

THEY CREATED A
WEAPON.
AND HE IS THAT
WEAPON...

HE
IS
CREED

PART ONE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LISA RENEE JONES

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He is...Creed

Part One

Lisa Renee Jones

*This book is dedicated to Diego Harrison. Your support is
impossibly unlimited. “Thank you” seems inadequate. One
day I’ll pay you back in comic books. For now, you’ll have to
settle for love.*

Dear Reader:

This series is a reimagining of a series I wrote in the past, but wasn't ready to write, but now I am and now it's everything I imagined it to be. I'm so in love with this world and these characters, that it is incredibly exciting to me to bring you this new version in my present voice. I sincerely hope you love this world as much as I do!

Lisa

Glossary

Area 51—Another name used for Groom Lake.

GTECH—The Super Soldiers who were created under Project Zodiuss, and who divided into two groups—Zodiuss and Renegades. GTECHs are stronger, faster, and more agile than humans. They heal rapidly and have low mortality rates. They can windwalk. Over time, many are developing special gifts unique to them, such as telepathy, the ability to communicate with animals, and more.

GTECH Body Armor—A thin bodysuit that fits like a second skin. Extremely light and flexible. The material is made from alien technology recovered from a 1950s crash site. Until the Green Hornets were created, no standard-issue ammunition could penetrate the suits.

GTECH Serum—The serum created from alien DNA that was gathered at a crash site in the 1950s and then used to create the GTECHs. The original sample was destroyed. Since alien DNA will not allow itself to be duplicated, there can be no new serum created without new scientific discoveries. The remaining serum disappeared the day Area 51/Groom Lake was taken over by the GTECH rebels known as Zodiuss Soldiers. The GTECH serum cannot be created from GTECH DNA. This has been tried and failed.

X2 Gene—A gene that appears in some, but not all, of the GTECHs by the fifteenth month after injection of the GTECH serum.

Groom Lake—Also known as Area 51, this is the military base where the Project Zodiuss experiments with alien DNA took place, which was later taken over by the Zodiuss rebels.

Project Zodiuss—Code name for the government's top-secret operation—two hundred Special Operations soldiers who were assigned to Groom Lake (Area 51) and injected with what they believed to be immunizations, but was, in fact, alien DNA.

Zodius City—Still known as the top-secret U.S. military facility often called Area 51 or Groom Lake, located in Nevada, it was taken over by the rebel GTECHs led by Julian Rain. This facility is both above and beneath ground level.

Zodius Soldier—A rebel GTECH soldier who follows Julian Rain, the leader of the rebel movement. Julian intends to take over the world.

Lifebond Mark—A double circle resembling a tattoo that appears on the back of the female's neck after their first sexual encounter with a GTECH, but only on a female meant to be that GTECH's lifebond. After the mark appears, the female feels a tingling sensation whenever the male lifebond first approaches.

Lifebond Process—A lifebond is a male and female who are bonded physically for life and death. If one dies, so does the other. This bond allows the GTECH male to reproduce, and it offers the females the same physical skills as their male lifebond. The lifebond mark, a double circle resembling a tattoo, appears on the back of the female's neck if she's the intended lifebond. It's believed that a blood exchange is required to complete the physical transformation of the female to GTECH, if the couple makes that decision. There is physical pain and illness for the female during conversion. It's believed that there is only one lifebond for a GTECH which can make it very hard for a GTECH to find that woman.

Blood Exchange—A part of the lifebond process done by choice after the lifebond mark appears on the female's neck. This completes the female's transformation to GTECH, and links the two lifebonds in life and death. (See Lifebond Process.)

Dreamland—Though Groom Lake/Area 51 is often called Dreamland, in this series, Dreamland is the fictional military facility opened eighty miles from Area 51 by General Lawrence to take a stand against the Zodius who overran Area 51. You hear the Dreamland term in books two and three.

Red Dart—A red crystal found at the same UFO 1950s crash site where the GTECH DNA was discovered. The

crystal creates a red laser beam that enters the bloodstream and creates a permanent tracking beacon that is sensitive to sound waves. These sound waves can also be used for torture and control of the GTECHs. Thus far, U.S. military attempts to use Red Dart have been fatal.

Renegade Soldier—A GTECH who protects humanity and stands against the rebels known as “Zodius”. The Renegades are led by Julian Rain’s twin brother, Caleb Rain.

Shield—A mental barrier that a GTECH uses to block their psychic residue from being traceable by Trackers.

Green Hornet—A special bullet that is so powerful it not only shreds human muscle and bone, it also permeates the thin bodysuit armor that the GTECHs—both Zodius and Renegades—wear when no other bullet can do so.

Neonopolis—The Las Vegas satellite location for the Renegades, covertly located in the basement of the Neonopolis entertainment complex off Las Vegas Avenue.

PMI or “Private Military Intelligence”—A company run by General Powell, the officer who created Project Zodius. PMI is used as a cover for top-secret military projects that the government doesn’t want to officially show on the books.

Stardust—An alien substance that is undetectable in human testing and causes brain aneurysms.

Sunrise City—The main Renegade facility. An advanced, underground city located in Nevada’s Sunrise Mountain Range.

Trackers—These are GTECHs with the special ability to track the psychic residue of another GTECH or a human female who’s been intimate with another GTECH. If a female possesses this residue, then only that female’s lifebond can shield her from a Tracker.

Windwalking—The ability to fade into the wind, like mist into the air, and invisibly travel far distances at rapid speed.

Prologue

Addie

Eighteen months ago...

It's still a scorching one hundred-degree Nevada night when I reach my parents' home for our once-a-month Sunday dinner. Of course, even with my father's command post nearby, he only makes about half the occasions, but my mother and I still enjoy our time together. Tonight, it's the three of us though, which I'm looking forward to very much, and we, in fact, have quite a lot to celebrate.

I park in front of the steps that lead to the sprawling porch and exit the car, staring up at my parents' vast property. It's a luxurious place worthy of a highly achieved scientist and a general, but it still manages to feel very white picket fence cozy with beautiful flower gardens my mother fiddles in on weekends.

With a bottle of champagne in hand, I head up the wooden steps and don't bother to ring the bell. This is my second home, after all. I step inside the door, and I'm about to call out when I hear my parents' voices rise with a rasp of anger in their tones.

"All this grant does is delay Project Zodiak. We need to talk to Addie tonight and tell her neither of you are accepting that grant with NASA."

"You're trying to rush the research. You can't do that safely," my mother pushes back. "The work Addie and I will do with this grant is a necessary step. You have to see that. We'll get there. Just don't create a problem to fix a problem."

"Bullshit," my father says. "We're not going to Houston. The work is focused here in Groom Lake. We need to be here. I'll get you a private investor. I'm close."

"Don't do this. You know what this means to me and Addie. And she's coming here to celebrate what is a prestigious grant

with *NASA*.”

Their voices lower, and I can no longer make out the conversation.

I don't understand what I've just overheard. The work we're doing with *NASA* is about alien organisms and their impact on Earth's atmosphere, but we're talking microscopic findings, invisible to the human eye. Nothing with direct impact on Groom Lake. Nothing that has any connection to Groom Lake or the military that I know of at all.

There is a sudden echo of silence in the house and I quickly open the door and shut it, to call out, “Hello, hello!”

A few beats later, my mother joins me in the foyer, her blonde hair tied at her nape, which means there's serious cooking going on. “There she is!” she exclaims. “I made your favorite spaghetti, and your dad keeps sneaking into the sauce.”

And just like that, it's a “normal” Sunday dinner. My dad rounds the corner and greets me with a hug, and everything on the surface is normal and happy.

But it's not. I know it's not. I can't unhear what I've heard. I wouldn't want to, either. My mom and I need to talk, just not tonight.

“How's that young man you're dating?” my father asks after handing me a glass of wine.

“Already over,” I say. “He's off on another mission, and I'm going to Houston. It's not magic.”

“He wasn't good-looking enough for you anyway,” my mother comments. “Polite. But not that cute.”

My father laughs. “I have to agree.”

“Of course you both do. No man will ever be hot enough for me in your eyes. You're my father and they're all scared of you. A general's daughter is not an easy gig.”

“The right man won't be afraid of me at all, honey. Watch and see.”

It's about halfway through the meal filled with laughter and smiles that I wonder how many times they were fighting and I never knew. How many times did they fake happiness when my dad was home, just to give me a normal life? Too many, I decide.

And the fakeness of it all is what gets to me.

What is real and what is not?

The next morning is my final day in the university research department. My mother and I are scheduled to fly to Houston tomorrow morning for meetings, but we won't actually head in that direction for the grant work for another month. I figure I'll talk to her on the plane. As much as I don't want to walk away from an opportunity to learn and grow at NASA, if we need to stay in Nevada to save my parents' marriage, I'll do it. She needs to do it. I mean, if the funding is the same, the resources at Groom Lake are deep. It's not NASA, but I'll survive missing that opportunity.

Dressed to impress in a black pantsuit, I arrive at the airport an hour and a half early, shocked my mother hadn't called me, nor is she waiting for my arrival. I check my ticket to be certain I'm not confused but today is the day. I'm antsy when I can't reach her, and eventually decide she must be on the other side of security, and the airport cell service is the issue.

But when I get to the other side of security, she's not there. Time ticks, and I've dialed her phone a good half dozen times. I finally call my father, but his phone goes to voicemail, which is not a surprise. He's probably in the underground section of the military base.

Boarding starts and I'm pacing, worried now. I walk to the counter. "Can you please page my mother? She's supposed to be on this flight."

It's then that I'm paged. "Addie Lawrence, please come to the service desk at concourse B."

My heart races, a horrible, clawing feeling in my gut. “Where is that desk?” I ask the woman.

“Go right and follow the signs to gate ten, but if you leave now, you’ll miss your flight.”

I barely hear what she’s said to me. I’m already running toward gate ten, breathless when I reach the service area, to find a uniformed officer talking with the woman behind the counter.

“I’m Addie Lawrence,” I pant out. “You paged me? Is this about my mother? She’s supposed to be here for our flight.”

The officer speaks up then, “Let’s step over here please, Ms. Lawrence.”

I see it in his face. I know what he’s going to say. “No. No. No.” Tears are already streaming down my cheeks and I’m trembling all over when he steps in front of me and starts speaking. I can’t feel my limbs. I can’t draw air into my lungs.

“There was a car accident. I’m sorry to tell you Ms. Lawrence that your mother—”

The floor sways, and I collapse.

The funeral is a rainy day with full military service that honors my mother’s service long before I was born and all but destroys me. It’s the trumpets and the gunfire that shred me inside and out. I think it can’t get any worse until I stand in my parents’ kitchen, people milling around and chatting about what a great person she was, and my mind conjures the smell of her famous spaghetti, at least famous to me. The grief that seizes me is equal to the sheer force that is the Army my parents once served together, where they met.

I hurry through the room and the house, then exit, rushing down the steps to end up staring at my mother’s flower garden and that’s it. I’m in tears again, sobbing uncontrollably and I end up sitting underneath a big oak tree.

When I finally gain my composure, my father appears and kneels in front of me. “You have to stay here with me. I’ll get you a grant for your work. Just give me a little time. We need to be together.”

“It wasn’t what Mom wanted,” I say, replaying their argument in my head. “I overheard you fighting. She believed NASA has to come first before whatever you’re planning. So honor her, Dad. Honor her wishes. I’m going to even if you don’t. I leave for Houston in the morning.”

Houston, fifteen months later...

I exit my office in the NASA facility where I’ve been working, defeated at best at the realization that the grant I’m working on is running out and doesn’t seem likely to renew. I feel as if I’ve made little progress on my research, even if objectively my mother would say that’s not at all true in the big picture. But I’m not where I wanted to be at this point. I feel as if I’ve let my mother down. The red tape that is NASA has been cumbersome and contributed to a slower progression of my work in ways I didn’t expect. Of course, the truth is my mother’s absence on the project is more than a little obvious. While I might be able to mimic her skills in some ways, her years of experience will take me years to match. Not only was she trained to evaluate the mental health of the astronauts exposed to alien microorganisms, both literally and hypothetically, but she was also a brilliant researcher, her dual role one that would have led us to far more comprehensive data performance.

I’m just passing security when the guard flags me. “This came by courier for you earlier today.” He offers me a FedEx package I accept, curiously noting the empty return address spot.

“Thanks, Joe,” I say, and hope it’s the data I’ve been hoping for, which might just seal in at least a six-month extension on the grant.

I reach my car and frown when I find a huge yellow envelope sitting under my wiper. It's unmarked, and I wonder if it's in the wrong place but I grab it anyway, and desperate to escape the scorching heat, climb in my car, which is, of course, burning up.

Cranking the air, I reach for the envelope and open it, only to blanch at the note that reads: *Do you know what your father has done?*

I suck in a breath and flip to a document that's labeled "Top Secret" and "Project Zodiak". I start reading and my blood runs cold, my mother's warning to my father back in my mind: *Don't create a problem to fix a problem.* And that's exactly what has happened. Special Forces soldiers were given immunizations laced with alien DNA, and not only are the soldiers living with the consequences, so might the world.

Chapter One

Present day...

Nevada's Area 51, otherwise known as Groom Lake, is not only the subject of government conspiracy theories and my father's base command, it's now officially my new home. A good hour before sunrise, I pull into the military parking lot outside a top-secret underground facility. This is where the top-secret Project Zodiuss GTECH Super Soldier Program is now eighteen months underway.

It's surreal to finally be here after months of working through my job transition, leaving a grant that was renewed with NASA behind for nothing more than a scientific consulting job with the Army, and do so as my father's daughter, the *General's daughter*. Despite this hard-to-escape label, I'll strive for my own identity, and do so quickly. I need to get to the bottom of the reports I was given. but I also have to go into this new job with an open mind. It would be dangerous and perhaps counterproductive to assume my father did anything but try to protect his men. This despite the fact that someone, the person who dropped me those records and went on to write me not one, but three letters in three months, believes his intentions far greedier and deceitful.

Now, I'm here. Now, I'll find out the truth myself.

The ride from my new on-base housing is a whopping three minutes, which, considering the inhuman hours the military favors, will be a big plus. The simplicity of a standard green Army skirt and jacket—required despite my contract status—seems to be working for me as well. The cardboard bed, not so much. It has, however, made a great desk for my laptop and all-night reading.

Considering I'm only three days on the job—taking over for the former Head of Clinical Psychology, a title that fit my mother, but hardly fits my biomedical and research science background, I've had my hands full. In my opinion, and frustratingly so, no one on this scientific team has done one-

fourth of the studies I've deemed absolutely critical to properly evaluate these soldiers.

As for my official job title, which my father told me to ignore, I cannot do the same for the responsibility attached. I've worked closely enough with my mother in the past to say that I'm not one bit pleased with the lack of resources and support they've offered to these soldiers. I'll certainly be nudging my way into that territory. These men deserve everything and more from our country, and I'm going to make sure that happens.

Files in hand, I exit my red Volkswagen Beetle and push the door shut with a flick of my hip. I've walked all of two steps when the wind whips into high gear, fluttering my suit jacket at my hips and tearing to pieces the blonde knot tied at my nape.

Shocked by the sheer impact of Mother Nature's outburst, I halt, swiping at the loose locks of hair now in my face, only to gasp. As impossible as it seems, four men dressed in black fatigues materialize from out of what appears to be nowhere on the other side of the long parking lot next to the elevator.

Only it's not nowhere at all. *They traveled by way of the wind*, I think. These are the GTECH soldiers I've only studied on paper, and unfortunately in a too limited way, as of yet. These are men who can not only travel with the wind but also have superhuman strength and are immune to human illness.

I draw a shaky breath, my heart pounding in my chest and my knees trembling. Apparently, I'm not quite as prepared for the phenomenon that is these men as I'd assumed myself to be. They're perfect weapons, men deceived and told they were being immunized when they were being injected with alien DNA. Suddenly, a dark parking lot is not where I want to meet them, a concern that is fleeting as the four men disappear into the elevator.

Eager to be inside, I start walking, but make it all of two steps before another man appears beside the elevator. This time there is no wind as warning. That's not supposed to be possible, and yet, I just watched it happen. My God, the things

he could do, the danger he represents. And is it only him that can do this, or can the other's as well, and it's simply not documented properly?

Still a good distance away from the building, I slow my pace, hoping to go unnoticed, but I'm not so lucky. The soldier punches the elevator button and then turns, waving me forward. Oh, no. No. No. I'm wholly unprepared to meet anyone now. My ducks are so far from in a row, they're quacking in the wrong direction. Trying to think fast, I quickly put on a show, juggling my files, and snagging my cell phone from my purse, as if it rang, then holding it up, and waving him off. The elevator doors open, and he hesitates a few moments before he finally steps inside and disappears.

Relief washes over me at his departure and I double step, determined to get to the darned elevator before another soldier appears. I'm there quickly, jabbing at the button, and relieved once again as the doors open quickly. Hurrying inside, I am soon sealed in a steel box, traveling downward, toward an underground facility which even after several trips over the past few days, still makes me more than a little uneasy. It's a deep dive, beyond what feels normal and safe. I mean, I'm fine once I'm down there, but the trip down is just really unsettling.

When the doors open again, I dart out of the elevator only to run smack into a rock-hard chest. I gasp and my paperwork flies everywhere, while strong hands slide around my arms, steadying me from a fall. It's then that I glance up to find myself staring into the most gorgeous pair of crystal-blue eyes I've ever seen in my life.

I swallow hard and notice his long, raven hair tied at the back of his neck, rather than the standard buzz cut—a sure indicator he's Special Ops. There's a mix of both at this facility. He could be one of the two hundred GTECH soldiers stationed at the base or a *Windwalker*, I think, still in awe of what I'd seen above ground.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, aware that this is the man who tried to hold the elevator for me, which somehow makes this more unnerving. "I wasn't watching where I was..." That's all I

have. I've lost the rest, my mouth incredibly dry, and with good reason. I've just realized that my legs are pressed intimately to his desert fatigues, and my conservative, military-issue skirt has managed to work its way halfway up my thighs. "Oh!"

I quickly take a step backward, righting my skirt in a flurry of panicked movement. When I'm put back together, at least on the outside, I hold up a hand. "That was—I hope I didn't hurt you." He arches a dark brow with obvious meaning. He's a good six-feet-plus of incredibly hot man, all lethal muscle and mayhem while I'm a petite five-foot-four—on a good day with the right heels—and a hundred and ten pounds. I laugh at my ridiculous statement, feeling uncharacteristically nervous. "Okay," I say, folding my arms in front of me. "Obviously, I didn't hurt you. But, well...I'm still sorry."

He stares down at me, his gaze steady, unblinking, the chiseled lines of his high cheekbones and square jaw expressionless. Except deep in those strikingly blue eyes, there is a tiny flicker of what I think might be amusement. "I'm not sorry," he says, squatting down to pick up my files.

I blink at the odd response, tilting my head and then squatting down to face him. "What do you mean?" I ask, a lock of blonde hair falling haphazardly across my brow, free from the clip that was supposed to be holding it in place. "You're not sorry?"

He gathers the last of my files, and then says, "I'm not sorry you ran into me. Have coffee with me."

It isn't a question. In fact, it almost borders on an order. And damn, if I don't kind of like the way he gave me that near order. My heart flutters with the unexpected invitation. Have coffee with the hottest man I've ever met when my love life is non-existent? Why, yes, I think, but quickly chide myself. "I don't know if that is appropriate for all kinds of reasons," I say, thinking of my job working with the GTECHs, which he could well be. And for reasons I can't explain, I add, "And I don't even know your name," as if that changes everything and explains my objection fully.

Besides, his name is on his uniform, at least his last name, which is Monroe.

The elevator behind us dings open, and I twist just enough to spy Katie Stein, Assistant Director of Science and Medicine for Project Zodiuss, appear in the opening. “You’re early, Addie,” she comments, definitive amusement lifting her tone. “Morning, Master Sergeant Monroe,” she adds, as she walks right past us, as if she’s found nothing significant or abnormal about me squatting on the hallway floor with a hot soldier in front of me doing the same.

I pop to my feet, appalled I’ve made such a spectacle of myself. My sexy Special Ops soldier follows. “Now you know my name,” he says, and this time, his firm, way-too-tempting mouth hints at a lift. Not a smile, a lift. God...it’s sexy. Really, really sexy. “Creed Monroe. Call me, Creed.”

“*Master Sergeant* Creed Monroe, I say,” guessing him to be early thirties, which means, based on rank, he’s been a lifelong soldier.

“Creed,” he corrects.

“Addie,” I say, unable to utter my last name, dreading the moment all the men realize my lineage. I mean, what am I supposed to say right now? *Hi. I’m the daughter of the man who changed your life forever by injecting you with alien DNA without telling you first, and then claimed it was to save you from an enemy biological threat? Now you’re a GTECH Super Soldier for what we think is the rest of your life, but who knows what that really means long-term for you? But, hey, I promise I’m one of the good guys, and I’m desperate to prove he is as well, but no matter what I’m going to ensure you are not used and abused just because you’re now a kick-ass, secret government weapon?*

“Addie Lawrence,” he says, handing me my files, leaning in close, the warmth of his body blanketing me in sizzling awareness. “I know who you are. And, no, that doesn’t scare me away. I never run away from anything I want.” He leans back, fixing me with another one of those dreamy blue stares. “So how about that coffee?”

At this point, I can barely breathe with his directness, but, as a true general's daughter, I manage to recover quickly, remembering my duty in a painfully responsible fashion. "I... don't think that's a good idea."

He studies me a moment before stepping into the now open elevator doors. Without one second of hesitation, I rotate to face him. "I'll ask again," he says, and I find myself lost in those addictive crystal-blue eyes—eyes that had promised nothing, but somehow, promise everything—until the steel doors shut between us.

I inhale, the scent of him still lingering in the air—a masculine, earthy scent that reminds me of the wind on an autumn day—and I bite my bottom lip. Too bad he's off limits, and I have so many reasons to swear off soldiers anyway—namely, my father.

