forget them," Corrine says, pulling my arm. "Come on, let's just go. You don't want to be late."

Suddenly I want to get out of there as fast as I can...before Kieron or Drusilla happen to glance up and see me. What are they doing here together? Is he reading her some poetry, too? Is that his *thing*?

Sickened, I spin on my heel and rush the other way, Corrine right beside me.

Chapter 15. Lucky

Sighing, I signal Gyan to bring me another drink.

“Bones, you’re being ridiculous.” I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

“Am I? Some demion shows up and the next thing I know you’re telling me we can’t hang out anymore because your feelings are all confused. Why *shouldn’t* I kill him? He’s a nobody...a nuisance...and he’s got you all messed up in the head.”

I roll my eyes and take several long swallows. The way Bones is acting, I know I’m in for a long night. At least he’s speaking to me again, although listening to him plot Kieron’s demise isn’t much of an improvement.

“Trust me, it’s not his fault, it’s *hers*. Like I told you before. You wanna kill someone, kill Liora. Be my guest.” I swish my hand like I’m swatting away a fly, and spin my chair around to check out the rest of the room. Same as always. And no Kieron in sight.

Where is he, anyway? I haven’t seen him in a few nights...

“You know I can’t do that,” Bones says and chugs his whiskey.

I press my lips together and start tapping my feet to the loud music. I’m glad Bones stopped me at the Bridge tonight so we could come to the Bar together. But his attitude is testing my patience. *I* don’t even know what I’m feeling. How am I supposed to explain it to *him*?

“Is it because he’s part human and I’m not...is that why you like being around him so much?” he asks a few minutes later.

I sigh again, and twist a long lock of hair around my finger. If only Bones could understand. But he’ll come around eventually...he has to. I’m sure it’s just his precious ego being hurt that’s pissing him off. He’s not accustomed to having any competition for my affections; he’s used to having anyone he wants throw themselves at his feet.

“Partly...I think. But that doesn’t change the fact that I still need you... he’s not replacing you. You’re my very best friend, and I don’t know what I’d do if that ever stopped. I just want to be friends with him, too.”

His eyes meet mine. Despite my growing feelings for Kieron, Bones can still melt my insides when he wants to. “Yeah well, just remember, I’ve been around longer and I’m not leaving. No outsider’s gonna change that.” He sets down his drink and wraps his strong arms around me.

I get the familiar flutters I always feel when Bones holds me close. This time, though, it’s my relief that things are okay between us again. I hug him tight, giving him a kiss on his warm cheek.

“Thanks,” I whisper. “You don’t know how much it means to me to hear you say that.”

Bones pulls away and looks me up and down. “But I’m telling you now...if he steps outta line...if he does anything, even *one thing* to hurt you,” he holds up his finger before gliding it across his neck, “then all bets are off. I’m gonna let the whole pack loose on his pretty-boy punk-ass and scatter his limbs to the furthest corners of the territory. I don’t care who he thinks he is, *nobody* messes with my girl.”

I roll my eyes again. Bones can be so dramatic sometimes. But the sentiment is sweet. “Everything will be fine...”

Bones’ magnanimous mood ends abruptly as Kieron enters the Bar. He stiffens and clenches his jaw. I focus on remaining stoic, cool. Now is *not* the time for me to make it obvious how happy I am to see Kieron again. It has only been a few nights, but I’d been growing increasingly concerned...

As Kieron casually makes his way toward us, I hear Bones growling softly under his breath. “Play nice,” I whisper. He turns back to his drink.

I’d made the effort to look especially hot for Kieron tonight, hoping I’d see him. Even though I’m planning on tormenting later this evening, no

long dresses here. The low-cut, teal-colored cat suit hugs my curves perfectly, and leaves little to the imagination. Although Liora certainly doesn't have even the slightest clue how to be sexy, I don't want there to be any doubt in his mind which of us is more desirable. *I'm* the one who'll rock his world and blow his mind. *Not* her.

"Good evening, Lucky, Bones," Kieron says, taking the seat beside mine. Bones just grunts, but Kieron is unfazed by the rude greeting. "Bones, I heard there was another incident along the western border...do you know anything about it?"

Bones takes several long, deliberate gulps of his drink before acknowledging Kieron's presence.

"Do I *look* like I'm on patrol right now? Why don't you bug someone who *doesn't* have the night off," he says.

"Bones..." I place my hand on his arm.

"No, its fine, Lucky. I just thought he may have heard something. If he doesn't know anything..."

Bones jumps out of his seat so quickly he nearly makes me spill my drink. "Why don't we go outside and I can explain to you exactly what I *do* and *do not* know," he growls, eyes blazing.

Kieron's face remains passive as his eyes lock with Bones'. He slowly rises to his feet, but I push him back down.

"No. Stop it. *You, sit,*" I say to Kieron. Then I grab Bones' sweater and yank him to the back corner.

"What the hell, Bones? Not two seconds ago you said you were gonna be cool with this."

"I just don't like the guy, Luck. What can I say...he just rubs me the wrong way. I mean, you heard him...practically called me a clueless idiot

back there just because I didn't want to tell him what happened last night." Bones scowls, his eyes still flashing with anger.

I sigh. "You're being overly-sensitive. He's just making small talk. Settle down."

He rolls his eyes and lets out an exasperated moan. "I only promised you I wouldn't kill the guy...for now. I never said I wanted to be buddy-buddy with him."

"You don't have to be buddy-buddy...just don't be a total dick."

He smirks. "Can't promise that, love. There are some things in this world that are just out of my control. You enjoy your evening. I'll see you around."

"Bones..."

He turns to leave, but stops when he sees the stunning red-head hurrying toward us. "Lucky, Bones, good you're here." Her normally jovial face is clouded with concern.

"Hey, Catalina. What's wrong? You seem upset," I say.

"I need to talk to you guys...it's important. Have a minute?"

"Of course," Bones says, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "Here, let's get you a drink, and you can tell us what's got you so worked up. Come on." He steers her over to the bar, several seats away from where Kieron sits alone. I signal for Gyan to bring Catalina her drinks.

She eases onto a barstool, giving us a pensive glance. "I'm sorry to bother you, and I'm sure I'm just making a big deal out of nothing..."

"What is it?"

She pauses to take several long swigs from the glass Gyan sets down. Bones and I exchange silent looks, both noticing the worry in her eyes.

"I was just wondering...have you guys seen or heard from Ivy or Cody recently?" she finally asks.

“No, not for several nights.” I’ve been so wrapped up in my own drama, I’m not sure *when* I last saw either one of them. “I just figured they were taking some time off or something...” I glance at Bones and he shakes his head.

“That’s just it...everyone just assumed they were off doing their thing. But I stopped by their house today to get back some shoes Ivy borrowed and...” Catalina hesitates, then gulps the rest of her drink.

“And *what*?” Bones and I ask in unison.

“And, well, their house looked...*weird*...the way they left it. It was all done up as if they were going to have a romantic time...bed turned down, flowers everywhere, champagne bottles in buckets of water, the stereo was even playing soft music. But it was obvious no one had been there in a while. It seems really odd they would have left it like that...”

“What are you saying? You think something happened to them?” I ask, my heart starting to pound.

She nods, fear in her eyes. “Yes, but no one seems to care. Everyone thinks they’re fine, and why wouldn’t they be? Ivy’s more than strong enough to take care of both of them. But something’s not right here. It’s not like her to just take off for this long and not say anything to me. She didn’t even get a replacement for her post here at the Bar. She just didn’t show up...same with Cody.

“That *is* weird,” I admit.

Bones nods in agreement, his brow furrowed. “What should we do?”

“That’s just it; I don’t know what to do. The few demons I’ve mentioned this to say I’m overreacting and not to start trouble where there isn’t any. But I’m *not*...I’m just worried, and I hoped maybe you guys could help...”

“There’s been some fighting along two of the borders lately, and I know there have been several incidents of humans being murdered in the local

towns. But I don't see how any of that would involve Ivy or Cody," Bones says.

Catalina sighs, and nervously tugs at her crimson waves. "So you think I'm overreacting, too? I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse." Her pouty lips turn down in a frown.

"I don't think you're wrong to be worried," I say, "But what're we supposed to do? If they're in the territory and had trouble or something, Bones and the other boys would know. And if they're out of the area, well, how would we find them? They could be anywhere..." I stop mid-sentence as I realize the answer to my question is sitting at the bar.

Kieron.

He sees me looking at him, and I wave him over. Bones growls softly behind me. "Stop it. He can help us," I mutter.

Kieron comes to stand behind me, and I fill him in on what Catalina had said. He immediately looks concerned. "Any ideas *why* they might be in some sort of trouble? Did they have any problems with other demons that you know about?"

Catalina and I shake our heads, and Bones glares at him silently.

"No...none that I ever heard of. Everybody likes Ivy, and Cody's as nice as they come...."

"Hmm. Any first-searchers been sent out?"

Catalina shakes her head again. "No, like I told them," she says motioning to Bones and me, "no one's worried about them at all."

Kieron's gaze falls on me. "But you're worried?" he asks.

I lean back against the bar and nod. "If Catalina feels something's amiss, I believe her."

Kieron presses his lips together for a moment. "Okay. I'll go see what I can find. If I can stop by their house first to pick up the trail, this'll go a lot

faster.” He absently runs his hands through his hair. Bones looks like he wants to eat his face off.

Catalina’s face brightens. “You mean it? You think you can help?”

“He’s a *Latros*,” I say proudly. Bones narrows his eyes and growls again.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” Catalina gushes. “I’ll feel so much better once I know everything is fine and I’m just being a hysterical drama queen.” She jumps up and gives Kieron a big hug. I know she’s just grateful for his help, but seeing her lithe body pressed up against his grates on my nerves.

“I’m going too,” I say, leaning closer to him.

“So am I,” Bones says.

Well, this oughta be interesting.

The three of us race through the night; me on Diablo, Kieron on his Ducati, and Bones as a hellhound. Following their senses, Kieron and Bones have both led us in the same direction so far. But I fear their macho desire to outdo one another will spell trouble for our little tracking party if either of them crosses the line.

“Bones, knock it off!” I yell as he cuts Kieron off for the third time. Kieron swiftly dodges Bones’ sideswipe, and soon retaliates with a near-miss of his own. I groan inwardly and roll my eyes. *Boys...*

Without warning, Bones screeches to a halt. Kieron skids his bike around once he realizes his racing partner is no longer beside him.

I ease Diablo to a prancing trot. “What is it?” I ask. Kieron pulls up beside me and looks around suspiciously.

Bones points his nose in the air and moves it in several small circles. Then his body shivers and shakes. Kieron averts his eyes from Bones’ nude

form.

"It stops here," he says. Then he looks at Kieron. "Why'd you keep going? Did you sense something I didn't?"

Kieron nods, still looking away. "I've been following something else for several miles. An energy mixed almost indistinguishably with Ivy and Cody's."

"Wait, someone care to fill me in...where are Cody and Ivy? *What* other energy?" I ask, surveying the surrounding area. It's dark, but Illyria's moons provide enough light, and my pupils are at maximum dilation. I can see perfectly. Problem is, there's nothing to see.

"Their scent was solid up to the meadow. It was especially strong by the river. But it trailed away from there and gradually faded..." Bones says.

"Something else was with them," Kieron adds. "An energy that started by the river. I think we need to follow it and see where it takes us—"

"What *kind* of energy?" I interrupt him. "We're looking for Ivy and Cody, not some mystical spark plug."

Kieron has a strange look on his face. "I think they're connected. Follow me," he says and revs his engine. He speeds off, Bones quickly transforms and chases after him, and I take up the rear. The three of us fly over the miles of open countryside.

When we reach the border of Dryndara, we stop. Any further and we'll be trespassing. Although these neighbors, the Hlbafa, aren't as hostile as some of the others, we're forbidden to cross over without permission. Otherwise we're fair game for attack.

"What now?" I ask.

Kieron shakes his head and shuts off the engine. As he props the motorcycle on the kickstand, I dismount and walk over to him.

Bones sniffs the air again, then resumes his human shape. “I don’t smell anything. Are you sure...”

“I don’t think they came here of their own free will,” Kieron says under his breath. My heart starts racing. With Bones and Kieron at my side, I know we’re a force to be reckoned with. But not knowing what forces we face makes me uneasy.

Kieron closes his eyes, tilts his head to the sky, and slowly turns in a circle. Bones and I exchange confused glances. I shrug.

A moment later, Kieron opens his eyes. “There,” he says, pointing to a patch of trees in the distance.

“What’s there?” Bones and I ask in unison.

Kieron seems to be in a trance. He grasps my hand, and the vacant look in his eyes unnerves me; it’s as if he’s a million miles away. I sense Bones’ irritation as he moves to stand beside me. But Kieron ignores him, speaking to me in hushed tones.

“Cody and Ivy are in trouble, and I’m not sure if the danger has totally passed. I’ve located their positions and will go check on them. For right now, I think it’s better if you stay here. Please wait for my signal that all is clear.”

Despite my growing dread I give a low chuckle. “Think again. Those are my friends in there. If you think I’m staying here like some kind of...”

“We’re *all* going,” Bones says, and wraps his hand possessively around my arm. “Lucky is one of the best fighters around. She doesn’t need you treating her like a Sapie child.”

“It’s on the other side of the border, behind that grove. Crossing it has its own risks, but that’s not what worries me. What this is...what I think has happened...This is different than anything you’ve ever been prepared to face.” Kieron’s face has an eerie, haunted look to it.

I jerk my arm out of Bones' grasp, and my hand from Kieron's. "You two work it out. I'm going in." I run across the border before either of them can stop me.

They dash after me as I leap over a fallen tree and make my way to a small, hidden clearing. The stench is overwhelming, and I scrunch my nose in disgust. I stop and glance around, my eyes suddenly freezing on a gruesome sight. Jumping back in horror, I let out a blood-curdling scream.

Instantly, Kieron's hand is over my mouth, muffling the cry. Bones makes a pained, whimpering sound, and I feel like I've just been whacked in the gut with an ax. I squeeze my eyes shut, unable to bear the sight of what is left of Cody's bloodied, mangled corpse.

"No, no," I moan, pressing my face into Kieron's chest. "Who would do this? Why?"

"Shhhhh..." he whispers in my ear. "They may still be here." He wraps his arms around me. Instantly, rage overtakes me, and I push him away, sending him staggering back against a tree.

"Tell me where so I can rip their heads off!" I yell, my eyes blazing with fury.

Kieron rushes to me and slaps his hand over my mouth again, urgently signaling for me to be quiet. Only the terrifying intensity in his eyes forces me to remain still.

Bones slowly pads over to the lifeless body and nuzzles it with his nose. His droopy eyes display an unspeakable grief demons rarely show. Bones and Cody had been close friends for over twenty years, and I know Bones is allowing himself to feel pain out of respect for his lost comrade. But he'll soon shut off the feelings that are causing him such unbearable suffering.

Lucky bastard.

I fluctuate between choking back sobs and screaming at the top of my lungs. I want to hit something. I want to destroy everything in my sight. I want to find whoever did this and rip them to pieces. But something in my gut is telling me to obey Kieron's cautions. I grit my teeth and look at him, but his attention is elsewhere.

The hairs on my arms stand up at the sound. "Did you hear that?" I gasp, and quickly disentangle from his embrace.

"No, Lucky...wait."

I don't have to go far; she's only a couple hundred yards away. I almost don't see her, as her body is mostly covered by a fallen tree.

Frantically, I throw off the wooden branches. But uncovering Ivy's body reveals a sight even worse than death. I'd thought Cody looked horrific...

I'm momentarily frozen...stunned by what I see. Her blonde hair is stained bright red from the wounds. Her face, so swollen it's unrecognizable, is various shades of green and yellow. But that isn't the worst of it. Her eyes have been carved out of their sockets, and tears of blood run down her cheeks.

But she's still alive...*barely*.

She lets out a moan so soft I can hardly hear it, but it's enough to spring me into action again.

"Shhhhh," I whisper, cradling her head in my lap. "I have you, sweetie. Everything's going to be okay. You're fine..." I look up at Kieron, who's scanning the area for hidden dangers.

"Is anyone out there," I whisper. My breath stops until he finally shakes his head.

"No, they're gone...for now" he says, coming to kneel beside us. When he sees the extent of Ivy's injuries, his face contorts in stunned disbelief.

"We have to help her." I speak quietly, under my breath.

“No. We have to get out of here, *now*.” His command is as urgent as it is panicked.

“I’ll carry her.” I lift her broken body.

“No, you *cannot*. They will trace you. Put her down,” he orders.

“I’m not leaving her here to die,” I hiss.

“She has been marked by them. She is already dead.” His eyes are as hard as steel.

“By *who*? Kieron, we *have* to get her out of here!”

“If you do that, you’ll soon be dead, too. And so will everyone you care about if you take her back to Dryndara.” His face is marked with anger and fear.

I can’t believe what he’s suggesting. It’s like he doesn’t even care that my friend is badly hurt and I have to save her.

When I don’t move, Kieron pries my hands away from Ivy’s body, forcing me to set her back down. “Don’t touch her anymore. Their energy is still all over her. Their toxin is poisoning her, and she’ll be dead shortly. It’s amazing she’s lasted this long.” He looks deep into my eyes. “You *cannot* save her.”

“Kieron, I have to. She’s my friend...” I push him away, and try regaining my grip on her. But he clamps his hands around my wrists and shakes them loose.

“You take her anywhere, dead or alive, and they will find her. And you. All of us. And it will be bad. Very bad. Worse than the worst thing you can imagine. We are not safe, and we need to get out of here *now*!”

“No! You may be afraid of them, but I’m not! What demons did this? I will find them and kill them. You can run away—”

“A demon didn’t do this, Lucky,” Kieron says, his voice low and heavy. He glances around nervously and leans closer.

“Of course a demon did this...look at her. Look at Cody! No human could possibly even remotely...”

“It wasn’t a human. It wasn’t a demon.”

“Then what was it? Tell me, or I’m taking her out of here right now...”

He tightens his grip around my wrists so I can’t move. I had no idea he was so strong. But it’s the terror in his eyes that’s got my attention.

“Lucky, it wasn’t demons who did this...it was *Light-angels*.”

Wordlessly, I stare into his blue eyes, my mouth no longer able to function properly. The crunching of twigs behind us causes me to jump, and Kieron looks over his shoulder.

“Is she alive?” Bones asks in a dull voice, grief clouding his masculine features.

I slump down, my gaze slowly moving from Bones over to Kieron, down to Ivy’s motionless body, and back to Kieron again—a silent, desperate plea in his eyes.

Almost imperceptibly, I shake my head *no*.

“Probably for the best. Don’t imagine one would want to live without the other,” Bones says. Now he sounds cold and detached. He holds up a small black band. “Found this in what was left of Cody’s hand. I’m guessing they either just had their blood-binding ceremony or were about to when they were...attacked.”

I glance down at Ivy and gasp. I hadn’t even noticed she was wearing the sacred gown of the blood-binding ritual. She and Cody had finally made it official, or were about to.

I close my eyes, my insides thoroughly shredded as I release my grip on her and stand up.

“Whatever demons did this are in for a world of hurt. Let’s go,” Bones says, before falling onto four paws and sprinting off toward Dryndara.

I can’t believe I’m leaving Ivy here to die alone. But I know Kieron’s right. I know we have no choice. My legs wobble as I gaze upon her battered body one last time. Kieron wraps his arms around me and holds me steady.

“We can’t leave her here to suffer like this,” I whisper. “I just can’t...”

He nods grimly. “We need to be fast.”

I feel like I’m dying a million deaths as I release the explosion of electric fire from my hands, and instantly reduce Ivy’s body to ash.

“I will kill you for this! Do you hear me? I will find you and I will *kill* you!” I scream at the top of my lungs, not caring who or what hears me.

Kieron gives me a haunted look, and grabs my hand. We take off running.

Chapter 16. Liora

I know something's wrong the moment I open my eyes; there's a disturbance deep within my soul. Something's happened with Lucky. But I don't want to know what it is. I don't want to think about anything right now. I just want to lie here in my bed and bask in the soft sunlight streaming in through my bedroom window. School's out until tomorrow, so I'm going to savor this one last day of peace and quiet before having to face Kieron and my humiliation.

To anyone else, I'm sure it would seem like I'm overreacting. So what if Kieron was at the mall with Drusilla. So what if they were sitting by each other, laughing, obviously enjoying each other's company. *So what?* It's not like he and I were anything special, or ever could be. And we've only known each other for what, a week?

Somehow, it feels longer. Much longer. And even though it was obviously all in my head, it'd felt like our connection was deeper than just friends. For the first time in years, I actually wanted to let down some of the walls I'd built to protect my secret. I wanted him to see me. Moreover, I wanted to see him. Really *know* him.

But it's definitely better this way. He needs to be with a girl like Drusilla, and I need to be alone. It's the only way. It's too dangerous allowing myself to fall for someone, when, inevitably, both of us will be hurt—and in his case, destroyed.

How selfish of me to even entertain the notion of a having a relationship... how cruel...

How pathetic.

There is a light tapping on the door. "No school today, remember? I get to be lazy all morning," I call out. Tatiana ignores my words and enters.

“Rise and shine. It’s a glorious day outside,” she sings, carrying in a large glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice.

I sit up, smiling at my guardian. Oh, how I love Tatiana. She’s always been here for me, through good times and bad. She’s the one whose shoulder I can always cry on. The one whose ear is always available to listen to my problems. The one who reminds me who I am, even when I feel my most worthless. No one else could’ve handled me and Lucky the way she has, with effortless grace, eternal patience, and limitless understanding.

Impulsively, I hug her and plant a kiss on her cheek. She responds with a crackly laugh. “What’s all this?”

“Just felt like giving you a hug is all. I don’t give you enough of them and that’s going to change.”

“Well, you won’t be hearing me complain about that,” she says, her white eyes crinkling in amusement. “What’s brought this on? Not that I mind, of course.”

I lie back down, propping myself up on the pillows and sipping some of the juice. “Dunno. I just feel like, life is too short. Gotta tell the ones you love how you feel before it’s too late.”

The words come out of my mouth without me even thinking about them. I scrunch my eyebrows together, trying to think what would be making me feel this way. Perhaps I’m still affected by what happened at school? Yes, that must be it. I am normally not the sentimental type.

“Well, I appreciate the gesture. Now hurry up and finish your juice. You don’t want to keep your visitor waiting.”

“Ack! What? What visitor?”

She brings her hand to her mouth. “Sorry, dear, I got distracted with your lovely hug. Yes, there’s a gentleman caller waiting for you outside. I

told him you would be getting up soon, and he said he'd wait. But you mustn't keep him waiting too long."

I'm already halfway to the bathroom. Quickly, I splash some water on my face and brush my teeth. My eyes are bloodshot and a bit swollen. Was Lucky crying last night?

I run a brush through my hair, briefly touching that place on my neck where it burns a good twenty degrees hotter than the rest of my body. The crimson star, permanently branded on me at birth, is a constant reminder of a world I'd like to forget. It's always there, haunting me.

I throw on some jeans and a sweater. Even though the sun is making a rare appearance today, it's still cold outside. My hands shake as I fumble with the laces on my boots.

Why is Kieron here?

It has to be him; no other guy has ever come to my house before. I don't even think anyone else knows exactly where I live.

I race to the front door, only slowing down at the last moment so as not to appear too eager. I take a deep breath. He's there, leaning against the truck, his beautiful face bathed in the glow of the soft morning light.

"Liora, hi. Hope you don't mind me stopping by," he says, ambling toward me.

"Of course not, its fine. How are you?" My heart speeds up the way it always does when he comes close...actually, when he's anywhere in the vicinity.

"I'm good. I would've called, but I don't have your cell number. And your home phone isn't listed anywhere."

He checked? "Um, yeah, we don't have one."

He tilts his face to the sky. His skin looks so smooth it's like one of those air-brushed models in a magazine. "I was wondering what you were

doing today...if you had any plans.”

I shake my head. “No, nothing special planned. Just gonna hang out, maybe do some homework later...”

“Wanna go fishing again?” His eyes light up. “You don’t have to actually fish if you don’t want...just keep me company. This time I promise there’s plenty of gas in the tank, and we’ll leave way before dark.”

I scrunch my nose, remembering. “Sure. Sounds great...let me just go tell Tatiana...”

Just over an hour later, we unload the gear from Kieron’s truck and head toward the river. Birds are out in full force, singing and enjoying the sunny day. The grass sparkles with dew, looking like a blanket of crushed emeralds. We set up camp by the water, just like last time.

Nearby are wide stretches of velvety moss, and as Kieron baits his line, I give into temptation and take off my boots. The soft coolness beneath my feet brings back a memory—one of me as a child, playing outside on a warm summer’s day with Kayla and Michael. The thought of them brings a small smile to my face. As I wander closer to the cliff’s peak, I glance over my shoulder to see Kieron watching me. He also has a smile of contentment on his face.

I inhale deeply and let the fresh mountain air flow through me. *In with the good, out with the bad...* I tell myself silently as I take several, long deep breaths. For several minutes I stare out over the valley, at peace with myself and the world below. Funny how being up here makes all my problems seem so small and far away.

I turn and see Kieron still watching me. He has his pole in one hand, but his focus is squarely on me. He’s not smiling now; he’s just looking. The several yards between us could have been mere inches. I see strength in his

eyes...and safety. Like I belong there. Slowly, his soft mouth curves into a half-smile. He reaches out his hand and beckons me to him.

There is nothing holding me back. Nothing is telling me to stop. Every fiber of my being, every ounce of my soul, is telling me to go to him.

As I sit down, he shifts over slightly so that our bodies touch. My heart is racing, yet I'm strangely calm. With the tips of his fingers he gently guides my chin toward his as he slowly brings his face down, closer. His eyelashes tickle my cheek as he presses his soft lips against mine.

A few minutes later, we both reluctantly sit back. He smiles, and chuckles to himself. Dizzy with happiness, I stand up on wobbly legs and take a few steps down to the water's edge. I need a moment to process this new version of myself. *I'm* the girl who's just been kissed and held by the most amazingly sexy, beautiful, and caring man on the face of the earth. I'm *that* girl. That just happened to *me*, Liora Greyson.

I meet Kieron's gaze, and in that split second, our connection is sealed. Everything is changed. We're no longer the same two people who sat side by side in the truck driving up here. Now we're something else entirely... something new, beautiful, and miraculous.

He lounges back on the blanket and fiddles with his pole before casting his line into the water. "How are you feeling?" he asks. I love the way his mouth moves when he talks...the way his lips form their shape around the different words. And especially, the way they feel when they're on mine...

"I feel good. A bit warm maybe. Didn't realize the sun was actually going to work today," I say and laugh. "But I feel good. *Very* good. How about you?"

His gaze lingers on me. "I feel good, too. I feel *too* good." His voice is strained, his eyes look almost...*sad*.

I sit back down beside him. His hand reaches for mine, but his words have made me wary. And the haunted expression on his face. Something is bothering him.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, softly.

His eyes search mine for the longest time before he answers. “Nothing. Everything will be fine...it *is* fine.” He smiles again, and any traces of his earlier concern disappear.

I don’t press it. Even though I’m dying to know what he’s thinking, I don’t want to ruin our nice moment. Maybe it’s because of what I saw at the mall...maybe he has something going on with Drusilla, too.

I don’t want to know...but I *have* to know.

I gather up the courage to find out. “Kieron, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. ‘Sup?” He flashes me a quick grin, unhooks a squirming trout and places it beside him.

“I thought maybe I saw you at the mall. But I’m not sure...”

He lets out a small chuckle. “You saw me talkin’ to Dru, huh?”

Hearing him call her by her nickname is like fingernails scratching a chalkboard. “Yeah, well, it’s no big deal...you can talk to whoever you want,” I mumble, turning my eyes away from him.

“Yes, but I don’t want to talk to *her*. I want to talk to *you*.”

My eyes creep up his cheeks to meet his gaze once more. “Oh. Well, why were you then? Didn’t look like you had a gun to your head.”

He laughs. “Well, that’s true. It wasn’t as if I was running down a mountain onto some crazy man’s property with *her*,” he says and winks.

“Touché.”

“Actually, I was trying to do you a favor.” He casts his line and looks at me from the corner of his eye. “I saw you in the dress store with Corrine.

Drusilla was on her way in with her friend and I didn't want her to ruin your fun, so I distracted her for a while."

Even my toes are smiling right now. Meeting his gaze, I lean toward him again. He lays down his pole and wraps both of his arms around me tightly.

Being here, kissing Kieron and having him kiss me back is sheer ecstasy. It is unlike anything I have ever experienced. In this moment, held securely in his arms, I feel a deeper connection with him than I have ever felt with anyone...ever. I forget that I'm half-monster, and that he and I are doomed. It doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is right here in my arms, this boy kissing me so sweetly and with such tenderness.

Right now, everything is right in my crazy, mixed-up world.

Everything makes sense.

Everything really is perfect.

Finally.

Chapter 17. Lucky

“You can’t tell Bones...or anyone. They can’t ever know the truth. The results would be *beyond* catastrophic,” Kieron says.

Earlier this evening, Kieron had stopped me just as I reached the Bridge of Kings. He’d told me that we needed to talk...in private. So instead of going directly to the Bar, we’d detoured back to my special place high on the mountainside where we could be alone.

I pace in circles, my hands on my head, still unable to process all that has happened. *Cody... Ivy...Light-angels...*It’s too much. Impossible to believe.

“*Light-angels?* You really think *they’re* responsible for this?” My voice is frantic, bordering on hysterical. But I have good reason to be upset. If he’s right—and I fear he is—our whole world is about to change.

He nods solemnly. “The burn patterns are unmistakable. Their energy is unique to only them. ”

“But how do you even *know* this?” I ask, fingering my Boumeaux nervously. “If Light-angels really are responsible for this, how did they get into Thiberoux? How is that even *possible?*”

“I don’t know...I don’t know,” he mutters, shaking his head in disbelief. “I’ve never heard of it happening before...I’ve only had experience with them in the Mortal World. To think they’ve somehow managed to enter Thiberoux...that must mean they’re more powerful than we’ve ever imagined. That’s why we had to get out of there...”

I’m dizzy from his words and my own incessant pacing, so I sit down on a rock. The Sirens are singing, but even their soothing melodies can’t calm me now. “Okay. You need to start from the beginning, because none of this makes any sense. Why can’t Bones know? Shouldn’t we alert the others?”

Kieron comes and sits beside me, his face grim. “There’s a lot I don’t know...but there’s some stuff I *do* know.”

“Start with what you know.” I pull my knees to my chest and hug them tight.

He takes a deep breath. “Okay. I know that sometimes we have conflicts with Light-angels in the Mortal World—”

“Duh, even I know that...but not *here*!”

Kieron shakes his head in wonder. “Maybe they found a way to get in through a Portal. I *do* know there’s a bit of a power struggle happening with their side, and it’s always been a possibility that our side may be dragged into it. I also know that if we go to war with them...again...the world will spin into chaos. Millions of lives—human *and* angelus—will be lost in the crossfire—”

I turn my face to him, my eyes hard. “But we *must* warn the others...we can’t just let them get away with it—”

He places a gentle hand on my knee. “A response is just what they’re after. They left those bodies to be found for a reason. Telling the others, especially before we have all the facts, would be tantamount to starting the Apocalypse.” He searches my face for understanding, and I scowl.

“But what are we supposed to do—*nothing*?”

He nods glumly. “For now. It’s best to let the others think it was other demons. Better to fight a small battle with some of our kind than to bring about the end of the world as we all know it.”

“But what if they come back? We’re not safe here anymore...” My words fade away and I bury my face in my hands.

Kieron sighs, taking my hands in his. As he does, I realize how much I’m trembling.

“I’m afraid you might be right,” he says. Then he tilts my head and looks into my eyes. “But I promise I’ll get to the bottom of this, whatever it takes. Ivy and Cody’s deaths will not go unavenged for long. But for now, until we know more, we must remain patient. Calm. We mustn’t let the others know. Do you understand?”

I nod reluctantly.

“Everybody just quiet down. Silence!” Bones yells, jumping on top of a table. Kieron and I make our way around the crowd gathering inside the Bar. I’ve never seen it this full before...every demon, demion, and creature in the territory has packed the place to capacity. Once word about Cody and Ivy got out, which it did quickly, everyone came running.

I spot Catalina weeping in the corner and move over to place a comforting arm around her, Kieron right by my side.

“Okay, now that you’re all here...we have a problem. As you probably heard, Ivy and Cody were ambushed and killed. We found their bodies just across the Hlbafa border.”

“They crossed illegally?” a demion named Jax asks. Like Bones, he’s part hellhound, but unlike Bones, Jax’s other half is human, and he spends his days as a Junior High math teacher.

“No, we don’t think so. We think they were taken to their side. Attacked in Dryndara and dumped in Hlbafa.”

“An attack on one is an attack on us all!” a voice shouts, and the room breaks out in cheers and hollers. Bones raises his hands, signaling for them to settle down.

“But the Hlbafa are our allies...we’ve never had any problems with them,” a young succubus named Zanna says.

Bones nods. “Yes, that’s been true so far. But we don’t know if something’s changed. Perhaps it’s just the actions of a few rogues...”

“Kill them! Kill them all!” an anonymous voice shouts out. More cheers from the crowd.

Bones raises his hands to quiet them again. “I’m assembling a small group to accompany me to speak with their leaders. See if they know what’s going on—and if indeed this was unprovoked aggression.”

Several voices shout in unison, prompting Bones to shush them again. “I only want three...any more will make it seem like we’re attacking them.”

“I’ll go!” Jax shouts out. Bones nods at him.

“So will I,” my voice rings loudly over the chaos.

“And I!” Kieron follows up.

Bones glares in our direction for a brief moment before nodding tersely. “Okay. I have my trio. We’ll travel to the Hlbafa council tonight and meet with their tribe leaders. Then we’ll know if they are now our enemies, and if their blood shall be spilled.”

Kieron and I exchange a quick glance. I close my eyes and make a silent wish it doesn’t come to that.

We approach the border, and Bones and Jax shift back to their human shapes. I dismount Diablo, and Kieron parks his motorcycle. My heart hasn’t stopped pounding since we took off from the Bar, and I find myself continually glancing down at my Boumeaux to see if it’s starting to shine yet.

The four of us gather in a circle. “We walk from here,” Bones says. “And stay together. It shouldn’t be long before one of their scouts spots us. When they do, let me do all the talking.”

I light the Otium Torch I'd brought with us with a controlled stream of fire from my fingers and hand it to Bones. The flame glows green before changing to a sparkling white...a show of peace for our neighbors as we cross their lands.

"What if they don't want to just *talk*?" asks Jax. "For all we know, they're waiting for us and we're walking right into a trap."

Kieron and I exchange a private glance. "We need to be on guard," I say, pulling my dagger from my boot. "But even they know the penalties against attacking when we carry the White Otium Torch. If they do anything at all, then *they* are in violation of the treaty."

"I'd say it was nice and violated when they decided to slaughter Cody and Ivy," Jax growls.

Bones stiffens. "We need to be sure it was them before we act. It's more than possible it was demons from another tribe. They could easily have placed their bodies there."

Jax persists. "But still, what if it *was* them? What do we do if we are attacked? Do we fight back? What if there are too many of them?"

I understand his concerns are valid, but Jax's questions are getting on my nerves. Of course he doesn't know what Kieron and I know—that it was most likely Light-angels behind the killings, and the Hlbafa had nothing to do with it. Still, I wish Bones had chosen someone else to accompany us.

Kieron, silent up until now, steps forward. "I, for one, feel that if we encounter any hostility, our best option is an immediate and rapid retreat. There are only four of us. We'll be outnumbered easily. We only have the barest of weapons. If anything should happen, we flee back to Dryndara."

Bones smirks. "I'm not surprised you'd be the first one to suggest running away. If there's a fight, then it's each demon for him—" he looks at me, "or *herself*. If you want to fight, go ahead. If you want to run away," he

glances at Kieron pointedly, “be my guest.” Pivoting on one foot, he heads toward the border.

Kieron glares at Bones, but says nothing. He falls in behind me as we form a single line. Bones in front, with me following. Jax takes up the rear.

We soon arrive near the spot where we found Cody and Ivy. I look at my Boumeaux to make sure it’s still black. Kieron paces the area, a puzzled look on his face as he examines some of the surrounding earth. “What is it?” I whisper. He just shakes his head.

I can’t bring myself to revisit the scene of the crime, so I stand guard while the other three investigate. I keep one wary eye on the terrain, the other on my Boumeaux. Fortunately the ground here is flat and mostly barren—with the exception of occasional patches of trees—so there’s little chance of an ambush. But if these aren’t some ordinary Light-angels, who knows how they can attack us? Anything powerful enough to take out Ivy is a frightening force to be reckoned with.

After they’re done examining the wooded groves, Bones, Kieron and Jax come back to where I am. “Ivy is already ash and Cody soon will be,” Bones says, his voice flat. He doesn’t know that I’m the one responsible for Ivy’s accelerated decomposition.

“Did you see anything new? Any clues?” I ask, looking at Bones. But my question is really meant for Kieron.

Bones shakes his head. “No. It’s just like it was last night.”

But it’s Kieron’s eyes that have my attention. *He saw something...* I can tell.

I *know* he knows something.

But what?

The four of us march on through the valley, and I'm beginning to wonder if we're *ever* going to see anyone from Hlbafa. We've been walking for a few hours now and haven't seen a soul. Even if they don't have sentries stationed at lookout points, like we do in Dryndara, we should've come across *some* form of life by now. I'm also starting to get concerned about my time. I still have several hours left, and I can always run if necessary. But still, I didn't think this was going to be such a bust.

Just when I'm ready to say something, there's a howling in the distance, quickly followed by another...and another.

We've been spotted.

I take a deep breath, and Bones holds the torch up higher. I know he wishes he could shift into hellhound mode right now. But he can't, as it would surely be perceived as a sign of aggression. But Bones doesn't do passive very well.

"We stay here," he says, tensing up. "Let them come to us."

My heart races and I take several more deep breaths. Even though I know they're not the ones who killed Ivy and Cody, a rush of adrenaline shoots through my veins. We are trespassing on forbidden lands. This is reason enough to kill us. Even though we carry with us the recognizable peace torch, it's not exactly unheard of for demons to disregard it, slay the trespassers, and claim no such torch was present.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and Kieron shifts closer to me. Both of us are focused on the figures racing toward us. Three...no, four... *five* hellhounds, each the size of a Sapie automobile, are charging at us from every direction.

We stand in a small circle with our backs pressed together, as the growling beasts surround us. Their eyes are glowing red, and venomous saliva drips from their razor-sharp fangs.

“We come in peace,” Bones says holding out the torch. “We respectfully ask for passing to speak with your leaders.”

The largest hound inches closer, growling and sniffing. Then it shakes and convulses, revealing an Amazonian beauty with blonde hair tumbling in waves down past her hips. She is easily the most exquisite creature I’ve ever laid eyes on, with a face too perfect to be imagined. Half of her body is covered in strange, bright-blue markings, reminiscent of ancient tribal tattoos. I’m more stunned, however, by the fact that the hellhound revealed itself to be a female; I’ve always assumed they were all males. At least, they are in Dryndara.

“Why are you here?” the goddess asks. Even her voice sounds like sublime harmonic perfection. Another large hellhound hovers right behind her possessively, while the other three form a triangle around us.

Bones clears his throat. “We come from Dryndara. Two of ours were murdered recently and found on your side of the border.”

“I see,” the woman says, gliding closer to Bones. She reaches out and graces a long, shapely finger along the side of his cheek. Bones doesn’t react, and she laughs. “Ah, an incubus. Too bad. You would have been fun.” The other hounds make small yapping noises, almost as if they are... *laughing?*

“Did you or yours sanction the attack on us? Can you account for how they were killed?” Bones demands.