He alone represents every reason I will never have coffee with Master Sergeant Creed Monroe, unless it's in a professional capacity.

The end.

Chapter Two

Forcing myself to shake off the encounter with Creed, I head to the lab with a plan to unload in my tiny but convenient office in the back corner of the room, only I barely make it past the door.

Katie is just inside the room, waiting on me.

The two of us have been casual friends for years, having met at a military seminar, which also means I can read her well. She stands before me looking every bit the scholar with her light brown hair neatly piled on top of her head, her lab coat already in place, and a pencil tucked behind her ear, with mischief on her mind.

“It’s a shame those blue eyes of his are really black now, isn’t it?” she asks.

“Hello and good morning to you, too,” I say, piling my things on top of one of the many empty lab tables filling the room and turning to face her. “And what do you mean, his eyes are really black?”

“I see someone is behind on their homework,” she chides, claiming one of the stools beside me to sit down. “All of the GTECHs have black eyes, but they can camouflage them to their natural color. Well, except with their bonded females. It’s kind of freaky and amazing at the same time, like everything else around this place. And how do you not know this, considering who your father is?”

Because I didn’t want to know, I reply silently, and end up losing my father as I did my mother, and that’s about as selfish as it gets. But now, I’m not sure I can, in good faith, stay away. I wonder if she wrote the notes that were left for me, but I can’t assume anything at this point nor can I lie, so I tell another truth, one that played a large role in why it took three notes, not one, to get me here.

“I resisted leaving NASA,” I say, “and the project I worked on with my mother.” My belly tightens at the very idea of the

work we'd started together and never finished because she's gone. Forever. She's never coming back. "But it was time."

"I know you made some major moves to make colonization of other planets possible," she says. "As happy as I am here, I was shocked you actually walked away."

"The research project was struggling for funding," I say truthfully, and eager to change the topic add, "My father gave me the broad strokes that were apparently broader than I thought, so yes. I agree. Clearly, I'm way behind on my homework, but I have thousands of pages of reading to do. I know nothing about camouflage and changing eye colors. And what do you mean by bonded females?"

"To date, three random women have experienced pain on the back of their necks shortly after their first sexual encounter with a GTECH. Immediately afterward, a mark appears on their neck resembling a tattoo—a double circle with intricate design work around the outer line. For now, and for lack of a better term, we're referring to those couples as 'bonded' since the mark is clearly some sort of link between the two, though frankly, our understanding of what that means is weak at best. But the very fact that the GTECHs can't camouflage their eyes from the female they gave this marking to supports some sort of unique bond."

I'm confused and concerned. "You're sure these marks aren't tattoos, and the three women—maybe even the GTECHs—are in on this together—trying to get attention?"

"That was my first thought, too, but there's no ink, and we've attempted surgical removal with no success. I mean, yes, we've removed the mark, but here's the freaky part. The mark regenerates immediately."

I blanch, blown away. "Unbelievable."

"You can say that again," Katie agrees. "One thing about this job—it's never boring. Also, note to self and you. Don't sleep with a GTECH, no matter how hot he is. You never know if you'll get that mark."

"So everyone doesn't?"

“No. Everyone doesn’t.”

“What about a condom for protection?”

“Not enough data to be sure, but we’ve drilled that premise into the men’s heads. Wear a condom. We literally don’t know what the mark means for the women, but the couples in question are very connected. It’s like love, but it can’t be love. Right?”

“I mean, maybe. There’s a chemistry effect to love. We know that, even if science can’t fully explain it. Maybe love has a physical manifestation with the GTECHs. I have a lot of questions on this topic. Aside from the immunity to the camouflage, what kinds of effects are these marks having on these women?”

“Some specific bloodwork changes that appear to be non-malignant. None in the GTECHs involved. Did I mention the GTECHs are sterile and immune to human illness? Needless to say, the ability to skip the condom is one of the perks of their injections they’ve now lost.”

“You can’t be sure they’ll take precautions though,” I point out. “What about the dangers to the general population? What if this tattoo marking comes with dangers we don’t know about yet?”

“Two hundred GTECH soldiers and who knows how many sexual partners, yet only three women have been marked in two years. Laboratory studies are inconclusive, but we’ve run test after test, and we’ve found nothing environmental, and no set of stimuli that re-creates that mark. And believe me, we’ve tried thousands of combinations. The odds of this mark spreading across the general population, even with unprotected sex, are next to zero. Even lower, if at least a portion of the men actually use the condoms.”

“I can’t believe this program is two years underway and none of these answers have been found.”

“Obviously, we needed you. You are a protégé scientist who graduated from Yale at seventeen. And with your background in biomedical and research science, I hope we can make real

progress now.” She eyes her watch. “The weekly department heads meeting starts in an hour. It’s always...interesting.”

“A lot of egos in one room always are.”

She laughs. “Truth. Oh, I did manage to convert some male geese to GTECH. I put them in with female geese and said let’s go. Let’s see what happens. And,” she holds up a finger, “and this is incredible—a male and female produced the mark on the female. I tried this with thousands of mice and rats, with no action.”

“Interesting. Geese mate for life. Rats and mice do not.”

“Exactly how I got the geese involved. I thought who mates for life, because that’s what the mark, this tattoo of sorts, seems to be, though I can’t prove that yet. We’re observing the pair of geese, but it’s so far it’s uneventful.”

“I’m starting to wish I came sooner. This is an incredible research opportunity.” I hesitate. “Who made the decision to move forward with the serum, Katie?”

“Was it your father?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “That’s what you want to know, of course, and my answer is I don’t know. Dr. Wiley, who was lead researcher before Dr. Chin took over, was fired and blamed.”

I nod, feeling sick to my stomach as I worry, Dr. Wiley was a fall guy, though he might have been paid off well. Or maybe he really did make the call, no matter how much my gut tells me otherwise.

Katie motions to the door. “Why don’t we grab some coffee, and I’ll brief you before heading in that direction? Bring your files, and I can answer any questions.”

The mention of coffee has Creed back in my mind, playing with my thoughts. *I’ll ask again*. Disconcertedly, I shake off the memory and clear my throat. “Yes. Okay.”

Katie pushes off the lab stool and reaches for her files as we head toward the door. “You know,” she says, mischief creeping back into her voice as we headed toward the door, “I’ve seen many a woman drool over Creed, but I’ve *never*

seen Creed look at anyone the way he looked at you by that elevator.”

The out-of-the-blue comment has me cutting her a sideways glance, a little concerned she’s seeing sex, and he was simply seeing my father’s daughter. “What look?” I ask. “The man was all emotionless steel.”

“Oh, he had a look,” she declares. “How does it feel to be wanted by ‘The Dark One’?”

My brows furrow. “The Dark One?”

“That’s what everyone here calls him. You know—because he’s all dark and intimidating.” She laughs. “They’re afraid he’ll kill them if they look at him the wrong way.”

Now I’m gaping. “Kill them?”

Kelly chuckles. “I’m kidding...or mostly kidding. The stories of Creed are darn near legend, though half of them are probably not even true. The whole lethal-in-battle and lethal-in-bed kind of typical soldier talk. They say he’s different than the other GTECHs.” Before I can ask how, Katie wiggles an eyebrow and adds, “He’s certainly got that tall, dark, and sexy thing going on, doesn’t he?”

I point a finger at her. “Oh, no. You aren’t luring me into saying he’s sexy. I’m here to do a job, not drool over the soldiers.” Though silently, I’m not sure “sexy” even begins to describe Creed’s appeal.

“You don’t have to admit it,” she says. “I saw the look on *your* face, too.” She grins. “Just use a condom.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I don’t need a condom. Or a soldier to fret over, especially a man who apparently has plenty of other women to do it for me. No way. I am *not* having sex with Creed.

But the interesting thing about this conversation to me is that I had a perfect chance to ask about windwalking and the way he’d done so in absolute silence, when the rest of the GTECHs had not.

But I didn’t. And I don’t.

Chapter Three

Late that evening, I sit at my simple steel desk in my still barren office—now my home away from my not-so-comfortable home—trying to focus on a GTECH case study and failing. I grimace and give into the temptation driving me to distraction, and punch in Creed Monroe’s name. He’s thirty-four, two years older than me. Of course, who knows how the GTECH serum will affect his aging process. His body may well be thirty-two, the age he was when he was injected, and stay that way forever. Who knows how long he will live? One year? Ten? Eternally? He’s immune to all human illness, but there is no way to know how the human body will react to the alien substance long-term.

I could date the man and literally become an old lady, and he may never age a day. It’s like a damn vampire novel, and I happily move on. He’s from California and, ah, wow. His family owns Monroe Industries, one of the largest weapons manufacturers in the world.

This information has me sitting back in my chair. There’s no way his being here, a part of this experiment, is a coincidence. My father, of course, had to know. I’d bet my weight in chocolate that Creed is here because my father believed he could be useful in the future, if not already. I lean forward, punching the keyboard again. Sure enough, Creed was pulled from his Special Ops unit and brought here to Groom Lake. My father is nothing if not strategic. He’d wanted something from Creed beyond his battlefield skills. He wanted that connection to Monroe Industries.

“What are you up to, Father?” I whisper. “And why do I know it’s not a good idea?” Frowning, I stare at the computer screen. And what made someone like Creed, who has to be filthy rich, join the military? *Family trouble*, I decide. Lord knows, I get that more than most.

I tab down the computer screen, reading the details of how Creed’s father died in a small plane crash in Saudi Arabia right before Creed was reassigned to Groom Lake. Creed had been on a mission and didn’t hear about the death until after the

funeral. His mother now runs Monroe Industries. Creed could have opted out of his service shortly after but re-enlisted. So even after his father died, Creed chose to stay in service to his country. He wants nothing to do with the family business. Or his mother doesn't want him involved.

“How's my favorite daughter doing?”

At the sound of my father's voice, I jolt, feeling guilty for all kinds of reasons, when it's he who should feel such things, but is incapable of anything of the sort. My gaze lifts to find him standing in the doorway, a smile on his face, looking sharp as always in his well-decorated uniform, his gray hair trimmed neatly.

“I'm your only daughter,” I remind him, wishing he'd share that smile with the staff at Groom Lake who fear him far more than they should. Okay, maybe they should. He tricked the soldiers, lied to them, and changed them forever. “And that joke is older than you, Father,” I add, punching a button to clear Creed from my screen.

“The old ones are the good ones,” he says. “Remember that.” In tip-top shape and looking far younger than his fifty-five years, he personifies that statement. So much so, that some might think he injected himself with that serum, but his recent bout with the flu proves that theory wrong.

He is a charming man, who most believe to be the most respectful of servicemen. He plays the role of perfect father to perfection, and at times, I really want to believe it's true.

“I don't have to,” I said. “You remind me often.”

He studies me with a critical eye. “Why aren't you sleeping?”

“I'm a workaholic, like my father.”

“And if your mother were alive, she'd hang us both by our toes.”

Even now, almost two years after her car accident, the reference to her passing works a number on me, and my belly is pure acid. I'm not blind to the timeline here either. Almost two years since she died. Almost two years since he injected

the soldiers with a serum that could give them eternal life. He always had a hunger for power, but mixed with grief, I fear it was a dangerous cocktail for him and the soldiers. And maybe the world.

“As an expert psychologist,” I comment, “she’d be as nuts as I am over the incomplete evaluations done on the GTECHs.”

“I have no doubt,” he says, “but before you dive in and try to conquer years of what you see as our deficiencies, I want you to focus on a specific list of ten soldiers of special interest to me.”

“What kind of special interest?”

He shuts the door. “They’ve all tested positive for a certain gene we’re calling X2. We have animals in the lab also testing positive that are showing aggressive tendencies we need to be certain don’t translate into our GTECH population. We need to rerun all baseline evaluations and whatever extra testing you deem necessary, then ongoing evaluation.” He fixes me in his silvery stare. “The animals and the soldiers seem to be showing the gene growth somewhere in the nine and twelve-month post-injection range.”

“Do the soldiers know?”

“No. And they will not be told until I deem that necessary and relevant. Why stigmatize men now considered heroes? Why freak them out for no reason?”

I grind my teeth. I do not approve. They have a right to know what is going on with their own bodies. My father has always been about protecting his country at all costs, and the truth is, I worked at NASA with the same ideas in mind, but science requires some ethical boundaries be crossed. It takes a strong moral fiber to never let that go too far.

“Are we any closer to me talking to the scientist who masterminded the serum and injected the soldiers without full approval?”

His jaw flexes and his eyes sharpen. “I told you, Roland Wiley defected to Russia. We’ve wiped all records of his

existence for national security reasons. There is no one who wants to bring him back more than me.”

“And the rest of his team?”

“You know the answer.”

“They went with him. All of them, along with all the research documents.” It’s not a question. It’s me repeating what he’s told me.

“Yes. The Russians fear our Windwalkers, as they should.” He swipes a hand through the air. “Enough of this right now. Let’s have a father-daughter breakfast in the morning,” he orders rather than asks, but then it’s his way. He is a general through and through, and I’m rather immune to his commands at this point.

Knowing this, and seeing it as his form of affection, I smile despite all my concerns. I do love my father and I desperately want to believe Roland and his people did this, not him. “I’d like that.”

“I’ll pick you up at seven,” he says, giving me a nod before disappearing out the door, but there is no denying the sense of unidentifiable dread I’m left with for no real reason. Dread that lingers well into the next hour.

Finally, tired and ready for food, I gather my things and pack myself into that elevator for the ride up instead of down, greeted topside by more than a hot, muggy Nevada night. I have a flat tire, which appears to be shredded by a nail. Does a drive flat work in this situation? I don’t think so. “Great,” I mumble, setting my files inside on the backseat.

Glancing around, looking for the resources never in short supply on a military base—a soldier or two or three, I might have avoided this morning that I’d sure welcome now.

Suddenly, the hair lifts around my neck, a soft breeze picking up momentary speed with a raw, masculine scent touching its depths. A second later, Creed appears right in front of me, close, so very close, and as big and broad and devastatingly sexy as he had been this morning.

“You really should come with a warning alarm of some sort,” I say, willing my racing heart to calm. Can he hear it? Can he sense my nerves? My attraction to him? I scold myself for how little I know about these men. *About this man.*

“So I hear,” he says dryly, his too-blue eyes flickering with a hint of unreadable emotion before he glances at my tire. “Looks like you need help.”

There is something overwhelming—perhaps decadent, even—about this man that has me, a well-educated scientist, struggling to remember how to form a proper sentence. “I... yes, please.” I brush a lock of blonde hair from my eyes and glance at the elevator, then at him. “Was that you this morning holding the elevator for me?”

He kneels to inspect my tire. “Yeah,” he says, tossing me an amused look over his truly spectacular shoulder hugged by a nice, tight black tee. “But apparently, strange men and elevators don’t work for you.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. “I had a call,” I lie awkwardly and badly. The look he flicks me says he’s not buying it, so I just confess, “Okay, fine. I’m not beyond admitting I was a little intimidated. You windwalked without any visible wind. I didn’t know that was possible.”

He pushes to his feet and ignores my comment. “You’ve got a screw the size of a rocket launcher in that tire. It’ll have to be replaced.”

I’m not letting him off that easy. “Can everyone windwalk without any visible wind?”

“I can,” he says, his lids half-veiled now, his jaw a bit more tense. “I don’t pretend to speak for anyone else.”

Katie’s words play in my head. *The stories of Creed are darn near legend.* “You’re the only one who can do it, aren’t you? That’s why people talk about you. Because you’re different and it scares them.”

He steps closer to me, so close, I can feel the heat of his body. So close, I’m forced to tilt my chin up to look him in the

eyes. His flicker and then turn solid black. “Do I scare *you*, Addie?”

Oh, yes, I think. He scares me, all right, but not for the reasons he assumes. This man reaches inside me and demands a feminine response I’m not prepared to give him, and yet I can’t help myself. I’m warm all over, my skin tingling with his nearness. In fact, standing here, looking into his eyes—I don’t care if they were black or blue—they speak to me in some soul-deep way that tells me far more than I think he knows. He’s showing me the GTECH, but on some level, I think—I know—he wants me to see the man. “I’ll make you a deal, Creed Monroe,” I say, my voice rasping with how affected I am right now, “I’ll be scared of you when you give me a reason to be. But just so you know, being all broody and showing me how well you can shift your eye color isn’t doing the job.”

Surprise flickers across his handsome features, and for a moment, I almost think he might smile. And, God, I really want that smile, and for reasons I can’t explain, I hang on a thin string waiting for it, until the moment is gone. Until he says, “Let me take you to dinner. I promise to work on being scarier while we eat. And for added effect, I’ll replace your tire when we get back.”

Warnings play in my head at the invitation. He’s a GTECH. I’m studying the GTECHs. My father had some involvement in how they came about that my gut is certain isn’t as innocent as he would have us all believe. It’s unethical for me to get involved with this soldier, but there is something about Creed, something I am inexplicably drawn to. “I shouldn’t,” I whisper. “I know you know why I shouldn’t.”

“Tell me why,” he urges.

“We both know who my father is. For all I know, you hate him and me.”

“You’re not like him,” he says simply, as if he’s looked into my eyes and knows all there is to know about me, and maybe he does. Maybe a GTECH knows. Or maybe he’s luring me in because he hates me. Maybe he will be the end of me, but

somehow it feels as if it will be one hell of a bittersweet ending.

But still, I challenge him, “Then you do hate him?”

Those black eyes of his shift back to blue fire, filled with enough heat to make my knees weak as he says, “I’m not asking him to dinner. And if I could just grab you and take you with me right now and erase all your doubt, I would.”

“But you won’t?”

His eyes narrow, and now his lips curve. “There you go, proving how not involved in your father’s world you are.”

“I do work here now. That contradicts that statement.”

“You just started. And you know far too little about GTECHs for your own good right now. That would not be the case if you’d been involved in this program before now.”

“What does that mean?”

“I can windwalk with humans, but it can be fatal so I’d say, let’s not do that.” He motions toward a black Mustang a few parking spots away. “Gives me an excuse to keep Carrie.”

“You named your car Carrie?” I ask, surprised yet again by this man. He is far more human than people make him out to be.

“She’s the friend who has never failed me,” he says, clicking the locks and walking to the passenger door before holding it open. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

My feet have apparently already decided I’m going with him, based on the fact that I’m now standing by the door. “You do know Carrie’s a psycho demon character from a Stephen King novel? Not sure that’s a friend I want to have.”

“You won’t say that after you ride in her,” he promises.

All too aware of his warm stare, I slide into the car, sinking into the soft leather surrounding me a moment before he shuts me inside. *The friend who has never failed me.* Someone has not only failed Creed Monroe in the past, they hurt him doing it. And that hurt is now a part of how he defines who and what

he is. Maybe it even made him as lethal as everyone seems to believe him to be. Maybe I *should* be afraid of him. I probably should. So why am I not opening the car door and getting out?

Chapter Four

Creed joins me in the Mustang and there is a presence about him, an energy I couldn't begin to fully explain to someone who'd never experienced it.

Power, I think.

Lethal power.

Something so beyond human it's terrifying and yet when he glances over at me with those ice-blue eyes, all I see is the most amazing man I have ever met. "You do know that I invited you to dinner and there are no restaurants in Groom Lake."

"Oh, right," I say, twisting around to study him. "This whole secluded thing is new to me. Both my mom and I lived and worked in Vegas, though my dad spent years trying to get us both out here in the middle of nowhere." I tilt my head to study him. "But I bet you just windwalk to get decent food and come back, don't you?"

"Exactly. And since we just determined I can't take you with me, we have four options."

I laugh. "That's a lot of options. More than I expect in Groom Lake."

"Most of them are not good."

"One of them has to be good. Give me the top two."

"We can drive at least forty-five minutes, both directions, or I take you home, pick up whatever you want, and then bring it back."

He'll just windwalk right over and get us food. It's unreal, in so many ways. "Just out of curiosity, what are options three and four?"

"Military food, which I don't recommend, or I can take you home and say goodnight."

A stab of unexpected disappointment follows that suggestion. I'm the General's daughter, and he's the man he

may well blame for what he's become. "Is that option your way of backing out?"

"I invited you, Addie. I don't want to back out."

The way he says my name a bit roughened up does funny things to my belly. "I don't want military food. And driving is nuts. You don't mind the whole windwalking and get us food option?"

"Not at all."

"Are you even allowed to do that? Aren't you supposed to stay on base?"

"I can go get us food," he repeats, which translates to, *no he's not supposed to leave base, but he will, and he does.*

"A proper general's daughter should not corrupt the soldiers, and that means you."

"I'm long ago corrupted, sweetheart, so if that's a problem, I should take you home and say goodnight."

"Are you?"

"Ask around. Then you'll get your answer."

"I've already heard stories," I admit, "but I prefer to hear about you from you."

He studies me for a moment that feels as if it stretches eternally and says, "What do you want to eat?"

"How do you feel about hamburgers? There's this famous place in Vegas called—"

"Henry's?"

"Yes," I say, and I can feel my eyes light. "Do you like it?"

"Love it. Shocked you do."

"Why?" I laugh.

"Windwalking requires a lot of calories. Henry's does the job. And you're a little thing."

I laugh. "Watch me eat, is all I can say."

“I will,” he assures me, and then he starts the engine, and it roars to life a moment before he backs us up and starts driving.

He doesn’t ask where I live but drives right to it, which doesn’t freak me out. I’m the General’s daughter. Everyone would have talked about me moving in, and I took over my predecessor’s place.

Creed parks in my driveway and kills the engine. “I’ll come around and get you,” he says, as would any perfect military gentleman.

I cradle my files and just that fast, he’s already there, opening my door, no doubt windwalking to get there. It’s as if he has to do it, as if the wind is a part of who he is—what he is.