“Can *you* account for how you found them on *our* side of the border?” she retorts, her large, lapis-colored eyes now menacing slits.

“That was my fault,” Kieron says, stepping forward. “I’m a Latros. I was tracking the victims’ scents and crossed onto your lands unintentionally. I was unaware of the boundaries, as I am only temporarily

visiting Dryndara as part of another job. Please forgive me.” He bows his head slightly toward the woman.

The beauty laughs, a tinkling sound that makes chills race down my spine. “Ah...such a handsome young man. And not an incubus. Yes, you will do quite nicely.”

My eyes narrow.

Do what?

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Chapter 18. Lucky

“We have done nothing to provoke unwarranted trespassers on our lands,” the beauty continues. “But, we demand a sacrifice for your transgressions. A penalty of sorts.” She appraises Kieron thoughtfully, a sly smirk crossing her lips. The hounds yap again.

I raise my dagger to my face and catch her eye. She smiles at me menacingly. “Oh, what have we here? You claim to come in peace, yet this lovely young creature possesses a weapon of death. How interesting.”

“I have a right to defend myself,” I say.

She laughs. “Yes, my love, of course you do. Just as we have a right to defend *ourselves*.”

“We want to know who killed our friends,” Jax shouts, startling me. “They were found here, on your land. You’ve broken the treaty. That gives *us* a right to investigate.”

The four hounds circle us like sharks. Bones, Jax, Kieron and I press our backs closer. The blonde creature floats over to Jax and puts her face mere inches from his. “We have broken *nothing*,” she hisses. “It is *you* who have violated the law. And for that, one of you must pay.”

My heart races even faster, and I steal a quick glance at Bones. His face is hard, his jaw set. I peek at Kieron, who appears to be struggling internally, but his expression is impossible to read. “I believe you,” he says. “I don’t think that one of yours is responsible. I think it was a different—”

But his words are cut off, and we are all knocked forward by Jax’s massive body as he suddenly transforms into a hellhound. I feel like I’ve been hit in the back by a bus, and fall to my knees. Kieron and Bones stagger forward, but then regain their balance. A ferocious growl is followed by loud barks as Jax lunges at the woman, pinning her down.

Instantly the other hounds pounce, and before I can even blink, Bones shifts form. Kieron grabs my arm and yanks me away from the bloody fracas. “Stop it!” I scream, but it’s too late. Bones and Jax are both embroiled in the vicious fight; fur is flying, and it’s impossible to tell who is who.

The blonde beauty lies motionless on the ground, her eyes staring vacantly, her throat ripped out. “Bones!” I scream again, and watch in horror as two hounds jump him at once. I hear his painful yelp as he twists and turns, fending off the duel attack.

“Kieron, help him!” I plead desperately.

“Do you know which one is which?” he asks, a terrified look on his face.

“That one is Bones...” I say pointing. “I think Jax is the one with the grey tail...I don’t know!”

“You just have the one dagger?”

I nod, my eyes wide as my fingers grasp the smooth hilt. But I can’t use it. If I get anywhere near the brawling hounds, I’ll be torn to shreds in seconds. And my powers are of no use; using demonic fire against a hellhound is only slightly more effective than punching an ocean’s waves.

“You’ll have to throw it,” he says. “Aim right between the eyes. It won’t kill it, but it will stun it long enough to give Bones a fighting chance.”

“Impossible! They’re moving too fast...there’s no way...”

“It’s our only chance right now. You have to try...!”

I take several long, deep breaths and steady myself. A few more moments of this one-sided fighting and Bones and Jax will both be dead.

I grip my dagger tight, cocking it behind my ear, waiting...I need one of them to turn and face me, if only for a second.

My heart pounds. I narrow my eyes and focus my attention on the one who keeps attacking Bones from behind. It's almost looking my way... almost...

Swish! The emerald blade flies out of my hand and lands squarely between the glowing red eyes. There is an ear-piercing squeal as the hound falls back, legs twitching in the air. For a brief moment Bones and the other hound seem distracted, but Bones for a fraction of a second less than his opponent. He spins and clenches his razor-sharp jaw on the animal's jugular, and shakes his head back and forth mercilessly.

The other two hounds continue lunging at Jax, apparently unaware of what has happened. Kieron races over to the fallen beast and retrieves my dagger. He hands it back to me. "Kill the other ones..." He sprints back to pick up the fallen Otium torch, using its bright flame to set fire to the stunned animal.

My eyes shift from Bones to Jax. One of Jax's attackers turns and spots Bones pinning its comrade, and instantly guns for him. "No!" I scream, before letting the dagger fly again. It hits the charging beast mid-air squarely in the forehead, knocking it back. Kieron races over with the torch, yanks out my dagger, and engulfs the hound in flames.

Bones drops the wounded dog from his deadly grip, and leaps over to where Jax lies squirming and bloody beneath the last remaining hound. He jumps on its back and sinks his teeth in the animal's neck. The hound lets out an anguished cry and crumples to its side. Bones furiously paws, claws and bites, ripping the flesh to shreds until there is nothing left but bloodied fur.

After Kieron finishes setting fire to the remaining creatures—including the blonde leader—he jogs to where Bones and I are standing over Jax's body. In death, he has shifted back to the form of a man.

“Stupid fool,” I mutter. Kieron comes to stand beside me, and Bones, still in hound form, lies at my feet. I reach down to pet him and he whimpers. I pull back, surprised by the dampness in my hands.

Blood...Bones is soaked with it. But how much is his? And how much came from the other creatures?

I wait for Bones to shift back, but he doesn't. Instead, he stands on four wobbly legs and limps away.

“Kieron look, he's hurt.” Kieron leans down to set the torch to Jax's quiet form. His body will take longer to decompose, and it's essential we clear our tracks and wipe away any evidence of what has transpired. The Hlbafa will soon realize they are missing five hellhounds, but without any clues as to what happened, we should be able to minimize our danger. We have enough to worry about as it is.

“I imagine he is,” Kieron replies, rising. “That was a serious battle, and he's lucky to have survived it. You saved his life.”

“No, *you* did...I was paralyzed just watching...I didn't even think to throw my dagger.” I shake my head and tighten my grip around its handle. No way am I putting it away until we're safely back in Dryndara.

“Suppose that's why he's not shifting back?” he muses. “Perhaps his injuries are too severe—”

“No,” I quickly reply. “I'm sure he's fine. He's just staying on guard until he knows we're safe.”

“Then why isn't he running?”

I lower my eyes. It's clear that Bones is badly wounded, dripping with blood. “We just need to get back to Dryndara,” I say, as I run up to walk alongside him.

“Lucky, look at him. Something is definitely wrong.”

I chew my lip nervously and stare down at Bones. He's curled up on the ground, somewhere between asleep and awake. He still hasn't shifted back, even though we've made it safely back to Dryndara. The three of us are camped out at a small meadow by the ice-river Valkis.

"Maybe he's just tired," I say, kneeling beside him. I gently stroke him, and in his sleepy state he flinches. My hand is covered with blood from several deep gouges in his side. "This is bad...very bad," I whisper. "I've never seen him hurt like this before."

"It's because he was attacked by his own kind. Their powers are stronger against each other. Naturally he's never fought with one of his own here..."

"I just wish he'd talk to me...tell me what to do!" I whisper frantically. I can't help but notice how dangerously close Illyria's moons are. My time is already running out. But even scarier, so is Bones'.

"Perhaps he's too weak to shift..."

I pat his head gently. "Bones...Bones, can you hear me?"

He lazily opens an eye and lets out a small whimper.

"Bones, you have to tell me what to do...where are you hurt? Is there someone I should get?" I feel my eyes grow damp. He looks at me groggily and lifts his head a few inches before dropping it back down again.

"Bones?" This time it's more of a plea. I feel his life force fading, and a panic rises deep inside me, threatening to consume me entirely. I rest his head in my lap and pet the side of his face. His breathing is shallow and labored.

"It might help him heal if he could replenish," Kieron says. "If you want I can run to the Bar and get him something..."

"Yes! And *hurry!*" I don't know who has less time left—me or Bones. I give Kieron a pleading look as he jumps on his bike and shoots off into the woods.

“You’re fine,” I whisper to Bones, though I’m not sure I believe the words myself. “You’re gonna be okay. Kieron went to get you something to drink. You’ll be tip-top in no time.”

Bones rests his head on my lap and I gently stroke his cheek. *Please, Bones, please don’t die*, I plead silently. He’s not supposed to die—ever. It’s not supposed to be like this. But we were able to finish off the other hellhounds, and neither Kieron nor I are pure demon. They must have had mixed blood, even the leader. Although she was clearly part succubus, she must have had some Sapie blood in there somewhere since Jax was able to kill her. But maybe the one Bones fought with and killed was pure...

Bones lets out another soft whimper and nuzzles his head into my lap. I softly stroke his massive body, not caring that my hand is covered in blood. I have to squelch the frustrated rage threatening to boil over inside me. First Kayla and Michael. Then Ivy and Cody. Now Bones.

Why do the ones I care about keep dying?

I ignore the tears that stream down my face, but cannot ignore the ominous disks in the sky merging as one. It’s almost morning in the Sapie world. Soon I will fall asleep. Liora might not wake up right away, but she will be in control. I need Kieron to hurry. I need him to get back here so Bones can drink and grow strong again. I need to be far away from them when Liora wakes up.

But I know it’s already too late. Even running as fast as I could, if I left right this moment—and there’s no way I’m doing *that*—I’d only make it about halfway to the cabin.

I can only hope that when Liora awakens, she’ll have an ounce of compassion for our fallen friend. After all, she was friends with Bones too, before our split. She has the same memories of our times together that I have. She knows every detail of our shared life up until the point the

Amazèa cracked us in half. Although she claims to despise us now, there was a time when she cared for Bones just as much as I do now.

I can only hope she does the right thing.

The roar of the approaching engine sounds just as the first cool waves of weakness flutter through my body. “Kieron, hurry!”

He leaps off his bike and rushes to my side, a large flask of green liquid in his hand. “How’s he doing?” he asks, uncorking the lid.

“The same, but look...” I motion with my chin to the sky, my voice faint.

He looks at me with horror as understanding registers on his face. “Oh, *no*...Liora...she’s coming...”

I nod. “You must stay here, Kieron. You have to help her. She’ll be afraid, and very upset. You must take care of her and get her home safely. And Bones...*please*...save him...don’t let him die...”

My words fade away as the blackness seeps in all around me.

Chapter 19. Liora

I don't dream...at least I don't *think* I do. If I ever have any weird patches of memories when I awake in the morning, I always brush them off as Lucky's. Fortunately, the thoughts always fade quickly and I don't have to relive her nocturnal adventures.

But maybe I'm still sleeping. It's dark, mostly. There's a bright glare on my face. *Ugh, did Lucky leave the bedroom light on?*

I try to roll over and bury my face in the pillow.

But there is no pillow, and I feel like I'm falling....

"*Wha!?*" I wake up with a start.

....at least I think I'm awake. Here's Kieron, holding me in his arms, gazing upon me with such love and concern.

Hello, gorgeous...

I reach up to touch his face and bring it down to kiss mine. *As long as I'm dreaming....*

"Liora."

With that one word, my eyes come into focus, and my head clears....only for a moment before it goes into a terrifying tailspin.

I try to jump up, and it's only then I realize that something is in my lap, weighing me down. Something heavy, ugly. A dead animal? And it's wet.

"Liora, don't move. Do not be afraid. You're safe. I have you." Kieron tightens his grip around me.

Without thinking, I scream.

"Shhh...shhhh...don't be frightened. I promise; everything will be okay. Just don't panic." Kieron places his hands gently over my mouth. Instantly, I bite down on his fingers and he grimaces, then reluctantly pulls back.

"Liora..."

“Get it off me! Get it off me!” I scream and try to squirm away, but I’m trapped by the heavy weight.

This is a nightmare and I need to wake up.

“It’s Bones,” Kieron says softly. “He’s been badly injured. We need to help him.”

I feel like I’ve just been slapped across the face with a million tiny daggers. Slowly, I look down at the bulk in my lap. As comprehension forces its way into my head, I turn to face Kieron.

The sound oozes out of my mouth. “*You...*” My one word accusation speaks volumes.

He dips his head and sighs. “Yes. But please, whatever you are feeling toward me right now, Bones is your friend, and he needs our help.”

I can’t catch my breath; I know air is entering my lungs, yet somehow it isn’t doing any good.

“Liora, calm down...you’re going to hyperventilate...” The soothing quality of his voice is totally lost on me.

“*You...you...this whole time...*”

He lowers his head. “Liora, we must get Bones to transform back so he can drink this,” he says holding up a green flask. “He was badly hurt, and without it he might die.” His eyes flash azure, and I realize for the first time how deep they are. Like they could hide the truth behind their beauty.

“So, I don’t care. Let him die,” I whimper, leaning my body away from the beast’s head.

“Liora, you don’t mean that. Bones is your friend—”

“No, he’s *not*. He’s *her* friend.” I look away. I can’t stand to meet his eyes. The eyes that lied to me.

He dips his head trying to look at my face. “He’s very special to her. She cares for him deeply. Tonight he was injured, mainly to protect her, I

suspect,” he adds under his breath.

“So, I don’t care. Get him off of me.” I push at the dead weight on my lap but can’t budge it.

But my voice doesn’t carry the same conviction as before. I gaze down on the wounded animal, and my chest aches.

Of course I know Bones, and yes, at one point he *was* my friend. A dear friend. But he’s one of *them*...and they’re all the same. Just look at what they get themselves into.

“Where are we?”

“The far side of Dryndara, near Valkis River. Have...have you ever been here before?”

I survey the unfamiliar landscape and shake my head.

“But, obviously, you’ve been to Dryndara...”

Slowly I nod. “It-it’s been awhile. Years.” I look up at the sky. I know the shining yellow disc I’m seeing isn’t the sun, but the trinity-moons overlapping as one. It’s daylight at home, yet nighttime here. Forever, eternally night.

Thiberoux—a place crawling with monsters and evil. A place that rips my soul out time and time again. A place I’d hoped and prayed I’d never again see with my human eyes. Yet here I am.

But it’s also my home. My true home. The first home I ever had, and the first one I remember. And in my lap is Bones, the first friend I ever made. I met him long before I met Michael and Kayla, but he always kept his distance...like a protective older brother.

He’d told me when I was older we’d be better friends, but since I was still young, I needed to play with children my own age. I remember him giving me rides on his back through the woods as I grasped tightly around his neck. I remember him speaking to me with his soft, silky voice,

explaining the ways of Dryndara and the specialness of Thiberoux. I remember him giving me a shiny black diamond when I was five—the first time I wandered into the forest by my cabin, looking, searching...seeking something that I *knew* was out there somewhere, just waiting for me to discover it. I remember how he'd appeared from behind a tree and presented me with the special diamond...the one that even now rests at the base of my neck, binding my cloak shut. I remember how magnificent I thought he was. How powerful, proud, and beautiful.

Now, as I gaze down on his broken and bloodied body, my heart suddenly breaks.

"What can I do?" I whisper.

Kieron hands me the flask and helps me prop up Bones' head. "Here, try to get some of this down his mouth...at least enough so he can transform and drink the rest."

He opens Bones' wide mouth, carefully avoiding the razor-sharp teeth, as I angle the vial and slowly dribble some of the liquid inside.

Bones' eyes flutter open, and he inhales deeply.

"Bones, it's me, Liora. Remember me? You need to change shape now so you can drink the rest of this and get better," I say softly, stroking his wet body.

A low growl rattles in his throat, followed by another. Then a small bark, as he raises his head and stares at me. His colorless eyes slowly brighten, as if a light switch has been flipped on inside. He growls again.

"Come on, you can do it..." I urge.

I feel the shaking in my lap and watch as the enormous black mass seems to disappear before my eyes. Almost instantly, where before it felt like a boulder was crushing me, there is lightness.

He's a man.

He shivers and shakes, his tawny skin welted and covered with blood. I unhook the clasp holding my cloak and throw it over his nude and trembling body.

Kieron kneels beside us as I pour the rest of the liquid down Bones' throat. Some of it spills on his chin, but most of it he eagerly gulps down until it's gone.

"There, that's better..." I coo as if I'm speaking to a baby, instead of a demon monster.

He angles his face to mine. I'd forgotten just how beautiful he was. And he hasn't aged a day. "Liora?" he whispers.

"Hi, Bones. Long time no see." I give him a small smile, but my heart is pounding, still a little fearful.

He sits up and gives me a devastating smile, then draws me in his arms hugging me tight. Despite myself, I hug him back, unable to resist the soft strength of his embrace. He kisses my cheek and I feel tingles where his lips press down. "It is so good to see you. I've missed you."

"I-I missed you too," I say, even though until this moment I'd hardly given him a thought. But being here with him now is bringing back a rush of memories long since buried. Memories of my previous life, before I despised what I was.

"Are you okay? I know it's scary for you to be here..."

I have to laugh. Although his wounds are not yet healed, he's more concerned with me than with himself.

"I'm okay. How are *you* feeling?"

He pulls himself to his feet and wraps the cloak around his waist, fashioning a loincloth. He glances from me to Kieron. "I need to thank you...both of you. I know what you did for me..."

Kieron shuffles his feet. "It was nothing."

I'm aware of Kieron standing beside me, but I can't bring myself to face him. He lied to me. He tricked me. He deceived me. This whole time he acted like he was someone else, when all along he knew the truth about what I really am.

Bones appraises me. I'm shivering from the cold, now that I'm without the cloak Lucky was wearing. I glance down at what I have on and feel the heat rush to my cheeks. I may as well be naked in this skintight cat suit. Why couldn't she have worn one of her dresses tonight?

"We need to get you home," Bones says. "Do you want to take Diablo?"

"I-I don't know how to ride," I say through chattering teeth.

"I can give you a lift on my motorcycle," Kieron says, "I did it with Lucky once before."

And just like that my heart officially shatters. I feel sick.

"I'd rather jump into that frozen river than go anywhere with you," I snap, my voice hard and cold.

"Well, we need to get you home," Bones says. "Um...I don't know if you're up for it, but I can take you if you like...I'll change back and you can hold on like you did when you were younger..." He looks me up and down, and where his gaze falls, my body warms instantly, as if heat lasers were coming from his eyes.

I hesitate, but know I have no choice. I nod. "Okay then, here you go," he says, handing me the cloak. I avert my eyes. "I'll go slow, and grab onto as much fur as you need to stay on. Don't worry about hurting me; you can't."

He transforms, then lowers his massive body. I mount eagerly. I lean forward and wrap my arms around his neck, burying my face in his silky fur.

"I'll be following right behind you," Kieron says.

I lift my face and turn to him. “Don’t bother. In fact, don’t *ever* come anywhere near me again. I want *nothing* to do with you. Understand? *Stay away!*”

Bones takes off at a slow trot, leaving a crestfallen Kieron behind.

We’ve travelled for a few hours at a mild pace when Bones suddenly stops and crouches down. Confused, I dismount and step away as his body twists and shakes. When I see he’s becoming a man again, I lower my gaze...tempted, though, to sneak a peek.

With my eyes closed, I hold out my cloak and feel him take it from me.

He chuckles. “It’s okay, you can look now.”

I open my eyes again.

“Through those trees is the Portal...I can’t go further as a beast, only as a man.”

“How much further to the cabin?” I ask, glancing around. I search my memory for this place, but although it’s vaguely familiar, I know that once I exit Thiberoux the scenery will change dramatically.

“I’m guessing about ten miles? It’s quite a walk...I can run and carry you in my arms...”

I have to smile. “Seriously? You can do that?” I don’t know if the idea frightens or excites me. Then, I look into his eyes, and know I desperately want to be in his arms.

“I’ll be careful, promise. We’ll be there in no time.” With that, he scoops me up as if I’m no heavier than a feather and carries me over the threshold into a different world. My world. Once again, I clasp my arms tightly around his neck and squeeze my eyes shut. The blast of wind rushing past my face tells me we’re travelling very fast, but I’m too afraid to look. I bury my face in his chest, feeling his soft, warm skin on mine.