He offers me his hand, and I have this instant certainty that the minute I touch this man, I will be changed forever. It’s not about that mark on the neck I heard about today, either. It’s just this strong, soul-deep feeling. He will change me and do so in ways I can’t possibly know right now. And yet, I reach out and press my palm to his palm, and I swear a tingling sensation slides up my arms, across my chest.

He eases me to my feet and catches my files just as they’re about to tumble to the ground, and we are so close, the heat of his body scorches me far more than the Nevada heat. “Thank you,” I say, scooping the files into my arms. “I keep trying to drop these.” And for a moment, we’re just staring at each other, and there is this intense pull between us that has me a little breathless as I add, “Groom Lake’s version of secure is to keep everything in paperwork and nothing in an electronic database.”

“Nothing to do with the GTECHs, you mean,” he says, his hand no longer touching mine and it’s not a question.

“Yes. I’m learning that. I want you to know that I’ve been in Houston working at NASA. I didn’t *know*.”

He just stares down at me with hooded eyes and says, “What do you want to eat?”

The rapid change of topic has a whiplash effect, and I fear that his motives tonight might be about my father, but that would mean I'm the only one that feels whatever this is between us. And even if that is, I can deal with it. I want to earn his trust. Which is a good reason to roll with the punches. "I can't believe I'm finally getting Henry's again. It's hard to decide. Okay, so—I guess—a double cheeseburger and onion rings. No, French fries. Okay, no." I hold up my hand. "Cheese tater tots—they're so good—and a chocolate shake."

He arches a brow. "That's a lot of food."

"It's been a long time. Houston doesn't have anything close to as good. Can you help me eat it if it's too much?"

There is what I think might be a hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth but I'm not certain. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever seen him smile. "I'd say I'll have to," he replies. "I'll be back."

"How soon?" I ask.

"Just as long as it takes them to make the food."

And then he's gone. He disappears and there is not even a hint of wind. The crazy thing is, I can still feel his touch.

Chapter Five

As long as it takes for them to make the food.

I can only assume that means Creed can travel from here to Vegas in seconds, and while that blows my mind, right now, I'm just thinking about him returning and how nervous I am about him here, in my house. It's tiny. He's not, in body or presence. And I feel like I'm breaking rules having dinner with him, even if that's not really true. It's not like I'm his therapist or even his doctor, but I'm still here in a professional capacity, and I can't claim this dinner is professional. There's chemistry between us. So much insane chemistry, like I've never experienced in my life.

And I'm still standing outside, staring at the spot where he was just standing.

Hurrying to the door, I fumble with my keys, and enter the tiny living room, rushing to the bar, which is also my equivalent of a kitchen table, where I set down my files. Next, I head to the bedroom and kick off my high heels. I feel this deep need to be a normal woman right now, not someone in Army greens who looks like a scientist studying Creed, when I'm sort of both.

With this uncomfortable reality in mind, I quickly yank leggings and a tee out of my closet, and change. I finish the look with sneakers, and then check myself in the mirror. I tug my hair free from the binding, blonde hair falling around my shoulders. I look younger than my skillset. This is good. I look so far from a scientist right now, I can almost convince myself I'm nothing of the sort.

Okay, I think. I'm ready, and my growling stomach agrees. Now I wait, and when my gaze lands on my cellphone where it rests on the bed, I realize I should have given my number to Creed. Not that he gave me the chance. He was here and gone in a blink.

I walk to the bar that frames the kitchen, which isn't much of a kitchen at all. It truly looks like something out of the eighties, with greenish counters made of some sort of fake

countertop material, and an old-fashioned fridge, but fancy doesn't matter. I'm not here to live in luxury, and when my father offered me officer housing, I declined. I don't want to be seen as an extension of him when I know to some extent that's unavoidable.

Hiking myself up on a wooden barstool, I slide my MacBook in front of me, having left it here this morning. This particular facility isn't keen on outside technology, but I have been working to create my own data on Project Zodius.

There's a knock on the door, and my heart thunders in my chest, nerves tap dancing in my belly. I have got to get myself under control. With a deep breath, I walk to the door and open it, and despite knowing full well it's Creed, the impact of him standing there is pretty darn breathtaking. He's a beautiful man. He really is.

He's also got his hands full, and I quickly take the drinks. "That was insanely fast," I say, motioning with my head for him to come in.

It's only now that I realize we're in my new home, as a part of our first date—if that is what this is—and it might suggest I'm about to sleep with him. But I really don't think that's what he believes or assumes. It's just convenience and the necessity of our location—being Groom Lake.

He steps inside and uses his boot to kick the door shut, his arms are still loaded. I set the drinks on the bar and grab a bag. "This is a lot of food."

"You have a big appetite," he says, and I can't tell if he's teasing.

"I think it's more you who has the big appetite. We'll never eat all of this."

He joins me at the counter and sets the remainder of the bags next to the drinks. "You really don't know much about us, do you?"

"Not yet, no. Why? What does that mean?"

"It means, let's eat."

I search his face, trying to understand but read nothing. I climb onto my stool and he does the same, close to me by necessity. The bar is just not that long. I grab one of the bags and start pulling out food. There's an empty burger wrapper and I'm starting to put things together.

"You need more calories than an average man."

"Windwalking requires fuel."

"What if you windwalk during combat and don't have it?"

"I hear they are working on another immunization."

His words zip like an accusation and when he sets my tater tots in front of me, I feel a little queasy. So much so, that I ignore my food and reach for the bag and pull out another three burgers, wishing I knew what to say to him right now, but I don't. Everything I think of sounds contrite in my mind, and that sends a message I don't want to.

But I have to say something.

I have to respond.

I glance over at him and just go for honesty. "I don't know how to reply to that comment."

My stomach growls rather loudly, and while I don't get a smile out of him his eyes light with amusement. "Try telling me you like the tots."

"You sure?"

"I went to Vegas for those tots."

I smile, even if he does not, and say, "And I really appreciate it."

"Then eat, Addie," he urges softly.

I nod and turn to my tots, pulling them out of the foil and unpackaging my plastic fork. By the time I've salted my food, he's already opened another burger. "I got you everything on your wish list." He sets fries and onion rings in front of me.

"I'll never eat all of this," I laugh.

“I’ll help,” he promises, and the energy in the room is measurably lighter, like whatever triggered his remark is hidden away between hamburger buns and tater tots with cheese.

I dig into my food, and he does the same. For just a bit we’re silent, but it’s not actually uncomfortable. I’ve just finished off a bite of my burger when he grabs an onion ring at the same time I do. Our hands collide and the charge is impossible to miss.

We share a look that packs a punch and I abandon the onion ring, leaving it for him. “I have a small confession,” I say, eager to ensure whatever this is happening between us isn’t tainted by lies or secrets, which I believe he’s experienced too much of as it is. “I looked you up on the database today.”

He rotates to face me and I do the same to him. “And what did you find out?”

“Personal stuff I should have let you tell me yourself. Family, age. Basic things. I didn’t look at anything deeper.”

“My father and I hated each other. Now my mother and I hate each other.”

His confession is unexpected, but I don’t back away from it. “Why?”

“He was a rich, arrogant prick who wanted me to become the same. I joined the Army to spite him. My mother blames me for his death even though I wasn’t even on the same continent at the time.”

“And now you’re here, and Project Zodiak happened. Do you regret joining the Army?”

“Regret is a fool’s emotion that makes you weak and insecure.”

It’s a telling statement that cuts open those family troubles and lets them bleed out right here in front of me. “You really hated him,” I observe. “As in, *really hated him*.”

His eyes sharpen, his jaw with them. “Why did that statement bring you to that conclusion?”

“Because I think I’m a pretty brave person, but my mother died in a car accident eighteen months ago and all I have is regrets. We were close. We were headed to Houston that morning for an opportunity of a lifetime at NASA.”

“And now you’re here. Why, Addie?”

Unbidden, I bristle defensively. “Is that why you asked me to dinner? To find out?”

Chapter Six

“No,” he says, without hesitation. “I did not ask you to dinner because I wanted to know your motives for being here. On the other hand, I can’t know you without knowing why you’re here anymore than I can expect you to never ask me a GTECH-related question.”

“There are a number of ways I could take that statement.”

“And I meant it in about every possible context you can conclude. You and your mother stayed away. You went to Houston. You left NASA, which we both know was a prestigious place for you to be. So I repeat, why are you here now?”

I have this overwhelming urge to show him the notes and the file I was left, but it’s damning to my father, and I don’t know if he’s guilty or how Creed feels about him. I don’t know that it’s in anyone’s best interest to turn the men against him.

“I received anonymous letters and a file that explained Project Zodiak to me. I was blown away. I couldn’t look away.”

“Why do think this person went to you?”

“You know why. Because I’m my father’s daughter, but also because I worked with alien microorganisms at NASA. No one knows better than me how little research has been done on this topic. And, most importantly, I’m nothing like him.”

“Did you confront your father?”

“That’s not the way for me to get answers—real answers you and the other GTECHs need. Honestly, answers the world needs. He’s long wanted me out here. I told him my grant expired and it was time for me to come home, all of which is true. The best way to get anything from my father is to let him believe he got what he wanted.”

His stare is heavy-lidded, the silence stretching before he says, “No one expects you to be loyal to anyone but him.”

“And that’s fair. How could I expect any different until I prove myself, and I realize that is a high hill to climb.” My chin lowers to my chest and battles with what I should or should not say.

“Addie?”

I force my gaze back to his eyes and say, “Let me see their real color.”

“Not now.”

“Why not now? Why do you have to hide being who you are?”

“You know why.”

“I don’t know why. I don’t like the hidden nature of any of this.”

“We live in a world of humans, and I am not that anymore.”

“You are to me.”

“Then you can’t handle the truth.”

“You’re buying into the legend of Creed. You’re letting the talk make you a monster. I can see that in your eyes, no matter what color you show me when I look at you.”

He pushes to his feet, so close to me momentarily that our legs press together, his hands pressing to either side of my chair, and my entire body is alive in ways I can barely process. There is something intense connecting and me and this man. And there is something intensely angry and wild about him right now. “What would your father think if he knew I was here?”

“I don’t need his permission, and I don’t care what he thinks. I’m not him. And you can talk to me, Creed, and it stays with me. I swear to you.”

“Only we won’t just talk, now, will we? And if that happens, you might find out just how not human I am.”

“The mark on the neck? I know about it. I’m not afraid of you or it.”

He stares at me, his eyes shifting from blue to black and he says, "I like that you're not afraid, which is why I'm going to leave before you are." With that, he pushes off my chair and walks to the door.

Without hesitation, I run after him, but by the time I'm at the door, he's gone, but I swear I can still smell the masculine perfection of him in the wind.

Chapter Seven

I spend the entire night reading about GTECH, with Creed heavily on my mind, and the scent of him lingers in the air, almost a part of me, as if it's on my skin. It's silly, really. He barely touched me. I counted six hamburger wrappers and I dig through the file trying to figure out how many calories he has to eat to simply survive but come up dry. There have to be files on a database I've not been given access to, and I text my father with that request.

Surely, there are not only paper files for Project Zodiuss. What do I have to do to get that clearance?

It's midnight, he replies. You know that, right?

I didn't think soldiers, especially generals, ever slept. I need clearance.

You'll have it first thing in the morning. Now go to sleep, daughter, before I fire you.

Ha. I think about that. You can't fire me. You spent too many years trying to get me here. Now you have to live with me and my demands.

Go to bed, he replies.

I will because it's late and I'm up early, but I wonder why I wasn't given that access in the first place? I was literally told the files are only paper.

Security protocol you passed today, he replies.

It seems too easy, and I wonder if it's really more than I already have, which is just basic information on the soldiers in the program.

But as I lay down in bed, I know it will be more, and I know damn well that security protocol was him. He decides who sees everything and he hadn't given me clearance.

I also want to know why Creed is different from the others, and what he knows about him, but I can't risk singling Creed

out with my father. I have to hope the new security clearance tells me what I want to know.

I wake the next morning early, brew coffee, and down half a pot as I'm getting ready. I'm not exactly used to this early of a morning. In Houston, I got to work at eight am, not six, and there's a time zone change in the mix to top it off.

I'm about to walk out the door when I realize my car still has a flat tire. Groom Lake isn't exactly the place to call an Uber either. I text Katie: *I have a flat tire. Can you pick me up?*

Sure thing. Give me ten.

I fill another coffee cup and decide to head out to the front porch to wait on my ride. I open the door and to my surprise, there's an envelope at my feet. I set my cup on the table just inside the door and bend down to pick it up.

I quickly open the envelope, and my hand is trembling for no real reason. Inside is a small piece of paper, that reads: *I leave this morning on a mission, but I replaced your tire for you. I didn't have your key or I would have brought it to you.*

Creed

I'm blown away by his actions and I'm eager to tell him as much, but he's gone for what could be months. That's when I realize I never got Creed's phone number and he never got mine. I can't thank him. And I have no idea when I will see him or talk to him again.

Chapter Eight

Katie pulls us into the parking lot right next to my car, which means I have to explain my tire that's no longer flat. We exit her vehicle, and it's already suffocatingly hot outside. I'm fanning myself when she starts her walk around my car. "Someone fixed it." To my surprise, she's not surprised at all. "There are perks to being around men trained to follow orders and be gentlemen." She laughs. "Especially since they aren't usually gentlemen in bed."

My eyes go wide. "You did not just say that."

"I did," she assures me, motioning me toward the elevator. "We have to have something else to get ourselves hot other than the weather, though I keep my hands off the GTECHs. We're studying them, so that feels wrong, and they are just so unknown."

Guilt slices through me over Creed, but there is no doubt in my mind that if that man showed up at my door this very night, I'd welcome him inside. I'm at worst infatuated with him and at best, intrigued. I don't consider myself a person with a lot of weaknesses as far as what I would call addictions, but I could easily see him proving me wrong. Is that because of the serum, because of some pheromone he now possesses? And even if it is, is it because he and I would have connected no matter what? These are questions that form actual lab hypotheses in my mind I must explore.

We're in the elevator and I don't even remember stepping in, which says a lot, considering my phobia about this steel box. "Where are the women with that mark on their neck?"

"The government has them on lockdown in some offsite facility."

"How are we supposed to study them and help them if they aren't here?"

"The thought was they needed to be separated from the GTECHs for safekeeping. There's a research team with them, but it's problematic."

The elevator opens and we step into the facility with thankfully no one around. “How?”

“The men they were with when the mark appeared were uneasy without them. It seems to require space and time to disconnect them enough for them to function without distraction.”

“Uneasy how?”

“Protective. Angry they were kept from them. It’s like there is a bond between them that is unbreakable. Like I said, we can’t remove the mark from the women.”

“But I’d assume these same men were with other women and this didn’t happen, right?”

“Yes. We confirmed that exact fact.”

She glances at her watch. “I have a meeting in ten. I’ll come by later, and we can talk this out.” She hurries away and I grab coffee from the breakroom before heading to my office.

Once I’m behind my desk, I decide I’ll splurge on a coffee pot of my own before I pull up my email. My father holds the first spot in my inbox and I click on the message.

Now that you have clearance, I’m including your login credentials. You need to start by looking at the X2 studies. This is a rapid action item and a problem that must be contained.

It’s signed in his formal automatic signature, which is expected. This is work, and we both have jobs to do.

He has my attention, and I sip my coffee then quickly log onto a database loaded with information. Okay, not quickly. I go through what feels like an SAT exam to actually get onto the system. I scan and find the folder for X2, which requires another round of identification verification. Finally, I’m in and reading and find a concerning development.

Out of almost two hundred GTECHs, fifteen soldiers have tested positive for what they are calling an X2 gene mutation. Some of these soldiers, not all, have displayed out-of-character aggression, disobedience, and godlike complexes, and as a

result, all fifteen men turned into pincushions. This mutation has not been reported to the higher ranks beyond our facility.

There are recommendations by more than half the scientists on site, which means dozens, to seclude these soldiers until we know if this mutation is contagious, and before they can no longer be contained. That recommendation was referred to my father for approval.

Are they serious?

This is insanity.

There are nearly two hundred GTECHs, all extraordinary and dangerous, and on our side. When you start locking even some of them up, they become our enemies. Surely, my father gets this even if the scientists do not.

My heart starts thundering in my chest and I click on the list, nervous to see the names and I know, I just know without looking, Creed's name will be there. Sure enough, he's number one.

And he's gone now.

On a mission or to be tricked into confinement?

I shove to my feet and I'm around my desk in a heartbeat, charging through the lab, hellbent on confronting my father.

Unfortunately, my father's office is so far on the other side of the facility my walk is not short. When I finally arrive at the entirely separate wing, I'm still fuming. His secretary, Lana, is behind her desk—a pretty blonde with big breasts, which irritates me a bit because you know, he's my father and well—my mother—and all the emotional baggage that comes with me thinking he picked Lana for her looks.

His door is open, and I don't bother to stop at her desk. I walk right in to find him gone. Whirling around, I step back into the lobby to find his assistant standing.

“Where is he?”

“He left for a mission this morning. “

“When is he back?”

“I don’t know. It’s top-secret, and I’m not given details.”

Oh my God, I think. He left. Creed left. This is not good.

I start walking and I don’t stop until I’m on the other side of the facility again, standing in front of Katie’s desk. “X2.”

“Yes. It’s scary, right?”

I open my mouth to ask if she thinks they’ve been locked up, but I realize I don’t know her security clearance. I don’t have any idea if anyone but me has seen the collective recommendation.

“It’s not scary. It’s inconclusive as to why the men show aggression and disobedience. They were injected with alien DNA. I’d be a little angry too.”

“True. That is true.”

“Are the men with the X2 mutation the ones connected to the markings on the women’s necks? Do you know?”

“I do not. Good question, though.”

“My father is gone. Creed is gone. How do I find out who else on that list of soldiers with mutations are gone as well?”

“How do you know Creed is gone?”

“It doesn’t matter how I know. I know.”

“Right.” Her lips hint at a smile. “Just be careful. And I’m not given information on who is sent on what missions.”

“Are there scheduled tests being done for the X2-positive soldiers?”

She quickly keys into her computer. “Yes. There are tests planned in three weeks.”

“Here?”

“Here. Yes. Where else would they be tested? It’s a top-secret program.”

She pushes to her feet. “What’s going on in your head right now? Or what do you know that I don’t?”

“I’m interested in those fifteen men,” I say. “And with my father gone, I don’t know how to get in touch with them.”

“We’ve got contact info on all of them. I’ll email the info to you to keep you from hunting. But if you get them in, I want to sit in for whatever you do with them.”

I nod. “Okay. I’ll let you know.”

I rotate and exit her office, and travel rapidly back to my own. I’m quick to find contact information for all the X2-positive soldiers but my attempt to contact them is in vain. I connect with no one. I pray my father’s mission isn’t to lure them into captivity, because that would be bad. So very bad.

No, dangerous. That’s the right word. It would be dangerous for us to confine those men.

Chapter Nine

Creed

The foul scent of dead fish flares in my nostrils, made worse by the heat radiating beneath the canvas roof that covers the displays. Appropriate, considering today may well be “dead day” for one of the fools I’m about to confront.

I walk into the Kuwait City Fish Market off Arabian Gulf Boulevard in street clothes—casual jeans, a black T-shirt, with shades covering my eyes, arriving to hushed whispers and a general awareness of an American filling the air. Not just an American, but one who looks and reads like an American soldier, and when there is one of us there are more. Which is true, but I don’t need the back-up, not on this gig.

But while many of these people might feel uncomfortable by my unexplained presence, one man—the one standing a few feet away—already feels me right to his soul. A stocky man with dark, wavy hair, and dressed in white robes, good for hiding weapons, Raj Mustafad doesn’t know me, but I know him from his pictures and his reputation.

For starters, he comes here every Friday to shop, oh, so casually. As if he’s a normal human, when he’s a monster plotting a slaughter. The piece of shit is linked to an Iranian terrorist group hellbent on the annihilation of Israel by biological attack.

Three tables of stinking fish separate me from him, which I remedy, fading into the wind and reappearing right in front of Raj, not giving a crap about witnesses. Not in Kuwait City, where people are afraid to speak their own names for fear of being stoned to death in the streets.

“Who are you?” he demands, fear trembling through him by the obvious quake of his jaw. “*What* are you?”

“Where are the canisters?”

“Fuck you,” he says, proving his English to be top-notch.

He rotates and starts to run. My lips curve because the truth is, being jacked up on alien DNA does have its moments and this is about to be one of them. I let him dash and go all the way to the other side of the fish market before I fade into the wind and appear in front of him. He screams like a little bitch, rotates, and starts running again. At this point, there's laughter in the market, and Raj is doing just what I want—wearing himself out, but I'm growing impatient.

This time when he reaches the other side, I appear in front of him, grab his robes, and fling him onto the center of one of the tables of fish, the slimy bodies smashing beneath him and flopping off the table.

Somehow, he has his shit together enough to pull a gun and point it at my chest. "It won't hurt me, but I can hurt you without ever pulling my weapon. You know that. I know you've heard about men like me."

"GTECHs," he spats. "Creatures. You're nothing but creatures."

"Yes," I confirm, and in moments like this, I embrace such a name. "Yes, that's right. Where are the canisters?"

"Help!" shouts a woman. "Help! American! American soldier!"

Which equates to a cry for help from the very soldiers who would rape and beat the woman if given the chance, and the ignorance never ceases to amaze me. The wind shifts, and I don't have to look up to know Caleb and Julian Rain, identical twins, stand on either side of me, covering my back. And while I trust Caleb with my life, Julian is another story.

He's a fucking loose cannon with a god complex who I'm going to have to kill someday soon to spare Caleb, the only person I would call a close friend, the pain of doing it himself. And that would be a gift to him even if he can't see it now. In fact, I have no doubt the General pairs me with them because he knows I'll kill Julian if he goes too far. The General knows, as I know, that Julian's always right there on the edge, but then so am I.