Unfortunately, my ride is over in only a few minutes. The rushing wind stops and Bones gently sets me down. I open my eyes and see the cabin a few hundred yards away.

I turn to him and smile. “Thanks, Bones. I really appreciate it.” Impulsively I hug him, savoring the sweet feeling of his arms around my body.

When he holds me, I want to swim in his skin, and I take several deep breaths of his intoxicating scent. Now that we’re here, I don’t want him to leave. I can’t imagine not seeing him again, and I don’t want to blink for fear he won’t be here when my eyes open. I want him to ask me to do something, *anything*, just so I can have the pleasure of obliging him. I feel that the whole reason I was born was so I could meet him and have him look upon me the way he is looking on me now. *He* is the reason for my existence...he is my *everything*, always. If he leaves me, I shall surely die.

“You take care of yourself, girl. And don’t be such a stranger. I miss you.” He disentangles from my eager embrace and hands me back my cloak.

“Wait...please don’t leave me...” I beg, reaching out for him.
But he’s already gone.

“Oh, Liora, thank the gods you’re all right. I have been worried sick.” Tatiana rushes at me the moment I walk through the door. She angles her body away from me awkwardly as she hugs me, and I remember I’m still wearing the magical black diamond. I was warned as a child how it’s fatal if any human, like Tatiana, comes into contact with it.

Yet for some reason, *I* haven’t turned to ash.

“It seems there were some problems last night. Lucky got stuck in Thiberoux,” I say as I make my way across the room to sit on the couch. A

small fire burns in the fireplace, and I'm so tired right now, I could sleep for days.

Tatiana pours two cups of tea and brings one over to me. "Yes...I knew you were there, but I couldn't see you. That worried me."

"It was...okay. Everything worked out." I remember Bones, but for some reason I'm not feeling as swoony about him as I was a few minutes ago. Then I think of Kieron and my heart turns to ice.

"What's the matter dear? You're upset, I can tell." Tatiana sets down her gold-rimmed cup and turns to me.

I take another sip. "Nothing. I'm just really tired, is all. Tat, look, I know I agreed to finish school, especially because I came back that day with my 'one good thing'..." My voice trails off as I recall the morning I didn't want to go to school, and Tatiana made me, saying if I couldn't find 'one good thing about my life' then she'd let me drop out. That was the day Kieron showed up and took me fishing at the magical meadow.

That was the day I started to fall in love with him.

So, like an idiot, I'd told her of my 'one good thing', thereby sealing my fate to graduate high school. But now that good thing was gone. Truth is, it was never there in the first place...it had all been a complete and total lie.

"Yes, Liora?" she prompts when I don't continue.

I shake my head. This is too much to process right now. I give a deep sigh, and look at her compassionate face. "Nothing...I'm just tired. I really don't feel well. I know school's starting back up, but I can't go today. I'll go tomorrow, I swear."

"And you'll graduate with your class?"

I sigh again.

"Yes."

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Chapter 20. Lucky

“C’mon, Diablo...*move it*,” I urge and squeeze my legs tight. He’s already racing at top speed, but I can’t get to Kings River crossing fast enough.

I start shouting for Bones as soon as I pass through Thiberoux’s Portal.

“Bones!...Bones!”

Soon, I’m rewarded with the sweet sound of his howl. The moment his black form emerges from the shadows I leap off Diablo’s back, not caring that he is still running at a gallop. I fly into Bones’ arms just as he regains his human form, and hold him tight. “Oh, I’m so happy to see you. I’m so glad you’re all right.”

“Geez, if I’d known that being shredded by some whorish hellhounds would make you act like this, I would’ve done it years ago.”

I laugh and pull away, appraising him. “You look so good. Perfect as always. Now, tell me *everything* that happened after I checked out. Don’t leave out a *thing*...” I pull him to a tree stump, and we sit down by the river of dancing fire, watching the orange flames swirl around themselves.

He stretches out beside me, fingering the lace of my dress. “Liora handled it like a champ. So did Kieron, I guess,” he adds, more as an afterthought.

“Tell me.”

“All I know is I was kind of out of it for a while...when I came to, you...I mean Liora, was pouring some Source Energy in me. It gave me enough strength to transform, and after I finished the rest of it, my wounds healed right away. Better than ever.” He flexes a perfectly shaped bicep and kisses it. I laugh and roll my eyes.

“Tell me about Liora...did she flip out? Did she go completely nutso on everyone?”

“Well...” he hesitates.

“*Tell me!*”

“She didn’t seem too pleased with Kieron. Do those two have something going on? And just how exactly does that *work*? Talk about a kinky threesome—”

“Forget them.” I brush my hand through the air. “What else...?”

He chuckles under his breath. “Okay, I might as well tell you now. I was worried about her. I knew she’d be scared and needed to get home safely. She was furious with Kieron and didn’t know how to ride Diablo, and I know how she feels about...our kind. But I needed to do something to put her at ease...just so she’d let me take her home.” He has a devilish smirk on his face.

My eyes narrow. “You *didn’t*...”

“Just a little bit,” he says, pinching his thumb and pointer finger together. “Just enough to get her to submit and not put up a fight. But you should’ve seen her when I left her at the cabin. She was practically *begging* to have my little demon babies—”

I whap his arm and he laughs.

“I’d say overall, we dodged a bullet,” I mutter. “I can’t *believe* Jax did that. If he wasn’t already dead, I’d kill him myself—”

“Hey, guys.”

I hadn’t noticed Kieron approach. I stand up, brush off my dress and walk over to him. Then I give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek, relishing how good his body feels pressed against mine.

“What was that for?” he whispers as we pull apart. He glances over to where Bones sits and gives him a small nod. Bones turns away.

“For saving my friend. You were the one who got him the Source Energy. I don’t know what would’ve happened if...” My voice fades away.

He gazes into my eyes. There’s a sadness there. Unspoken truths that I can’t read. Is it because Liora is mad at him?

“What is it?” I ask quietly, moving my hand down the length of his arm until his hand is holding mine. He gives it a gentle squeeze and pulls me over to where Bones is staring out at the rippling fire.

“Actually, I need to talk to both of you...it’s about what happened last night.”

Bones looks over at us, his expression blank.

Kieron sits on the grass, me beside him. “I just wanted to say I don’t think it would be a good idea for it to get out what went down last night.”

Bones’ laugh is more of a sneer. “Of course it would. They killed one of ours when we went there on a peace mission. I know you’re not from around here, so you don’t really care if one of us lives or dies. But I care. I take it pretty damn personal when one of my boys gets torn to shreds.”

Kieron hedges. “Yeah...I understand that. But there’s something you should know...last night, when we re-visited the place where we found Cody and Ivy, I saw something...something I hadn’t noticed before.”

“Yeah, so?” Bones asks flatly.

“So, what I saw...what I sensed, leads me to believe that I know exactly what kind of *demons* killed them.” He eyes me pointedly at the word *demons*.

“They are transient demons with no home,” he continues. “They travel in particular patterns, ones I’ve been trained to spot. They don’t come from the Hlbafa side, nor were any of the Hlbafa responsible for what happened.”

“Okay, so maybe they didn’t kill Ivy and Cody, but they attacked Jax.”

“Well,” I interject, “to be fair, Jax *did* attack them first. Besides, the ones who attacked us are all dead now. Maybe Kieron’s right...maybe we should just let it go...” I don’t know where my magnanimous mood is coming from; normally I’d be down for any fight for any reason—good or bad.

Maybe it’s because I’m sitting here beside a healthy and strong Bones, and next to Kieron, who is still covering my hand with his beneath the waves of grass. Maybe it’s Kieron’s words—that it was *demons* who killed Cody and Ivy, not the Light-angels we’d first feared—that filled me with such a sense of relief, I no longer feel like tempting the fates.

Or maybe because, with Liora out of the picture, Kieron can focus his attention on me. Only me.

“*Wait a minute,*” Bones says, turning to Kieron. “If you knew last night that the Hlbafa weren’t responsible, why didn’t you say anything then? Why let us carry on?”

“Because I wasn’t sure if the demons responsible were still in the area. I thought we could speak to the Hlbafa leaders and maybe get some information from them...see if any of them knew anything. But, we all know how well that went.”

Bones is quiet for a while. “I suppose I see your point. No use in making something bigger than it needs to be. I have things I’d much rather be doing than fighting and killing,” he says, standing up. “But you should have told us.”

“Where are they now?” I ask.

Bones and Kieron look at me, both with blank looks their faces. I let out an exasperated sigh. “The *demons*, you idiots. The ones who killed Ivy and Cody.”

Kieron looks down. “They’re gone. Far away.”

I feel like he's not telling me everything, but turn my attention back to Bones. "You off to mate?" I ask, recognizing the look in his eyes. Kieron and I rise to our feet as Bones nods.

"Yup, right after I hit up the Bar. Gonna treat myself to a few extra virgins tonight, too." He grins salaciously. But this time my stomach doesn't wrench up the way it usually does. I smile and give him a kiss on his cheek.

I watch his retreating back as he crosses the bridge and start to follow, but Kieron holds me back. "Lucky, wait a second."

"What is it?" I turn to meet his gaze. My heart does the wobbly flip-flop as he looks into my eyes and puts his arms around my waist. Gently, authoritatively, he pulls me closer.

His lips find mine, and my head begins to spin. His kisses are soft at first, then stronger, more passionate. We stand there by the river of fire, arms around each other, kissing with an intensity I've never experienced before. My insides smolder, and I'm sure my head must be melting. I feel strong and weak at the same time.

I don't want Kieron to ever stop, but eventually he moves his lips from my mouth to my cheek, to my forehead, finally kissing the top of my head. I rest my head on his chest, a contented smile on my face.

"I just needed to do that first," he says, his voice husky.

"I'm glad you did...what took you so long?" I ask as I snuggle closer. I don't want to know if he's already kissed *her*; I don't even want to think about it. I only want to be in this moment, here and now. With him. Just the two of us.

But we both need to drink, so after a few more kisses, we walk hand in hand across the river of flames.

“So, what’s on your agenda tonight?” Kieron asks, his face inches from mine as I lean back against a tree. As much as I love hearing the sound of his voice, every moment he’s talking is a moment he’s not kissing me.

“This,” I say, pulling him in for another. After we had our drinks at Demon Bar we’d returned to my special spot on the hillside. But now I think of it as *our* special spot. The Sirens seem to be singing especially for us tonight as Kieron and I embrace passionately along the edge of the cliff.

My hands wander down the sides of his body and under his shirt. My fingertips dance along the ridges of his rock-hard abdomen. Tiny baby hairs make a trail down to his jeans. He groans softly and pulls me closer.

“I wish I could do this all night, but I can’t,” he says.

“Why not?” I give him my best pout.

He sighs. “Well, I actually have to work. I picked up the trail of a quarry last night, and I need to see if it pans out. Not that I’m holding my breath,” he mutters, looking away.

“Well, I *was* planning on tormenting tonight...but maybe I can go with you instead?” I trace the side of his face with my finger. *God he’s beautiful.*

“I might be gone a few days...that’s why I had to make sure to do this before I left.” His eyes sparkle, and he leans in to kiss me again.

I jerk back as if punched in the gut. “A few days?” I whisper.

He nods. “I’ve been tracking these demons for quite some time. I’d lost them for a bit, and then they were hiding out in lands I’m forbidden to enter. But they’ve resurfaced. In fact, they’re the ones responsible for Ivy and Cody. I didn’t want to say anything earlier with Bones right there—”

“What?! Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I’m *definitely* going with you!”

Kieron sighs again and takes a small step back. “You can’t. Like I said, it might be a few days...maybe longer. You know you can’t be away that long. But I need to act fast and secure their position. It’s of the utmost

importance that I contain them before they have a chance to disappear again.”

I’m disappointed because I know he has to go, and I can’t follow. But something else is bugging me, too...something I hadn’t put my finger on until just now. “Kieron, when we found Cody and Ivy, you were convinced they were killed by Light-angels. You said they had the markings, the energy and everything. What made you change your mind?”

A haunted look shadows his face, and his eyes darken. He studies me at length before responding. “I was wrong. The demons who did it...they are a special kind that absorb the powers and energies of their victims. They feed off those energies; it’s how they survive and grow stronger. My best guess is they’d had a run-in with Light-angels in the Mortal world shortly before attacking Cody and Ivy in Dryndara.

“I’ve only heard of two demons who have that power...” My voice trails off.

No. I *cannot* process this. No. No. No.

Kieron nervously runs his hands through his hair, the pain evident in his face.

“I’d really hoped to avoid this. I’d considered just leaving and not saying anything to you, but I couldn’t do it. But I *should* have...” He shakes his head, as if he’s angry with himself. “Remember how I said I came here to kill you because you were interfering with one of my quarries?”

“Um, yeah...I just figured I killed one of your bounties and you were pissed about the money. I’ll pay you back if that’s what...” I mumble, still in complete denial of where he’s going with this, even though I know *exactly* where he’s heading. I want him to stop talking *now*...before it’s too late.

“No, that’s not it. You were interfering because you were hunting them, too. These particular demons are highly sensitive and spook easily. I’d been tracking them for several months. And just when I had them in my sights, something scared them off—you.” He looks down at the ground.

Suddenly, everything is spinning around me and I begin to feel faint. My back slides down the side of the tree until I’m sitting on the ground. But even that doesn’t help. An achy sickness permeates my body, and my blood seems to have turned to poison—slowly, methodically, killing me.

“There have only been two demons I’ve ever hunted who’ve evaded me,” I whisper, still in disbelief.

Kieron nods, and shuffles his feet nervously. “And I have a blood contract from the Supreme Legionary to bring them in... Alive.”

I jump up. “What?! No! You *can’t*! If they’re here... if they’re somewhere and you know where they are, Kieron you *must* tell me. I *have* to kill them. You *know* I do.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t let you. The Supreme Legionary decreed...” His voice is barely a mumble.

“The Supreme Legionary...Kieron, *who are you?*” My eyes feel ready to pop out of my head, if it doesn’t explode first.

“Lucky, this isn’t the time to get into all this. I’ll explain after I get back...”

“After you get back from protecting the murderous monsters who killed my friends and destroyed my life, you mean!”

He looks at me with pain in his eyes. “I had no idea what the Amazèa had done to you when we first met. I only figured it out after talking with you. Then I put two and two together. No one would be stupid enough to hunt them if they didn’t have a hell of a good reason.”

My quivering lips twist into a snarl. “Oh, and I suppose *you* have a good reason?”

“I’ve been bound to this bounty for months. Finding them, containing them, and handing them over to the Legionary is the only way I can win my freedom...otherwise...” He looks away and nervously runs both his hands through his hair.

I step into his line of vision and glare. “What about *my* freedom? What about *my* justice? *My revenge?*”

He lets out a deep sigh. “I’m sorry Lucky. I really am. If it makes you feel any better, they’re being held for high crimes and will likely be stripped of their powers and banished to the Wasteland for all of eternity.”

“No, it *doesn’t* make me feel better! They need to *pay*. They need to *die*! And I have to be the one to do it. For Kayla...for Michael...Cody and Ivy. *For me.*” I stomp my foot so hard, the trees beside me tremble.

“Lucky, if I don’t turn them in safely by the time my contract expires, I will be bound to the Supreme Legionary for the rest of my life. Do you know what that means? I will be a slave, forced to do their bidding, whenever and wherever they want me, with no free will, *for the rest of my wretched life*. I’ll have to leave here forever...that means never seeing you again. But, if I turn them in before the bounty on them expires, then I am *free*. That’s the deal I made with them after I met you. I knew I needed to be here with you. That’s why I was gone for a few days...not that you probably even noticed. I made the deal for *you*...so I could be with you...so I could have a life with you.”

My hollow laugh seems to be coming from someone else. “Well, that’s a pretty crappy deal you made because if you don’t tell me where they are *right this second*, not only do I *never* want to see you again, but I’ll kill you

right here and now.” Instantly, two large balls of fire erupt in my palms. I raise my hands ready to unleash them.

His eyes flash wickedly. “Lucky you don’t mean that. Listen to what I’m saying...”

“Oh, I’m listening...and all I hear is how this is all for *you*. Well, I have news for you. I don’t care what the cost is, or if I die trying—I *will* find the Amazèa, and I *will* kill them. Not you or any other creature on this planet, alive *or* dead, is going to stop me. And if you get in my way I will kill you and not think twice about it. Understand?”

“Lucky...”

“Get out of my sight...you make me sick,” I turn my back to him. I can’t let him see how devastated I am.

I hear him sigh. “It doesn’t have to be like this.”

I don’t move. “You need to get out of here, *now*.” My voice is barely above a whisper, but the threat is unmistakable.

“I’m leaving. Don’t follow me. I’ll know if you do...”

I spin around, feasting my fiery eyes on him for what I hope is the last time. “You are *done* giving me suggestions. I have my own ways of finding them. And I will. But I will *not* follow you. I’ll never follow you anywhere...”

“I’m so sorry, Lucky...” He gives one last pained look before turning around and disappearing into the night.

My heart shatters into a million pieces. Spinning, I hurl the balls of fire onto a tree behind me, and it explodes with a thunderous *crack*. I collapse on the grass and scream as loud, and as long as I can, until I can scream no more.

Then I cry. I cry for Michael and Kayla, and their unjust and cruel sacrifice. I cry for Ivy and Cody, in the wrong place at the wrong time, at

what should have been the happiest moment of their lives. I cry for the pain I felt as I spat those hateful words at Kieron, and the cold look in his eyes when he betrayed me. I cry for his unfair predicament...his *and* mine.

And I cry for us—me and Liora—because our only chance to reunify as one and reclaim our rightful life will mean losing the one boy we *both* love.

We truly are damned.

Tears blur my vision as I angrily slash my way through the forest, but they don't slow me down. I could run through the woods blindfolded if I had to. I'm too upset to ride Diablo right now; I need to move my body, to do something with all this energy before I explode. I knock down trees and blow up boulders as I sprint through Dryndara, handy outlets for my all-consuming rage.

Tatiana sits by the fireplace waiting for me as I burst through the door and send it flying across the room, narrowly missing her. She doesn't flinch.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I shout at her.

"You didn't ask," she replies quietly.

"Do *not* patronize me, Tatiana. I am *livid*. I want to kill...I want to kill..."

"Who exactly?" she asks, a small smile on her face. The rage inside me boils to such a point I fear I'm going to completely lose control. I take several deep, measured breaths, and storm around the small room.

"You know *exactly* who I'm speaking of. The Amazèa. Kieron. They're back and you didn't tell me..."

"They are still far away, and outside your boundaries. Hunting them is futile...even more than when they are inside..."

"But Kieron...he's after them right now. And he's going to *save* them." I picture his beautiful, chiseled face. Then I picture myself kicking it with an

especially pointy steel-tipped boot.

“He has a much wider jurisdiction than you. Besides, he is working under official orders, something you are not.”

“I don’t care if he’s under the orders of Lucifer himself. Find them and tell me where they are. I cannot let him get to them first and save them...”

“Maybe it’s *you* he is saving,” she says.

“Do *not*, Tatiana. You *do not* know that I will be defeated; I don’t care *what* your freaky floating flowers tell you. I have the element of surprise. I can kill from a distance. No one goes after them...they think they are invincible. Untouchable. I have the advantage...”

I can’t stand the boiling feeling in my blood any longer, so I stomp into Tatiana’s room for my emergency stash.

“And even if you do succeed, what do you think will happen?” she calls out. I grab the freshly-refilled green bottle off Tatiana’s nightstand and stalk back into the living room.

“What do I think will happen? It will be over. I can finally *live...that’s* what will happen. I can stop being a prisoner of the night, and someone else during the day. I can live the rest of my life knowing that I didn’t let the creatures who killed four of my friends just get away with it.”

I take several swigs, not caring that it’s later than I should be drinking. I glare at Tatiana, my eyes daring her to reprimand me.

“And you just assume that you’ll be magically reunified and your life will go on like nothing has happened? What about consequences from the Legionary? They will know you acted illegally and you’ll be severely punished. What good would it do if you are banished to the Wasteland, or, at the *very* least, stripped of your powers and demoted to lower demon status?”

She rises to her feet and walks towards me. "...I must say, Lucky, while your emotion and passion make you stronger than many other demions, they will also be your downfall if you don't use your common sense as well."

I refuse to let Tatiana's words sink in; I've heard it all before. She's made it perfectly clear over the years that she's not as convinced as I am that killing the Amazèa will make me whole again...blend Liora and me the way we were before—a pure demon.

But reunifying my soul isn't my only motivation; it's getting justice for Michael and Kayla...and now, Cody and Ivy. I *must* have my revenge on the monsters who murdered them...I can't *live* without it. I need to do what I *should* have done that night five years ago, instead of what I did do—freeze in terror and run away.

I acted like a stupid, weak Sapie.

I need to make it right; undo what I did...do what I *didn't* do. I've replayed the scenario over and over in my head so many times, there are times when I believe I actually *did* fight back—that I was able to save Michael and Kayla—that the split never happened, and we're all still best friends who love each other and share everything with each other. Sometimes, I'm able to trick myself into thinking that Michael and Kayla are just around the corner, waiting for me to come outside and play—not buried under six feet of dirt a mile and a half away, under the circle of stones I'd placed to mark their grave.

It was *I* who found the scattered pieces of their corpses and lovingly put them back together again after I returned to see what the Amazèa had done to them. It was *I* who buried them next to the tree where Kayla had happily given me the nickname "Lucky", and Michael had given me my first kiss...

the same place Tatiana had later found me, catatonic, as the police combed the woods with Michael and Kayla's frantic parents.

Of course, the bodies were never found; I couldn't bring myself to tell their parents the truth—that their beloved children were dead, and it was all my fault. Tatiana had ushered me away and later placed a spell on the parents, removing any traces of Michael and Kayla from their memory. But she could not do the same for me.

And I will *never* forget.

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Chapter 21. Liora

I fumble through my locker in a trance. I'm not the only one; it seems most of the students are still dazed by what happened. It's been a few weeks since the murders, but the students have yet to regain their jovial and boisterous attitudes from before. The hallways are much quieter, and the sound of laughter is rare. Grief and tension are palpable.

For once, I don't feel like such an outsider.

But my sadness isn't from what happened here; yes, it's awful. Truly. But I grieve not for the three classmates I didn't care about, but for the one boy I did. The one who is gone, probably forever.

"Hey, Liora." Corrine leans against my locker, subdued.

I glance up and give her a half smile. "Hey."

"Ready for the test?"

I shrug. I don't even know what test she's talking about, but I'm sure I'll ace it without even trying. I zip up my jacket as the wind gushes past, stinging my face. I like the pain. It's the only way I know I'm still alive. The rest of the time I just feel numb.

I still catch myself craning my neck, looking for any sign of Kieron. But he's gone. And I don't even understand what he was doing here in the first place. Or what he was doing with *me*.

Even though I'd told him I never wanted to see him again...and I *meant* it...I guess I just figured I'd see him anyway. That he'd be waiting for me outside the cabin one morning and we'd walk to school together. Or he'd be in class, and after school we'd take off to the mountains again...or maybe the cemetery to read poetry to each other.

Maybe he'd be able to tell me something...anything...that could make the unbelievable ache in my chest subside, even just a little.

At first, after I'd gotten over the initial shock and anger at discovering Kieron's true identity, I'd cried. When I couldn't cry anymore, I got mad again. Mad that he lied. Mad that he deceived me. Mad that he used me.

I didn't want to admit that was *exactly* what I'd been doing to him.

My case was different. If I was still a *real* demion, I'd never hide it from other demions. But...I guess I *would* hide it from humans.

Sigh.

I know I'm angry at Kieron, but the longer he stays away, the harder it is for me to remember exactly *why* I'm angry with him. As much as I hate what he is, there's a strange comfort in the fact that he knows what *I* am.

I love that he knows the real me...just as much as I hate it.

I can't figure out if I love him or hate him. Maybe neither. Maybe both.

All I do know is, I miss him very much. And I desperately wish I could see him again.

When class finally lets out for the day, I hurry to the parking lot and jump in my Mustang. I brought it today so I could drive to the cemetery after school to read from Kieron's poetry book. I've read it through several times already, but just leaning against the headstones, feeling the crisp air sear through my lungs, and reading the beautiful words that Kieron had been so deeply fond of, somehow helps alleviate some of the painful loneliness. Here he's with me, if only in spirit.

I park my car and gather my things....a small blanket and a snack for later. I'm going to stay here as late as I can before I have to head home and let Lucky take over.

I step over the tangled vines and jagged branches and crawl through the opening in the iron fence. My cheeks are numb from the cold, but I don't care; this is the only place I want to be right now.

I spread out my blanket next to a large, cracked stone with faded engravings. Then I take out the soft, brown book and open it to the middle. Unlike the other pages, this one has the corner folded down, as if Kieron had marked it for some special reason.

For what must be the twentieth time, I silently read the poem by William Blake titled “A Divine Image”.

*Cruelty has a human heart,
And Jealousy a human face;
Terror the human form divine,
And Secresy the human dress.*

*The human dress is forged iron,
The human form a fiery forge,
The human face a furnace sealed,
The human heart its hungry gorge.*

I read and reread the words, a slow tear trickling down my cheek. I’ve always hated my demon side for what it’s done, what it represents. But I’ve always overlooked the flaws I carry as a human. I’ve been cruel. I’ve been jealous. Being human doesn’t make me humane. The words hint at self-destruction with no hope for salvation. Because humans are flawed, I am flawed, no matter how I look at it. I can only accept myself for who and what I am, good and bad. I can’t hold demons to a different standard than I do my own kind. Every element of evil that repulses me in demons can be found in humans as well.

I close the book and my eyes, and pray that someday I’ll see Kieron again and be able to make everything all right.

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Chapter 22. Lucky

I gulp down the tall glass of iced whiskey and reach for another.

“I hate seeing you like this,” Bones says from the seat beside me. “I don’t remember you *ever* being this depressed before. It’s ‘cause of him, isn’t it?”

I give him a look out of the corner of my eye. I don’t want to talk about Kieron, especially since he made me feel and look like *such* a fool. I still can’t believe I’d had all these ridiculous feelings for someone who’d only been using me. How stupid could I be to possibly think for even *one moment* Kieron was someone who actually cared about me? *The award for Dumbest Demion of the Year goes to...*

“I’m just glad I get to kill him next time I see him,” Bones finishes.

“You need to get in line behind me for that one,” I say, taking another sip. “But it’s not just him I’m mad at...I’m also pissed the Amazèa are too far outside my range for me to hunt them myself. Thanks to lame-ass Liora and her insistence at showing up at dawn...”

“Yeah... kinda hard to have such a limited time frame to work with, huh?”

I don’t say anything. I just stare at the back of Gyan’s head and think of poor Cody.

Bones casually leans his arm over the back of my chair. “I know you hate it when I say this, but I’ll say it anyway,” he continues, “I’m glad it’s him hunting the Amazèa and not you.”

I’m too drained inside to argue. “He’s not *hunting* them, he’s *saving* them,” I mutter. I gulp down the last of my drink and slam the glass on the counter.

“That’s pretty impressive, though, that he works for the Supreme Legionary. I’ve never met one of their bounty hunters before. I expected him to be...I dunno...bigger maybe.”

I pick up the fresh glass Gyan has set down and aimlessly swish it with my fingers as Bones babbles on. “I wonder what the Amazèa did, anyway. It must have been something pretty crazy for them to get a contract on their heads. I heard they were the ones responsible for killing a bunch of Sapies recently, but I don’t know why the Legionare would care about that. Doesn’t it make you feel any better that they’ll be punished, even if it is for something else?”

“No.”

“Think about it, Lucky...with the exception of the immortals, we’ll all die at some point. True, some of us live longer than others, but we’ll extinguish eventually, one way or another. If you kill the Amazèa now, where is their suffering? Where is their pain? It doesn’t seem they would be punished as much by dying as they would be if they were stripped of their powers and banished to the Wasteland for eternity. I mean, can you imagine anything worse?”

“Yes, I can,” I grumble.

Bones rolls his eyes. “Hurry up and finish so we can go outside. I want to talk with you about something.”

I glance around the sparsely populated Bar. “So talk.”

“Not here. We need privacy. Just finish,” he instructs, flashing a devastating smile. In spite of my supposed immunity to his demonic seductive powers, he still hasn’t lost the ability to charm me whenever he wants to. Drives me nuts.

I begrudgingly finish my drink and stand up. “After you,” I say, waving my arm with lavish flair.

Bones hops off his chair wearing a cocky grin and grabs my hand. I shouldn't be surprised at how pleasurable it feels having his fingers wrapped around mine, but I am. It's almost as if I'd forgotten how good Bones makes me feel... like being wrapped in a snug, familiar blanket. It's different than the way I felt when Kieron held me. With Kieron, I felt thrilled, alive, and totally at peace, all at once. With Bones, I just feel comforted—like a little girl who's fallen down and scraped her knee and is given ice cream and a kiss. Bones is my solace.

Hand in hand, we dodge through the narrow trees, sprinting deeper into the Faerie Forest. Bones is taking me to *his* private spot. He's brought me here several times before, yet I've never brought him to mine. No one has ever been there except me...and Kieron. Realizing this makes me feel even worse. I've allowed my sacred place to be spoiled by a traitor, but someone as awesome and loving as Bones has never been invited. I make a quick mental note to take him there soon.

Like my private grove, Bones' spot is high on a mountainside. But instead of being out in the open like mine is, Bones' lair is tucked away inside a cave. He easily tosses aside the enormous boulders covering the entrance as if they're tiny pebbles, and throws some logs in a pile. "Do you mind?" he asks with a coy grin.

I step forward and release a small reddish-orange stream of heat from my fingertips. The firepit casts a serene and inviting glow along the walls of the cave.

Bones sits down beside the fire and opens up his arms. I immediately nestle into them, my back to his chest, his body wrapped around me lovingly as he rests his chin on top of my head. Together, we stare at the flames as they sparkle and dance; I feel myself relaxing more and more within his soothing, hypnotic embrace.

He holds me quietly. His two hearts beat steadily on my back, and his warm breath tickles my neck and ears as he presses his cheek to the side of my head. I try to focus on how good Bones feels, instead of on the eternal torment I've suffered since Kieron's departure.

Bones had said he wanted to talk, but he doesn't say anything. The silence is nice, so peaceful and relaxing. I sit there in his arms, letting our heartbeats and breaths synchronize. At least an hour passes before either of us stirs.

"Lucky," he finally whispers into my ear. I angle my head slightly back towards him, and feel his hot breath on my cheek. "How long have we been friends?"

I smile, slightly puzzled. "I dunno...a while...twelve, thirteen years?"

"And in all that time, have you ever wondered if maybe we're supposed to be more to each other than just *friends*? I mean, I know right now you're going through some nasty stuff, but do you ever think you could feel the same way about me that you did for...*him*?" His voice is barely audible, but it sends shockwaves through my brain. My stomach flips and sinks.

"Bones," I sigh, snuggling deeper into his chest. "You don't know how badly I wish it could be you who was the one for me. So bad. So bad it hurts. I care about you so much..."

"So what is it, then? What's stopping you? Please tell me, because for the life of me I can't figure it out." He brushes my hair behind my ear and nuzzles my neck.

Why can't things ever be easy, just for *once*? Why can't he be who I want him to be? Why can't he be like Kieron?

I immediately shove the last wish away. *I don't want Kieron. Not anymore. Not after what he did.*

My mind knows it. Problem is, my heart doesn't want to listen.

“Bones...we have a good thing here, and I don’t want to lose you, *ever*. If we try to be something more and it doesn’t work out...”

“But why *wouldn’t* it work out? We’ve been great together all these years. We’ve been through so much, and we’re closer than ever. Why do you think that would suddenly go away if we became more serious? If I was yours and you were...mine. All...*mine*.” He gulps and I feel his hearts skip a few beats.

I tilt my face to his. Our eyes lock.

For a brief flash, I convince myself that the outside world doesn’t exist—that he won’t bed multitudes of other women, night after night, and gaze on them with the same sweet, loving and seductive eyes he’s showing me now. For a moment, I ignore the fact that he’ll only love half of me, and my neglected twin will always despise him.

Maybe this is the best I can hope for. Maybe I don’t get to have someone who can love all of me and have all of me love him back. Maybe that’s the deal. Maybe Bones really is the one I’m supposed to be with, and Kieron had only tricked me into thinking otherwise.

A moment of denial is all it takes.

Bones lowers his face to mine and kisses me with the gentle expertise of a skilled lover. I close my eyes, and, forgetting all the reasons why I shouldn’t, allow myself to succumb to his tender embrace.

Gently, he lays me on the ground, pillowing my head with his hand. He swiftly removes his black sweater, placing it under my head where his hand had been, then hoists himself on top of me. Our kisses come fast and furious. We’re headed for dangerous territory, but I don’t care. I stroke his silky soft skin, and nibble on his arms and neck.

He begins unfastening the hooks to my corset, one by one. As it falls aside, revealing my naked breasts, I feel no shame. hungrily, he feasts on

my arms, kissing and suckling every spot of skin as if it's the sweetest honey. His every touch sends shivers of fire up and down my spine, and when he loosens his pants and lets them fall, I know we've passed the point of no return.

He presses his naked body down on me, and I run my hands over his smooth, sculpted back. He kisses me deeper, brushing his fingers through my hair and delicately stroking my neck. My body is a blazing inferno, and even with my eyes closed, I see perfectly his exquisite face.

Slowly, his trail of kisses travels down my neck, between my breasts, and to my abdomen. He gently glides his hands up under my long dress, tickling the inside of my thighs with his fingertips. My body squirms and writhes with anxious anticipation. Never have I craved anything as badly as I crave him right now. My back arches, desperate to feel his skin on mine. His hands massage my hips as he kisses his way back up my body, each kiss deliberate and torturous. I eagerly await the feel of his mouth on mine again.

Finally, his hot breath reaches my neck, my face, and at last, my lips, as he devours me once more. The full skirt of my dress is still an uncomfortable barrier to what my body most desires, and as I start to lift it up, I hear the hypnotic suggestion in my ear.

"Say my name..."

"Kieron," my voice is a breathless whisper, "Kieron..."

He stops. My eyes open, and it takes another full second of staring at Bones' wounded expression before I fully comprehend what I've just done.

"No...wait, Bones...I didn't mean..."

"Yes, you did," he whispers dully. He looks away, and quickly pushes himself off me. His back pressed against the cave wall, he stares blankly at the fire.

I reach out to him, racked with guilt. “Bones...I’m so sorry...I don’t know why I said that...”

How did that just happen? Why did I say Kieron’s name?

He picks up his jeans and throws them on. Then he tosses a few small twigs in the pit and stares vacantly as the sparks fly. “You said the name of the one you most desire. The one you most wanted me to be.”

“But I don’t...*he’s not*...I don’t understand.”

He turns to face me, and I’m suddenly very aware that I’m still topless. “I don’t understand either,” he says quietly, “I thought for sure if you just let yourself open up to me that I would be the one...”

“Bones...”

“*Don’t*.” His voice is harder now. “You can fool yourself all you want to, but you can’t fool me. And as much as I want more than anything to be with you...to *really* be with you...I only want it if you feel the same way.”

I reach for my top, my hands shaking as I try to latch the row of tiny hooks. *Why do there have to be so many of them?* The awkwardness expands with each passing second as I search my brain for the right words. The problem is, there aren’t any.

“It’s okay,” Bones finally says. “Deep down I had a feeling you were still into him. I’ve never seen anyone affect you the way this guy has. But I had to try. If for no other reason than to make myself face the truth.”

I finally get my top on, and move closer to him. Bones’ magnificent beauty is enhanced even more by the dancing firelight, but the sadness in his eyes is unmistakable and gut-wrenching.

“Bones...” I reach out to him.

He gives me a wry smile and clasps my hand. “Sun’s coming up soon. You don’t want to be stuck out here with me...”

“I’m so sorry... I didn’t mean to hurt you...”

“You should go.”

“Bones...”

“Lucky, it’s okay. I don’t feel any different about you. You’re still the one thing in this world I care most about, and until the time comes when it is right for us to be together, I’ll wait for you. I’ll *always* be here, waiting for you. Because I know one day things will change, and you and I will be the ones who are meant for each other. One day it will be my name you say...”

“Bones...”

“Go now. I’ll see you later.” He gives my hand a gentle squeeze. There’s still plenty of time left before sunrise, but it’s obvious he wants to be alone.

I give him a quick hug and a peck on the cheek, saddened by how stiff and cold his body feels to me now. I can’t even bear to look into his distant eyes as I whisper “sorry” one last time before dashing off into the sanctuary of the forest.

Chapter 23. Liora/Lucky

“Hey, Liora...um, can I talk to you for a sec?” Corinne leans against the row of lockers and fidgets nervously with her necklace.

I let out a soft sigh. I’d managed to make it through yet another day of school, only because I had the quiet cemetery to look forward to later. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts and dead people who don’t judge me. As much as I genuinely like Corrine, I hope she’s not looking for us to have some more girly-bonding time, as this comes into direct conflict with my desire to retreat from the outside world completely.

But Corrine is the only one who’s never judged or criticized me for my antisocial behavior. If I lose her, I’ll have no one. And I don’t know if I’ll survive feeling even lonelier.

I slam my locker shut and force a smile. “Sure, what’s up?”

“Um, well, I was wondering if I could ask you for a small favor. Well, small for you but it would be huge for me...” She chews the side of her mouth and twists her hair around a plump finger.

“What is it?”

“I was wondering...*hoping*...that maybe you could help me with some problems I’m having in a couple of classes? You’re so brilliant; maybe you could explain a few things to me...I figured you were able to help Kieron, maybe you could help me?” She seems to be holding her breath waiting for my answer.

Inexplicably my mood brightens, despite hearing his name. Not much, but some, and I chuckle. “Sure...what do you need help with?”

She hangs her head as we make our way to the parking lot. I’ve long since stopped looking for Kieron’s truck, having accepted that he’s gone and never coming back.

“Well, it’s kinda embarrassing. I’m not doing all that great in math, but right now I’m failing history and English. I try the best I can, but my writing is terrible...I can’t remember all the stupid rules. And in history, I keep getting confused about who did what when, and why I should care. Math...that I just suck at, period. And don’t even get me started on chem.” She lets out a troubled sigh. “I’m just really scared ‘cause if I mess up too bad and don’t graduate...” She looks away, but not before I catch the glistening in her eyes.

“No prob...I can totally help you.” *Finally*. My useless brilliance might be good for something other than making the stupid teachers think they’ve actually taught me something.

“Really, you can? I mean, you will? That’s great!” Her voice is overflowing with relief. “I wish I could pay you for your time, but I don’t have any money. Maybe I could wash your car or clean your—”

I laugh so loud it surprises me. “Corinne, stop it. Don’t be silly. I’d love to help you, and you don’t have to pay me or do anything for me. The extra study would benefit me, too,” I lie.

She smiles wide, flashing her crooked teeth. “Wow, thank you *so much*. That’s so cool of you. Um...when are you free? I know nights don’t really work for you.”

“I’m free in the afternoons. I just need to be home by dark. So any days you want.”

The more I think about helping Corinne, the more I like the idea. I desperately need something...*anything*... to help occupy my mind and distract me from the endless hours of torment. Something to focus on other than...

“You wanna do it now? The library is open till six.”

“Sure.”

We stroll toward the circular building, and I can't help but think of the time I came here with Kieron. Will I ever be able to do anything again without thinking of him?

Corrine is an eager student, and listens to me carefully. As the afternoon progresses, I'm more and more amazed at how much I enjoy teaching her things...the feeling of satisfaction I get deep inside when she gives me that look of understanding. After she answers some complex math questions, I don't know who is more proud, her or me. And the gratitude in her eyes when our session is up...utterly priceless.

"Liora, I don't know how to thank you. You are *such* an amazing teacher. You explain everything in a way that actually makes *sense*. Already, I feel like I understand so much better. Maybe there's hope for me yet."