I'm everything he wants and needs in a soldier, but far too close to something none of us want to talk about, for him to ever want me near his daughter. This thought is as random as the many other times over the past three weeks away that Addie's popped into my head when she should not be there, and I curse my distraction.

Raj is now whimpering like a baby, begging for his freedom. "I don't have time for this," I snap, and I don't. Not with millions of lives on the line, and reliable intel from the Israeli government that the attack is planned for some time in the next twenty-four hours. A week and a half of chasing our tails for the details has led to only one person—Raj. He is all we have. He's all the people of Israel have.

"I don't know what this is!" Raj spouts out, and I snatch his gun from him and press it to his ear. "I'll start here and move on."

Gunfire sounds behind me.

"Anytime now, Creed," Caleb snaps.

I lean in close and say, "I could disappear and take you with me, but there's a high probability you'd die in the process. But if the soldiers get here before you talk, you leave me no option." I ease back and let him see the truth burning in my black eyes.

Raj spills his guts before I do it for him. "Don't let me find out you lied," I say, "I'll come back for you and it won't be gentle. Anything else you want to tell us?"

"No! No. No. That's all. I swear it on my life."

"It is your life."

Soldiers have reached the tent, and we're now surrounded by guns. "Now!" Caleb shouts, and the three of us disappear, and I for one, do so knowing Raj is alone and alive but he won't be for long.

He'll be considered a traitor and slaughtered, and the fear he's feeling right now, knowing that reality as truth, is sweet revenge. I feel absolutely no sympathy or guilt for leaving him to this destiny because he's a monster. At least, that's why I

tell myself I'm okay with it, but on some level, I can feel my humanity slipping away, and maybe, just maybe, I'm losing the ability to feel such things.

That's when I become a monster, too, but then, that runs in my family.

Chapter Ten

Near sunrise, several hours later, I materialize from inside the wind behind one of four terrorists, on top of an unlit fishing boat they're preparing to arm, and silently snap the man's neck. Only a few feet away, two more insurgents are taken out by Caleb and Julian. If Raj's claims were accurate, then in exactly three minutes a supply Jeep will appear on the barely existent dirt path leading to the dock—that Jeep will hold the live biological agent the men on the fishing boat were here to collect.

I scan for the fourth man that, per Raj, should be here, locating him on the edge of the boat, about to jump. I windwalk to appear beside him and take him out with another snap of a neck. I hike his body up and follow Caleb and Julian's lead, dumping the bodies down the stairs leading below deck.

The eerie sound of what I know to be the Arabian wolves who inhabit this area howling rips through the distant woods. Caleb and Julian step to my side, and Julian murmurs softly, "Another ten insurgents a half mile down the hill, with the intent of protecting the exchange we already stopped from happening."

I don't ask how he knows. Julian is now the "animal whisperer" with a weird as fuck way of talking to animals, which doesn't fit him at all. The whole theory that animals are a good judge of character is blown to hell in rocket fuel.

Headlights flicker down the dirt path, and the group of us fade into the shadows, taking cover. The engine grows louder, and I watch a canvas-covered truck halt in front of the dock. You'd think this is when I'd feel the adrenaline rush as I ready for battle, but that reaction is no longer a part of who I am, not when fighting at a skillset that amounts to kindergarten playground time. We're no longer like our enemies. The only reason we're hiding at present is to ensure this mission is short and sweet before it's over which means no reinforcements are called in and that no one escapes.

The doors to the vehicle open and then slam shut, followed by the rumble of male voices in the air.

My team has a plan and we stick to it.

We allow two of the men to approach and then board, the men Raj said would do a security check of the fishing boat, before allowing the men we've now killed to retrieve the weapons.

The minute they're on board, Caleb and Julian disappear and head to shore with the biological weapons now in their sights under limited guard. I flatten my enemy combatants with barely any effort, and I leave the boat, appearing just behind the truck where Caleb is illogically alone, standing on the ledge of the vehicle, lifting a canvas covering. Where the fuck is Julian? In that moment, a young soldier, a boy of maybe sixteen, rounds the vehicle and holds a machine gun at Caleb's back. And I can feel him ready to shoot.

Time stands still as I react, drawing my weapon with one thought: GTECHs don't die easily, but enough bullets in the right place from a machine gun could do the job. It doesn't matter that the boy is a boy, probably forced to fight for his family, he could end Caleb, and I will not allow that to happen.

Without hesitation, I fire my weapon strategically, hitting the boy with a bullet in one arm, and then the next, for good measure. He falls to the dirt and begins to scream out in pain. Caleb jumps to the ground, a grim expression on his face, telling a story. I've known this man since we entered basic training and somehow two years ago, we ended up at Groom Lake together.

I was with him when he heard his parents were killed by a gas leak in their house right after the damn injections. It was a hellish time for all of us, but for him, he was burning alive with the pain. He was destroyed while Julian was indifferent.

Caleb is one of the best men, if not *the* best man, I have ever known in my life. Honorable, the Superman of warriors, and he's torn up by what I've done to this child. I have only a moment to recognize and feel the relief of knowing that I am

as well, that Raj and the boy are different to me, human versus monster, before trouble rages again.

The wind ripples, and Julian appears beside the boy and shoots him in the head. My anger is instant, the force of my ability to “feel” just that. A force—wind tunneling around me as I step toward him. Caleb is between us in an instant, facing me, hands on my chest. “Not here. Not now.”

“He just killed him,” I bite out. “We both know he needs to die.”

“Not here, not now,” Caleb repeats, while Julian laughs behind him, drawing a grimace from his brother.

“Shut up, Julian!” Caleb shouts over his shoulder.

But Julian doesn’t stop. “Stop with the fake emotions we both know you don’t feel, Creed,” he taunts, and Caleb softly reminds me, “The mission, man, and millions of people’s lives on the line.”

Anger burns through my blood, damn near boiling, but Caleb is right. The mission matters and that boy is gone. Dealing with Julian has to wait, but he has to be dealt with, and while I know Caleb knows this, he resists anything that ends his brother.

I turn away from both men, drawing in a breath, calming myself and the energy radiating from my body, and the wind that hums inside me in ways I could never explain to anyone, not even another GTECH.

“He’s human and a piece of shit,” Julian declares. “Weak in every possible way.”

I rotate to face him but I’m under control now. I’m contained. He hopes. “He was a young boy.”

“He was a weak human, corrupt in body and mind. You know it, because you’re like me, not like *them*. Caleb will too, one day, when he’s like us. You don’t have to pretend for his benefit.”

That comparison between him and me that hits far too close to home, shreds me. He’s right. Caleb is a GTECH, but for

him, that means he's a soldier who would be human if not for his extraordinary powers. Julian is something else. So am I, but I will not allow myself to become the same something that defines Julian. Exactly why I deny the part of me that wants to see him die a horrible death right here and now. Because I'm not like him. I will never be like him.

Gunfire sounds in the near distance and my teeth grit. "As Caleb pointed out, we have a job to do." I walk to the truck, to a trunk Caleb's exposed, to find three airtight canisters, small, yet lethal—each capable of killing hundreds of thousands. Julian reaches in and roughly removes a canister. "Eventually, there must be an end so that there can be a new beginning."

His eyes aren't just black at that moment, they're hellish black. "Maybe I'll keep one of these babies for myself." The wolves in the distance howl as if joining in on the joke.

Caleb hits his limit. "Put the fucking canister down, brother, or it's me you'll be fighting."

Julian laughs. "Whatever, Caleb. You were always melodramatic." He returns the canister to the crate and seals the lid. "I claim the honor of taking these to the brave and honorable General Lawrence." He hoists the crate against his body and disappears.

Caleb curses and cuts me a stare. "I'll handle him. You have my word." He disappears.

I feel no compulsion to follow. Caleb is a good man who will check Julian, but he's not as strong as his twin anymore. He's not going to be able to control him for much longer. I glance down at the bloody puddle at my feet, the blood of the young boy, and have one thought. I'll have to handle Julian. Because he's right. I'm not like Caleb. I'm not human anymore. But that's a good thing, because it'll take every bit of my power to destroy him. The kind of power no one really quite knows I possess, not even Julian. Because I don't want them to know. Because I don't know what I'm becoming. And I hope like hell it's really not him.

There can't be two of us to contend with. He has to die. Maybe killing is what I'm here for now. The only reason.

More gunfire rings out followed by voices, and I fade into the wind. And fuck me, without making the clear decision to do so, and for reasons I can't explain, I am standing in Addie's driveway.

Chapter Eleven

Addie

It's nearly nine on a Friday night, and my big plans include me dressed for bed early, in my bedroom, and settling cozily in my new overstuffed chair, with a glass of wine and my MacBook. I've promised myself I'll go to bed early, aware that the fourteen-hour workdays are wearing on me. I just can't stop my obsession with the X2 research, but I need data to arm myself to battle on their behalf with my father.

There's also a cool breeze fluttering through my open patio door, compliments of a hit-and-run August storm, which is sweet relief to the Nevada heat and my crappy air conditioner. For some reason it drives my thoughts to Creed, as so many things have so many times over the weeks that he's been gone. I'm not one to obsess over a man, and I tell myself that it's because of my work, because he is a part of that work. But deep down, there is more to this and I know it.

The reality here is that I have never even kissed Creed, and yet there is a near-clawing sensation in me at his absence. It's not normal, and I can't help but believe my research can tell me why. I also have to hypothesize that my initial thought, that the same bond we might have as humans is magnified with the changes in him.

I could be, and this is a long shot, his nature mate, a woman he might marry, which could also mean I'm one of the women who will get that circle on my neck if I have sex with him.

Or not.

Maybe it's just some kind of pheromone he puts off that is literally like a drug to me. If that's the case, I wouldn't be the only one to react this way to him. In truth, if the latter is true, he could become a weapon in so many unusual ways. They all could be, if they're like him.

Unbidden, my mind goes to that fight between my parents the night before my mother's accident, as I have a million

times before.

“All this grant does is delay Project Zodiuss. We need to talk to Addie tonight and tell her neither of you are accepting that grant with NASA.”

“You’re trying to rush the research. You can’t do that safely,” my mother pushes back. “The work Addie and I will do with this grant is a necessary step. You have to see that. We’ll get there. Just don’t create a problem to fix a problem.”

“Bullshit,” my father says. “We’re not going to Houston. The work is focused here in Groom Lake. We need to be here. I’ll get you a private investor. I’m close.”

My mother knew about Project Zodiuss, but she wasn’t willing to move forward with it. She called it dangerous and yet it happened right after her accident. Almost as if, without her, my father had no restraint. Or he needed to complete the project she was somehow involved. And I can’t seem to get a straight answer from him on who pulled the trigger. He offers me no admission or denial but rather deflection. Per him, those involved have been dealt with. I want to believe he really didn’t get behind Project Zodiuss, and the deception of the soldiers.

The curtain lifts with a full-out gust of wind, and I shiver with the idea that it’s somehow responding to my thoughts. It’s insanity, but then who would even think men could travel in the wind in the first place? How connected to us, through them, is it?

Whatever the case, it’s freaking me out.

I set my computer on the table beside the chair and push to my feet, my sheer white gown settling just above my knees. I intend to shut the door, just slam it, lock it, and be done with it, but Creed is in my mind again so very strongly.

I pull the curtain back and suck in a breath at what I find. He’s sitting on my patio, in a chair, his head low, his shoulders tense. As if he’s holding up the world with no one there to help him. And yet, he ended up here.

On what equals my doorstep.

There's no way I'm shutting the door now, not with him outside and me inside.

Chapter Twelve

For a moment that stretches into a full minute, I just watch Creed, his head down, his dark hair draping his face, and I can feel his torment, his pain mixed with a swell of womanly need in me that is so beyond understanding I don't even try. And besides, maybe it's not so beyond understanding anyway. Maybe he's just the first man that really speaks to me on such a deep and complete level.

All I know is that he came to me tonight not because he wants me, at least not solely, but rather, because he needs me. He's alone in this world, battling enemies on all fronts—the perception of him, the fear and judgment attached to who he has become, as well as whatever horrible things he sees with every mission he undertakes.

One of those enemies could be my father, who I've spent weeks fearing locked him away.

The man who may well have green-lit creating him.

My relief is that Creed is here and free, not in captivity, but for all I know, he was tricked, he was imprisoned, and he has escaped. Or what if a mission went wrong, and someone is dead?

This very idea drives my urgency to find out what is happening. I don't bother with a robe. We both know where we're headed, and I have no intention of sending him a message that I am afraid of that path or him. Illogically perhaps, which defies the woman of science that I am, I am not.

I step outside, and I know he knows I'm here, but he doesn't look up. Of course, he knows. He's Creed, after all, almighty in his skills, and Lord knows I've heard stories, so many stories these past few weeks, that if believed, would make him more legend than man.

My bare feet carry me over the damp stone that lingers from the storm, and I close the space between us, no hesitation in me as I settle on my knees in front of him, my hands boldly

pressing to his knees. The touch is more intimate than the act, and for just a moment, my breath catches in my throat. And still he hasn't looked at me. "Creed," I whisper, a plea in my voice for him to look at me. "What happened?"

His gaze lifts and his stare is as dark as I imagine hell might be, darker yet, without the fire. His chiseled jaw sharper than a blade, his voice sandpaper rough, *anguished*. "I shouldn't be here."

"Why?" I ask, but it's too simple a question for what is obviously a decision filled with conflict for all kinds of reasons, all of which I reject. "If I want you to be here, and I do, and you *want* to be here, too, why shouldn't you be here?"

"There are so many ways I might hurt you. You have to know that."

"But you won't," I say, my voice firm with the certainty burying deep inside me and taking root this very moment. "That's what defines us all. What we can do, what we actually do, what we won't do. Did something happen?"

"That's a loaded question, don't you think?"

He means the serum, I think, and all that followed his "vaccine" that was no vaccine at all. I don't believe anyone thought it was anything but an experiment.

I push to my feet, using his powerful thighs as my launchpad. "Come inside," I say firmly, my hand capturing his hand, my fingers lacing with his. I swear that connection tingles a path up my arm and across my chest and yet somehow, I still manage to feel it deep in the pit of my belly.

He just looks at me, but his eyes tell a story, one laden with guilt and armed with nothing but a trillion reasons to leave. Exactly why when he stands, towering over me, I don't know his intention—be it to stay or go—but the wind whistles and hums, and in its depths, as insane as it might seem, *I feel him*.

I start walking backward, tugging him with me, encouraged when he follows me, aware of his lethal grace even now, in this small movement. It's an energy he possesses that on

someone else I'd call absolute masculine confidence, but on Creed, it's next level. It's almost a hum of energy.

We reach the door and I step inside, but just when I believe he will join me, he extracts his hand from mine. He plants one palm on the glass door, the other on the wall of the house. "What the hell am I doing?" he murmurs to himself, and then to me. "No, Addie. This is a mistake."

I'm excruciatingly aware in this moment that he has not touched me once of his own accord, and I fear I've misread this visit in all kinds of ways. And how inappropriate am I, in my sheer gown, touching him, pulling him inside, when maybe he just wants to see someone who can help him, and not by way of getting naked with him?

My arms fold in front of my chest. "Okay."

"Don't say that like I just wounded you. *God, woman.* I'm here. You know I want to be here. You're standing there in a damn near see-through gown. How can I not want to come inside with you?"

"Which was inappropriate of me. I should have gotten a robe. And I'm sorry. We can talk. I'll put a robe on, and we can sit outside, and I—"

"I don't want you to put on a fucking robe. I want you to take off the gown, but damn it, I know you know about those women who—"

"None of them were with soldiers with the X2 gene, which may or may not mean anything, but—"

"You know I'm positive." His statement is flat, hard.

"Of course, I know."

"Then why are you standing here with me, inviting me inside?"

"We don't know what it means."

"I do. *I do, Addie.*"

I suck in a breath at what is obviously an admission of something he doesn't want known. And that's a dangerous

thing for him because of who I am. He must feel his need to trust me defies survival and logic. “You can trust me. And I’m not afraid of you, Creed Monroe. I’ll say that a hundred times if it will make you believe me. Please come inside.”

“You know what’s going to happen when I come inside, don’t you?”

“I have an idea.”

“Do you, Addie?” he challenges. “Because while I might talk to you, that’s not what I need right now. I can’t drink myself into oblivion. I can’t escape me and all that I am unless it’s buried in you. So to be clear, I want to fuck you. I need to fuck you, every which way you’ll let me fuck you, and for reasons I can’t even explain, it can’t be anyone else. But afterward, we both have to live with the consequences. And I’m pretty much at the fuck the consequences place in my life, so fuck the consequences. But you’re another story. So I ask you now, do you want me to come in?”

Chapter Thirteen

My cheeks flush with his bold words, but I also feel the challenge in their depths as certainly as I do the slick heat between my thighs. And that challenge is clear. Can I really handle him?

Uncharacteristically bold, I dare to lower my arms, allowing him a view of my body beneath the thin gown, my puckered nipples. But I also step closer to him, so close I breathe in his earthy, masculine scent.

I tilt my chin up to meet his stare and speak every truth I can summon. “If you’re trying to shock me, Creed, it didn’t work. If you’re trying to prove I’m a scared little scientist, it didn’t work. I’m not afraid of you. Maybe I should be, I don’t know. I can’t explain anything between us, but what I know is that you needed to come here to me tonight and *I needed* you to come, and I’ve needed that every day since you left.” I throw my hands out to my side. “You don’t want to talk. I don’t either, but I can’t seem to stop, so either go or come inside and give me something else to do.” I back up into my bedroom, giving him space, wanting none of it, challenging him as he has me.

For seconds that feel like an eternity he just stares at me, and I’m losing my mind, but then his gaze rakes over me, hot, intimate, dirty, and it’s a good dirty. But still, he hasn’t touched me, he hasn’t come inside, and I am hanging on a thread, expecting him to disappear at any moment.

“Creed,” I whisper, a plea in his name.

He answers by stepping into the room, shutting the door, and then it happens. He’s finally touching me, one hand possessively at my waist, another on the back of my head. “I’m obsessed with you, Addie, and that is not going to end well for either of us.”

“If you keep saying so, you might make it so. You’re a GTECH. I’m pretty sure you can protect us both from everyone and anything.”

A low growl escapes his throat, more animal than man, which is probably the hottest thing I've ever heard in my life, then his mouth closes over mine, and I'm instantly melting into the hard lines of his body, pressing myself close to him, my hands catching his hips.

And then he's devouring me, kissing me like I have never been kissed, like a starving man, who has found life in me. The hesitation is gone from him, and it was never there for me but there is urgency in him that I recognize now as my own. As if someone will stop us, as if someone will tear us apart. In the back of my mind, I know that someone is my father, and I shove away the thought.

His hands travel up and down my back, and when he cups my backside and squeezes, my hands find their way under his shirt, muscle and taut skin warm beneath my touch. I'm so lost in Creed right now, that I don't know how it's possible, but there is a dark seed of something trying to surface that I know of my father, and what he might do to Creed if he finds out we were together.

But he has no right.

He never had a right to do anything that deep down, I know he masterminded. I am desperate to escape the reality I am not yet ready to face, and I shove up his shirt, wordlessly telling him I want him naked.

Creed reaches behind his neck and tugs his shirt over his head, muscles flexing with the action. So much muscle. My mouth is dry, and I am slick between the thighs. Before his tee ever hits the ground, his deft fingers are walking my gown up my body and then tugging it over my head. I have a moment of nerves I cannot help but feel. He is gloriously male, a man who could have any woman he wants, and I am but just me. I'm petite, not all that curvy, but blessed with full breasts. For all I know though, he likes big butts and small breasts.

It's not a fear I have for long as the look on his face, in his blue eyes as they rake over my body, is pure lust and satisfaction. He folds me to him, pressing my breasts to his

chest, and I tilt my chin up, meeting his stare, and say, “Make your eyes black.”

“Why would you want that?”

“Because I don’t want you to have to hide from who you are with me. Don’t pretend with me. I don’t want to have to pretend with you, either.”

He strokes my hair back and stares down at me. “How do you pretend and to whom?”

My heart skips a beat and then races, my fingers curling in the springy, dark hair on his chest. “Now is not the time for this.”

“Tell me,” he orders.

“It’s the whole general’s daughter thing. I’m like a soldier. I always have to be in perfect form. I always have to show absolute support.”

“Do you support him absolutely?”

“You know the answer. I’ve told you.”

“Tell me again, right now, in my arms. *Tell me.*”

“I try. I try hard.”

“Do you?” he demands, his voice rougher now, a push behind his words.

My mind flashes back to that fight my father had with my mother, and a fist twists around my insides. I’ve already hinted at this, told him this, but he seems to really need to hear it again. And I can all but guess that means he blames him, which means he was right when he said—this is headed no place good, but naked in his arms, I can’t seem to care. “No,” I say, “but please don’t ever repeat that. I beg of you.”

“The only thing you need to beg me for,” he says, “is when you want me to stop teasing you and let you orgasm. I’m not going to tell anyone anything you don’t want me to.” And then he’s kissing me again, and I swear it’s laced with a drug so addictive I’ll lose my mind if he stops.

Chapter Fourteen

When Creed looks at me again, his eyes are black, and to me, that says trust. It says he's willing to show me everything because I dared to expose myself to him. Because speaking against my father to one of his men is exposing myself.

He buries his face in my neck, his hand on my breast, his whiskers rasping against my delicate skin, nuzzling just below my ear. "You smell like roses."

But I don't. I can't. I have on no perfume at all, and in some far corner of my mind, I wonder if he smells things we can't smell. I also wonder how a man everyone claims to be a brutal warrior can be as tender as he is right now. His lips brush my neck, shivers sliding down my spine, my nipple puckering against his palm. My senses and body are so his right now, there's really no time for me to process any one thought.

His arms wrap around my legs just below my backside and he hikes me upward, pressing me to the wall, and placing my breasts at his mouth level. And then his mouth is on my nipple, licking and teasing me until I can barely stand it. My fingers tangle in his hair. "Creed," I plead, and when he looks up at me, the animalistic quality in his eyes steals my breath.