"Wanna do it again tomorrow?" I ask. The afternoon has flown by so quickly, I know I need to get going soon. But other than the days spent with Kieron, this was the best afternoon I'd had in a long time.

She bobs her head up and down eagerly. "Yes...I want to, *need to*... keep going, for as long as you're willing to help me. If I don't do well in my classes...if I don't graduate..." She drops her head.

Impulsively, I give her a hug. "You'll do fine...and I *promise* you'll graduate."

"I have to," she whispers under her breath. "It's the only way I'll ever get out of my house and out of this God-forsaken town."

"You can do it, Corinne. I know you can. And I'll help as much as you need."

"Liora, thank you...thank you so much. You really don't know what this means to me. You are saving my life. You...you're an angel."

I smile, her effusive praise making me feel strangely warm. I've never been on the receiving end of such gratitude before and it makes me feel good inside. Really good. It's nice to feel needed, and even better, to feel *appreciated*. To feel that I have a purpose.

"I'm no angel, but I'm happy to help. We'll do more tomorrow after class."

"Okay, great. Thanks again. See ya." She waves vigorously, heading toward her bus stop.

Automatically, I head into the woods, only remembering a mile or so into my trek that I'd driven to school today. I wish I had remembered sooner. It's getting dark earlier these days, and I'd stayed at school longer than I probably should have. If I don't hurry, I won't have time to eat dinner, and Lucky has definitely been consuming *way* too much alcohol lately; even more, I suspect, than is necessary for her to function properly. Every morning for the past two weeks I've awakened to Tatiana sitting by my side, pink hangover remedy in hand.

I weave through the trees, taking a short cut from my normal path. There's no distinctive trail to follow, but I know the way. As I tip-toe along some rocks across a small stream, I replay my afternoon with Corinne. I remember a conversation with Kieron and how, when he asked me what I wanted to do with my life, I hated that I had no clue what to tell him. Slowly, an idea begins to form.

Despite Tatiana's warnings, deep down I'd always assumed that my condition was only temporary, and that one day Lucky and I would wake up as one, reunited and back to our normal life, whatever that may be. And when that happened, I'd have the power to do *whatever* I wanted, *whenever* I wanted.

But as months have turned into years, I'm beginning to think that maybe this is just how things are going to be. I will be an ordinary human for the rest of my life. Well, *almost* ordinary.

I need a new game plan. Instead of biding my time waiting to die, I need to find a way to do something with my life that makes me happy. Really happy. Like tutoring. Maybe one day I can even become a teacher. That might work—teachers only work during the day time, and I really like little kids. Since I'll never be able to have any of my own, maybe teaching will be something I might like...something I can do.

I'm nearing the final bend, close to the cabin. Lost in happy thoughts for my future, I nearly jump out of my skin when I hear a sharp *CRACK* behind me. I freeze mid-step and spin around, searching...listening.

Nothing. Silence.

Must be an animal, I tell myself, and continue walking.

A few seconds later, I hear the sound again, louder...closer. *Those were definitely footsteps*. And no one is supposed to be out here. My heart races as I look in every direction.

"Hello?" I call out in a shaky voice. Maybe it's poachers, looking for game. I don't want to get shot by accident, and maybe if they know someone else is out here, they'll leave. But after a few moments of silence I decide I'm just being paranoid. It's probably just a deer, or maybe a large raccoon.

The sun is approaching its final bow in the hazy sky, and I estimate I have about half an hour left. I need to get home quickly and get some food in me, so I ignore the uneasy feeling in my gut and continue on my way. But after only a few steps the loud, distinctive crunching sounds again...right behind me.

I jump and turn around, adrenaline pumping through my veins. Then I freeze in disbelief, my eyes wide. Slowly, I bring one hand over my mouth, while the other reaches out to touch the person before me.

“Liora, I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to scare you.” His voice is as tender and melodic as I remember. He steps closer and wraps his arms around my waist.

“Kieron...is it really you? You’re back?” I ask stupidly, flinging my arms around his neck. “I thought you had gone away forever and I was never going to see you again...that you didn’t want me...” I climb up on my tip toes and bury my face in the scruff of his neck. He hasn’t shaved and his skin is coarse against my cheeks, but the musky scent is intoxicating. A mixture of earth and air.

He wraps his arms tighter around me, and I let myself melt in his embrace. I’ve imagined countless times how it would feel to see him again, but even my wildest fantasies hadn’t come close to the euphoria of this moment. I pull back enough to gaze at his gorgeous face.

“I’m sorry, I had to leave for a while...and...” His eyes glisten with hope.

He leans in and kisses me sweetly on my lips. They burn with desire for more.

“But where *were* you? Why were you gone for so long?” I ask after several kisses. As much as I love the feel of his mouth on mine, I need some answers. Fast.

“I had a job to do. A very important job...I’m sorry, it ended up taking a lot longer than I thought it would, and I wasn’t sure...” Stress and fatigue show on his face, and his normally crystal-blue eyes are bloodshot and weary.

“But you’re back now?” I can barely contain my elation.

“Sorta, the job isn’t exactly finished yet.” He sits down and pulls me beside him. “Liora, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, I know, but I don’t have much time left.” I glance at the darkening sky, trying not to be worried by his serious tone. After all, if he had wanted nothing more to do with me, why would he have come back? Would he return just to tell me we’re through?

“Liora...” He squeezes my hand. “Do you have any idea where I went? What I was doing?”

I shake my head. Of course I’d asked Tatiana if she knew anything, but getting information from her was like squeezing blood from a rock. I’d even gone so far as to write Lucky a note asking if she knew where Kieron had gone. She’d scribbled, “*That lying, traitorous dirtbag is dead to us. Forget you ever knew him.*” But I didn’t think I should mention that part to him just yet.

“No, I just...figured...you know, since I told you I never wanted to see you again...well, that maybe you actually *listened*. Although I didn’t mean it...” I add hurriedly.

He places his hand under my chin and looks into my eyes. “Nothing... nothing could be further from the truth. I hate how we left things between us, and I haven’t stopped thinking about you for one moment. But we’ll get to that later...right now I *do* need to tell you what I was doing.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

His face is grim as he stands up. “We can’t do it here. I have to take you somewhere. It’s a risk...a big one, but one I have to take.”

“Take me where? Kieron, I don’t have much time left, if there’s something you need to say...”

“We can talk more when we get there. I need you *and* Lucky there. I’m not sure she’d be as cooperative, so I need you to come with me.”

My heart pounds. Why is he being so mysterious? Is he just using me? Lying to me again? And why wouldn’t Lucky listen to him? The idea of him going through me to get to her makes me extremely uncomfortable.

I press my lips together and frown. “So let me get this straight: you want to take me somewhere so that when Lucky wakes up, *she’ll* be there?”

He nods emphatically. “Yes, and we must go *now* if we hope to make it in time.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “Clearly, you’re not aware of the ginormous massive flaw in this little plan of yours. I’m pretty positive she won’t like that one little bit, *especially* if she’s already mad at you—which I’m under the impression she is. It’s really not a good idea to get her angry. I really like you and would hate to see anything horrible happen to you—”

“I need *both* of you there, please...We don’t have much time. Please,” he repeats, looking past my eyes and into my soul. “Please, *trust me*.”

“I trust you,” I whisper.

With that, he whisks me off my feet and cradles me in his arms as if I’m a baby. I feel tiny and weightless in his powerful grip.

“Hold on to my neck. I won’t let you go, but it will be easier if your arms are safely out of the way.” I lock my arms around him the same way I had with Bones.

We dash away at a dizzying speed until the forest becomes nothing but a greenish blur. I don’t want to even think what would happen if we should crash or if he should trip. I close my eyes tight, but even though I’m completely dependent on Kieron for my life, I’m not afraid. I never feel safer than when I am in his arms.

He runs—if you could call it running—for several minutes—through the forest, over mountains, down a deep valley. I open my eyes once, long enough to see that we’re somewhere in Thiberoux, but the landscape doesn’t look familiar... not that I’d be able to tell, the way the scenery is whizzing by.

Finally, Kieron slows his breakneck pace, gradually coming to a halt. He sets me down gently and places his arm around my waist to keep me steady on my wobbly legs.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah, but I think my liver and spleen are still back there somewhere.”

He smiles. I take a quick look around and almost wish I’d kept my eyes closed. Gone are the lush trees and shrubs that populate my homeland. All I see is miles and miles of sickly yellow dirt and piles of rocks. There is no sign of life anywhere; even the air is dry and stale.

During our mad run, I’d been too worried about the suicidal speed we were travelling to give much thought to where we were travelling *to*. But I’d assumed it would be *somewhere*. This vast, barren desert is *nowhere*...as if we’d fallen off the ends of the earth and landed in one of those creepy, post-apocalyptic TV shows on the Sci-Fi channel.

“Where are we?” I whisper, not sure I want to hear the answer. This place is beyond depressing. I’m glad it’s almost time for me to fall asleep; I don’t like being here.

“We’re in Thiberoux, but not Dryndara,” he says, confirming my suspicions. This place...it’s very special and carefully shielded from outsiders.”

“Why? It’s not exactly prime real-estate; it’s just creepy and barren. I’m pretty sure I speak for all humans *and* demons when I say no one will be

lining up to visit here anytime soon.”

“This place serves a very important function. Inside those caves are rooms for holding fugitives and other demonic prisoners for transport to the underworld kingdom.”

Suddenly I feel nauseous. And very afraid. “Why are we here?” I demand, not even trying to hide the panic in my voice. “Why did you bring me here?”

I was wrong...I was totally wrong about him. I am so sorry, Lucky...this was all a trap for you.

Kieron tries to hold my hand, but I yank it away. “Liora, don’t be afraid...” he says, pleading with his eyes.

“It’s a little too late for that. You brought me here so you could trap Lucky, didn’t you?” The corners of my eyes well up, but I refuse to cry. I’m *done* crying because of Kieron; I simply have no more tears left.

He motions to a pile of rocks blocking what looks like the entrance to a cave. “I have the Amazèa locked up in there.”

“You...*what?*” My whole body begins to tremble. This is even worse than I’d imagined, and I pray it’s just some sick joke... but why would he want to terrify me?

Please, please don’t tell me those murderous monsters are really this close, and here I am, exposed and vulnerable...human.

“Liora, don’t be afraid. They can’t harm you. They won’t harm anyone ever again, I promise you. You’re safe.”

I look into his eyes seeking reassurance, and find it there. But my voice is still shaking. “Why did you bring me here?” I ask softly

He reaches out to me again, and this time I don’t flinch from him. His touch is comforting, calming. “Liora, I need to talk to you, and we don’t have much time. It is important that you speak with me openly and

honestly. It is of the *utmost* importance that you do... both of our lives might depend on it.”

“Okay, I’ll try...” I whisper, still staring into his eyes, the one place I feel safe.

“No matter how hard or painful it is for you, please tell me the truth.”

“Okay, I promise...”

He takes a deep breath. “Do you agree with Lucky that it is *she* who must kill the Amazèa in order for you to reunify as one entity?”

“I...I’m not sure *what* will happen to us if she kills them. But I want them dead for what they did. No one else can or will do it...” I look away, unable to hold his intense gaze.

He gently tilts my chin back to him. “But what if someone else *does* do it? What if they were punished for what they did to you and Lucky and your friends?”

“It’s...there’s more than just that. I do think Lucky has to be the one to kill them for us to have a chance to undo what happened to us. It’s the only way we know that might work...”

“But there is no guarantee, correct? Say she does kill them and nothing changes between you two. Then what?” His eyes search mine.

I take a step back from him and brush my hair off my face. “I don’t know...we just have to live with it I guess...I mean, I never thought it would be forever, but if that’s how it is...I...we just have to learn to live with it, I guess.”

“But are you aware of the fact that if you—*she*—does kill them, she will be in violation of Order 417.74 that states no demon or demion may attack a higher ranked demon or demion without sanctioned provocation or legal ordinance or they, too, shall be stripped of their powers and banished to the Wasteland?”

I furrow my brow. “I haven’t exactly studied up on the demon legal handbook. Look, I’m about to fall asleep so whatever you need to know, ask me now.”

He takes a step closer, and wraps one arm around me, while tracing the side of my cheek with his other hand. “Liora,” he whispers. “What I really need to know...forgetting all the craziness around us right now...Do you think you and I...do you think someday...you might ever be able to love me?”

I stay lost in the depths of his gaze as the familiar burning returns. Here I am safe. Here I am secure, whole, and warm. Here I feel his unspoken love for me radiate to the depths of my soul.

“I already do,” I whisper. My last conscious memory is of his warm lips on mine.

He moves away quickly, but not quickly enough. I grab his throat and hiss, “And just what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

I throw him towards the rocks with all my might. The shattered boulders crash to the ground, but Kieron simply stands up and brushes himself off—unhurt, and clearly unfazed, judging from the cocky smile on his face.

“Hello, Lucky.”

“Don’t ‘*hello Lucky*’ me,” I snarl, building a firestorm in my palms.

“Wait, wait...don’t shoot, I come in peace,” he says with a smile, holding up both of his arms.

“Very funny. Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?” I look around at the unpleasant scenery. This place gives me the creeps; it reminds me too much of the hideous Wasteland the Altrumina sent me to. “And where the hell are we?”

“I brought Liora here so I could show you something. I didn’t think I could get you to come with me willingly.” He eyes my flickering palms, waiting for me to unleash their fury. “And I see I was right.”

“You have about five seconds to tell me what is going on before I fry you to a crisp.” My eyes narrow in anger, but even I don’t believe my hollow threat. The harder I try to deny my deep pleasure at seeing him again, the hotter and more volatile the conflict within me rages.

He cocks an eyebrow and beckons me to him. “I have something for you.” He starts tossing aside the boulders that aren’t already smashed, and when he’s made a big enough opening, motions for me to follow him through.

I stay put, and eye him suspiciously. “What’s in there? Do you really think I’m going to just follow you into some creepy cave like an idiot?” I don’t like the feel of this place, and I like his arrogant attitude even less.

“Why don’t you try not hating me for a minute and trust me instead?”

I laugh. “Yeah, sure, I’ll get right on that. Right after I join a convent and marry a goat.”

He stops and turns around, forcing his steely gaze on mine. “Lucky, I know you think I betrayed you. I brought you here so I could prove I didn’t. But if you’re too pigheaded to see what is plain as day...”

“And what is that?”

He sighs deeply. “That I care about you. That I am trying to help you. And that I believe in you...and us.”

He believes in me? What the hell does he mean by that?

“I don’t remember asking for your help,” I retort. But the fire in my hands is already beginning to subside, and try as I might, I’m having difficulty holding on to my anger. When I look into Kieron’s eyes, sincerity

stares back...and something about his smile is like cold water on my smoldering rage.

“What’s in there?” I motion toward the opening, but stay where I am. It goes against all my instincts to let myself get into a situation where I don’t have complete control over my surroundings. And this place is just too weird...the energy is unsettling and all wrong.

“In there is a cage surrounded by the strongest, most impenetrable magical shield known to demonkind. And in that cage are the Amazèa.”

I gasp. “*What?* Why are they here...why did you bring me here...?” I reach down for my dagger before I remember I don’t have it. *Damn, Liora, what have you gotten us into?*

“So you could kill them,” he says.

My eyes narrow again, and my heart begins to race as I slowly straighten back up. I stare at him for a long time, trying to discern if he’s lying...setting a trap. Maybe he’s just trying to trick me into going in there, and something really horrible is waiting for me. Maybe what he’d said before about coming to kill me...maybe he’s following through on those plans. But now he knows I’m strong...that I’ll fight back. So he’s devised a ruse to deceive me into believing he—

“Lucky...” Kieron’s voice is gentle, but I take a few steps away from him. “I know it’s not in your nature to trust...to believe in the goodness of others. But I’m asking you to try. Everything I’ve told you...everything I said to you that first night at the cliffs and every night since, well, I meant all of it. *Every word.* I never knew it would be possible for me to find another demion I’d care about so much. One I would want to spend the rest of my life with. One I could actually love and who was capable of loving me back. Someone I couldn’t imagine my life without.”

“Why are you telling me this? It doesn’t change the fact that—”

"I'm telling you this, because I made the deal to turn in the Amazèa in exchange for my freedom. But I only want that freedom if it means being able to have a life with you. Without you, my freedom won't mean anything. Not if you hate me..."

"What are you saying?" I whisper, inching toward him.

"I'm saying...I brought the Amazèa here for you to kill. I know you cannot hunt them outside your boundaries, so I brought them to you. If you want to kill them, you are free to do so. I won't interfere."

I pause. "But...but what about your contract?"

"I will have failed in upholding my end of the bargain, therefore I'll be bound to the Legionary for whatever purposes and for however long they see fit." His jaw slackens, and his shoulders droop slightly.

I pace back and forth like a nervous rabbit. "So, you're saying that you'd give up your freedom...so that I could kill them?"

He nods. "It's not much of a choice really. I want you. But more than just that, I want you to be *happy*. To be whole. To be who you want to be and whoever it is you were *meant* to be. I don't want to be the one who stands in the way of that. If you must kill the Amazèa in order for that to happen, then I am more than willing to sacrifice my freedom for it. I'll do it happily and without reservation."

I narrow my eyes as I stare at him, trying to decide if he's telling the truth. "But...what about the Legionary? Won't you be forced to report me?"

He shakes his head. "You're well aware of the repercussions of your actions, but I also know that your revenge on the Amazèa is not simple blood lust. I won't report you, nor will I participate in the hunt for you if there is one. I understand what you must do..." His voice trails off.

"I don't know if you can ever fully understand how I feel...I don't think you can," I mutter.

“They killed my mother. In front of me. I’ve wanted to tear them apart with my bare hands for the past eleven years. The only thing that stopped me was the opportunity to finally put all that anger and hate behind me and trade their freedom for mine.”

He puts his head down and looks at me through lowered lashes. “I want you to know that whatever you decide to do, I’m with you on it. If you go in there and kill them, I won’t report you. Or, if you decide to let their punishment lie in the hands of the Legionary, then I’ll do my best to help you deal with that decision, also. I know you’ve been planning for this day for a long time, so I want you to take some time to think it over. But know that I’ll be here for you in whatever capacity—”

“I don’t need to think about it. Take me to them. Now.”

Chapter 24. Lucky

Kieron nods his head silently. He enters the dark cave as I follow close behind. Once we're both inside, he snaps his fingers several times, each time igniting a small, singular flame from one of his fingertips. The flickering light reveals a long, twisting tunnel. Sharp grey rocks jut menacingly at every turn, and I shiver in the unnaturally icy cold. I wonder how Kieron managed to drag two of the strongest, most powerful demons in existence down here by himself, or if indeed, this isn't some elaborate hoax after all.

My agitation increases with every step. For so many years I've longed for this moment, and now that it's finally here, my stomach is churning with anticipation and dread. This isn't exactly how I'd pictured my showdown with the Amazèa unfolding; nevertheless, it will end the same way. I will have my revenge. Justice for Kayla and Michael.

We travel deeper into the cave, until Kieron finally halts. "You're almost there. They're right around the next turn."

"Aren't you coming?" I ask, suddenly fearful and trying not to let it show. It's not being hurt by the Amazèa that I'm afraid of; it's being alone with the monsters whose faces have haunted me for so long.

He shakes his head, the light from his fingers casting an eerie glow on his handsome face. "No. This is for you and you alone. The cage's shield only works one way, so your powers will be able to penetrate it; theirs will not. I'll be waiting outside for you when you're...done."

"Thank you," I whisper, hating the way my voice trembles. I look in Kieron's eyes one last time as he brushes past me and disappears into the darkness. I almost call out to him; I don't want him to leave me here all alone.

But I say nothing. He's right. This next step is for me and only me. Despite all my rage and bravado, I'm scared—terrified I won't have the strength to do what I've vowed to do.

I take a deep breath, and the cool air fills my lungs. Opening my palms, I let my own dancing fire guide the rest of my journey. I force my legs forward one step at a time, and with each step my heart thumps heavier. At last, I round the narrow corner and my breath catches in my throat.

The small orb has an orange glow and emits a faint electric hum. Several interlocking circles rotate continuously around the outside, and standing in the middle, holding hands and smiling sweetly, are the two Amazèa demons.

Nausea floods over me in waves. I stagger to a wall. I lean against it until my knees buckle and I slide to the floor. I can't blink, and for a long moment, can't breathe. How many times have I imagined seeing their bright, angelic faces...their big blue eyes, like innocent school girls...their long golden hair cascading down their childish bodies. The two deadliest creatures I've ever known in my life, and they resemble the sweetest, the most perfect visions of innocence and youth...the very things they live to steal from others and to absorb within themselves.

I take several deep breaths and attempt to compose myself. Despite the chill of the cave my skin is on fire, my insides a raging inferno of hate. These demons not only destroyed my friends, but my innocence and my sanity. They literally shattered my soul, reducing the broken pieces to empty, pitiful shells.

Because of them, I hate my human half for causing me to care so deeply for Michael and Kayla in the first place. The pain of losing someone you love is the worst torture imaginable, and these monsters have been torturing me for years...

Ironically, my human half hates *me* for being of the same vein as these creatures—ones capable of this much destruction and heartache.

Deep down, I know we're both at fault. And neither of us is to blame.

I glare at the monsters in their glowing orange cage, and they eye me curiously. I wonder if they know who I am or why I'm here. My face is like stone as my eyes bore into their enchanted prison. Why don't they seem bothered? Why are they just standing there contentedly, smiling and looking around as if they don't have a care in the world?

Suddenly, they grab hands and start dancing in a circle, singing a child's nursery rhyme.

*"Ring around the rosey, pocket full of posey,
Ashes, ashes, they all fall down!"*

On the last word, they collapse in a fit of giggles and playful screams. Everything they do, designed to torment and mock me.

They know who I am.

The rage burning inside me threatens to erupt. But I force myself to remain still, motionless. I sit on the cave floor and just watch them as they repeat their act again and again, dancing and singing and laughing hysterically as if they're the happiest little girls who ever lived. They repeatedly flash cherubic, dimpled smiles in my direction as I glower at them, fireballs in hand.

The time has come to do what I need to do. And once I do it, there's no turning back...my fate will be sealed. Bracing myself against the cave wall, I slowly rise to my feet and lift my arms.

Suddenly, Tatiana's face flashes in my mind. I think of how she'd found me in the woods as an infant after I'd been abandoned and left alone to die. Of how she took me in, cared for me, raised me, and gave me everything,

and more, that I could ever hope for. She's more than a guardian—she's a friend.

I glance at the Amazèa again and back down to the swirling fire in my palms. I see Bones, my dearest friend and companion. I don't know what the future holds for us, but I do know I never want to see him get hurt. It's bad enough I've already hurt his feelings, but I know someday he'll forgive me and things will be good again. I *cannot* let him get physically hurt because of me. I have to protect him —protect him from defending me, which he undoubtedly would, if I become a target of the Legionary for my crimes.

My heart racing, I slowly lower my hands to my sides as the Amazèa dance and sing happily. I swallow the bile rising up the back of my throat.

There's Liora. She's a part of me. Her humanity, a hindrance and a strength. As much as I hate her sometimes, I know it's only her ability to feel love that allows me to experience it myself...an intoxicating sensation I know I never want to be without. True, when it's bad, it's really bad. But when it's good, it's *really* good. And if killing the Amazèa *doesn't* lift the curse, Liora will be hanging around for a while. As long as she's alive, she's vulnerable. Therefore, I'm vulnerable. She'd never survive a life on the run.

Finally, Kieron. As much as I desperately craved hearing his words of love, I can hardly believe they're real—that *he's* actually real. He who fits me so perfectly, who is my exact match in every way, and makes me feel like a better version of myself. He who makes me feel so alive after years of feeling dead inside. He who sees *me*—really sees me—with all my flaws, but is still here anyway. He who is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for me and my happiness.

My arms go slack and the flames on my palms subside.

This isn't just about me anymore.

Michael and Kayla—as much as I loved them—are gone forever. Nothing will bring them back. The love between us can now serve as my compass...my guide.

I slowly realize my criteria for achieving happiness has changed. Even if I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that killing the Amazèa would reunify Liora and me, we'd never be whole. Not if it meant losing all the people dearest to us.

Michael and Kayla taught me that.

I glance at the smiling faces of their killers for the last time. Then I turn and head toward the darkened corridor, never once looking back. The balls of fire on my hands are now reduced to tiny flames on my fingertips, showing me the way out.

Kieron sits on a rock, staring off into the vast wasteland. He's made a small fire, the only light in the otherwise gloomy night. His mouth is set in a hard line, his jaw clenched. I can see he's bracing himself for what I'm about to tell him.

He doesn't flinch as I sit beside him. I reach out, and immediately his soft hand surrounds mine. Finally, he turns to look at me, and the love in his eyes wraps around my heart. Without the faintest hint of judgment or condemnation, he searches my face for clues.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He swallows. "For what?" he asks hoarsely.

I lean closer to him. "For believing in me."

His eyes sparkle, and a small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. He places one hand behind my head, pulling me to him. The sweet reunion of our lips douses the last embers of hate raging within me.

"I believe in us," he whispers in my ear.

He rises to his feet, pulling me with him. “I have to go now. Finish this once and for all. My contract expires at dawn.”

I almost laugh. “Good thing you’re not cutting it close or anything.”

He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me close for another kiss. I don’t want him to move, I don’t want him to leave my arms, not now, not ever. But I know I have to let him go this one last time.

I know it’s okay. He’ll be back for me.

For *us*.

The End

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Prologue

It's cliché to say it's always darkest before the dawn, but in my case it's true. There is a brief window of time, just before I wake, when I am not *Me*, and she is not *Her*. We are together as one, unified in our blissful state of unconsciousness.

Sometimes this sleep lasts for a few seconds; other times, a few hours. It is during this time that we exist in harmony, slumbering away our fears, hostilities, our mutual disdain and resentment of each other. It is during this time that we have a few fleeting moments of peace. Because for more than five years, it has been *only* during this time that we are together as we should be. As we were meant to be.

It is also during this time that we can dream of him...remember the way he held us, kissed us, looked into our eyes and filled us with such love.

The memory of loving and being loved by Kieron is the one thing she and I now share, along with the unbearable pain we've silently suffered since he's been gone.

Now, we also share the soul-crushing fear that he's never coming back to us.

And we are more damned than ever.

Chapter 1. Lucky

I don't know what it is about strip clubs that seems to draw the nastiest types of demons, but for some reason they're attracted like stink on fish. To be honest, I'm not sure which is worse—the soul sucking Lazerines who work these places, or the scummy human men who frequent them. I swear, if one more grubby Sapie asks me for a lap dance I'm going to rip his thing right off.

“Hey, sexy, want some company?” asks a middle-aged Sapie wearing a rumpled business suit. Apparently my disgusted glare isn't enough to dissuade him as he moves to the empty chair beside me and, without waiting for my reply, begins to sit down.

I roll my eyes and swish my hand, causing the chair to fly out from beneath him. He falls hard on his backside, spilling his overpriced cocktail all over his cheap suit. A few patrons glance in our direction, but quickly return their gazes to the center of the room. They are far more interested in the scantily clad girls moving seductively on the raised stage beneath the pulsating lights than some clumsy drunken fool.

The cheesy voice of the club DJ rings out over the loudspeakers. “And now get those dollar bills ready and help us welcome the very lovely Serenity to the stage.”

Hoots and catcalls sound as a slender brunette wearing a miniscule skirt and bikini top sashays out from behind the thick velvet curtain. She begins her seductive routine, rolling her hips, swishing her hair, and spinning herself around a tall, metal pole. As she grabs the pole and bends backward, letting her long hair fall free, I catch the distinctive markings on her back under the flash of the strobe lights.

To anyone else they look like tattoos, but I know better. They are the Mark of the Lazerine... powerful female demons who control men's minds through lust and desire. Only the Prince of Darkness knows how many countless Sapies have lost their house payments and kid's college funds under their spell. Not like I care about that, but Lazerines are loathsome creatures who are particularly satisfying to kill. And right now I could definitely use some satisfaction.

I take a few sips of my Jack Daniels and stand up, careful not to trip over Mr. Mid-Life Crisis struggling to get off the floor. As I make my way to the stage, I retrieve a fistful of bills from my inside my bra. Lazerines are addicted to money and use their powers to drain their victims dry. The money will keep her distracted. Otherwise she might realize that I'm a demon, and I am so *not interested* in a public brouhaha tonight. I'll kill her clean and easy, in the VIP room where there are no witnesses. None who will be paying any attention to me, that is.

The room of men turn to gawk as soon as I start laying dollars down on the stage, their faces aglow with carnal pleasure. Of course they love it... this is their best fantasy right here. I'm by far the most beautiful girl they've ever seen, and Sapie men are *such* suckers for a little girl-on-girl action.

I wonder if they'd still be so turned on if they knew I was planning to rip her heart out in a few minutes.

"Hi, beautiful," the Lazerine purrs in my ear as I lay down a row of five-dollar bills in front of her.

"Can I get a VIP dance with you when you're done?" I ask as she rubs her face against my cheek in appreciation.

"I'd love to. It starts at one hundred dollars." She reaches for the money and slips it into the side of her tiny pink G-string.

“Not a problem.” I flash another thick stack of bills under her nose. Her eyes glow brightly before giving way to a smug smile.

“I’ll be right back, darling.” She collects the rest of her tips before prancing off the stage.

I return to my table and signal the waitress to bring me another drink while I wait. When she returns, I take several sips of my Jack Daniels and let out a long sigh. My heart just isn’t in the game anymore. There was a time when I loved nothing more than slaying unsuspecting demons—if not for fun, for the practice. All so I could keep my human half, Liora, protected from harm, and to make sure I was ready to face the Amazèa when it came time for our final reckoning. But of course, that didn’t go as I’d planned.

I’ve had more than my share of second thoughts since that night in the cave when Kieron took me to face the Amazèa—the demons responsible for killing my closest friends and splitting my soul in half. I had a decision to make...I could kill them, but I would lose Kieron forever. Or, I could let him turn them in to the Legionare and we could be together.

I still blame Liora for whatever emotional insanity swayed me to choose a life with Kieron over killing the Amazèa like I’d always planned. Many nights, I wonder if I made the right choice.

It would be so much easier if Kieron would return so I can look into his eyes again...feel his lips on mine...to give me a reason to remember *why* I’d chosen him. Why I’d chosen *us*. But he’s been gone for over two months, and now I’m starting to wonder if he’s *ever* going to come back. And the more I wonder, the sicker and angrier I feel.

In the meantime, I have to do something to keep myself from going completely crazy. If it’s killing some low-level Lazerines in a seedy strip

club outside of Fairfax, Virginia, then so be it. A demon's gotta do what a demon's gotta do.

"I'm ready when you are," the unsuspecting Lazerine whispers in my ear as she comes up beside me. I take a quick swig of my drink and flash her a smile as I rise to my feet.

Together we enter the glass doors and head to a darkened corner. "You're so pretty," she coos as she leads me toward a couch in the back. "What's your name?"

I sneak my hand down into my thigh-high boot and remove my emerald dagger.

"They call me Lucky."

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"Cuttin' it kinda close, aren't you Lucky girl? You don't have much time until sunrise in Sapie land. Don't want your better half showing up and making a scene." Bones laughs and rubs my leg affectionately. Scowling, I elbow him in the ribs and take another drink.

"Last one and I'm outta here," I say, and spin my barstool around. Demon Bar, the place where all demions, demons, and creatures in Dryndara come to replenish off the Source Energy, is nearly empty. Most of its usual occupants are off preparing for their lives in the human world, just as I should be doing. But the nagging sense that something is wrong has been plaguing me for many nights now, and gotten much worse over the past several hours. I just needed a quick stop off at the Bar on my way home, and a chance to chat with my best friend, Bones.

Things had been pretty weird between us for a while, so I'm glad we seem to be getting back to normal. I hated the awkward tension between us. But it was my fault, I suppose. In a moment of weakness, I'd given in to his



irresistible charms and almost allowed myself to be seduced by him in his mountainside lair. If it wasn't for the fact that, in my euphoria, I'd said Kieron's name instead of Bones', who knows what would have happened?

Actually, *I* know what would have happened: We would have made love, it would've been *amazing*, and my feelings for Bones would be more confused than ever. If I think I'm emotionally unstable now, I can just imagine how I'd feel if I let myself fall for him. It's bad enough that Kieron just abandoned me. But to watch Bones leave me every night to make love to other human girls—many other human girls...*forever*—well, that's a recipe for self-inflicted torture if there ever was one.

But there are times, despite my intense feelings for Kieron, I still can't help but wonder what it would be like to be with Bones. To really be *with* him. To run my fingers through his luscious bronze hair and lose myself in the depths of his coffee-colored eyes. To feel his intoxicating energy flow through me and succumb to his delicious masculinity. When Bones looks at me, really looks me, I feel like I'm softly melting under his gaze. If he was a drug, I'd be addicted.

*Just say no, Lucky.*

Things had been awkward between us for a while. But with Kieron being gone so long, we've started to ease back into our normal routine. Our playing and flirting has almost reached "pre-Kieron" levels. As I catch Bones' gaze, I can't help but wonder if he hopes Kieron never returns, just as much as I desperately hope he will.

I swallow the last sip of my drink and lean over to give him a light peck on the cheek as I stand up. "Bye, sweetie, see you tomorrow."

He rises to his full height and wraps his arms around me, smothering me in his gentle warmth. "Later, Lucky love."

Once outside, I sprint across the Bridge of Kings, barely glancing at the churning river of fire below. Upon reaching the other side I let out a sharp whistle. Almost immediately, my black stallion emerges from his hidden spot deep in Dryndara's forest. I leap onto his back and lean forward, clutching a fist of his onyx mane.

"Home, Diablo."

I pause outside the cabin, half-hoping Tatiana is in her room busy making a potion or casting a spell...anything that'll prevent her from seeing me and giving me a hard time about my night.

"Greetings, Lucky. May I presume you stopped by the Bar on your way home?" Tatiana asks as I walk through the door. I roll my eyes and sigh. *Of course* she's waiting for me...when is she not?

But I play it cool. I walk over and give her a pat on her back. Five inches shorter than me, older by who knows how many years, and sitting on the floor in the lotus position with her eyes closed, my beloved guardian looks no more threatening than an ordinary housefly. But I know better. Tatiana is one of, if not *the*, most powerful witches around. A mere utterance from her lips, or a well-designed potion of her making can cause effects even I can't believe a mere mortal can create.

"Sorry, had to talk to Bones." I give her shoulder a light squeeze.

"May I presume Liora will be needing some of my remedy when she wakes up?" she asks, opening one opaque eye to fixate it firmly on me. Although she's completely blind, Tatiana has a way of seeing things. *Too many things*.

"She might need a few sips," I admit, not guiltily. Why should I feel bad about who I am and what I need? It's not *my* fault my human half can't handle it.

“Any particular reason you drank so close to sunup?” Tatiana asks, this time with both eyes open.

I avoid her gaze and head to my room. “I had a nasty encounter with a Lazerine earlier,” I call out over my shoulder. “Didn’t realize she had several friends with her. Took a lot of energy to take them all out and then put a forgetting spell on all the Sapies there. Was kind of a pain, actually.”

Tatiana doesn’t respond, and I let out a deep breath. *Good*. Maybe she won’t be angry with me. Perching myself on the edge of Liora’s four-poster bed, I carefully remove my steel-tipped boots, then stand to peel off my tan leather pants, noticing some ash marks left by one of the Lazerine demons.

I sigh and brush them away, annoyed with myself. This is what happens when I get distracted—I get sloppy. Their attack had caught me off guard. Fortunately, I was able to rip out their power sources and reduce them all to dust, but not before freaking out a whole throng of witnesses. Not exactly how I planned my night to go. But it’s hard to stay focused when I’m worried.

*Where is Kieron? Why hasn’t he returned by now?*

As the familiar blackness creeps in around me, my last conscious thought is that I’ll never see him again. And I gave up my only opportunity to fix my broken soul for nothing.

## Chapter 2. Liora

*Aww, man, she did it again.*

My head spins as I struggle to sit up, and I wrap the blanket around my shivering, aching body. “Tattie?”

The moment the weak cry leaves my mouth I notice the pink-tinged water concoction beside my bed. *Thank you, Tat*, I silently praise my guardian. I reach over and eagerly gulp it down, grateful not to have to suffer the consequences of another one of Lucky’s late-night drinking binges.

As I empty the glass, my body eases back to normal and my mind clears. Instantly, my thoughts return to *him*.

Kieron.

My heart brightens, but my mouth falls into a frown. Will today be the day he comes back? As much as I desperately hope so, a bigger part of me feels I’m setting myself up for more disappointment. If Kieron doesn’t come back to me today, then this will be day sixty-three of his absence. Sixty-three long, painfully lonely, confusing, and heart-wrenching days. It feels like sixty-three *years*.

“Good morning, Liora dear. How did you sleep?” Tatiana greets me as I amble out for breakfast. I ignore the plate of blueberry pancakes she’s set out and head straight for the pot of freshly-brewed coffee. Although her remedy worked wonders, as usual, my stomach is still uncomfortably clenched at the knowledge that Kieron is not outside my front door waiting for me.

“Fine,” I mumble and sip the piping hot beverage. There’s been an uneasy truce between me and my demon half lately, and I know Tatiana is grateful for this. I’d hate to burden her with any more of my problems.

I force myself to go through the morning routine one step at a time, like everything else these days. The thought of facing a whole day without seeing Kieron is downright unbearable, so I just concentrate on one minute at a time. After a quick shower and a lazy brush through my long hair, I give Tatiana a kiss goodbye and head out. I hate that I can't stop from automatically glancing around to see if by any miracle, Kieron and his shiny black truck is out front waiting for me.

Nothing.

*Of course not.* Why should today be any different than yesterday? Or the day before? Or the day before that?

By now I should know better than to expect miracles, but I can't stop the rush of disappointment that floods my heart.

*Where is he?*

I stroll through the woods, wondering, as I do every day, just *what* is taking him so long to return. The last time I saw him, I told him I loved him. The last thing he whispered in my ear as he leaned in to give me my final kiss was that he loved me, too.

*So where is he?*

The bitter morning air slaps across my face, and I shove my frozen hands into my jacket pocket. I wish it would get colder...so cold it would numb my entire body, and I wouldn't have to feel this aching abandonment any longer.

And that is the truth I have to face, no matter how painful. Kieron has abandoned me. He's abandoned *us*. Can't say I really blame him, though. One doesn't have to be Dr. Phil to see why Kieron would get the hell out of Dodge and as far away from me as possible. Who in their right mind would want to be with me, anyway? A broken Dark-angel with a fractured soul. I don't *get* to love. Why can't I get this through my thick skull?

Maybe it's because of Lucky. Maybe she's still hanging on to the delusion that he's coming back for us. She'll just have to find someone else, and hopefully soon. Maybe there's another demon out there that will turn her on.

Not for me, though. I'm *done*. Of course, I've met other demons since becoming human, and I hated every single one of them. They're nothing but evil pretenders hiding beneath their human façades like lying little cowards.

But Kieron...he wasn't like them. He seemed so real...so pure...so *loving*. I shake my head. *Just another evil pretender.*

I have to find something...anything...to fill this aching void left in my soul. But what? I only have one sort-of friend, Corrine. No one else likes me, or even really talks to me if they don't have to. I've turned down social invitations for so long they never come my way anymore.

When I had Kieron— even just knowing he was nearby—everything seemed better somehow. With him, my life had become not just tolerable, but actually pleasurable. More pleasurable than I'd ever dreamed possible.

But now it feels worse...so *much* worse. The poet Tennyson famously wrote, "It's better to have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all." But he was so totally full of crap. It's way better when you don't know what you're missing, or constantly tortured with the memory of how good it once was.