He's this over the edge for me—a scientist, who is hardly the seductress, and who barely lets a man in her bed, and some part of me I barely know feels like it wakes up and screams for this man.

He eases me to the floor, slides his fingers between my legs, pressing aside my panties, his fingers playing in the wet heat. I can barely breathe for how on edge I am, how absolutely aroused. And with his mouth on my neck, my head tilts backward, offering myself to him. His teeth scrape my flesh and then suddenly, he rips away my panties. I yelp with the shock of his actions, and I can feel the pulse of his energy, his hunger. Or maybe it's mine.

He turns me to the wall, forcing me to catch myself on my hands. He's behind me then, his thick erection fitting intimately to my backside.

His hands move over my body, caressing my breasts, my waist, my hips, until his lips brush my shoulder, and he orders, “Stay right here.”

And then he’s gone.

I try to turn and he catches my waist. “Stay, Addie.”

My heart leaps and sprints, as this is new to me. The truth being, that I’ve had a rather vanilla sex life. Nothing exciting. Nothing that made me feel any of the trillion emotions I feel but cannot name now. I don’t know how to be daring even if I want to be.

But then his hand slides around me and settles between my breasts, my body cradled to his as he speaks by my ear. “I will never hurt you. Ever. Of this, I swear to you.”

He’s not just talking about right now, in this moment, and I can feel this shift between us, an intimacy that reaches beyond sex. A need for trust in him and me, that I know will make or break us. “I know,” I say softly.

“You don’t know, but stay where you are, anyway.”

He waits for an answer and I whisper, “Yes.”

Only then does he caress a path down my arms and allow his touch to slide away, and I already want to pull him back to me. I want to turn, but this is an act of trust, and that is everything he wants from me. I can feel it. I can feel him in ways I cannot explain.

The air shifts, and I know he’s stepped away from me, and somehow the way he’d waited for my reply means everything. Allows me to trust him. I can feel the heat of his gaze on my naked body, and it’s ridiculously arousing to have him look at me but not touch me.

There is the sound of clothing being removed, and I think, *finally*. Finally, he will be naked with me. And then he’s back, his palm flattening onto my back and squeezing even as his fingers of the other hand, and Lord help me, his cock slides between my legs.

I moan, I can't help it, the feel of him where I want him most, everything right now. But his assault on my senses is so far from over. His big body is wrapped around me, and he's palming my breast while the fingers of his other hand slide between my legs and cup my sex, his thumb stroking my nub.

I'm melting right here against him, dripping wet and trembling with his touch. "That's what I want, sweetheart," he says. "Come for me." He turns me around, and I have but a fleeting moment of him fully naked, and it is astounding how perfect this man is, before he's on a knee, his hot breath on my belly.

His black eyes focus on me, and the color might be hell to some, but they draw me in and swallow me up in this pit of passion, where I just want to swim forever. He kisses my belly, licks my sensitive skin, and then his fingers are inside me, his mouth traveling lower and lower. I have not had a man between my legs in a very long time, since before my mother died, and I have never had one who knew exactly what to do with his tongue. Almost instantly I'm on the edge of something spectacular, embarrassed by the fact that I'm about to come. And I do. I come, right there on his tongue, clenching his fingers with my sex, my entire body quaking.

And when it's over, he's towering above me, kissing me with a wicked lick of his tongue and then whispering, "Now you know how you taste on my tongue."

I've barely recovered from that intensely sexy proclamation when he says, "But now I really have to fuck you, Addie."

I like the way he says my name as if he wants me to know he knows exactly who he is with, and that somehow matters. He scoops me up like I'm a feather, carries me to the bed, and sets me down facing the mattress.

I'm on my hands and knees then and he's pressing inside me, so hard, so deep, and sensations rock my body. I can feel that primal part of him now, the part that just needs to fuck. The part he says needs an escape he can't get anywhere tonight but with me. It's wild and hard and dirty, and when he comes, grinding into me with a guttural groan, I come with

him when I've never in my entire life had two orgasms in one night.

I'm panting when my body calms, and I expect him to pull out, but he rolls with me, cradling me against him, me in front and him behind, stroking my hair. He whispers something, low and rough, and I can't hear him. I don't think he wants me to hear, either.

When finally he starts to move, I catch his hand. "Creed," but I hesitate on his name, not sure what I want to say, maybe "don't go," but I'm not sure if I should.

As if he knows exactly what I'm thinking he says, "I'm not leaving unless you make me."

The relief I feel with those words is extreme, unnatural in some way I can't even explain. There's something happening between Creed and me, and it's not wholly natural. But then, neither is he.

Chapter Fifteen

“I’m going to get you a towel, sweetheart,” Creed says, kissing my neck.

Only I don’t think he was kissing my neck just to kiss it. He was looking for the mark. He starts to roll away and I catch his hand. “Is there a circle? The mark?” I ask.

He nuzzles my cheek with his, the rasp of his whiskers rough against my softer skin as he says, “No. You’re safe. Hang tight. I’ll be right back.” He pulls out of me, and his words “you’re safe” root deep inside me and sit roughly. *This won’t end well*, he’d said. He sees himself as black as I see his eyes. I think he needs someone to see him another way. I think he needs that to be me, or he wouldn’t have come here tonight.

I twist around to find him walking toward my bathroom, which is easy to find in the small room, and naked never looked so good on a man. No wonder there are legends about Creed. It’s his body. And while I wasn’t self-conscious about my own a few minutes ago, hanging out naked while not having sex feels a bit more intimidating than when in the throes of passion.

Scooting right, I grab tissues from the nightstand, clean up, and by the time he returns, I’ve raced across the room for my gown, which I do not have on yet.

He tosses the towel in his hand toward the bed and reaches for the gown in mine. “I’ll help.” He eases it from my grip, my naked breasts between us, and while we’ve just had sex, somehow him pulling the gown over my head and letting it slink over my body is far more intimate. His hands settle at my waist, a possessive quality to them as he eases me closer. “Unless you want to be naked again, put the robe on, too, especially since I’m going to have to raid your kitchen. I need to eat. I promise to restock your supplies.”

I laugh and say, “Only a soldier would call groceries supplies. Eat what you want. I owe you for dinner a few weeks back.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Addie.”

I’m confused by this statement and its meaning, which I don’t think has anything to do with the “supplies” but before I can say so, he releases me and snatches up his pants. I’m slightly distracted as he pulls them on commando-style, and leaves them unzipped and low-slung, his ripped abs on full display. Then there is a peekaboo of dark hair reminding me of what’s below that doesn’t do much for my ability to think straight right now. Partially because he’s hot, and partially because it tells me he’s not planning to leave anytime soon.

I swallow hard and manage to say, “I’m afraid all I have are Lean Cuisines, my cheat day frozen pizza, and pints of ice cream. Not much more.”

“Sounds like heaven right now.” His gaze sweeps over me, smoldering as he orders, “Robe. I beg of you. Later I’ll beg you to take it off or just do it for you.” He delivers this line with absolute seriousness, and I wonder when, if ever, he laughs and smiles. I feel like this needs to be my mission—to make him do both. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen,” he adds as he heads for the door, and I have a sense that his need to eat is urgent, that kind of *absolute need* that could become a weakness if he’s not careful and that worries me for him.

I walk into the bathroom, grab my robe, pull it around me, and then stare at myself in the mirror, sucking in a deep breath. I have to look at my neck. I mean he did, and clearly nothing was there. I just...I need to look. I open a drawer, grab a hand mirror, and turn to the vanity, lifting my hair. No mark. I have this odd dip in my belly that I can only call disappointment, which is insane. Why would I feel such a thing?

I drop my hair, shove the mirror back in the drawer, and finger my mussed-up hair. This is good news. The reality here is it gives me ammunition with my father. I won’t state it as personal but so far, no X2-positive soldier has created that mark on a woman’s neck. In reality, they could be the safest of the bunch. It’s something I think Creed needs to hear as well.

Hurrying out of the bathroom, I find my slippers, push my feet inside and pad out of the bedroom to the kitchen where I

find Creed waiting by the microwave while scooping ice cream from a pint. I push myself onto a barstool, all too aware of his naked, sculpted torso, but I'm trying to focus on the man, not his incredible body.

"Tell me again," I prod, "do all GTECHs need to eat as much as you do?"

"We eat a lot," he says, opening the microwave and pulling out a dinner.

"As much as you?" I push.

He pulls the plastic back on a lasagna dinner and sticks another in the microwave. "I try not to concern myself with everyone else, but the further we travel, the more energy it takes."

"And you traveled far tonight? And yes, I know not to ask details."

"I traveled far. Are you hungry?"

"No. I'm not. How far can you travel without a break?" I realize then I might sound like a scientist right now when that isn't my intent. I hold up my hands. "Sorry. You're not a lab rat. I don't mean to make you feel like one."

He studies me a few unreadable moments and then leans in close. "I am a lab rat, but I also think it's normal for you to want to know things about me, even if you weren't who you are. I can travel just about anywhere around the world without a break. It's more a matter of how much I do it in a span of hours."

"It's the same for all the GTECHs?"

"They all need to recharge."

"That's not an answer."

"You know I'm different."

I decide a generic "how" gives him too much room to wiggle away from the question, so I go at this more directly. "The wind is more connected to you, right?"

"Something like that."

“Does it talk to you?”

His eyes narrow on me. “Did it talk to you?”

I think back to those moments in the room right before I found him in the back of the house. “I’m not sure if it was you or the wind. Or both. Or maybe I’m crazy.”

“You’re not crazy, Addie.”

So he can talk to the wind. Or it talks to him. Or some combination. But I can sense I’m pushing too hard. “Okay, I have another question. One much more serious.”

I can feel the tension around him, the crackle of energy that tells me he’s intensely on edge, but I charge onward. “Are you off work this weekend?”

“Why?” he asks.

“Because I wondered if you might go somewhere with me?”

“Where?”

“I have to work in the morning. It’s a meeting with some of the team’s scientists, but after—well, it’s my mom’s birthday and I’m not really good at surviving that. I want to go to Vegas and visit her grave and go to her favorite restaurant. I just... alone is rough and my dad rejects the idea. He says she’s gone, and he can’t survive by pretending otherwise. So I thought—I don’t mean to corner you into something other than sex, but —”

He rounds the counter, turns my stool to face him, and cups my face. “There is no way I would let you do that alone. I would be honored to go with you, Addie.”

“You would?” I ask, and I’m trembling inside, the emotion attached to tomorrow, the idea of him going through that with me, just so *much*.

“Yes, I would. I am.”

I cover his hands with mine. “Do you think you might smile for me?”

“Not when you cry. Not ever when you cry. But if anyone can make me smile, Addie, it’s you.”

Chapter Sixteen

Talking or laughing isn't what Creed has on his mind the rest of the night. We stay up late and naked until I fall asleep in his arms. I wake up to breakfast in bed, because he's apparently gone to Vegas and brought us back a feast. It's after we eat, and he showers with me, that he checks my neck again.

I rotate in his arms and stare up at him. "There's nothing. I already looked."

"Because you're worried."

"Because *you're* so worried. Can I be the scientist I am for just a minute, despite us being naked in the shower?"

He strokes my wet hair and says, "You doing your job doesn't bother me. I suspect it's why you're not afraid of me."

"Everyone in the scientific community isn't so unafraid, but my mother was. And really, my father is, too, though neither of us can say we think that's a good thing. But my point I wanted to make, though I won't attest to this being a firsthand experience, there is concern among the researchers involved in Project Zodius about what that mark on the neck means. As of now, there are no X2 positive connections to that mark. You might actually be the group to fear the least."

His hands settle on my upper arms. "You're wrong, Addie." And then he releases me and is stepping out of the shower.

I suck in a breath, in shock at his abrupt departure and quickly turn off the water, grabbing my towel from above, on the shower edge. Once I've wrapped it around me and opened the shower door, he's gone. I'm just baffled and confused. I quickly twirl my hair beneath a second towel, wrap the robe around me, and walk into the bedroom.

He's already in the fresh pants he brought with him when he came back with the food, and he's tugging on a T-shirt, the ripple of muscles highlighted by the sharp edge to his tense shoulders. "What just happened?" I ask.

He rotates to face me, stares at me a moment with blue eyes, because apparently, I need to be sheltered again, and then sits down to start pulling on his boots. “You have to go to work,” he says. “I need to follow up on my mission and make sure Caleb wrapped up a few loose ends.”

There is this pinching sensation in my chest at the idea that this is over. I feel silly, too, asking him to go to Vegas with me today, and I turn away from him, entering the bathroom again, and sitting on the edge of the tub, expecting to hear the door open and shut any second. What was I thinking anyway? I’ve been dealing with losing my mom alone for almost two years. I don’t know why I would ask a man who’s basically a stranger to help me get through it.

The air shifts—it’s odd how I feel him so easily—but I know he’s approaching even before he sits down next to me. “Pretending that I am not what I am is not good for you or me.”

I rotate to face him, and even beneath the dark shadow of his jaw, I can see the flex of muscle. “And what are you?” I ask.

“Dangerous,” he says without hesitation. “The stories of me being that and more are not made up, Addie. Vicious killer, if I have to be, yes. Cold, yes. Able to do things other GTECHs cannot? Yes. What they leave out of all these stories is that all X2 are dangerous. Julian is the worst of us, and you need to stay away from him.”

“What does that mean? The worst of you?”

“Just consider him nuclear, about to blow at any time.”

“I see,” I say. “And his twin brother, Caleb?”

“One the best men I know and have ever known. If you need help and I’m not there, you go to him. But the very fact that I’d trust him to protect you is why it’s going to be bad for me and him when I kill Julian, and someday soon, I will.” He states this with an absolute to his voice that is somehow still matter of fact before he shifts the topic in a whiplash effect and asks, “Do you know why I like being with you, Addie?”

“Why?” I ask, holding my breath for the answer.

“Because you prove I have the capacity to feel things I thought I wasn’t capable of anymore.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I reply, hoping he’ll say more.

But that’s not what he gives me. “I don’t want you to know, either.” He hands me a piece of paper with a phone number on it. “That’s my number. Call me when you finish up today and I’ll pick you up. I’ll get us a room. Unless you get smart today, and decide I’m a bad choice. That would be a very good decision, because part of being X2 apparently translates to I’m selfish as fuck. I know I’m bad for you, but I can’t stay away.” He pushes off the tub without so much as touching me, and exits the bathroom.

A few seconds later, I hear the door open and shut.

Chapter Seventeen

I dress casually for my Saturday meeting that will be more about plans for future studies and who is doing what than anything substantial. On my way to the facility, I dial my father and end up in his voicemail. Despite the sharp twist in my belly at his pre-recorded voice, I'm not surprised. Last year on mom's birthday, he wouldn't talk to me either. A week later, he told me he had to deal with it on his own and he did that by working. He's probably not even back. But the truth is that the X2 report and recommendation to lock the positive soldiers up weighs heavily on me. I'm worried for Creed. And if he is right and Julian is nuclear, I'm worried for us doing something rash that could backfire. I'm also worried about us doing nothing.

Once I've pulled into the parking lot and parked, I text Creed: *Now you have my number. And so you know, I'm not changing my mind about this weekend. I'll text you when I'm close to done.*

I don't have to wait for a reply: *I'll see you soon, Addie. And I look forward to hearing about your mom.*

I tear up at his reply, which is not like me, but this day...it's just this day. But he's going to have a hard time convincing me he's a cold-hearted killer with that reply, that's for sure. I quickly punch in one last message: *I'm really glad you're going with me, Creed. I'm going inside now.* That last part is so he knows I won't get any reply he sends once I'm underground.

I exit my vehicle right as Katie pulls up and I hang back to wait on her. The minute she's out of her car, she rushes toward me and lowers her voice conspiratorially. "I have news." She glances around, as if she's afraid someone will overhear us in the wide-open space.

"You're making me nervous," I say. "What is it?"

"I'm dating one of the soldiers that wasn't involved with Project Zodius. He was brought in right after it all went down, and he went dark on me three weeks ago."

The same time Creed left on his mission, I think.

“But he never left,” she continues. “He finally called me last night and told me—he wasn’t supposed to tell me, but he did—he was part of a covert program that transported the GTECHs attached to the marked woman to the same facility where they’re being held. It’s on property but way on the other side. We all thought they were somewhere else.” She doesn’t pause for me to comment. “Addie, he was in the middle of telling me more when the line went dead.” She catches my arm. “I’m scared for him. I’m really scared.”

I am too, I think, but that’s not what I say. “I’m sure he’s fine. He might have gone underground. I’ll see what I can find out.”

“You can’t ask your father.”

“I’d already planned to talk to him about his plans with the soldiers who are X2 positive anyway, so he might tell me something that helps, but he’ll be out of the loop this weekend. Today is my mom’s birthday. I guess we handle it our own way. He’s a loner about it.”

“Oh, gosh. I’m sorry. And you have this meeting.”

“It’s fine. I’m going to her grave this evening and to her favorite restaurant. It’s something I did last year, and I want to do it again.”

“I’d offer company, but I’m worried for Jack,” she says. “I want to stay close.”

“I got this and so do you,” I tell her, a strong sense of needing to keep me and Creed private. I feel like he will, as well.

“Let me know if you change your mind.”

“Thanks. And text me the full name of the soldier that you’re dating, will you? And let me know if you hear from him. I’ll worry with you. I promise not to bring up his name. It’s just for me to know, okay?”

“Thank you. It’s good having you here, Addie.”

Another car pulls in, another on our team, and we start walking toward the elevators. *I'm glad I'm here, too*, I think, but I wish I would have come sooner. I wish I would have done something to stop Project Zodiak from existing. And right now, I don't feel I've done enough to uncover the truth of its origins, and how it's been handled. I have my father's ear. I have influence. And I have to fight hard enough for what's right to make my mother proud. I just have to figure out what "right" means at this stage of the game.

Once we're inside the facility, I excuse myself for a minute. "I'll be there in five," I tell Katie. "I want to put my stuff up."

We part ways, and I hurry to my office, sit down, and type out a text message to my father: *I know how you are about this weekend, and I respect that you have your way of coping. But I need to make sure you know my opinion on that data you sent me. And yes, I know text message is going to piss you off for this, but I can't risk you not checking your email. When you start treating people like the enemy, they start acting like the enemy. There are studies on this behavior, and when I get out of my meeting I'm walking into, I'll send you links. Just be careful. Build them up as allies. Please, Dad, General Lawrence. Just wait to act. And right now, no one with that mark has a connection to the mutation. You might not even be locking up the right people. I have theories I need to test. Just give me a little time.*

I wait for a reply, but minutes pass, and nothing follows. Of course, nothing follows. I have no reception down here. I email him the same message. I have to go to my meeting and pray I've given him enough pause to at the very least, halt his actions.

Chapter Eighteen

The minute I'm out of the meeting, I head to my desk and check my email, only to find nothing from my father. Discouraged, I locate the case studies I think he needs to read, send them in an email, and then add them to my text message that should send when I reach above ground.

Once I'm above level, walking to my car, I try to call him only to go straight to voicemail and I wonder if he's underground. I have to pray he's actually checked his email. I settle into my car and text Creed: *Headed home now.*

By the time I pull up in my driveway, I find him on my porch, leaning against the wooden post, looking as absolutely scrumptious as he does lethal in jeans and a T-shirt. That's a word my mother used for her homemade baked bread, but I think Creed has earned the right to be labeled as such, and then some.

I exit my vehicle and almost expect him to appear by my side, but instead, he just stands there, watching me with those lethal black eyes. I'm actually nervous as I close the distance between us, him tracking my every move, but not afraid. I hate how he always expects me to be afraid.

Hurrying up the stairs, I stop in front of him, a tad disappointed to realize his eyes are blue. We're back there. To him masking his real self from me, but he catches me to him, his hand sliding under my hair, cupping my neck, and he kisses me with so much passion, I'm melting right here, and it has nothing to do with the Nevada heat.

"Where's your bag?" he asks softly, stroking my hair, and I swear I'm trembling inside. What is it about this man that undoes me this easily?

"Inside. I just need to grab it."

He gives a nod and helps me up the last step, and when my hand trembles with my key, he catches it and pins me in his stare. "Addie?"

“I don’t know why I’m like this, but it’s not bad. I swear to you. I think you just kind of give me sensory overload, but again, in a good way.” My hand flattens on his chest and his heart thunders underneath it. He is worried about what I’m feeling, about me not really wanting him here. He’s always sure that’s what comes next, which is insane. How would any woman turn this man away?

I rotate to him, press to my toes, and kiss him. “I’m really glad you’re here. I can’t promise not to be a mess today in all kinds of ways. It’s here,” I ball my fist between my breasts, “heavy and wrong because she’s gone, you know?”

He runs his hand down the back of my hair and presses his forehead to mine. “I know. I can feel it.”

And I believe him.

He can. And maybe that’s exactly why I needed him here with me today. I think he understands my pain, because it was once his. Even if he hated his father, losing a parent just feels like losing a part of yourself. Like your world will never be the same. And you can be with ten people and still feel alone. But I don’t with Creed. Somehow today, with him, he hit the right note, nuzzling down into my soul in some strange way, and I’m not as alone. And as wrong as it may feel to him, it’s not. I refuse to believe that to be the case.

Chapter Nineteen

Creed is granted a weekend pass to leave Groom Lake.

We end up taking my car to Vegas, simply because Creed lives in the highly secure military housing on the property. It's just easier to take my basic sedan than to retrieve his vehicle, but even so, Creed is quick to claim the driver's seat. It's the first time we've had to just talk, and I couldn't be more interested in learning about this man. "Tell me about your mother," he urges.

There is a swell of emotion in my chest, in an uncomfortable way. "Not yet," I say. "I have to get past the graveyard. Can you tell me something about you? Are you comfortable talking about you?"

"What do you want to know?"

"What do you love?"

He glances over at me and then the road. "Road trips to Vegas with you."

"I'm serious."

"So am I, Addie. I haven't done anything like this in a long time."

"Since before you were a GTECH?"

"Even before that," he says, and he surprises me by how easily he offers more details. "I was on one mission after another. Every soldier that was selected for this experiment was the best of the best. That means we all worked pretty much around the clock."

"You grew up wealthy, but you live like a soldier now. And I get the impression you're much happier a soldier, or at least you were."

"It was the life I chose, and that's why I'm where I am now."

It's not really an answer so I try a bit harder. "Do you regret joining the Army?"

“No,” he says, “because Project Zodiak was going to happen, and I wouldn’t want to be a naïve human and weaker, thus a future victim. Because GTECHs believe they are better than humans, and that’s what these soldiers living amongst us will eventually become.”

Which is a scary statement, but for now, I focus on him. “But you’re a victim.”

He glances over at me. “I’m never a victim. And you wouldn’t be here if you were, either. You came to make a difference even if it meant standing against your father.”

“Do you think he was behind Project Zodiak?”

“Do you?” he asks, for the second time now.

“You’ve already asked me that. You know my answer. Do you?” I repeat.

“Do you want to know my answer before or after this weekend?”

“There is no before. We’re living it. And I want to know.”

“Yes,” he says. “I think he did it.”

“And yet, you’re still here with me?”

“Yeah. Pretty inconvenient for us both, but here we are.”

“I’m not revenge against him, right?”

He literally pulls the car to the side of the road in the middle of what is nowhere, no other car in sight, and turns to me. “No. One hundred percent no. I swear to you, but if you think that —”

“I don’t. I never had the thought until just now, and I don’t feel it in my gut or anything like that, but the logical part of my brain had to ask.”

“No,” he repeats. “You are not revenge, and the truth is, you’re the most dangerous decision I’ve ever made. You can take everything you find out about me back to them. You could be using me to conduct an experiment.”

“I’m not,” I say quickly. “I’m one hundred percent not.”

“I know that, Addie, or I wouldn’t be on my way to Vegas with you.”

I reach out and catch his hand where it rests on the console between us. “Let’s go to Vegas.”

“Let’s go to Vegas.”

And then he lifts my hand in his, tenderly kissing it before he releases me and sets the car into gear. And I’m struck by the very human, gentle side of Creed that manages to exist without diminishing the lethal edge beneath his surface that some of the legends have gone so far as to call *brutal*.

Chapter Twenty

We stop to get my mother's favorite white lilies on the way to the graveyard and arrive late afternoon. Creed parks the car, and I can't seem to move. He doesn't move either. He just seems to know I'm not ready. "You okay, sweetheart?"

It's strange to have someone here with me—here *for* me—and I swear it makes it as better as it does worse. Because she's not here anymore. Tears well in my eyes, and I tilt my gaze to his. "Thanks for coming with me." My voice is as hoarse as my throat is raw. "I swear I'm not a weak person. She was just my person, you know?"

"I don't know. I've never been lucky enough to have that person in my life, but I'm glad you did, and I'm sorry I didn't meet her."

"She would have discovered ways to protect you and help you, and I haven't yet."

"I'd bet everything that you'll her make her proud. Give yourself time, Addie. And maybe you're not supposed to protect me. Maybe I'm supposed to protect you."

"Maybe we can just protect each other?"

His lips curve, and he says, "I'd like that."

I reach up and touch his face. "You sort of smiled. I didn't know you knew how."

"Seems I do," he replies, stroking my cheek. "See, saving me already. Take me to meet your mom." He opens his door, and this time I wait, and let him open mine. He helps me out and then we walk together, with his arm around me to my mother's grave. I cry. And cry some more, and talk to her a lot, actually.

I kneel at her tombstone, and murmur softly, "Things happened that I think you meant to stop. Now, I have to do this without you, Mom, and I don't want to disappoint you. I *won't* disappoint you. But I'm afraid Dad did." The wind rushes

around me, and I stand and turn, but only Creed is here with me.

“What was that?”

“Her letting you know she’s here.”

“Her or you?”

“Not me.” He steps closer to me and pulls me into his arms. I don’t know what he’s heard, but I think everything. Because the wind is everywhere even when it feels nonexistent. And I think that means Creed is, too. Which means I need to explain myself.

When we’re back in the car, I turn to him. “I always thought I was close to both of them, but my father was gone a lot, so how well did I really know him, you know?” I don’t give him time to reply. “I overheard them fight the night before she died, Creed. I think he was trying to move forward with Project Zodiak, and she believed that our NASA research had to come first. I can’t figure out what I was supposed to learn while I was at NASA to help, but I think there was an answer I missed. Anyway, once she was gone, he just—did it. I hope I’m wrong. I need to be wrong.”

“And if you’re not?”

“I don’t know, Creed. I just don’t know.”

“You don’t need to know now. Let’s go get settled in the hotel and then eat. I didn’t even ask. Do we need reservations?”

“I made one for two at seven o’clock. I honestly hoped my father would join me, but I really knew he wouldn’t.”

“Well, now you have me.”

“I do,” I say, settling into my seat and buckling up, but as Creed pulls us back onto the highway, I wonder for how long. If my father deceived him and made him what he is, and then tries to lock him up, he’ll become his enemy.

And then I’m somebody’s enemy, too, I think.

Chapter Twenty-One

Our hotel is stunning, with a suite on top of the world, it seems, and plenty of luxury. Apparently, Creed really wanted to impress me, and I really love that he did, but, of course, I wonder about how he's affording it. Soldiers don't make a lot of money, but I wonder if the GTECHs have been compensated for what was done to them. If they have not, they should be, and I need to check into that. Of course, Creed comes from money as well.

Dinner is at a little Italian place not far from the Vegas strip owned by a family who immigrated from Italy. One of the owners, Marco, is quick to chat with me about my mother, and Creed is really involved as we talk with him, not the monster he sees himself as at all.

Once we have lasagna in front of us, I can't help but ask, "Should we order you more food?"

"I didn't windwalk," he says. "I'm good. And I try to act normal in public."

His words give my heart a little twist. "I hate that you see yourself as something other than normal."

"Come on, Addie," he says softly. "I'm not normal. There's a reason the military gives us an extra food allowance. But the windwalking has its pluses. I can be your personal DoorDash delivery guy."

I allow him to take things in a lighter direction, all too aware that tonight is a night where it's easy for me to go a little heavy-handed on the emotions. "That was great the night you did it," I say, and stick my fork in the lasagna. "You're going to want another order to take home."

"Let's see how right you are." He digs in and his approval is instant. "We'll order two to go."

"Two lasagnas for you and a cheesecake for each of us. You have to try the cheesecake."

“We better order a whole cheesecake. I have a sweet tooth. Donuts are a real weakness, but I do enjoy a good cheesecake.”

We talk a bit about favorite foods and what it was like for me growing up with a scientist as a mother. “We did experiments in the kitchen,” I tell him. “I loved it. We were very alike. That’s how working together came about. We just enjoyed it. We were best friends.”

I talk a lot about my mom and it’s healing, and it makes the evening happy, even if there is a pit in my chest. “You never talk about your mom.”

“No. I don’t talk about my mom.”

There is a coldness to his voice that has me wishing I’d said nothing. “I’m sorry, Creed. I told you I looked you up because I was curious about you, but a computer screen doesn’t tell me what you can. And I shouldn’t be nosey.”

He shoves aside his empty plate and leans in closer, as if trying to send me a message. His attention is on me and he’s not withdrawing. “I grew up wealthy, as we already talked about. Prep schools, fancy cars, and captain of the football team. I was that guy. My future was drawn out by my parents, and I just walked inside the storybook they created. I was smart enough and capable enough to take a role in the company and one day be CEO, and I actually started down that path. But once I was inside the company, the desire to make money no matter how our weapons systems were used, and who they hurt, was not acceptable to me. Weapons should be deterrents that keep people from actually using them. Then one night, after a sale to a particularly nasty group of people, I knew would kill hundreds if not thousands, I said *enough*. I decided that if he wants to create war, I’ll go fight the wars he’s bringing to our country’s door.”

“And what did he do?”

“Disowned me and disinherited me. Only he didn’t disinherit me. He ended up leaving me a small fortune, which pissed my mother the fuck off. Ultimately, when I wouldn’t give the money to her to use the same way he’d used the money, she

disowned me. The money is in an account, untouched except for some charity donations I've made. I don't want his blood money. I want to do something with my inheritance that somehow undoes some of his damage."

"Are you shocked that he gave you the money?"

"Not really. I think he always thought I'd be lured back to that lifestyle. Now, how ironic that I'm an engineered weapon. In some ways, it feels as if he and my mother got a little revenge on me."

"No," I say, my heart hurting for a man who seems to really have never known love. "You won't allow yourself to be used for bad. You choose what you do."

"I'm the property of the military."

"I don't think either of us believes that," I say, but we're interrupted by the waiter and perhaps it's a good thing. I want to say things to Creed that I should not. Not this soon into knowing him. No matter how human he feels to me, he's not wholly that anymore. And my father made him a weapon and a potential enemy. No matter how much either of us wants to inherently trust each other, and I believe we do, there are reasons, walls, I do not want to exist, between us.

And because I have this really, really horrible thought. My father knew who he was when he selected Creed for Groom Lake placement. He knew who his father was. My father told my mother he was working on private funding. Was that Creed's father? Did he push forward with Project Zodiak to ensure Creed was involved, and therefore his father was motivated to fund the program? And then his father died? I suddenly want to know exactly how those dates align and I want to know badly.

I want my father to be a good guy. I want him to be the father I knew growing up, but ever since that fight I overheard, I've questioned him. I continue to question him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It's a long time later, we're back in our hotel room, in the bedroom, on a curved blue couch. The bed is just in front of our little sitting area, and to our right is such a stunning view. The lights, the Eiffel Tower, which looks real at night like this.

"This is a gorgeous room. I thought you didn't use any of the money you inherited.

We're side-by-side, both with champagne glasses in our hands. "I didn't," he says. "But what does a soldier have to spend his money on? I've saved mine, and I chose to spend it on you."

To say I'm charmed and touched by his actions is an understatement. "You didn't have to do this, Creed, but it's stunning and I love it."

"I wanted you to have a good weekend. I know it's a rough time. Year two is still pretty damn raw."

"It is." I sip my bubbly. "But you've made it easier. Alone would have been rough. It was last year." I lift my glass. "It's weird drinking when I know it doesn't affect you."

"I'll just get drunk on you." He sets his glass down on the table next to him and then takes mine, doing the same. "Come here."

He catches my hand and pulls me onto his lap, the silk of the flared black dress I'd put on for dinner fanning over his lap, while my thighs straddle his hips. "Thank you, Addie," he says, folding me into him, his hand sliding under my hair to cup my neck.

"For what?"

"For making me feel more human than I have in a very long time."

My heart swells with his words. "Creed," I whisper, and there is this energy between us that is as warm and wicked as it is tender.

He drags my mouth to his, and I lean into him willingly, eagerly, our tongues tangling, and he tastes of sweet champagne and passion, the effect drugging in every way. He catches my dress and drags it over my head, and I push off him, unhooking my bra and tossing it aside, the heat of his eyes on my breasts, puckering my nipples. I reach for my panties, and he leans forward, catching the strings at my hips with his fingers, his mouth on my belly, even as he drags the silk down my legs.

I kick away the silk, and he folds me close, leaning down to kiss my clit, my head tilting backward with the rush of sensation through my body, my fingers diving into his hair, as his tongue swirls the sensitive area. My knees are already weak when he stands and tugs off his shirt, tossing it aside. I reach for his pants—I want him naked in a bad way. He’s anxious, too—it’s there between us—this need to remove the barriers. To just be together. And soon we’re standing there, just the way we wanted to be, naked, the Vegas lights framing us, when he sits back down and takes me with him.

His shaft is between us, and I reach down and stroke it, closing my hand around him. Reveling in the shift of his expression, the look of pleasure that feels like a reward with a man who shows so little of himself. But he showed me tonight. He’s been as human as he says I make him feel. “You’re the weapon,” he murmurs, lifting, anchoring me, and pressing his erection inside me.

Wet and hot for him, I slide down the hard length of him and moan with just how hard and thick he is right now, but when I’m settled against him, we don’t move. We’re just there, staring at one another, this pulse between us I can’t explain, but it steals my breath. He rolls my body forward, cupping my breast and kissing me.

“You’re too beautiful and too good for me, Addie,” he says roughly, and I have this sense that there is more to those words than the heat of passion. That I need to push back against them, but I never get the chance.

His mouth covers mine, his tongue a seduction that drags me under his spell and never allows me to recover. He thrusts into

me and then we're moving together, and his hands are all over me, touching me, caressing me, and my fingers are back in his hair, on his face, curling into his shoulders.

I am lost in this man, in how he smells, how he touches me, the way my skin tingles in the wake of his touch. The way I just want to inhale him, curl into him, and crawl under his skin when I simply can't get close enough to him. It just doesn't feel possible. I have never in my life been this completely in the moment, this all-in with a man. I barely know the moment I am too far gone to hold back. I'm tumbling over the edge. I'm already there. My body quakes and spasms around him, and I cling to him, my face buried in his shoulder. His fingers splay between my shoulder blades, and he thrusts again, a growl of pleasure ripping from his lips, as his body shudders, and we collapse into each other.

For a bit we just hold each other, his hand cups my head and he rolls me to my back, leaning over me. "I'm a selfish man with you, Addie, and that is going to be a problem. When we go back—"

My hand splays on his cheek, the shadowy stubble beneath my palm. "Stop. Just stop before you say something we'll both regret."

Seconds tick before he says, "I'll get you a towel," and then he's gone, pulling out of me and then disappearing. I don't move, I can't, and my mind races. This is about my father. I know it's about my father. And about him, and what he thinks he's become and might become. When he returns, he's in sweatpants and he offers me the towel and my silk robe from my bag. When I'm dressed, he's sitting on the end of the couch, his fingers laced together in front of him, elbows on his knees. "We both know your father did this. We both know that makes him my enemy." He looks toward me. "And you're too loyal of a person to turn your back on him. I can't put you in between us. It's not fair to you." He pushes to his feet and walks to the window, staring out at the city, the muscles in his back bunched with tension.

I decide then that I have to be honest with him, because I need to be honest with someone, and I need to trust him. I just

hope and pray it's not a mistake. I push off the couch and slide between him and the window, my hands resting on his chest.

"Creed," I say softly. "I don't know that he did, but I'm going to tell you something I won't tell anyone else. I'm going to trust you."

"Are you sure you want to do that, Addie?" His hands catch my waist, and he leans me against the window and his touch connects us in ways that feel different than any other touch I've known. I can't explain it. We have a connection, and it's real enough for me to be standing here, putting it all on the line.

"Yes," I say, my fingers curling in the springy dark hair on his chest. "If he did this, if he gave the command to inject you with that serum knowing what it was, my mother would expect me to stand with you, not him. And I will. You need to know I will."

"And if he continues to deny it?"

"That's just it. My father doesn't have it in him to deny something he sees as magnificent. I believe he sees Project Zodiak as magnificent."

"Because monsters are magnificent."

"You are not a monster," I say, flattening my hand over his heart, the race of its beating telling me he's affected in every way by this conversation.

"Enemies fight, Addie."

"We're not enemies." I wrap my arms around him and press my face to his chest, relieved when he folds me close and holds on tight.

But I don't know if he will forever. I don't even know if he will tomorrow. Blood and that damn serum have forged two swords on the verge of a war and place us on the opposite sides of the battle line, but I want to stand in the middle. And I think Creed could make all the difference if he stands there with me.

But no matter what.

War is coming.

It's in the air.

Chapter Twenty-Three

General Lawrence

I grieve my wife by honoring her, spending the weekend at the secret facility where we're holding the bonded couples for observation and working toward the answers she would want us to find. The results are explosive, at least in my mind, as I watch these men with their women, who I fear somehow weaken their minds, if not their bodies. When they are near these marked women, our testing thus far shows country isn't first. That woman is first.

Dr. Chin, our leading researcher, a fifty-something biology and astrobiology expert, who's deemed the process as "lifebonding," and those involved as "lifebonds," a kind of mating for life is the assumption yet to be fully validated. Only time will tell us if life really means life. The prospect is terrifying and dangerous rather than romantic. Men are primal beings with wandering eyes, which is part of how they become such warriors. They live for battle and a piece of ass, not love, and this new development could destroy our perfect warriors. But then, at this point, those involved in Project Zodius are far more something else than they are human.

Ironically, considering the way this bonding process weakens my soldiers, I wake Monday morning to not one but two phone calls. The first one I've campaigned for and now finally won. A call from the Secretary of State, to chat about just how effective Project Zodius can be in defending our country. In other words, locking those couples up this weekend was critical and the right decision. The White House, the President himself, wants assurance the program cannot backfire. That means it *cannot* backfire.

The second is a call from Dr. Chin about research developments I "must see." I arrive at the central lab where we've set-up a meeting to find both him and his assistant, Ava Lane, present. Ava's a stunning thirty-something redhead who I almost declined to hire for the distraction she causes us all. Men might not naturally want to mate for life, but they

certainly want to fuck a woman like Ava. But ultimately, her credentials all but equal Chin's.

"We can clearly validate at this point," Dr. Chin states, "that the decision to contain the marked females and their male lifebonds was a smart one as it allows us to rapid-fire research, what we could not otherwise."

"Well, this sounds interesting already," I say. "What are we talking about?"

"We came in this morning to discover the lab rats we've converted to X2 positive some months back turned abruptly aggressive. Several turned on each other and killed the other. We assume a trigger, but we have no indicator of what that might be, but this drives my concerns that our X2 soldiers are walking time bombs."

I stare into a cage where several dead rats lie and then glance at Chin. "I'm going to need to understand how the two things correlate, but who else knows about this?"

"Just us," Chin confirms. "We thought it best to find out how open you want us to be with the scientific staff on this unexpected progression."

"Keep it between us for now," I instruct. "Explain how the X2 aggression relates to the containment of the bonded couples."

"We don't know how a bond changes the couple, neither male nor female," Chin explains. "We need to understand as much as we can before an X2-positive soldier bonds. And we need to try to force this process in rats as quickly as possible. It could be that the bonding process stabilizes the X2-positive soldier, or it could be they'd start a war for their lifebond. We simply don't know. This would be a good time to talk about how we've worked toward the problem of limited serum supplies. I'll let Ms. Lane explain our findings."

"Of course," she says. "As you know, miraculously Dr. Stein was able to recreate the marked process in a couple of geese. I then did a series of tests, which included a blood exchange. The female converted to GTECH."

“You’re fucking kidding me,” I snap. “With all the same physical assets?”

“Some,” she states. “Longevity, immunity to human illness, but no added strength or gifts, as of yet. The process is in early stages, but we suspect the women that are marked could easily convert to GTECH.”

Which means they become unkillable distractions, I think irritably.

“But here is where it gets really interesting,” Dr. Chin adds. “One of the female GTECH rats who we completed the blood exchange with is now pregnant. This means the X2 females could, should they exist, in theory, become pregnant. Circling back to my prior comments, this is a dangerous proposition when we do not know the impact of the bonding process on those involved, particularly the X2 soldiers.”

“I just want to point out,” Ava interjects, “that three soldiers who’ve shown aggression do not create a scientifically accurate assessment of the X2-positive soldiers. The aggression may be wholly unrelated to that chromosome. We’re just moving quickly, and we have to make assumptions for safety reasons.”

Dr. Chin casts her an irritated look. “I have dead rats that counteract that statement.”

“Again,” she argues, “we don’t know the trigger involved.”

I’ve tuned out their bickering as the possibilities they’ve offered me burn with excitement in my belly. Ava has now claimed the X2 soldiers, who’ve shown to be the better-performing soldiers, might not be aggressive at all. And they can reproduce. “Let me be sure I’m clear on what you’re telling me,” I say. “In theory, any GTECH with a bonded female could reproduce GTECH soldiers?”

“One would assume yes,” Dr. Chin states. “We’re working through that hypothesis. But we can’t know if the offspring will inherit the GTECH skill sets.”

“What if the blood exchange was between a GTECH male and another male?” I ask, having lived with my wife long

enough to have plenty of questions and possibilities to guide us toward.

“Tried and failed,” Dr. Chin states. “But I wonder if we get the X2-positive soldiers to bond if we could actually avoid the triggered aggression? None of the bonded rats reacted to this unknown trigger. None of the X2 rats that did were bonded. The problem is time, and it’s very hard to figure out how that mark is created to even test this potential outcome. There are only two bonded rats out of hundreds that have coupled together. There’s more to it than sex, and we don’t know what that represents in terms of conditions that must be recreated to allow the bonding process or the aggression to occur. It’s frankly near miracle we’ve done what we have in such a short time.”

“Fabulous,” I state, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “So now we can potentially breed X2 monsters. Or not. Maybe they’re a perfect fighting machine with a bonded female. We need Red Dart. Now. Today. Experiment on the GTECHs. Make it work.” Red Dart being a weapon, a dart, that enters the bloodstream, tricks the immune system into thinking it’s a normal part of the body, but then tracks the carrier and allows for torture from afar. “Then we can control them,” I add.

“Science does not take orders, General,” Chin snaps back, the insubordinate twat. “Nor will it be rushed. Again, as I’ve told you numerous times, Red Dart is a weapon that was designed for humans, not GTECHs. In humans, it’s killing the target rather than doing what it was designed to do.”

“These are GTECHs. They don’t die easily.”

“Death isn’t my concern—they heal too rapidly. It’s the application. Their immune systems destroy the tracking dart before it ever hits the bloodstream, which is necessary for it to function properly. It’s worthless until I figure out how to trick their immune systems into seeing Red Dart as part of its normal operating system.”

Silently I curse, using every profane word in the dictionary. And some that were not. Outwardly though, I remain cool,

collected. “If I double your funding, how soon can it be ready?”