I sigh and kick some rocks out of my path as I trudge forward and resign myself to the fact that I'll never be able to enjoy that part of my life ever again.

I force myself not to look around the parking lot as I arrive at Dove Creek High School. Thankfully, I spot Corrine by the entrance and run to greet her, grateful for the distraction.

“Hey, Liora. So Kieron’s still not back yet, huh?” she asks.

I shrug and put my head down. Corrine doesn’t know the truth about him, that he’s half-demon just like I am. Of course, she doesn’t know the truth about me, either. If she did, there’d go my one and only friend.

“Nah, I guess he’s still away visiting his relatives.”

We head down the hall toward our lockers. Corrine chats in my ear, but I don’t hear what she’s saying. I just concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other, and try to remember my locker combination.

My eyes are focusing on the little dial when a sudden chill runs up my spine, and my heart takes an uneven jump. Woozy, I suck in my breath and lean against the locker.

“What’s wrong?” Corrine asks, concerned.

I shut my eyes and shake my lowered head. “Nothing,” I mumble a few moments later. “Just got dizzy for a second. I’m fine.”

“You sure? You look kinda pale—” She grabs my arm. “Wow, who are *they*?”

An eerie sense of unexplainable foreboding has crept over me, and for a second I’m afraid to move.

“Liora, look,” Corinne hisses, spinning my body around.

I open my eyes and am somewhat surprised to see a boy and a girl... obviously brother and sister. Both are tall and blonde, with tan complexions and light-blue eyes.

I stare at them, wondering why I feel an odd sense of *déjà vu*. Like maybe I know them from somewhere, or *should* know them.

But they’re obviously new here. And that in itself is attention-worthy. It’s rare that new people actually move to this part of Virginia, a small backwoods mining community just east of the Appalachians. Most people here are lifers. The only new person to arrive in all the time I’ve been going

to school here was Kieron, and even his arrival wasn't exactly what one would call 'natural'. In fact, he'd come here to kill me. Just another reason why I should forget about him once and for all.

"Wow, who do you think they are? I wonder what his deal is." Corrine whispers, pulling me closer. It's only then I notice the thick, jagged scar curving from the tall boy's forehead, around his cheekbone, and down the right side of his neck.

"I don't know," I whisper back, trying hard not to stare. On the one hand I desperately want to feast my eyes upon these strange newcomers, but, at the same time, I'm fearful they might look back and notice me.

"And look at the girl..." Corrine murmurs. Several other students are checking them out, too, but these strangers aren't causing *half* the stir Kieron had when he first graced the halls with his presence. With him, everyone stared and gaped in awe, like he was some sort of celebrity or something. It was pathetic, really. But with these two, people glance over, some smile inquisitively and then return to their normal activities.

Despite the brisk weather, the girl is wearing a light-yellow tank top as if it's a warm spring day. But that's not what draws my attention; I can't stop staring at her arms, covered with wicked, shiny gashes. Between the vicious scars covering her, and the ones on her brother's face, they look like they'd been through a meat grinder. I glance at Corrine who is just as fixated as I am.

"Stop staring, it's rude." I turn back to my locker and grab my books.

"Fine. We gotta go anyways. We're gonna be late." Corrine slams her locker shut.

I give a quick look over my shoulder at the mysterious boy and girl before heading down the hallway, and try to ignore the icy chills still clenching my spine.



I'm reading Kieron's poetry book, tucked inside my Shakespeare reader, when the classroom door opens. Another bout of shivers runs up my back, and I feel as if someone has dumped a bucket of ice water on me. *Great.* On top of everything else now I'm getting sick. Just what I need. I look up and see the blond boy standing in the doorway, gazing around the room. I feel dizzy again and lower my head.

The achy wooziness creeps through my body and I nestle my face in my arms, taking several deep breaths. Maybe Tatiana's remedy is wearing off, or maybe Lucky ingested something a little stronger than just "alcohol" last night. I wouldn't put it past her.

I concentrate on my breathing and clearing my throbbing head, and totally ignore what Mr. Sodenberg is saying. I'm sure he's just giving the "let's all welcome the new student *rah-rah-rah*" speech.

Luckily, a few moments after the sick feeling floods me, it passes. I slowly raise my head, but keep my eyes closed as the chill has now moved to my face. I finally open them and am met with a pair of cornflower blue eyes staring back at me.

"Hi, mind if I sit here?" the scarred, blond boy asks pointing to the seat beside me.

*You have got to be kidding me.*

"Someone already sits there," I say through clenched teeth and glance away.

"I apologize for that, but it's the only spot open in the room. Perhaps it'd be okay just for today until we can work something else out?" I'm staring straight ahead, unable to look at him, but I plainly hear the smile in his voice.

Since I don't respond, he takes my silence for permission and sits down. I glower inwardly. It's not like I can tell him not to sit there. It's not as if I own the classroom and I'm the boss of all the chairs. And it's not like Kieron is here to lay claim to his seat...and to his place beside me.

But there's no way I'm enduring sitting here a whole hour feeling sick and with this rude, inconsiderate jerk posed beside me. Just as I'm about to grab my books and leave—damn the consequences—I start feeling comfortable again. Relaxed. *Good* even. I let out a long sigh and return to my poetry.

But I feel his eyes on me, like tiny pins jabbing at my skin, pulling at my attention. I peek up and see him staring at me with overt interest. I give him my best scowl and return to my reading. "Stare much?" I mutter under my breath.

"Is it better that way?" he whispers, leaning toward me.

"Is *what* better *what* way?" I hiss back.

He angles his tall body in my direction and stretches out his long legs. "The book. Is it more interesting if you read it upside down?"

I roll my eyes and turn my Shakespeare reader right-side-up. But this time I have to physically force myself to look at the pages in front of me and not at the stranger beside me. My head wants gawk at him.

*Why?* It's not like he's good-looking, is it? Is it his wicked scars? Is it the fact that he's new?

That's probably it. It's only natural to be curious about a new person, I suppose. Even if he is a rude jerk-face.

The second the bell rings signaling the end of class I dash from my seat, beating almost everyone else to the door— no small feat considering I'm the furthest from it. I want to get away, as *far* away from that new boy as I

possibly can. But at the same time, I'm torn by an almost overwhelming urge to stare at him.

What the hell is going on?

Corrine gives me an uneasy glance as I silently brush past her and head down the hall. The fleeting temptation to stroll right off campus is quickly squashed by an image of Tatiana's scolding face. I'd promised her I'd finish the year strong, and there are five months to go. Short of a major emergency—such as my demon half making an uninvited appearance—ditching is off the agenda. I'll just have to control whatever crazy neurotic crisis is plaguing me this week.

My next class is history. I open my book and start to read, or, at least pretend to. I know every word in the textbook by heart, but I've long since learned it's best not to let on just how smart I really am.

"Hi, again."

For an instant I could've been sitting in a block of ice, but as quickly as the sensation appears, it disappears. I glance up from my book to see Blond Boy standing beside me. Again. I try to ignore him, but cannot resist the pull his eyes have over me. Slowly I raise my head and face him as he sits down in the empty spot next to me. Again.

"Don't get too comfortable there. Someone else usually sits in that seat," I say. I try not to gape at the silver slash curving down his face—violent, but beautiful at the same time. I'm drawn to it.

Like him.

"So, is every seat next to you already spoken for?" he asks, brushing his golden hair out of his eyes. Soft eyes. Like a robin's egg. Not the electrifying blue of Kieron's or the icy cool blue of mine and Lucky's.

"Pretty much."

“But there isn’t anyone here now but me.” His full lips shape into a cocky smirk, and he places his hands behind his head.

My eyes narrow. “My boyfriend usually sits there.”

“Oh, really. And where’s he now?” His musical voice is laced with amusement.

I have to fight back the overwhelming urge to reach across the desk and smack the smug look off his face. “Away. But he’ll be back. Soon,” I add.

“Well, until then, I’ll just make myself comfortable. If you don’t mind.”

“It’s a free country,” I mutter.

“So they say.” He reaches into his back pocket, flips open his cell phone and taps some buttons.

“Where are you from?” I blurt out, much to my surprise.

He lifts his gaze, raises his eyebrows, and snaps his phone shut. “Uh... couple of places...”

“Name one.”

His shocked look fades into one of amusement. “Well, I was born in Los Angeles, spent some time in Europe and South America before we moved back to Boston. Then—”

“I don’t need your whole life story,” I snap, then bite my lower lip. What is wrong with me? Why am I coming across like such a hostile bitch?

“Well....you *asked*...” He raises an eyebrow and cracks a small grin.

“I said name *one*. Why did you move here? And what happened to your face? Why do you have such a huge scar on it?”

The second the words come out I slap my hands over my mouth, mortified. I can’t even blame Lucky for my rudeness. Unfortunately, this is all me.

There’s an uncomfortable silence from his seat as his jaw drops and his eyes widen. “What did you just say?” he gasps.

I'm dying a million deaths right now. There's no excuse for me being so mean. *None*. I drop my head as the heat rushes to my cheeks. "I'm sorry," I whisper. "That was very rude. I didn't mean it..."

He clears his throat and sits up straight, his chiseled jaw rigid. "It's okay," he finally says, his voice stiff. A moment later he lets out a small chuckle. "It's interesting...I've never had anyone come out and ask me that before."

I gulp hard. "Sorry. It just came out. I wasn't thinking..."

"I suppose you noticed my sister's scars too?"

I nod, positive my face is redder than my cherry-blossom fingernail polish.

"We were in an accident together."

"I'm sorry," I repeat.

He shakes his head and shrugs. "Really, it's fine. So, what's your name?" he asks, leaning close again. But just then Mrs. Jackson calls the class to order, and he sits back. But I still feel his eyes on me. Not an entirely unpleasant feeling.

When class is over I rush to the door again, *convinced* now I must be coming down with something. It's the only explanation I have for the sickly chills I felt earlier and for my extreme bitchiness. But I feel physically fine now, and even when Blond Boy comes up and lightly touches my arm, I feel nothing unusual.

"So I never got your name," he says, his mouth curving into a friendly smile.

I pause beside him. "I'm Liora."

"Hi, Liora. I'm Tristan St. John. My friends call me Tris sometimes."

"Hey." *Demons call me Lucky sometimes.*

“I was wondering if you could tell me where room 217 is. I have Trig there next.”

I sigh. *Seriously?* But I’m determined to be nice, if for no other reason than to make up for being such a psycho earlier. “I’m actually headed there now myself. You can walk with me if you like.”

Tristan flashes another easy grin and falls into place beside me.

“Kinda late in the year to be starting at a new school, isn’t it?” I ask as we weave through the throng of students. Some glance in our direction, and as usual, they’re far more interested in the boy beside me than in *me*.

“Yeah. My sister Cassie wasn’t happy about it. But I don’t care much.”

“So why’d you move here?”

He shrugs, his gaze sweeping the hallway “My family had some obligations in the area. We don’t know how long we’ll be here, though...”

I find his answer interesting. What possible ‘obligations’ could one have in Dove Creek, Virginia? The obligation to die of boredom, or, if you’re really lucky, be attacked by demons, vampires, shape shifters, or other freaky things that roam around here at night?

“Here we are,” I mutter as we reach the classroom door. This time, however, the only empty seat is on the other side of the room. I take my place in the far corner and stare at the back of Tristan’s head, wishing he was still sitting beside me.

### Chapter 3. Lucky

My eyes scan the forest. “Bones....Bones!”

*Where is he?*

I dismount Diablo and approach the River of Kings, pulling my cloak over my head. Bones told me he was on patrol tonight, so he should be here. But it’s quiet, and there’s no sign of him anywhere.

Automatically, I reach for my dagger and cast a wary eye across the surrounding grounds. I know I’m just being paranoid, but one can never be too careful, especially these days. The bridge is supposed to never be left unguarded, especially since that incident several weeks ago when Cody and Ivy were attacked and killed. Even though only Bones, Kieron and I know what *really* happened that night, the rest of our tribe is still on edge. It was nothing short of a miracle we were able to diffuse the situation and stop an all-out war. Fortunately, Bones can be a pretty good liar when he needs to be.

I cross the river of dancing flames and head to the enormous grey boulder resting against the hillside. Only after I press the secret lever to enter Demon Bar do I dare put my dagger away. Daisy, Ivy’s replacement, greets me warmly as I reach the bottom of the steps. I smile back, but a flash of anger rips through me as I remember how I’d discovered Ivy’s beaten, broken body...and how it was I who’d put the final nail in her coffin, ending her suffering with my own deadly bursts of fire. Not one of my happier memories.

Daisy twirls her pink hair around a finger and loudly smacks her gum.

“Sup, crazy Daze?” I lean forward, air-kissing both her cheeks. No contact here. One controlled touch from her can turn any demon or demion

into ash, stone or fire, depending on what she feels like at the moment. We're friends, but one can never be too careful. "Bones here?"

She rolls her eyes and loudly pops a bubble. "Yeah, he and Catalina are in the back drinking. They might as well get a room or something."

My eyes narrow. What does she mean by that? I'd noticed Bones and Catalina have been spending more time together than usual, as they were both very close with Ivy and Cody. Still, as pure demons, they can't *still* be sad and needing to commiserate. Surely they've long since shut off their upsetting feelings the way only demons can. The way I wish *I* could.

*So what are they doing together?*

I sashay across the room, barely glancing at the other patrons. My eyes fixate on the couple in the back, obviously enjoying each other's company. A little too much for my liking.

"Hi, Lucky," the stunning redhead greets me as I pull up a chair and plop myself next to them. I have to give Catalina credit. If there's a demon in here who is close to being as beautiful as me, she *might* be it.

I turn to Bones and give him a wide smile, but he glances away. My chest tightens. "Hi, Cat. Hi, Bones. What's up? Why you guys sitting way back here?" I ask, hoping I sound casual. But inside I'm seething. It's one thing for Bones to go off and seduce his Sapie women...he *has* to do that or he'll die. But it's quite another to see him making time with another demon, one he has *no business* being interested in.

Catalina fluffs her long, wavy crimson hair and leans forward to reach for her glass, her ample cleavage catching Bones' approving eye. "Oh, we just wanted somewhere we could talk quietly while we had our drinks. Sometimes it gets so crazy in here, I can't even hear myself think!" She gives a high, tinkling laugh. Bones smirks and leans back, one muscular arm cocked behind his head, the other casually draped over Catalina's chair.



My insides smolder as I glance back and forth between the two of them.  
*What the hell is going on here?*

“You missing something?” Now a mischievous twinkle lights up Bones’ eyes.

“Obviously, I *am*.” I narrow mine, and he smirks again. I hate this cocky look he gets...the one that says how he knows he’s the sexiest creature alive and no woman can resist him. I hate it because he’s right. But demons are supposed to be immune to his incubus charms. Yet here Catalina sits, looking like she’s just dying to jump in his lap. Bitch.

“You don’t have a drink.” He stands up and removes his black leather coat, revealing a muscular torso beneath his form-fitting sweater. *God, he’s beautiful.* “What’ll it be?”

I wave my hand. “Whatever.” He steps over to the bar and I catch the lustful look in Catalina’s eyes. I know *this* look well, too...the one that says I’ll do anything to be yours. It’s the same expression that must’ve been plastered on my face every time I looked at him. That is, until I met Kieron.

Kieron...*Damn him*...Where the hell is he?

If Kieron was here, I wouldn’t be having all these mixed up feelings over Bones. I wouldn’t care if he was making time with some trampy demon with slutty red hair. I wouldn’t care that he was looking at her the same way he used to look at me.

“So, Lucky, when is Kieron supposed to be returning?”

It’s all I can do not to slap Catalina’s perfect, pouty lips right off her face. “Dunno. Soon, I guess.” I smile and shrug.

“Must be hard on you, him being away for so long—”

“Here ya go, Lucky Lady. Jack on the rocks with an extra shot of Source Energy. You look like you could use it.” Bones returns and sets the drink down on the table in front of me.

I shoot him another glare. *What the hell does that mean?* I look amazing, as always. Better, in fact, as I'm wearing a brand new, low-cut, sparkly red and black outfit specially made for me by the fire-witches of Rome. Top of the line and devastatingly sexy.

I gulp my drink, eyeing the two of them. When I finish, I storm up to the bar to grab another. I return to the table to see Catalina's hand lingering on Bones' shoulder, and him leaning into her as if they're sharing an intimate secret.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting something," I say loudly and sit back down.

"Oh, it's not a problem, Bones was just telling me about the time he—"

"I thought you were supposed to be on patrol tonight," I say to Bones, cutting Catalina off. Like I really give a crap about anything she has to say.

"I thought so too, but I guess it's Alik's turn at post. That's what Khalil said earlier—"

"I didn't see him at the bridge. No one was there."

Bones gives me his full attention. "Are you sure? He has to be. Maybe you just missed him."

I shake my head. "Nope. No one was there. Trust me, I looked. I was looking for *you*," I say pointedly, "but there was no one there."

Bones stands and gulps down the last of his drink. "I better go check it out. If there was some sort of mix-up and the bridge was left unguarded..."

"I'll go with you," Catalina says, rising to her feet. I swear, her bright-pink outfit might as well be painted on her body. Whore.

By now, I'm sure steam is coming out my ears. "Not me. I have better things to do. Later—"

Just as I set my glass down, a commotion behind me catches my attention. A thunderous crash is followed by angry shouts and panicked screams. Then a deafening explosion. And another.

I jump to my feet and spin toward the main room. Suddenly a band of unfamiliar demons storms in, shooting off fireballs and knocking over tables. For a moment I'm frozen with shock, and before I can blink, the whole room erupts in a huge brawl. Bodies fly everywhere, and right in front of me, a young succubus named Zanna gets vaporized by an enemy flare. A pool table flies across the smoky room amid explosions of fire and lightning.

Instantly the whole place descends into chaos, and the deafening yells and screams become the sounds of battle. Dozens more enemy demons swarm the enclave, some with weapons, others with their own balls of fire hurling from their hands.

"What the—?" I stagger towards the corner as a flaming ball of electric fire the size of a watermelon comes flying at my head. I duck, and fire singes the side of my face.

"Oh...No...!"

Panicked, I turn to see a horrified Bones. Adrenaline surges through my body, and it's another whole second before I realize Catalina is no longer standing behind me. The small pile of ash beside my feet tells me she didn't move out of the way in time.

"Lucky, get out of here!" Bones shouts. He grabs my arm and pulls me to the back wall as the whole room explodes with smoke and fire.

He braces his body over me protectively and we half-run, half-stumble, blindly toward the secret exit in the back. When we finally reach the small door camouflaged in the rocky wall, I kick a stone on the ground to let us out. Together we race down the dark, twisty tunnel, guided only by the light in my palms. I wonder why Bones hasn't transformed...he's much less vulnerable as a hellhound. I keep checking over my shoulder to make sure

we're not being followed as we rush through the narrow corridor, but so far we're alone.

Finally we emerge from the other side of the rock and into one of Dryndara's Dark-fairy forests. Bones and I exchange looks as we try to regain our bearings. I don't know what frightens me more, the scene I just witnessed in Demon Bar, or the terrified expression on Bones' face now.

"Bones, what was that? What happened? What's going on?" I cry, falling into his arms, panting more from shock than physical exertion.

It takes a long moment for him to answer me, but when he does, his normally strong and confident voice sounds hollow...haunted.

"That, Lucky, was a declaration of war."

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penelope King graduated from the University of California, Irvine. She lives with her family on the Carolina coast.

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Also available:

Fire with Fire (Demonblood Series #2)  
Witchy, Witchy (Spellbound Trilogy#1)

*A personal note from Penelope:*

From the bottom of my heart, I'd like to thank you for welcoming my stories and characters into your life. I hope you enjoyed reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. As an "indie" author, the best way others can be made aware of our work is through positive word of mouth and feedback from happy readers. Leaving a quick review on the site you purchased this from will go a long way in helping me get my work out to other readers. If you think someone else might enjoy this story, I encourage you to express your thoughts.

Thank you so much for your support and stay tuned for the next installment of this exciting series!

~Best Wishes and Happy Reading~

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