“Two years, if I have the right scientist in place, which I don’t feel I do at present. Maybe longer. Too long, considering we have no idea what set off the violence in these animals to begin with. The X2-positive soldiers could do the same thing at any given moment. As I’ve already made clear. They must be locked up.”

Locking them up makes them enemies. In this, my daughter is not wrong. “You’re certain it’s X2 related?” I ask.

“I’m not,” Ms. Lane replies. “We’ve focused on the X2-positive chromosomes. We need to do a broader study. It’s short-sighted to see this as an X2 problem.”

“I am of the belief that all GTECHs are the unknown, and thus volatile,” Chin reiterates after casting Ms. Lane a scathing look. “Exactly why I’m willing to work on Red Dart. But specifically”—he motions to the cages—“I disagree with Ms. Lane. This threat is directly linked to the X2 gene.”

“You lock some up, the rest are potentially triggered,” Ms. Lane replies, motioning to the cages. “Then what?”

“Are you suggesting we lock them all up?” I ask.

“I think locking any of them up is a mistake,” she counters. “You’ll turn friends into enemies.”

“Ms. Lane is out of line,” Dr. Chin states. “She takes risks with our very country with such careless suggestions. These men are weapons that could reproduce. They must be contained and contained now.”

My mind races rapidly. The only way I can lock them up, I think, is to tell the Secretary of State and the soldiers that they are undergoing vitamin injections, but this can’t be a long-term solution. My daughter and Ms. Lane are correct. What good is something that buys me time with the government if I turn the soldiers into our enemies? A consult with Dr. Stein comes to mind, but I quickly discard this idea. She’s too close to my daughter, who will be on her moral high horse, which isn’t how I need to make this decision. I cannot risk her talking to

her. Safety and the future dictate my next move, not a moral compass. That's part of being a leader, not a scientist. You make the hard decisions. "I'll think about it," I say. "And make sure this stays here, between us only. I don't want Dr. Stein involved, not just yet." With that, I turn and walk out of the room.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Julian

I lurk in the shadows of Ava's porch, watching as she parks and walks toward the house, her sultry hips swaying with her steps, my cock rock-hard, as it should be. She's marked. She's mine, and the only reason we haven't done the blood exchange is our need to keep her off the radar until we're ready to end this farce of a military operation Lawrence believes he's running. My heart thunders in my chest at her approach, and the minute she's up the stairs and within reach, I grab her and pull her to me, her lush curves melting into me with her instant submission. She knew I was here. She anticipated this moment as much as I did. We are one, and Ava will one day soon, when the time is right, bear my child, who will become the future leader of a new superpower—the Zodius Nation. A nation that will be free of weakness and crude human diseases. My nation.

And that day is almost here.

"Julian," she murmurs, her fingers curling on my chest. "I thought you wanted me to call when I got here. Are you just that anxious to be inside me?" she teases.

My cock throbs with her invitation, but business first. I set her away from me. "What happened in the meeting today?"

"Chin's so afraid of the X2-positives he's pressing Lawrence to imprison all the GTECHs, but Lawrence is resistant. I just don't know for how long. I'm trying to buy time."

Fucking Chin, I think, but Lawrence won't want to lose his mighty soldiers. That's in our favor, but he also won't risk losing control, and Chin is stirring that fear. "We may not be able to buy time," I say. "We can't risk Chin screwing us over."

"We aren't ready," she argues. "I'll buy time. I promise, I can do it. I'll get close to Addie. She's General Lawrence's daughter. She's got a soft heart."

She's right, of course. The underground facility I've funded through private investors with the promise of converting them to GTECHs isn't completed, nor do I have my hands on what's left of the serum to mass produce it. But sometimes you just have to push forward and the bright side to this plot to imprison us might just be the awakening of Caleb. My brother has clung to humanity's goodness, and yet those same humans would see us in cages. Perhaps even exterminate us, which is what I'll tell my followers, accurate or not. They mean to mill us. Even Caleb will see the writing on the wall. Humans corrupt everything they touch. It's us or them—and the stronger group, the GTECHs, will prevail.

“We need to act,” I say, my decision made. “My following at Groom Lake runs deep, and not just with GTECHs. The human soldiers sent to battle in their natural, vulnerable form, resent being denied GTECH conversion. We'll have no problem seizing control.”

“We don't have the location of the remaining serum.”

“We are the serum,” I say. “We'll make more. We'll create it from our blood. I know you can do it,” I add. “We can do it.”

“I'll do it, but we really need the extra serum for testing.”

“We'll make them give it to us. You mentioned Addie. We'll ransom her for it. Lawrence is a bastard, but I hear he loves her.”

“He does.”

“All right then. Let's go fuck and then plan our takeover.” My fingers wrap around the back of her neck and pull her close. “Do not fear, my beauty. Soon you will be the queen of a new nation that will grow and prosper. No one will stop us.”

“No one will stop us,” she whispers.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Addie

My weekend with Creed ends Monday morning at my place, with us reluctantly saying our goodbyes with one final passionate kiss and plans for dinner. He's going to windwalk to get us Chinese food, which I'm really excited about. To say that I'm "smitten," as my mother would call it, is an understatement. It literally feels as if Creed has crawled under my skin and settled somewhere deep inside my very soul. It's insane, and a scientific mind like my own has a hard time with that kind of fanciful idea. But I still feel it, and if my mother were alive, she'd have a million ways to analyze it, too. God, how I wish she were here to do just that, because while I learned a lot from her, objectivity on oneself is a tough hill to climb. I think—well, I think this must be what falling in love does to a person, and I've just never really experienced it before. But all these things contribute to my guilt over the one thing I didn't tell Creed.

That being the fact that my father is considering locking up the GTECHs.

I decide the best way to voice that problem is to talk my father out of that mistake, which was always in my plan anyway.

Driven by this idea, once I'm at work in the underground facility, my father is in my sights. The minute my things are put away in my desk, I start the charge toward my father's office. I arrive at seven thirty, and while his secretary is not yet in, his office door is open.

I step to the entryway to find him sitting with his head pressed to his hands and resting on his elbows. "Dad?"

He glances up and motions me inside. "Shut the door."

I do as he says, with concern rocking my belly. "What's wrong?"

“Just sit first,” he says, his tone irritated, but I get the impression it’s not at me, but rather a problem he can’t seem to solve.

I sit. “Dad?”

“What if I told you the X2-positive lab rats became violent, and some of them killed each other?”

My stomach sinks, but I remain composed and logical. “I’d say I’d want to know a whole lot more detail to understand what triggered such a reaction, and it is a reaction. No such behavior happens suddenly and in unison to other living beings, that is not triggered. But I’d also say this could actually be promising. Only three of the X2-positive have been aggressive. We find the trigger that set off this aggression, we isolate the problem.”

“Well, that’s a different take.”

“Than who? Chin’s?”

“Yes, but you need to hear the rest of the story. There’s more.”

“There’s always more. I’m listening.”

“A blood exchange between these ‘lifebonds’ as some of the scientific team are now calling them, at least in the lab rats, had an interesting reaction.”

“Which was?” I prod.

“Fertility.”

I blink in surprise. “Okay. I’m a little shocked by that one, but we are dealing with alien DNA. But again, I’d need to see the data. There are literally coincidences, and you have to deal with a large enough control group to deliver real answers. It could simply be that the males recover their fertility at some point after the serum injections.”

“Either way, we could breed GTECHs whose offspring could possess their skills. This means an evolution of human soldiers to super soldiers, but what if we breed X2 monsters?”

“First of all, if it’s the blood exchange, that’s not a natural thing to do. No one will know to do it if we don’t tell them to do it. Who knows?”

“Chin and his assistant.”

“Then keep it that way. I mean really, Dad, who would think to exchange blood?” I don’t wait for a reply. “There’s a rumor you locked up the marked women and the men connected to them.”

His jaw clenches. “I’d like to know who told you this?”

“Anonymous note on my car. That’s the problem, Dad. When you lock up a bunch of people there are people who miss them. Did you lock them up?”

“I did.”

“Why?” I demand. “I told you, this creates distrust none of us can afford.”

“Your mom would say we have to study them.”

“They’ll help us,” I argue. “They want answers, too. Don’t make them the enemy.”

His lips press together and turn down. “Ava Lane said that.”

“Thank God someone has reasonable thinking. *Do not* lock them up.”

“The White House is involved now. And you’re the only one who knows that or needs to know that. I might not have a choice.”

I push to my feet and tower over him. “You have a choice. I need to know something,” I bite out, my voice tight as a band.

“What exactly do you want to know, Addie?”

“Did you do this, Dad? Did you approve that serum being injected?”

“You know my answer.”

A scientist went rogue and was dealt with, I repeat in my head, but what I say is, “Tell me again.”

“Are you calling me a liar, Addie? Really? That’s where we’re at now?”

“That’s an answer,” I state, and suddenly I’m dizzy and not a little. I’m queasy, too, but I fight through the roll of my belly. Now is not the time to get sick. “Send me the studies, Dad,” I continue. “Give me a little time to look at them. I’ll write up my thoughts and argue them with Chin, if you’ll allow it. And don’t go locking anyone up. How did you handle locking up the lifebonds?”

“They agreed to studies just to be together. That’s how ridiculously pussy whipped this mark makes the men.”

“So they don’t believe they’re captive?”

“They know they can’t leave until the studies are completed, but they signed off on it.”

“Clearly, based on the note on my window, someone believes otherwise. I beg of you, don’t do anything until I look at the research.” Another wave of dizziness rushes over me, but I’m standing now, leaning on his desk, facing him, and somehow, I hold my position. “Promise me.”

“I’ll do what is necessary to protect our country, Addie. That is my sworn vow.”

“Of course, you will,” I snap back. “Of course, *you will.*”

“What does that even mean, Addie?”

“I just hope that your version of protecting our country really is protecting our country.” I rotate and start walking and I don’t stop. I’m not good. I’m not even a little good, and my mind is racing with the meaning. The marked women are thrust into the forefront of my thoughts. They were all sick before the mark appeared. But it was always right after a first sexual encounter. This is not that. It can’t be that. I ate something bad. I have a bug. That’s what this is.

I hurry down the hallway and fortunately pass no one who might offer aid and notice I’m sick, though my own father certainly did not. I manage to make it back to a bathroom near my lab and all but throw myself inside the small space, lock the door, and lean on the hard surface.

A burning sensation forms on my neck, a deep pain, and I reach under my hair, trying to rub it away, but I'm so sick, I drag myself to the toilet and heave. When it's over, I collapse onto the floor and squeeze my eyes shut against the burning on my skin. Time stands still and the dizziness controls me.

Eventually, it eases, but I have no idea how long I've been on the floor. I hoist myself to my feet and walk to the sink, rinsing my mouth and hands, running cool water on a towel, and pressing it to my neck. My fingers feel nothing, but this incident is not nothing. Panting out a breath, I lift my hair and turn to the mirror with a limited view, but I see enough. The mark is there. It happened. It wasn't textbook to the other marked women, but then Creed is X2. That must be why. And that's when the rush of awareness overcomes me.

Creed.

He's here.

I can feel him as if he's a part of me and I need to see him, I need to be right.

I yank open the door and he's standing there, his eyes as blue as a perfect sky. "You know," I say, and it's not a question.

"I know," he says, his voice low and rough. "I can feel it. I can feel *you*. I'm sorry, Addie. I want you, but I didn't want this *for you*."

I want to step into him, I want to touch him but there are cameras and we both know better. "I'm not sorry. It was meant to happen. It was there between us, and nature just did its thing."

"Is it really that simple?"

"No. It's not simple at all. There are things I found out this morning I need to tell you."

"Not now, not here. And, Addie, don't tell anyone what has happened. Don't trust anyone, and don't let your father being your father make you feel safe with him."

“You know how I feel about him, more so now than ever. They locked up the other bonded couples. You need to know that. There are other new developments, and you need to be careful. They’re more afraid of the X2 than ever. They could try to lock you up, too. I’m afraid for you.”

“I’m always careful, which is why we can’t risk being seen together. I need to go and so do you. I’ll come for you tonight.” He backs away and then he’s walking away toward the elevators where he will surely leave the research facility.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I'm behind my desk, reading through the classified documents my father actually sent me, which almost shocked me, taking notes, when Katie appears in my doorway. "Any news?"

"They all agreed to go in for the studies, so no one was actually turned into prisoners. Dr. Chin seems hellbent on changing that though."

"Meaning what?" she asks, claiming the chair in front of me.

I hesitate, because the data I'm looking at has not been cleared for anyone but me. "There were developments this weekend. I'll tell you more when I can. I'm going to try and get you clearance. I need to get my father some counter notes to those Chin has provided."

"Let me help. Please. I won't say a word."

I hesitate and fret internally, but this project I'm working on isn't just my life and Creed's. But we're talking about a wrong move creating a world event that might not be able to be undone. "Okay," I say, and I stick a USB drive into my computer. "I'll save the data, but I swear to you, Katie, if you share this information, it's a court martial for us both."

"I would never do that."

"You came to me the other day."

"That was a rumor, not classified material."

I study her a moment, and everything in my gut says to trust her and involve her in this. I add the data to the drive and hand it to her. "Take it home. Don't look at it here, no matter how much it kills you to wait."

"I'm going home at lunch. I'll work from home this afternoon. How do you want me to send you my thoughts?"

"Put them on a drive. I don't even want you to call me. It's too risky."

“Okay. I need to tell you something, though. Caleb Rain came to my house early this morning.”

“What? Why?”

“He’s concerned his brother is off the deep end. He doesn’t know how to bring him back. He feels he’s dangerous. He wanted me to tell him he could be saved.”

Creed’s concerns about Julian are now front and center once again. “What did you say?”

“I told him I’d come to you. He didn’t want me to because of who you are, but I told him you’re on his side. He’s worried about how his brother might impact the other X2-positives. I think he and Creed are quite close. I think he thinks his brother has to go to protect Creed and the others like him, though I’m not sure anyone is quite like Creed.”

“Go?” I ask. “What does that mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes,” I say, ice sliding down my spine. Caleb thinks Julian must die. “But I think it might be too little, too late.” I hand her the data drive. “Go home. Read it. We have a lot to figure out. We should go to Vegas this weekend and work the data and figure it all out, maybe get a place up there we can work the next few weekends.”

She nods and accepts the drive, before pushing to her feet and heading for the door. “Katie,” I call out.

“Yes?” she says, turning back to me.

“I’m not seeing where any of the X2 have special gifts. They’re just stronger and faster, and more testosterone-triggered. Is there more to it than that?”

“There are rumors. Creed. You know, there are whispers he’s able to use the wind a lot more effectively than the others. Like it’s part of him. The others, not so much.”

I nod and she exits the room, but I can’t stop thinking about what she’s said about rumors. Creed hides just how powerful he is. How many of the other X2-positive soldiers do the

same? And what are the consequences of what we don't know,
and they do?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I force myself to stay late at work, trying not to draw attention to me and Creed, but I'm dying inside with the need to see him. Finally, though, I step into the parking lot and reach my car only to hear, "Addie!"

In an interesting development, I turn to find Ava Lane rushing toward me, her red hair floating in the wind like silk. Ava being Dr. Chin's assistant, I can only assume she wishes to get me on board with imprisoning the GTECHs.

"Hi," she says, breathless as she joins me. "I'm sorry to accost you, but I need your help."

"Oh?" I say. "On what?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you this, but I'm hoping your father already has. Did you hear about the X2 lab incident?"

"Maybe."

She laughs. "I get it. It's classified, and you don't say what you cannot. So I will just talk around this. One small lab study does not define a proper result. We should not make assumptions that are potentially wrong, cage hundreds of men, and turn them into prisoners. What if we underestimate them? And are we just going to cage them up for life, or will they exterminate them? I can't be a part of that. I'm considering leaving, but then I think—what if I don't fight for them?"

I breathe out, an uneasy feeling in my belly. I haven't been sick since that mark appeared on my neck, but for an indescribable reason, I am now."

"I'm a champion for the soldiers as well. I don't want to see that happen. If you want, we can game plan on how to protect them. Maybe dinner tomorrow night?"

She studies me a moment that becomes two. "Is he going to imprison them? Because you know he did the marked couples?"

"He invited them to participate in a study."

She gives a bitter laugh. “That’s what he told you. He lied. So yes, I think we should have dinner, but only if you can stop being so naïve about your father. In fact, I don’t think you can.” She whirls on me and walks away.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I text Creed the minute I'm in my car, shaken by that encounter with Ava, but I think it's just that me and secrets are not overly friendly. I lied to my father today when I told him about some note on my car. I pretty much lied to Ava about not knowing what she was talking about. I'm hiding the connection between me and Creed. Everything around me reads as lies and secrets. Ava clearly sensed I was disingenuous in some way.

I'm trembling when I pull into my driveway for no good reason other than maybe I just lifebonded with Creed today, and none of us really know what that means. I'm also disappointed when I can't feel him nearby and he hasn't replied to my text. Maybe he's freaked out and shutting me out to protect me or himself. All I know is it's weird that I can feel him when he's near, that I literally feel him like a part of me. I don't even know how I'd truly explain the sensation to someone else.

My hand trembles as I unlock my door and just as I push it open and set my stuff inside the rush of awareness happens. I whirl around and Creed is here, standing in front of me, so powerfully present.

The next thing I know, his fingers are diving into my hair and he's kissing me. There's this insane rage of passion between us and "rage" is the only word that fits. It's all-consuming. It's *necessary*. He backs me into the house and then he's kicking the door shut, and I end up pressed against it.

The taste of him is like whiskey and wind but not that at all. I can't describe it. It's all so unfamiliar, but he tastes different than before, more addictive than ever, and yet intimately familiar.

We're different than before, too.

He yanks open my blouse, buttons scattering everywhere, bouncing off the floor, and he shoves down my bra, exposing my nipples and pinching them with his fingers. I'm gasping as he suckles my lip and nips it with his teeth. I yelp with the

erotic sting, but he's already kissing me again, tugging my skirt up my hips, and my panties are dust in the wind, almost literally. He yanks them away, and I swear I'm going to need a panty budget with this man in my life, but it doesn't matter. I just need him inside me.

We both reach for his pants, our hands and fingers colliding and it's moments that feel like forever before his cock is free, and he's pulled my leg to his hip, pressing inside me, and we're fucking like wild animals. Only somehow, fucking is not just fucking. It's like we're one in our need. Like it's the wildest lovemaking you could ever imagine and the dirtiest at the same time.

He's grinding into me, thrusting, and I'm clinging to him, and I couldn't be wetter or hotter or more on edge. We are so in unison, so connected, that when I shatter, he groans, deep and low, and yes, there is that word again. In my mind everything about us is animalistic. Primal. When it's over, we collapse into each other, our breaths heaving from our chests, merging together, filling the room with the aftermath of whatever that just was.

Seconds pass, maybe a full minute, before his cheek presses to mine as he says, "I don't know how I'll ever be able to leave you."

"Don't," I say. "Don't." But we both know he'll have to. There is always a mission. There is always something that will divide us. More than we know right now. Of that I am certain.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Creed carries me to the living room and for the next minute or two, we right our clothing, straightening ourselves, me as best I can with no buttons on my shirt. We end up sitting side-by-side on the simple brown Army-issued couch, everything that has happened between us hanging in the air. But it isn't awkward.

It's just *there*.

Finally, I ask the question that has been on and off my mind all day, "What color were your eyes this weekend?"

He cocks his head toward me and meets my stare, the blue of his eyes so much bluer than I remember days ago. "Why are you asking me that?"

"Because I asked you to show me the real you."

"I did. They were black. Now you see blue. You see me in my natural form."

"I saw blue this weekend. It had already started."

His gaze lifts skyward and he breathes out. "It had already started." It's not a question, just a statement, as if he's trying to get his head around the idea. "I'm sorry, Addie." His eyes meet mine again. "You will never be the same." The rough quality of his voice is pure guilt.

I press my hand to his face. "Kind of poetic justice, considering what my father did to you, right?" It's almost a confession of sorts. He did it. I know he did it, no matter what lies he's told me.

He catches my hand in his. "I don't want revenge on you, sweetheart. I just wanted you the moment I met you. Hell, the moment I saw you."

"Yeah," I say. "Same." I twist around to face him. "They put the marked women in captivity some time back. Now the soldiers connected to them are with them. My father told me that he invited the soldiers to take part in studies, and they

accepted. Ava Lane stopped me tonight and said it wasn't like that. He tricked them. He captured them.”

“And you think he intends to do that to all of the GTECHs or at least the X2-positive.” Again, not a question.

“Maybe. I think I'm holding him back, but for how long? The White House wants to use you as weapons. He wants that to happen, to be the almighty king of the Army. I can tell he does, but he won't risk losing control. He won't risk the program turning against him.”

“He at least has to weed out the X2.”

“Yes, I think so, which is why I might have to tell him—”

“No, Addie. He's colder than you think. Do not risk yourself for me.”

“We're kind of connected now, Creed, but there's more you need to know.”

“Tell me.”

“Look, before I tell you, this information means nothing. It's a limited study that was not controlled properly. I think ultimately all it shows is that there is a trigger that can be removed and—”

“What *happened?*” he bites out.

“There were major developments in one study,” I say. “First, a marked rat got pregnant.”

His eyes go wide, and his jaw all but cracks with the way he clenches. “You mean we could reproduce? Fucking *Julian* could reproduce? Tell me *no*. Tell me that is not what you mean.”

“I wish I could, but it's possible. Again, it's a very small test sample and it's rats, not GTECHs.”

His expression is all hard lines and his eyes blue fire. “What else?”

“X2-positive rats killed X2-positive rats, but that only means there was a trigger and—”

He's on his feet now, running a hand through his hair, when he turns to me. "What if I kill you?"

"What? No. You are not one of those rats." I'm on my feet now, too. "You are not Julian. There are differences between you and him and the rats. That's what I was trying to warn you about. Don't read into this. And no rat killed its mate. It killed another male rat."

"I'm bad for you, Addie. And we know when these bonded couples separate, it helps ease the need to be together. I need to stay away from you."

I swallow hard, fighting an insane urge to grab him and hold onto him, so much so that I have to hug myself to control my actions. "So that's it," I say, my voice raw and dry. "You're just walking out on me."

"I'm trying to protect you."

"That again? Is that all there is between us now? You protecting me by walking away? I mean, I get it. We were like a sexfest this weekend. Now you're being told you're stuck with me. You're not. That's not what this is."

He's in front of me in an instant, his hands on my shoulders, his touch soothing me in ways a mere touch should not, not after he made it clear we're not together. "I do not want to leave you, not even a little bit, and we both know we were always more than sex. That wasn't even close to what our weekend was together. I know that. You know that."

"Do I? Because right now—"

"I'm trying to figure out what to do with the information that has been thrust on me today. And I'm not talking about the mark. We were both shocked when we thought you didn't end up with it, Addie, and that was because of what we felt together. What I'm worried about is the rats killing the rats." His head turns sharply toward the door, his hand lifting to me in a silent motion. "Julian is here," he says softly.

"What? Why? And how do you know it's him?"

He doesn't explain. "Stay here," he orders, and he walks to the door and exits, firmly shutting it behind him.

My heart is racing, my mind on those lab tests and the dead rats. I tug my shirt together and race to the window to find them already standing together near my car. Neither of them waves hands nor lifts a fist, but I can feel the tension between them. It radiates off them even with the walls of my house between us. A full five minutes pass before Julian disappears into the wind and Creed reappears on the porch.

The door opens, and I step in front of him, every nerve in my body pitter-pattering a crazy rhythm. I'm so on edge, I feel drugged. "What was that?"

"We're leaving on a mission tomorrow. He's strongly opinionated about it."

I search his face and find the truth and it's not a good one. "You're lying."

He catches my shoulders and pulls me to him. "I'm protecting you."

Those damn words again, that now burn like acid in my belly. They are the end of us. I know it.

He strokes my hair, tenderness in his touch that defies the man I know to be capable and willing to kill Julian, a man he's called nuclear. "I have to go."

"The mission?"

"Yes. The mission."

I want to say so many things right now. I want to demand answers, but I can feel his stubbornness. I've gotten all I will get from him, at least right now, and maybe tonight. "Are you going to come back?"

"I don't know when. You know how this goes."

I nod. "Yes." But this is more than him leaving on a mission. As he said, I know it. He knows it.

He caresses my cheek and whispers something I can't quite catch. I capture his hand and say, "Just come back."

"Be careful, Addie," he replies, echoing the please I've offered him in the past. "Be smart like I know you are."

“You, too. Please.”

He nods, but he doesn't kiss me. That's what really guts me. I have this sense he feels that if he does, we'll end up against the wall again and he won't leave. That would be okay with me.

But he releases me, leaving me bitterly cold, and he walks toward the door, but panic rises inside me. I can't seem to let him go.

“What exactly are you protecting me from?” I call after him, because it's not those lab rats, not wholly. It's about Julian showing up here tonight.

He pauses but doesn't look at me. “Everything, Addie. And more.” He walks out of the house, and I hurry to the door, wanting more of an answer. To my surprise, I find him standing almost in the same spot where he'd been talking to Julian, only this time he's talking with Caleb. The conversation is brief and then they're both just gone.

Creed is gone, and I have a sense of loss like I might never see him again.

Chapter Thirty

Morning comes slowly, as I toss and turn, and wish for Creed's return. This after I'd chided Katie for calling me in an attempt to talk about the data I'd given her. "Not on the phone," I'd warned. "We'll have lunch."

"How about breakfast?"

"I need to get to the office in the morning and talk to my father again."

"Okay, yeah. No kidding."

After that, there'd been nothing but Creed on my mind. The more I'd fretted, the more the mark on my neck burned, and I'd begun to wonder if this is how I will be, and feel, without him. When I've finished dressing for work, I stand in front of the mirror, eyeing the hollow, dark areas beneath my eyes. I look like death, and I feel a bit like it as well. My biggest worry isn't about Creed giving me the cold shoulder. It's about why.

It's about Julian.

I can't get that meeting out of my head. He came here, he found Creed here, which means he knows about me and Creed, at least that we have been seeing each other. Creed went cold on me after Julian showed up, and it's impossible not to believe it's connected. Of course, it's connected. I'm concerned Julian managed to get his hands on the same information I did from Ava. I fear he knows some of the GTECHs were locked up. And I believe they were. My father made that decision and then lied to me about it. Lie once. Lie again.

I need to get to the lab and my office, but I quickly discover I can't find my keys. It's strange. I always put them in the same place and it's freaking me out. What is wrong with me? Has the mark affected my mind in some way? I'm just not right. Another ten minutes of searching for my keys and I give Katie a call.

“You lost your keys?” she says. “How very un-Addie-like of you.”

Ten minutes later, Katie pulls up in my driveway and shoves the passenger door open. Once I’m settled inside, she gives me a once over and says, “What’s wrong?”

“Ava cornered me last night in the parking lot as I was leaving the facility. She said my father locked up the bonded couples. She thinks he’s going to lock them all up. He told me he’d wait, but I’m afraid he’s already made up his mind.”

“After what you sent me, I have to agree, though the testing is wildly inconclusive. They’re focused on X2, so the only results are X2-positive related. And there has to be a trigger that set the violence off.”

“Agreed. One hundred percent.”

“Something is going on,” I say, but I don’t add to that because that would mean telling her about Creed and Julian, and even Creed and Caleb. Creed *and me*.

My cellphone pings with a work email, and I glance at it to find a memo from my father: *Effective immediately a portion of the GTECHs will be relocated to another facility. If you’re to be relocated with them, you’ll be notified by noon today. Stand by.*

“Oh my God,” I murmur, as Katie pulls us into the facility parking lot.

“What?” she says, sounding anxious, but my gaze is now on my father as he exits his SUV.

“Read your email,” I state, “I need to talk to my father.” I exit my side of the vehicle and start rushing toward him where he’s now speaking to one of the non-GTECH officers. “General Lawrence!” I shout, because while in uniform and in front of others, I give him that respect.

With a barely-there glance over his shoulder, he offers a short wave of acknowledgment and continues speaking to the other man. About the time I reach the two men, the officer salutes my father and heads across the parking lot.

“I’m on my way to a meeting,” he tells me the minute I’m by his side. “Whatever you need is going to have to wait.” He literally gives me his back and is on the move.

I double-step to catch up with him, firming my voice. “I just heard that some of the GTECHs in my studies have been reassigned. What are you doing? What is going on?”

“I heard what you said. I can’t lock them up. But I do have to seclude them in a place where I can lock down the entire facility with them inside if necessary.

“Did you single out the X2-positive soldiers?”

“Not now. The process is underway.”

Anger all but boils in my belly and I grab his arm, drawing him to a halt. “Don’t dismiss me like I’m one of your soldiers.” He’s apparently forgotten I can be as dogmatic as my mother when I want answers. “You brought me here to do a job. I need to know what’s going on to do it. I can quit. They can’t.”

“You try my nerves, Addie. You are my daughter, but you are also an employee of the base who will get the information as I deem necessary.”

“I can’t do my job without proper communication. I had expensive, specialized testing scheduled this morning that just got flushed down the drain.”

“Duty first, Addie,” he says, his tone a band of tension. “I’ve taken command of a secondary base that required immediate high-level security. You’ll find a list of the soldiers removed from evaluation status already in your inbox.”

“What about our research?”

“Dr. Chin left this morning to join the chosen soldiers. He’ll oversee the scientific monitoring and research of the GTECH program.”

My next statement is swallowed by a rush of dramatic wind pushing against us—unnatural, violent—a second before Julian Rain solidifies in front of us and drops a limp body onto the hood of the Jeep.

I gasp and back up, staring down at the limp bloodied body of the man Katie has been dating. I know this because I looked him up. I studied his photo. *Please, please* let Katie be inside. Julian's gaze locks on my father. "He was guarding the bonded couples, who you imprisoned, General." His black eyes are framed by sculpted bone structure. His full lips twist in contempt. "That's a good way to piss me off."

The wind lifts again, tangling the loose hair around my neckline and kicking dirt and rocks from the nearby desert terrain around us, my eyes and throat burning. But relief washes over me as the mark on the back of my neck tingles with the certainty that Creed approaches. Creed can control Julian. He will stop the violence before it explodes.

Creed appears beside Julian, as do four more GTECHs, all forming a V behind the two of them—as if they were standing behind their leaders. As if Creed is one of those leaders. I reject the warning sizzling down my spine. Creed is not standing with Julian, but then I don't know what happened this morning. I don't know what my father tried to do to them, either. But Creed isn't looking at me. He isn't showing any concern at the idea that I'm here now, when this is taking place.

"Creed?" I call out, desperate for him to meet my stare, to reassure me everything is going to be okay.

"Go inside, Addie," my father orders.

"Yes," Julian agrees. "Go inside, Addie. That is, unless you want to watch your father bleed to death."

My gaze rockets back to Creed, and I even step toward him. The wind whips around me, as if in response, pushing me backward several steps. I stumble and somehow regain my footing, only to be pushed backward yet again.

This is Creed trying to force me to leave, *but my father*, I think. I can't leave him, but Creed won't stop pushing me backward, and before I can stop it from happening, I'm at the elevators. I can't even see what is happening behind me, the wind at my back. I punch the elevator button and the doors

open. Once I'm inside, I try to calm my breathing. I need to find Caleb. He'll help. Creed trusts him and he was not there.

The minute the car hits basement level, I'm impatiently waiting for the doors to part, deciding I can't panic everyone around me. I just need to call Caleb, but I don't even know his number. It will be in the database. I exit the car and start running.

Once I'm at the lab, I burst through the doors and stop dead in my tracks. Ava Lane stands there, arms crossed in front of her full bosom, the glint of evil in her pale green eyes enough to send a chill down my spine.

"In a hurry?" she asks.

"Late for work," I say. "I need to handle something and then if you need to chat, we can chat." I start to walk past her.

"At one point I thought you were Creed's intended lifebond," Ava says, halting me in my steps with her words. "But no lifebond would keep the secret you kept from him. I would certainly never keep any secrets from Julian."

Oh my God.

She's with Julian.

I rotate and we face off. "What are you talking about?"

"You knew Lawrence was going to lock them up today."

"I didn't. No. I tried to tell him that was a mistake. I thought I'd convinced him. I don't agree with it at all. I swear to you."

"I don't believe you. And Creed is not foolish enough to believe you either." She walks toward the door and just exits. I don't even know what just happened, and I don't have time to think about it.

I rush to my office, yank open the bottom drawer where I'd placed my Army-issued handgun the day I arrived—the one I learned to shoot at twelve—and find it gone. My drawer is empty. I sit down to look up Caleb, but what if he's with them now? Ava spoke like Creed is with them, and it's gutting me.

The mark on my neck tingles and my emotions explode, hope filling me. I react immediately. "Creed!" I yell, certain he hasn't betrayed me, and he won't believe I betrayed him. Certain he will save us all.

But the minute I round the doorway and bring the lab into view, that hope, my world, self-destructs and crumbles at my feet. Creed is indeed here, but he isn't alone. He has my father in front of him, a blade at his throat. Blood trickles from an open wound on my father's jugular, no doubt the method used to keep him from warning me.

"Now are you going to tell me where the serum is, General, or do I need to use this blade on your daughter?"

There is no fear in me for me. I don't believe Creed will hurt me, but my father is another story. "Creed," I whisper, my eyes prickling with unshed tears. "Please don't do this."

The plea has barely left my lips when Creed lifts a gun and points it at me. He pulls the trigger and time stands still as I stare at the tranquilizer in my arm, and then my world that has already crumbled goes black.

Chapter Thirty-One

I wake abruptly, climbing through the darkness of a deep sleep to jerk to a sitting position, quickly registering the fact that I'm in a bed, steel rails on either side of me. An IV hangs from my arm. Green curtains cover the windows to the right telling me I'm in an Army hospital.

"Easy, sweetie," comes Katie's gentle voice, as my friend rushes out of the nearby restroom. "I knew you'd wake up while I was in there."

Katie. Katie is here. I battle the tangled memories weaving through the blank spots of my mind. Creed. My father. The knife. "My father!" I exclaim, my voice trembling, adrenaline rocketing through me and setting off my heart monitor with a series of fast beeps. "Is my father—?"

"Alive and unharmed," she assures me, and my relief is palpable. He's alive. Is Creed? I want to ask. I need to ask, but the burning sensation my fretting delivers is familiar, almost as if the universe is telling me my other half is alive. My other half who clearly betrayed me, and my throat goes thick.

Katie sits down on the edge of the bed. Her eyes are bloodshot, as if she's been crying, her attire casual jeans, and an out-of-character, wrinkled T-shirt. "Your dad had to fly to Washington to deal with the aftermath of Julian's takeover of Groom Lake." Her gaze glosses over. "I swear, that day was a nightmare I will not soon forget."

"That day?" I query, my hands gripping the steel bars. "How long have I been out? What happened to me?"

A nurse rushes into the room. "You're awake!"

"Please," I say, holding up a hand. "I'm fine. Just give me a minute."

"Miss—"

"I need a minute," I say forcefully.

Katie lifts and flashes the badge hanging from her neck. "She's in good hands. Give us that minute." Reluctantly the

nurse nods and exits the room.

The moment she's gone, I say, "How long have I been out?"

"Three days. You hit your head at some point." She stands up and fills a glass with some water and hands it to me. I wave off the cup, but Katie holds her ground. "Drink."

Seeing my compliance as my only path to answers, I do as ordered, accepting the glass, the cool liquid soothing my throat, but not my heart. Creed tranquilized me. That part I remember all too well, but he didn't kill me or my father, which delivers a bit of the hope I'd tried to feel during the attack. I shiver and hand the glass back to Katie before leaning against the mattress and crossing my arms over the hospital gown.

"How did we get out?"

"Caleb," she says. "And thank God for him, though I cannot imagine what it must have been like to stand against his brother. Apparently, Julian had been planning a revolt for some time. Caleb had been working to head it off. But when your father suddenly decided to move the X2-positive men, he forced Julian's hand."

I hesitate but have to ask, "The soldier you were dating—"

"He's okay. Still in the hospital, but he's improving."

I swallow hard thinking of his bloodied, beaten body. Thinking of Creed standing next to Julian and I can't hold back. "I need to ask about someone," I say, a lump in my throat, and I have no idea how to even approach this, so I just say his name. "Creed."

Katie squeezes my arm. "I had a feeling you were seeing him. He's alive, if that's what you want to know. With Julian, Addie. Half the GTECHs and almost the entire medical and military staff at Groom Lake followed Julian."

"Did they get the serum?"

Katie nods her confirmation. "Enough to create two to three hundred GTECHs. That's a lot of GTECHs, but not enough for

the world domination that Caleb says Julian has his sights set on.”

World domination, I think. This can’t be happening. “He’ll find a way to duplicate the serum. And now we know they can have children, Ava and Julian for sure. If you don’t know, they’re lifebonds.”

“I didn’t, but I’m not surprised. I had this weird vibe from her. But it will be years before children become a threat,” She says.

“We’re dealing with alien DNA. We don’t know that.”

“No, but they’re still mostly human. Or they were. Maybe that is changing. Either way, the original serum sample was destroyed, and duplicating a copy hasn’t proven a simple task. You know that. Once he hands out the serum he has on hand, he’ll have to find another way to grow the GTECH population. That could be literally years.”

“Or not,” I say. “Chin followed them, right?”

“Yes.”

“We have no idea what he has held back from us. And who says humans won’t follow him, Katie? The GTECHs could become like royalty. The humans will hope to be made into GTECHs.”

“Zodius,” she said. “That’s what the Army is officially calling the GTECHs who are under Julian’s command to distinguish those who follow him and those who follow Caleb. Caleb’s followers are now the Renegades because they’re standing against Julian, but refuse to report to the government.”

“That’s because my father destroyed any hope Caleb will ever trust us again,” I say, still reeling from what he’d done.

“Regardless,” she says. “Caleb is hunting Julian, Addie. He’ll stop him before he becomes a bigger threat.”

“Surely, we can end this with some sort of covert attack?”

Katie reaches for the remote control on the nightstand. “Once upon a time, I had a good bedside manner, but I don’t

seem to be doing the comfort thing well today nor do I think you want me to hold back.” She flips to the news where they’re showing images of a casino enveloped in flames before the images flash to one of a high-rise in downtown Manhattan, also on fire. “That’s how Julian is keeping Caleb in check. He’s seized Area 51 as his operating headquarters and promised that for every attack on Area 51, he’d retaliate. The government had to learn the hard way.”

“Of course, they did,” I say tightly. “What else?”

“There’s an inquisition into your father’s actions. He may face a court martial. And...there are guards stationed at your door in case Julian tries to kidnap you.” Translation—Creed might try and kidnap her, but Katie doesn’t want to say that or maybe she really doesn’t know how serious Creed and I became, how bonded. “Not that anyone has any reason to believe he might,” she adds quickly. “Though Caleb shared a scary piece of information with me. He told me that Ava was planning to kidnap us and use us for fertility testing.” She shivers. “That woman was going to offer us up to their entire male population. Bottom line here is that you’re safe. We’re just being cautious until things settle down a bit, in case they try to use you to lash out at your father.”

Ava was going to offer us to the entire male population. She would have found out about me and Creed. Something is going on here that I don’t fully understand, and I need to talk to Caleb. I think of the way Creed used the wind to push me away from Julian. I think of my missing keys when I never lose my keys. I believe in my gut he took them, trying to ensure I stayed away that morning. Creed saved me. I know he did, but why is he with Julian? *Is he with Julian?*

Our last words to each other play in my mind now:

“What exactly are you protecting me from?” I call after him, because it’s not those lab rats, not wholly. It’s about Julian showing up here tonight.

He pauses but doesn’t look at me. “Everything, Addie. And more.”

Julian

Two weeks after the Area 51 takeover, now inside a covert warehouse location, I sit at a conference table with Ava to my right, and Creed, now my second-in-command, to my left. Also present are twelve of the country's most influential powerhouses—men who represent banking, technology, pharmaceuticals, and even governments.

“As you know from prior conversations,” I announce, “we are here today because our government is failing our people, and you want to be a part of a better nation. You want a country free of corruption, free of human illness.” I tap the table “You want a Zodius Nation. Each of you is so very close to being a part of the future, and a perfect world. I know you can taste it. All you have to do in order to ensure that you're one of the first one hundred conversions to GTECH is to dedicate yourselves to our success. And that, among other commitments, starts when you write a check.”

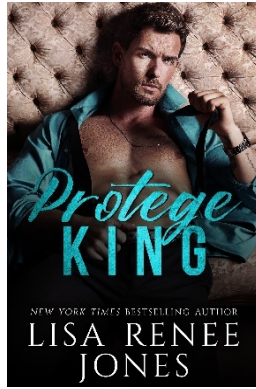
An immediate rumble of assurances quickly follow—promises of generous donations that border on begging. I ease back in my chair, satisfaction filling me. I really do enjoy when these humans—high-ranking amongst their race in power and prestige—beg for my approval. The game is changing. Let the bidding war begin.

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“You’re going to have to share your room with me, sweetheart,” he says, and he doesn’t allow me time to object or even savor that endearment, not that objection is on my mind. I’m thinking of nothing but his mouth and hands on my body and this time, mine on his.

He opens the door and enters the room, maneuvering me along with him. The door slams shut behind us, and he's already kissing me again. This time when his fingers find my hair, he gives the long strands an erotic tug and drags my gaze to his. "Control in all things, Bella. It's who I am. It's what I need, not a want."

"And as you remember," I say, my fingers curling on his chest, "I don't like what I can't control, which I guess actually means I like control, too."

"And you have it with me," he promises. "Always. All you have to say is no, and we find what feels like a yes to you. You asked if I trust you. I'm asking you now, if you trust me."

I consider the complexity of the question. Do I trust him to listen when I say no? Yes. Do I trust him not to break my heart? I'm pretty sure that's signed, sealed, and delivered, so, no. Do I trust him to make tonight all about pleasure? The kind of pleasure I'll remember long after he is married off to his future fiancée. Yes. That's a brutal yes because of where this is headed, which is nowhere but right here, right now, but one I can't walk away from, either. "Yes," I say. "I trust you."

"I don't think you do, Bella," he murmurs, and the way he uses my name—it's as if he wants me to know I'm not just sex to him. Or maybe I just want to believe that—even need to believe that—to be here with him, to be this intimate with him. Because I'm still me. I'm still not the "sex is sex" kind of girl, even if he aspires to change that in me. "But I want you to trust me so damn badly it's insane," he adds roughly, an edge of frustration in him, as if this statement somehow contradicts the control he so values.

It shakes me just how much I'm pleased that I've tormented him in some way, as if it's selfish of me. I know this, but Lord also knows I'm tormented over this marriage agreement he's obviously accepted. And if I think too hard about it, I will run. I will leave.

I don't want to leave.

I press to my toes, desperate for his mouth and body, for that oblivion he's shown me once that I crave once again.

His grip tightens gently round my hair, the act both arousing and brutal, as he denies me his mouth. “I’m going to make you trust me, Bella,” he declares, and then, thank you Lord, his mouth slants over my mouth, his tongue caressing my tongue. And it’s a toe-curling, deep, drugging kiss that leaves me breathless when his lips part mine. “Undress, baby,” he orders. “I want to watch.”

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Prior to publishing, Lisa owned a multi-state staffing agency that was recognized many times by *The Austin Business Journal* and also praised by the *Dallas Women's Magazine*. In 1998 Lisa was listed as the #7 growing women-owned business in *Entrepreneur Magazine*. She lives in Colorado with her husband, a cat that talks too much, and a Golden Retriever who is afraid of trash bags.